# Unforgiven Pride

**by** Laziza

**Summary**

Post-war politics is just as deadly as ever, when you are called Severus Snape and you are accused of war crimes... But when past students who should hate you prove to be your staunchest allies, you might just decide that life is worth living. Many canon characters. Adult themes. Slow build. EWE. Continuation of Unforgiven Love but can be read independently.

I'm not JKR, I don't own anything about Harry Potter, and I don't make any money.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This story takes place after the events of Unforgiven Love and deals with what happens after the war. Please note that the central theme is surviving traumas, so there will be angst, mentions of rape, self-harm, suicide, war atrocities and torture. It's supposed to be an optimistic story and I try not to be too graphic, but it sometimes can't be avoided to explain how it affects individuals.

Please bear with me for the "boring academia" of this prologue: I promise it helps understanding some parts of the plot... but if it's not your style, you can easily skip it and go to the first chapter where the story really begins in Snape's office at Hogwarts on May 2, 1998.

This prologue has been betaed by FionaLaFleur and by Astoria Telerin. Any remaining mistakes are entirely my own.

Prologue


[...] A photograph will just freeze the echo of an event. There is nothing of the real person in it, except the physical traits and the appearance of emotion. There is nothing more to it than what meets the eye despite the illusion of reality given by movement. (See *photography: techniques).

Ordinary paintings are also an echo of the past. They do not echo a moment in time but a person at a particular moment in time. Once the painting is finished, the echo of the person is permanently locked in the painting with their looks and personality until the very moment of the activating spell. You can interact with them, but they have only limited existence, capability of memory and they cannot evolve, rendering subsequent interaction superficial at best. If the portrayed person is still alive, they will ultimately differ from what they were at the time they were painted, as their range of experience will expand. First level Blood magic is implied, with a small shedding of the person's blood incorporated into the pigments, but the spells are very similar to photography.

The magic used in wakeful portraits is different from that used in the ordinary paintings. The intent is to keep a part of a living person after their death in order to benefit from their experience, cleverness and particular gifts. Since the aforementioned purpose can be accomplished only by capturing a portion of the soul, complete with the essence and memories of a person and link them to a painted portrait, the core of the spells are not very different from those used to make a Horcrux (See *criminality, *dark spells, *Voldemort). However, there is no dark magic implied in making that kind of portrait and no evil motive. The intent is based on love or respect.

Furthermore, the reversal part of the spell is missing unlike a Horcrux, since there is no intent to ever bring back the dead. Necromancers have tried to introduce it with poor success, like Phoebus.
Mephistopheles. He achieved the return of his lover Georgius Faustus' soul but only by his person transforming in a murderous squib. Faustus was sentenced to death by the German muggle authorities and Mephistopheles was sentenced to life in prison by the Magish Hoher Gerishtshof.

[…] In the process of portrait making, the soul is not fractured in violence as it is typically supposed to in the case of Dark magic. If death is implied, it is only as part of a time spell. The death of the portrayed one will activate the blood magic and suck in part of the soul in the portrait, thus enabling the waking of the painting. The portrait then takes on existence in a parallel plane to both the world of the living and the realm of death. No communication with the world of death has ever been achieved through a portrait, despite the fact that necromancers have regularly attested to trying in vain, resulting in violent reactions both from the portraits and the realm of the dead.

The portrait simply takes over from the point where the original person died. They lose the dimension of time that affects the living, but they can interact with them.

[…] Painters will often use two other time-setting spells. A fealty spell is mandatory for State portraits commissioned by the Ministry for Magic. The second, a displacement spell, is optional but has been systematically added since the making of the Hogwarts portrait of Headmistress Dilys Agripina Derwent in 1741. A displacement spell will enable the portrayed person to move from one painting to another.

Attempts have been made to make wakeful sculptures, link the soul to a Patronus and even make voluntary ghosts, but these seem to be too disturbing for the living and unsatisfactory for the preserved soul. Painted portraits appear to be the most satisfying compromise so far.

[…] The soul undergoes its ultimate destiny and awaits for the end of the portrait or the end of time to be reunited with its missing part. Speculations as to what would happen at the reunion of a soul with its missing part if the portrait has gone on living an entirely different way than its original life, either damning or redeeming, have been difficult to conclude.

[…] In time, entropy will affect portraits too, as raw materials like canvas and paint will age and decay. Restoration can theoretically extend their existence indefinitely but in fact, many portraits tend to become passive and dozy with time. Some even appear to experience depression or senility. A few have actually stilled, and it is supposed from their last words that their inhabitants have decided to reunite with the rest of their soul.

It has often been argued, and by portraits themselves, that it is not the condition of being a portrait that causes dissent, but the very personality of the portrayed person as well as the quality of their interaction with the living. The most powerful wizard in the world could very well turn mad or senile if their personality was rather troubled to begin with and if the living or other portraits were to refuse to engage with them in meaningful communication.

The best examples of wakeful portraits are the portraits of the former Headmasters in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry who are bound to the current Headmaster and the portraits of the former Chief Warlocks bound to the Minister of Magic. The tradition of Hogwart, as well as the need to watch for students all over the castle makes for rather close ties between the Headmaster or Headmistress and the portraits. Interaction with portraits at the Ministry, however, has experienced a steady decline during the twentieth century. It has been directly linked to a growing number of officials with a muggle-born background who felt uneasy with portraits and did not know how to deal with them.

[…] It is interesting to note that the first attempts to develop portrait spells were created by Salazar Slytherin himself, after the death of Godric Gryffindor. He became obsessed with the fated loss of knowledge and understanding about what they had tried to achieve at Hogwarts. That obsession was
further fuelled with the fear of leaving an incomplete legacy for his followers. He didn't carry his work very far before his own death, no doubt because of the poor quality of paintings at the time, though the Slytherin family boasted of a 'living' tapestry representing their famous forbearer, and that enabled him to hold a place of honour at all family gatherings. However, the tapestry was not heard of again after the burning that destroyed Slytherin Hall in 1651, as collateral damage of the Muggle Civil War (See *history of Britain).

The Quattrocento's developments in creative arts enabled wizard painters to progress Salazar Slytherin's fascination. The necessary spells were perfected by Rudolfo di Mugello, an Italian wizard who was Professor of Charms and Head of Hufflepuff from 1434 to 1555, and a friend of Fra Angelico and Leonardo.

[…] By the 1780s, there was hardly a European aristocratic family that did not boast of a gallery of prominent ancestors, who aided the Head of Family in decision making. It later proved more of a liability than an asset, since it tended to encourage conservative attitudes in purebloods by discouraging innovation and the seeking of knowledge outside the realm of their closest relations.

Modern historians now outline the portraits' significant influence in the trend that lead most continental pureblood families to be caught in muggle revolutions against nobility in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, and as the major cause of the devide between the muggle and wizarding society that developed in Britain later.

In that country, the absolute separation process began straight after the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations organised by the British muggle government in 1851. The afflux of visitors made for several very close calls when the magical firms building Platform 9 ¾ narrowly escaped being outed to the muggles. The most conservative pureblood leaders managed then to carry out in the Wizengamot a vote for a more definitive and drastic separation from the muggle world than even Salazar Slytherin had ever dreamed of. The display of muggle technological achievements fed the fear that they now had powerful means to find out, pursue and eradicate magical settlements. It is well known that the portraits of Chief Warlock Godwyn Diggory and Chief Witch Ambrosina Crabbe refused to be silenced during that session and insulted each other as traitors to the wizarding world, a quarrel that has been going on for decades now, despite repeated entreaties by the successive Ministers for Magic.

This plainly shows the level of independence portraits can develop despite the loyalty binding, all the more since they were forceful personalities to begin with. It also explains why they are often irreverently referred to as 'watcher portraits'. Hence the vast amount of legal texts concerning the portraits: copyrights or patenting rights for their post-mortem contributions, credits awarded in published research and recognition of the validity of their judicial procedures… But also formal demands from offended or harassed descendants to break the bind, take the portrait down and have them exiled, generally to Hogwarts.

[…] Weak minded persons should be barred from prolonged association with all kinds of portraits. As far as ordinary paintings are concerned, these individuals primarily risk projecting too many emotions on the portrait in a self delusional relationship, which often leads to depression.

A few examples show that forceful personalities can still grow as wakeful portraits, even to the point of manipulation of the living, e.g. the destruction of Dorian Gray's portrait as ordained by the Wizengamot in 1890 after the scandal of his breaking part of the Secrecy through a muggle work of fiction. He was sentenced for murder, manipulation and abuse of muggles, blackmail and repeated violations of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy. In fact, the scandal was so overwhelming that it led to the last reform to date of the Code. (See *capital punishment, *International Code of Wizarding Secrecy).
During the Second Death Eaters War (1994-1998) and its aftermath, several events at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and at the Ministry proved the validity of this analysis. [...]
Chapter 2

May 2, 1998 – 10:30

Minerva McGonagall stepped heavily in the Headmaster's office. It was at least the fifth time since the Aurors had arrived at Hogwarts and were surprised that the wards of his office and private quarters were down with not even a single booby trap spell. She looked around anxiously and noticed, not for the first time, how empty it really was.

The place looked absolutely impersonal, save for his much used quills, neatly ordered files and the incongruous sight of his first Slytherin scarf, long forgotten on a rack.

Not that Severus had ever had many belongings to set there, and just like his old office in the dungeons, it held nothing more than the regulation furniture and equipment. He had spent fifteen years in the dungeons, eight months in the DADA tower, eight months here, and save for his books and Potions materials, he had always lived as if he would leave Hogwarts at a moment's notice. Always the optimist, Severus...

She looked around one more time, eyes widening when she did not find what she looked for. With a deep breath, she opened the door to the private quarters, marched in resolutely but returned quickly, planting herself in front of Dumbledore's portrait.

"Do not pretend to be sleeping, Dumbledore. Where is his portrait?"

He opened his eyes and seemed at a loss for a few seconds. "Do you mean..?"

"If he's not already dead, it won't be long. They've taken him to St Mungo's, but the healer said he only has a few hours left since they haven't found his AntiVenum Draught and can't stop the tissue destruction. What he brewed for Arthur Weasley isn't effective any more." She repeated, almost pleading now, "where is his portrait? I want to be there when he wakes."

"There is none."

"What? But... I've seen the Ministry's order form."

"He refused to sit it."

Minerva let herself fall in the Headmaster's armchair. "Why?"

"You know him..."

She winced. She had known him well enough during all these years but she had let her anger and disappointment after Dumbledore's death get the better over her judgement – despite the signs that he could not completely hide from her but that she had refused to believe. When Harry Potter had thrown in Voldemort's face, for all to hear, that Severus had been loyal to the end to Dumbledore... and to Lily Potter, she had not been surprised. It all finally made sense.

"He just set the paper aside, saying he hadn't time for such nonsense. I tried several times, but... In
the end, he told me to mind my own business. Phineas tried too."

Minerva turned to Phineas Black but the dour Slytherin stared her down from his stately frame, defying her to reproach him anything.

She looked around at all the portraits. Dilys Derwent volunteered sadly, "I know why he refused."

All eyes turned towards her. She shook her silver ringlets in a slightly defensive manner. "It's true, he spoke to me sometimes... At night, since he didn't sleep much – when you were all gallivanting in other places. He knew I am discreet and," she gave an audible sniff as she eyed Dumbledore, "more compassionate than some." She was the accusing one, now. "I tried to do my duty and to convince him too... I didn't succeed but he needed to confide in someone, just like anybody."

"So?"

If looks could kill, and if he was not already dead, Dumbledore would have been atomized on the spot, the way the late Headmistress looked daggers at him. "He thought that what was left of his soul wasn't worth it."

Minerva slumped on the desk, leaning her forehead on her arms and began to sob.

It was the final straw.

She had seen countless children and comrades in arms being prepared for burial and she had managed to keep standing, to be the responsible one. She had seen to the catering for the living, the care for the injured, the reporting to the Ministry, the consolation of the mourning...

She had thought Harry Potter lost and he had raised from the dead. Against all odds, she had hoped the same with Severus Snape. He had always managed to return before... But they had taken him to St Mungo's, comatose and bleeding to death, after a frantic and useless search for an antivenin in his quarters and his private potions lab.

Severus.

He was her closest... Her closest... Tears blurring her vision, she wondered what she would ever call him now? They had had a sixteen-year relationship as colleagues... Tentative friends... And a strange, ambiguous link that had been at times purely maternal and at others... She had never dared use any kind of 'R' or 'L' word with him. In fact, she had strictly forbidden it.

He had once mockingly told her the younger generations call it friendship with benefits. They were in her village for some kind of family gathering and she had tartly replied that she had only invited him to witness true Scottish traditions and that he had better remember the friendship and forget the benefits in front of her family. Of course, he had manoeuvred her into coiling herself into tighter and tighter knots, the sneaky bastard – just for his amusement at her easily scandalised relatives. Why did she remember that episode right now?

Still, she had no name for their relationship, born of their being cooped up as they were all year round in the castle, both damaged and broken by the first war. Dumbledore all but forced them to be seen in public to help restore Severus' damaged reputation, and their evenings out had progressively become a cherished ritual. At first, there was some brief holding of hands for comfort and care in the hour of need... A little too intimate a hug after a well washed down expedition... And then so much more. So much more until Voldemort's return, when it was too dangerous for him to be in any kind of intimate relationship.

Funny that the students' imagination had often linked her to old Dumbledore but never to young
Snape... Not that there had ever been anything to watch in public other than their always sitting side by side.

Of course, she had realised it only after Dumbledore's death, when she thought he had betrayed them all. She had revisited her memories of Severus in anger, trying to understand how she had failed to see him as he truly was or -worse- when she had failed to help and keep him from toppling over the wrong side. Was it when Dumbledore decided to save Sirius Black? When he sent Severus back to Voldemort with a probable death sentence on his head? When he gave him the DADA position, knowing it was cursed? When she began, just like the others, to take his occasional hand tremors as mere routine?

Inconsequently, she had felt a stronger hate when he was Headmaster than after he killed Dumbledore, because it was so visible that he was more and more a dead man walking rather than a returning conqueror, and that he did not even have the decency to enjoy the benefits of his treason.

She had spent hours in her quarters wanting to scream for all the times they met and she tried to act just as cold, sarcastic and indifferent as him.

Of all the deaths, it was only that of Severus that hit her so much.

Because it was just as if she had killed him herself.

Because she hadn't loved him as he needed to be—but it hurt just as much.

Because she would never be able to ask him to forgive her.

Because Fate was so bloody unjust.

Because now, without him, she was old.

Phineas Black looked only at Albus Dumbledore, more furious than he had been during the short months of Snape's tenure. He wondered if it was doubt, hypocrisy or regret that furrowed Dumbledore's brow at last, almost at the same time McGonagall had collapsed. But now there was no mistaking the twist of his mouth, as he said to himself, "what have I done?"

It was pain.

Phineas did not find any consolation in the fact, and certainly not when he found himself dealing with a sobbing Dilys to top it all.

§§§

May 1, 1998 – 23h45 – The Shrieking Shack

"The Dark Lord awaits you, you lucky Right Hand of Him. After you, my Lord Snape," whispered Lucius Malfoy with a mock bow and more acid resentment than usual. "Yet... Yet... I wouldn't be surprised if you got... A surprise."

Snape glared at Malfoy. "If the surprise is so... Surprising, I might consider sharing with you, my good Lucius. Yet... Yet... I am a selfish fellow these days. You can leave and go play with the children."

Malfoy snorted.

"Manners, Lucius. Manners."
Snape stepped in, seemingly his usual composed self—but his instincts shouted that something was indeed definitely wrong.

He surreptitiously (he hoped) wiped one sweating hand then the other on his handkerchief and finally his mouth with a jerky turn of the wrist. He tasted bile, and his own fear, and had to straighten himself before going to court Evil once again.

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May 2, 1998 – 00h05 – The Shrieking Shack

"Severuss... You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."

Snape absurdly thought he had finally stumbled upon the full rot of the Kingdom of Denmark, and that death was going to wipe Potter and all the other actors before he would have a chance to play his part.

He might still escape the dance of death but he was going to fail in his last mission. Potter would never know he carried a Horcrux in his flesh.

And all would be lost.

As he frantically tried to convince the Dark Lord to give him more time to find Potter, he prayed. Lily! Help me! Please... The old fool's failed and let us down again.

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May 2, 1998 – 03:43 – The Shrieking Shack

It was the torture all over his useless limbs that made him come to again, though he could not see anything any more.

He knew the venom had been dissolving his blood vessels and now, by the pain, that it was attacking his nerves in depth. Obviously, his optical nerves were already gone.

It was unbelievable (or was it at last the power of faith?) but Potter had shown up and hopefully collected enough memories to find out that he had to die so the Dark Lord could be destroyed.

He had passed out, drowned in green eyes.

He knew he would not make it this time. He should have taken the Blood-Replenishing Potion when Potter showed up but the boy had used what little time he had. There was some in the AntiVenum Draught but no way enough. Now, his body was done obeying him. Somehow he did not care any more. He still feared his coming retribution in the other world, but there was nothing left for him this side of the Veil.

His life was pumping out of his body as his blood soaked everything around him. The initial flood was reduced to a very slow trickle by the AntiVenum Draught, but it only meant that it would now take hours for him to bleed to death. Severus, you fool.

He had hoped to die quickly in battle, feared it would probably be under torture but never imagined to end bleeding endlessly and uselessly on the dirty floor of the Shrieking Shack, of all places... Still, it seemed a fitting ending to his pitiful, dirty life. At least, he could not see it. He could not see that he was really, definitely alone.
He could not see either the silver threads of his escaped memories gently falling back on him like snowflakes, drawn to their natural place again. As he had done so often when he thought he could not take more, he conjured Lily’s face and was happily surprised by the endless mirror images of her green eyes and smile that invaded his mind like fractals.

He was so tired. So tirs...


"He’s not dead," said Auror Proudfoot. "He wouldn't be bleeding if he was, though I don’t feel his pulse. Ger, we need a healer. Now!"

They had come to retrieve a corpse, but as much as he looked dead, his body was not rigid and blood still oozed very, very slowly -almost imperceptibly except to a trained eye- out of the goring injuries at the throat. He was lying in a red pool of congealing, already stinking blood, in stark contrast to his overall black attire and livid face.

His colleague Apparated back with a red and green healer in under two minutes. Proudfoot wondered at the colour, and realised the green St Mungo’s robe was so much covered in blood, the man seemed bi-coloured. He clearly had had no time to Scourgify or forgot to do so in the urgency of the call. Why bother? He probably won't make it, he's lost so much blood. And if he makes it, it will be for Azkaban. But we're supposed to be the good guys and try.

Bitterly, he kicked at some garbage on the floor. The good guys who were kept in leash by the Minister and sent after children died to save the World.

Healer Fleming quickly assessed the situation. The mangled left side of the face told him the tale; he had seen several other corpses, some partly eaten, over the last few months. All presented the same kind of wounds after an encounter with You-Know-Who’s killer pet, but they were just that: corpses. The venom had burned and dissolved the blood vessels, nerve endings and soft tissues in a matter of minutes before destroying the heart.

Nagini had left only corpses in her wake since Arthur Weasley had been cured by this wizard’s potions more than by any tentative treatment, whatever his colleagues Pye and Smethquick liked to pretend. Now, Snape was still alive after lying here bleeding for hours. Bezoar? No. Wouldn't be much use against a multi-cursed venom. What did he use? There was nothing on him, not even an empty vial. Must know how he did it. He may be Dark, he's a genius. He tried to stabilize the heart and the bleeding and transferred the content of a fool vial of Blood Replenishing straight inside Snape’s stomach. With no time to gently Leviosa the body to the Hospital Wing, he grabbed his Medical Emergency Portkey.

#### May 2, 1998 – 06:40 – Hogwarts Infirmary.

Draco had forgotten the stinging of the slicing hex in the shock and daze of hugging with his parents like the child he would never be again, but soon enough the bleeding had worsened with the exertion of walking and had been too much for Narcissa to deal with. They had walked back to Hogwarts, much more slowly, his mother floating him as much as she could despite her exhaustion and worry, and his father carrying him in between.

He hissed when they made him lie down. He would not cry. Malfoys do not cry. Even if the world is
falling apart around them.

He had been shown a couch, hastily Scourgified after the departure of its former occupant and told to wait there. A hurried healing and two vials of disgusting potions later, he was shooed away to make place for the next injury and told to sit down right there, on the floor, while waiting for the effect of the potions to kick in.

He heard Pomfrey shouting to a St Mungo's Healer. "No! He left no AntiVenum Draught. He may have had other vials, but if you didn't find them in the Headmaster's quarters, I don't know where they are, and I don't care! Take the bastard away, we can do nothing for him here!"

Draco froze. The Headmaster. He looked better and recognised the black-covered figure, drenched in blood.

The bitch, he thought. He's going to die and she doesn't care.

He did not want to imagine a world without his godfather. It was simply unthinkable. He had prepared himself for his parents' death at the hands of the Dark Lord, but not Severus... Severus was steady as the North Star. He was like a cat: he always landed on his feet, his parents used to joke. He always did the right thing. He always was right, damn him. Damn. Damn.

He was going to cry, and he did not want to. He remembered the row between Severus who proposed to send him away in America or the Antipodes... Anywhere but Britain, and his mother who was saying she had no choice with Lucius so out of favour and in Azkaban, before he was taken before the Dark Lord to take the Mark. Severus had been so furious he had cut all ties with the Malfoys for weeks... Until his mother went to Spinner's End and begged him for help, and of course he had not been able to say no.

He had hated Severus afterwards for being right, as much as he had hated his mother for Severus' vow, his father for getting himself arrested... And himself for being a coward.

The healer calmly answered (and Draco thought in a detached manner that it was reassuring someone was calm here), "You're right. He needs intensive care and we can hardly get him that here." He marched to the Floo and called out, "St Mungo's Emergency Ward. Fleming. I'm going to bring a critical patient. I need...

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May 2, 1998 – 06:48 – Hogwarts Great Hall.

"They have taken him... To St Mungo's... Intensive care... But the healer was really bothered... That... They have no more AntiVenum... Draught..." Draco was panting as he tried to explain. His mother hugged him against her chest, for comfort and as if it could give him some of her strength.

"He... He looked already like a corpse and... And the Blood-Replenishing... It doesn't work. His face... Half his face... I couldn't recognize him... It looked... It looked like mash... He was losing blood as quickly as it was replaced... And they couldn't stop it. The healer said... He said he was critical."

Lucius and Narcissa looked at each other in stricken silence while Draco was telling, still out of breath, what he had just seen and heard in the Infirmary. The boy shrugged himself out of his mother's embrace. He leaned face against the wall, biting his lips and scrunching his eyes shut to avoid disgracing himself with tears. Narcissa searched for a small box from Honeydukes in her pocket and handed it to Lucius. They were interrupted by a group of Aurors, advancing on them and
forcibly demanding they hand their wands.

"Narcissa Malfoy?" She held herself proudly. "You're to be held under house arrest at Malfoy Manor." She exchanged a silent look with her husband. Nothing new under the sun. One of the Aurors stepped up for SideAlong and gripped her firmly.

"Draco Malfoy? I arrest you for collusion with the Death Eaters." Draco was bound and taken by two Aurors.

"Lucius Malfoy? I arrest you for collusion with the Death Eaters."

One Auror for Narcissa, two for Draco, still four for Simple Me. I should be flattered. Lucius's eyes narrowed and he leaned haughtily against the wall, holding his hands forward to show their perpetual trembling. "I have been here for hours, nobody approached me, I first need to see a Healer. Healer Fleming, from St Mungo's Emergency Ward. Only St Mungo's will know how to help me."

"Mr Malfoy, I strongly advise you not to play that game. It will not be appreciated by the Wizengamot."

"I know my legal rights, Auror. I may be arrested, I am not convicted and under no circumstances can I be denied to see the healer of my choice, as long as I am not sentenced to Azkaban!"

"Your request is noted, Malfoy. You will see your healer, under supervision. I warn you that it will be noted as obstruction if the healer finds no evidence that you really need care in St Mungo's."

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May 2, 1998 – 07:12—St Mungo’s Emergency Ward

"Healer Fleming. You asked for me, Mr...?"

"Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy."

Fleming had of course seen the rich patron of St Mungo's from afar on various occasions but he would not have recognised the haggard, untidy wizard that the Aurors had just dragged before him.

"War, he sighed inwardly as he automatically cast his wand over Malfoy. He frowned but was interrupted by his patient. "No need, Healer. I am here only on behalf of Severus Snape, who was last heard of under your care. Is he still alive?"

With angry snorts, the Aurors closed on the prisoner who hastily shouted, "I have AntiVenum Draught for him!"

Healer Fleming stilled the Aurors with a hand wave, and narrowed his gaze at Malfoy. "He's still alive. What do you know about the AntiVenum Draught?"

"Only that he brewed it using blood from the remains of Nagini's victims and the original potion he made for Arthur Weasley. It was clear new curses had been placed on the snake. He, my wife and myself carried some at all times as well as Blood-Replenishing Potion."

"The Blood-Replenishing doesn't work on him."

"I suppose he had no time to take it as it should have been. The AntiVenum was to be absorbed before any possible encounter with Nagini, so he would have taken it around 23:45 before meeting the Dark Lord and the Blood-Replenishing was to be absorbed within fifteen minutes of being bitten."
He obviously didn't take it."

"I didn't find any vial."

"The AntiVenum is transfigured. We couldn't afford to be seen carrying anything like that. You will find mine and my wife's in the guise of a handkerchief and a box of sweets in my pockets. You should find a similar handkerchief in his."

With the practised habit of a man who knew all there was to know about Azkaban, corporal search, and humiliation, he held his arms over his head and slightly spread his legs to be searched.

Soon enough, the Aurors handed the vials, transfigured back, to Fleming. The Healer immediately sent a nurse running to the Creatures' Damage ward to hand them at once to Healer Smethwick.

Lucius Malfoy seemed to slump in relief even as the Aurors began to drag him away. The Healer grabbed one of the Aurors, stopping the group forcefully. "I haven't finished with my patient," he said as his wand glowed madly over the Death Eater's body.
In the very hours following the battle, the Weasleys tried to make life as normal as possible, even while grieving for Fred and preparing the funeral. Harry and Hermione grieved with the family too. The Weasleys were tough, faithful people. In joy or in mourning, they clung to each other better than Hufflepuffs.

Ginny had made it very clear when she began to take Harry away for special times together, in her room or walking in the wild, that they were adults now and that nobody would interfere with her life any more—not that anyone seemed to be willing to.

After that show of will, she was happy to revert to her usual place of youngest child and sibling. In retrospect, she felt all the terror of facing Bellatrix Lestrange. The whole battle had been a frightening nightmare, as she knew they were fighting not only for freedom but for their lives. The climax for her had not been Harry's duel with Voldemort but her own confrontation with Voldemort's lieutenant, when she was sure, for a few minutes, that she was going to die.

Now that it was over, she could not help feeling that she was not really safe except around her mother or with Harry. But in truth, she was the stronger one with her boyfriend, because Harry looked too much like a boxer who is still standing to the count but will soon topple down.

She would tell him, "We're free now", and he would answer in kind, and lose himself in her for a time but he just did not seem to believe it. He still was not over the shock that he had died, come back, killed Voldemort and that all was over – but with the whole world turned upside down.

The first hour of elation had lasted just that: one hour.

After that, there was bewilderment and pain. People, friends had died, and it felt too much like they had died for him and that he had failed them somehow. The present was kind of a blur. The future a
definite void. Reality did not seem real, now that he had no further goal for the rest of his life.

"You can do what you want now," people kept telling him, repeating, "you're free", just like Ginny. The trouble was, after the initial relief at Voldemort's death and his own survival, he did not really know what he wanted. He never had time to really consider the future, being too busy trying to survive until the next confrontation with Voldemort.

The last year, he had given up any hope of living past his mission and had held only by the sheer will of Hermione and his own sense of responsibility. Snape's last minute revelation that he was to die to end it all had felt just right—because he did not expect more.

Only the past could give him something now, something he desperately needed: meaning and understanding.

He had been offered a second chance after visiting the strange void of King's Cross Station with Dumbledore, but it left him with a feeling that even in death, he had never been given a real choice. He could not really have let them all down, abandoning them to Voldemort to ride in a train to another life, now could he? And who told that another life would have been better?

There seemed to be no truth any more in his world. What he had always deemed true proved to be only lies. Who was Dumbledore in the end? Snape? And himself?

So, he spent hours viewing and living Snape's memories again and again – eagerly seeking understanding of the great net of Dumbledore's weaving that had trapped them all, and absorbing all possible glimpses of his mother... And his father. He found new details every time, glimpses of other moments he had hardly noticed in the emergency of the coming battle.

He also poured his own memories of Dumbledore and Snape in the Pensieve.

In hindsight and with greater maturity, Dumbledore was a first-class politician and manipulator. He always managed to distract, to question in lieu of answering and said meaningless, empty half-truths, with such a power of conviction that you did not realise before he left that he had not said anything at all, except something vaguely philosophical. He only ever admitted the truth after the facts, and only a chunk of it, using it to mislead.

"Quirrell said he hates me because he hated my father. Is that true?"

"Well, they did rather detest each other. Not unlike yourself and Mr. Malfoy. And then, your father did something Snape could never forgive."

"What?"

"He saved his life."

"What?"

"Yes..." said Dumbledore dreamily. "Funny, the way people's minds work, isn't it? Professor Snape couldn't bear being in your father's debt... I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father's memory in peace..."

In less than one minute, Dumbledore had managed to make him believe that there was nothing but an ordinary school rivalry between James Potter and Snape, implied that all was Snape fault's because it was Draco's fault they were at odds, and that Snape was an ungrateful lout...
To think he had believed this man walked on water, and that he cared for him!

Yes, he cared for him enough to abandon him to the Dursleys without checking even once how he was treated. He could almost hear him answer, if he had confronted him, that "Mrs Figg was there to check on you." Mrs Figg! He was not even sure if the old lady, kind as she was and focused on her cats, would have noticed if his uncle buried his corpse in the garden... The only thing she had ever noticed were the Dementors, but that would have been impossible to miss, even for a squib.

Yes, Dumbledore cared. He cared enough to send him back to Privet Drive for weeks on end without one visit or even one word of comfort after Cedric’s death and after Sirius's death...

He cared enough to leave to Snape the task to tell him he had to die.

His memories of Snape were another matter entirely. Re-living his encounters with Dumbledore left him bitter, but those with Snape left him ashamed.

Ashamed that he never realised the Potions master was just as good an actor as the Headmaster. Snape was never so nasty as when there was an audience of Death Eaters' children or of notorious school gossips. It was like laugh tracks on TV to make people realise "here was a joke." Snape made a drama of every encounter to proclaim, "See how I hate the Boy Who Lived!" He always managed to wind him up until Harry snapped. And did he snap! So insolently and nastily, in fact, that any other teacher confronted with the same treatment would have extracted a pound of flesh in detentions and house points.

Snape was a subtle man, but an honest one when you knew where to look. Their very first lesson had set the tone of the coming years but it was also a very symbolic declaration of intention. The first time Harry answered back, "I don't know. I think Hermione does, though, why don't you try her?" Snape had actually taken one point from him. One. How more symbolic could he have been?

He also had a small tic. He clenched his left hand in the folds of his robe before approaching Harry in the classroom and berating him. He did the same thing when he was in front of Sirius or of Alastor Moody, or just before marching on Minister Fudge and shoving his Dark Mark under his nose. And he did it in front of Voldemort, when the madman asked him why the Elder Wand didn't work for him.

Harry watched how, as time went by, Snape still clenched his fist before approaching him, but he hardly needed to say anything to make Harry defy him, just like Pavlov's well-trained dog.

It was the sole excuse he could put forward for the way he had always refused to acknowledge how much he owed to Snape and how protective the man had been. It was not Dumbledore who cast the counter spell to save him when his broom was cursed. It was not Dumbledore who was checking anxiously for his arrival when he missed the Hogwarts Express the second year. It was not Dumbledore who ran to confront Sirius when they all thought he wanted to kill Harry.

That he was exchanging his own childish, biased view of the past for another, maybe just as biased, did not occur to him. He fed his own resentment of Dumbledore's manipulations and abandonment with Snape's feelings of betrayal and wary acceptance of martyrdom.

Harry came to believe that only Snape could understand him—had understood him, since he now understood the man so well.

Always, he ended with Snape's memories of his mother. When he emerged from the relief of adoring visions of the beautiful, forever young Lily Evans, he left to meet another beautiful, young redhead who loved him with all her heart.
He told himself he did not mistake one for another, but who knows really? He would not be the first one to go after a woman who reminded him of what he knew of his mother. During the interminable summers at the Dursleys, he often flipped through the photo album Hagrid had given him. He always thought, as he watched how radiant Lily Potter had been, that Ginny would surely be just as pretty one day.

He stopped only the day Dilys Derwent sternly told him that Pensieve life on such large scale as he used was like a drug, it only gave regrets and mental addiction.

The other portraits nodded gravely in approval, as she added, "some need that to simply survive for another day" - she gave a meaningful glance at Snape's old scarf that somehow Professor McGonagall had left in place - "but you must let go and learn to live for yourself. The Headmistress doesn't realise all the time you spend inside that thing or she wouldn't give you such free leave to use her office. I was a healer. Trust me: it will only get worse if you do not stop. Now."

"She's right, my boy." Harry glanced at Dumbledore's portrait, who he had studiously ignored for several weeks. "Remember the Mirror of Erised? A Pensieve can do the same thing to your mind. It isn't better to dwell on memories than on dreams."

As he was ready to protest, Headmistress Derwent added, in a tone that brook no objection, "if it could heal and alleviate guilt, we would use them in St Mungo's."

Feeling himself turning crimson under the gaze of a gang of now surprisingly alert portraits, Harry left sheepishly—clutching the little bottle of silvery mist with guilt.

When they were sure he could no longer hear them, someone asked, "I thought they use Pensieves in St Mungo's?"

"Of course, they do, but that young man should be out in the sun with his girl. That's the best cure when you're eighteen," answered Dilys saucily, eliciting a round of chuckles.

§§§

Hermione followed Molly as a shadow. She was rather subdued, and unusually silent. After all the adrenaline-filled events that led to the death of Voldemort, she wanted to be left alone.

Everybody at the Burrow knew of the torture and the angry red scar tattooed on her arm, although she carefully avoided short sleeves and refused to speak of it. She even went so far as changing her wardrobe for rather over-sized tunics and jumpers.

"Sacks," Ginny called them disapprovingly as she inspected what Hermione had mail ordered. "They look like sacks. You must send them back!"

But Hermione did not want to. She had been so uncomfortable and cold all those months, she explained, that she needed the feel of being wrapped in her clothes as in a blanket.

She almost looked like a little girl dressed in adult clothes. Ron did not see anything amiss, since he did not exactly care for clothes, as long as they were not too shabby. Harry, who had spent all his life dressed in the hand-me-downs of Big D, even less so.

Molly shook her head sadly. She watched Hermione and Harry side by side, desperately thin in their too big clothes, and felt like she had rescued tramp twins from the streets. And then she would cry, remembering that they had been little more than that during the last year.

She knew that there was more to worry about Hermione than the way she clothed herself. She gave
Ginny a sharp set-down when she heard her nag Hermione again.

"Ginevra Weasley, not everyone is as vain as you are. Leave her alone. She can wear what she wants, and if you think she needs something else, you buy it yourself with your own budget." Which was below the belt, considering the budget, but effectively silenced Ginny. The stricken teenager suddenly wondered if her mother meant that Hermione, who was a virtual orphan right now, had any money left, and that maybe she was twisting the knife because Hermione could not afford anything else.

She generously offered her friend to share toiletries and all those products girls generally think they cannot live without. Hermione accepted, more to please Ginny than anything else, because she just did not care for that sort of thing.

She was not that short on money either, since the Ministry had unfrozen her Gringott's account. It had been confiscated along Harry's under Pius Thicknesse. Her parents were rather well off and had been very generous when they filled her vault. There was more than enough to pay for all her years at Hogwarts, so she still had a little nest egg, and Kingsley Shacklebolt had promised there would be a material proof of the country's gratitude in the coming months.

It was not material things, though, that made Molly worry about Hermione. It was to see the purple bags under her eyes that proved she did not sleep much, and the way she sometimes seemed to have trouble carrying out the simplest of everyday tasks.

Molly was the fit companion then. She busied herself as usual and had her simply in tow, letting her offer when she felt up to it and just sharing companionship when she didn't.

The Weasley matriarch generally managed to sound rather cheerful, but at times she just could not. When she had an unexpected crying bout, Hermione was not far behind. They always ended comforting each other. Molly's regard for Hermione increased tenfold during that time—if it was possible.

Molly would be proud all her life of saving her daughter from "that Lestrange bitch", but she was the only one to know that she had sent that killing curse with probably as much hatred in her heart than Voldemort's favourite. It hit her physically as much as emotionally to admit what depths of loathing and darkness she had been able to summon. She had believed for a long time that she had lived through the worst of what war could send her, until the Battle of Hogwarts proved her wrong. She had lost her son, and killed for the first time of her life in hate.

She would keep some kind of pessimistic streak after that, and worry regularly how soon the circle of darkness would start again.

For two decades, she had believed that she was on the firm side of the Light, prided in her choices even when she hurt in her own flesh, and disparaged those on the other side.

Now she discovered that she could indeed be executioner as well as victim. She had understood the concept, many times repeated by Albus Dumbledore, that any one can drown in evil if they do not take care, but she now felt the truth of it in her very bones. Nobody was immune, and you could not trust yourself.

She had her ways to deal with unpleasantness, but the day her children showed her that she now had her own chocolate frog card for killing Bellatrix Lestrange, described as "the maddest and darkest follower of Tom Riddle (Voldemort)", she retired to her room and burst into angry tears.
George was in their old room, sedated. At least, he was home.

Charlie bunked with him and kept an eye on him for as long as he could stay in Britain, then Bill and Fleur took him to Shell Cottage. He did not mind. He did not care much, even without drugs. At least, watching the waves for hours on end was soothing and gave an odd feeling of fullness again.

Sometimes the wind made him laugh at the memory of clever pranks, but the salty wind was always irritating for the eyes. This is what he kept telling himself when he rubbed at tears he had decided he had no reason to shed any more. Nothing would bring Fred back. They had had so many projects that he was left to carry out alone.

He hated himself when he remembered he would never again have to find ways to prove he was a full man, and not just half of a pair.

Molly cast a Notice-me-not charm on the Family clock, supposedly "for George's sake." Fred's clock hand had just frozen on mortal peril when he died, but nothing Molly did could make the pointer disappear as it was supposed to. Arthur forbade the children to say anything about it. They all knew it did not work because her heart did not let go. You have to mean magic. Molly was simply not ready to have the last proof of Fred's part in the family life disappear.

§§§

In the early days, there were always people Flooing in and out of the Burrow: Ministry agents, members of the Order, family relations... What with arranging for the funeral, and so much chaos to unravel... Officials missing, killed or arrested, and work to be done between Hogwarts, Grimmauld Place and the Ministry.

It was still dark times, as nobody knew any more who had really authority to decide, to question or arrest. There were many cases of expeditionary justice with unreliable testimonies to damn innocents—or to pave the way for lawyers to get guilty people free later. There was no room left in Azkaban to house more prisoners, so what was one to do with them?

Interim Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt was nearly driven to distraction, as was Arthur Weasley and the surviving or newly appointed Heads at the Ministry, until Percy stepped in, taking back his old job where he had left it. Percy was at his most efficient under stress. They found themselves grateful for his maniacal and workaholic habits as he took over the managing of agendas for them all. He gained a new respect from them, although he would keep his head down most of the time when he was not working.

It would be a long time before he could bring himself to look people in the eyes again, and not automatically search for signs of contempt. When Arthur put a hand on his arm or his shoulder and asked his advice—a more and more frequent occurrence—he often felt at a loss to understand why. He was always the least favoured in the family. He had wanted to show them all, and see how it ended!

It pained his mother, who knew it was her fault that he had been different and insecure from the first. Percy's birth had been the most selfish decision of her life, a way to turn the page on her brothers' death and her own hurts, and he could not help feeling it somehow.

Molly made it her business to hug him every chance she got, and surprisingly his siblings did the same. George even tended to cling to him, Percy wondered why. He should hate him, because if someone deserved to die, it was him, not Fred.

When he found the courage to ask, George told him that being reunited with him made that at least
Fred had died happy, and that he would always be grateful for it.

It was slow, but in the end, Percy remembered what being a Weasley meant.

Arthur embraced his Molly whenever he happened to be around.

In the early mornings, he made love to his wife, almost as usual. Not that they were that kinky, or in need of a desperate outlet, but they had learned the hard way and through two wars now that only tenderness and their physical bond would make the shared pain of lovers bitter-sweet enough to go on—and none the wiser.

They knew they were needed, and they needed each other to be able to do it.

Molly had killed Bellatrix Lestrange, but Arthur had his own demons to deal with, for killing Goyle. He had cast the spells with as much murderous intent as Molly, but he suffered more remorse for waiting for so long to do it than for seizing the opportunity during the battle.

Arthur considered himself a plain, unremarkable man, but he knew well his place in the world as a pillar for his family, and for the values of the Order. Considering what Goyle had done during both wars, it was his own burden to bear to keep wondering how things would have changed if he had been man enough, twenty-four years ago, to rid the world of people like the Death Eater.

The day of Fred's funeral was the one of the bleakest they had ever lived. It was all the more horrible that his was only one of many other funerals and therefore a little hurried. Later, they made a point to go to the Lupins's burial. They had to hear, and to admit to themselves, that they had been lucky to lose only Fred.

The day after, Arthur went back to work at the Ministry. There was no more time to mourn, with a whole country in disarray. He suddenly found himself in charge of a vast new Department of Muggle Affairs and Control of Secrecy but one strangely devoid of nearly half the staff—just like the rest of the Ministry. Many were mourning or at funerals, but even more were arrested or at least suspended. Kingsley Shackelbolt, as Interim Minister, was pleading with other governments for humanitarian help but also for volunteers for the Ministry.

Arthur was not in the mood to enjoy his promotion. The only nice thing was that he went to work with Percy, just like in the early days he had been recruited at the Ministry. The prodigal son was still very much aloof, due to his guilt and the shock of Fred's death on the very moment of their reconciliation, but his father would kill the fatted calf all the same.

Harry always had one official or another asking him questions. A team of counsellors and Unspeakables had been appointed to unravel what he remembered from his death experience and his duel—and to make sure that Voldemort was really gone this time, with no possibility to come back.

He was still too young to realise it, but the Unspeakables had made it their mission to discover if he was tainted by Voldemort's Horcrux and on his way to become the next Dark Lord.

Grateful at the beginning, he was growing resentful by the hour of yet another invasion of his privacy, yet another round of what sounded now like cross-examination.

"Surely, you have other people to question, no? I wasn't the only one to fight in that war."
"Tut-tut! Mr Potter." Unspeakable Croaker sounded like he had attended the same diction classes than Dolores Umbridge. It always made Harry grit his teeth. "We're not questioning you."

"You don't say!"

"You must understand your experience was absolutely unique and we wouldn't want to miss one detail that could help us to tie and eliminate the last remaining grips of You-Know-Who's magic."

"Voldemort."

Harry enjoyed the way the jaw of the condescending prat dropped. "He's dead," he said as if speaking to a small child. "You can say his name."

"I… Uh… You must know it's been decided that calling him… That name, is a bad idea." He straightened, now that he could recite official circulars from the Ministry. "People have suffered from the taboo he placed on them and we haven't finished investigating if there are other consequences still in effect. And it is illogical to honour a criminal like Tom Marvolo Riddle with the name and titles he gave to himself. Ministry officials and the press have been asked to set an example."

"Still afraid to call a spade a spade, aren't you?"

"Mr Potter-"

"Never mind. You can call him Tommy or Snake Face for all I care."

The wizard gave him a small smile, as if Harry had said a not very funny joke but he was willing to humour him. "All right. Are you sure-"

"No."

"You don't know what I was going to ask."

"No, you don't understand. I'm through with your questions. You have the memories of every single one of my encounters with Voldemort," he said, making a point to put as much emphasis as possible on the name, "and we've discussed them ad nauseam. You know what? You can keep them. I'm much better off without them and you can watch them as long and as often as you want."

"It's for your own good, Mr Potter! We may have missed-"

"Nothing," said Harry, standing. "You have missed nothing. You've been interrogating me like a criminal for days now." Before the man could stop him, he marched to the door. "If you want to do it again, you will have to arrest me for good."

Harry left, feeling that he would not put past Croaker to try to have him arrested. At any rate, he expected a Floo Call from the Minister sooner or later, but he would not change his mind. He was fed up being a puppet.

Shacklebolt Flooed in person and Harry was relieved when the Minister supported him. "Don't worry. You've been right to send them packing."

"I thought you were going to lecture me on ungratefulness or I don't know what."

"If anyone is ungrateful, it's the arses who pestered you when you didn't want to."

"It's your Ministry."
"Ha! Ha! Ha! I wish," he said without joy. "The truth is, the Ministry could very well function without a Minister. Some days, I think I'm just there to shoulder the blame so they can go on doing just as they please."

"It was you who insisted that I submit myself to this investigation when you were appointed Minister."

"And you agreed. If I remember correctly, you were just as anxious as me to be sure we were totally free from Voldemort."

"You call him Voldemort."

Shacklebolt acted sheepish. "Don't tell my staff."

They both laughed.

"I won't. It's a pity, you know? It all went well in the beginning. They really helped me sort out all the mess that was in my mind and suddenly, it all went awry."

So, Kingsley explained. There were so many people suffering from various types of psychological traumas that there just was not enough counsellors available. They were literally tied in St Mungo's by the flow of emergencies. Those appointed to Harry were so badly needed there that they soon quitted the evaluation team, after reporting that Harry did not suffer from major traumas, and that what he mostly needed to heal was time.

Unfortunately, without the counsellors to keep them in line, the prying of the Unspeakables became less and less understanding and more and more inquisitive.

§§§

They were all stalked by journalists whenever they appeared in public. Some were like locusts and did not respect any one, any thing or any occasion. No wonder tempers flared quickly, the emotions were still raw. The Burrow felt even more than usual like a haven in a mad, mad world.

After Charlie punched one of them in the face and barely avoided being dragged to Azkaban by Aurors, Percy proposed they agree to one interview each and negotiate to be left in peace after. They would just have to let him act as their common public relations agent. He had learned under Pius Thicknesse how to deal with the press.

The first to agree was Charlie. Not that he cared for the bad press, but he was eager to leave for Romania and he did not want to leave a mess for his family to deal with. The head of the Reserve would not hold his work for him forever, and dealing with Dragons was much more gratifying than dealing with the press or with the unwelcome attention he received whenever he went out. If he had been an attention-seeker, he would have chosen another kind of job to begin with.

Of course, the sharks would not be satisfied with only one interview with Harry Potter. So, Percy made him agree to a Press conference that would also accommodate foreign journalists, although he very nearly climbed walls when he was first told.

Uncomfortable as always with speaking about himself, Harry ended downplaying his own role as much as he could and speaking of Severus Snape much more than he intended. He was not over the shock of Snape's memories and it showed.

He could not call back his words anyway, when he had taunted Voldemort about Snape's real loyalties for all to hear, and he was no match for the likes of Rita Skeeter. The journalist managed to
extract from him enough details to draw a nauseating image of Snape, of his endless devotion to his mother ("from the very moment Riddle threatened her, that's what you told him, Mr Potter, isn't it?"), and of his own change of heart about the man who had been his "guardian angel" as she finally wrote.

Interestingly, it deflected for a time the hysteria around himself, and he soon learned to speak of the other heroes to get rid of personal questions.

For a time, it also generated a renewed interest in the fate of the *Most Hated Hero of Britain* as one foreign paper dared call Snape just after the fall of Voldemort. It was really a pity that the man was in St Mungo's and that the hospital could only inform that he still had a "very reserved prognosis of life."

Very soon, due to the lack of fresh news, Severus Snape was forgotten again - as good as dead.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I am publishing this story on FF.net at the same time. I have decided to publish the full, unedulcorated version here. It concerns only the present chapter, where we learn of Hermione's rape, torture and subsequent trauma. If you fear triggers and still wish to read the story, I suggest you rather read the FF.net version where I removed the hardest part (Hermione's memories of the rape and how she self-harms). I know people who have never experienced that kind of trauma may find it "mild" compared to some graphic descriptions you can read elsewhere, but I prefer to go for safety.

This is the last chapter that partially benefited from the beta work of FionaLaFleur. Sadly, she could not go on.

Quotes in bold italic are from DH.

What did they aim for when they missed your heart?

(Within Temptation, A shot in the Dark)

When the war trials began, Hermione and Ron were called as witnesses several times, sometimes together with Harry, sometimes on their own.

Whether they were both to speak or not, they would come together and sit together, often linking hands out of habit and comfort. People associated them together, but nobody knew that as clingy as they seemed to be, neither of them was able to move further than their brief kiss in the heat of battle.

People were often surprised to see how Hermione, who looked rather subdued most of the time, could get aggressive and cutting in the courtroom. The Prophet's correspondents several times had quite a field day portraying her as a scary, vengeful woman who consistently refused any mark of sympathy and regret but always went straight to the point in a rather clinical manner.

§§§

At the time, Snape's name appeared only in such boring publications as the Minutes of the Wizengamot. He was perpetually cited in the many trials organised for the remaining Death Eaters and accomplices. He was still under a pending investigation for murder and war crimes himself, but his crucial contribution to the war was a truth universally acknowledged and used as evidence by both prosecution and defense.

Only Draco and Lucius Malfoy benefited of it.

Narcissa Malfoy had already been exonerated on Harry's testimony that she lied to Voldemort and saved his life, and by the fact that she had never been a Death Eater herself but obliged to play hostess while a prisoner in her own home.

Draco was judged not as an effective Death Eater, despite the remnants of the Dark Mark on his forearm, but as an accomplice. His lawyer easily proved that he had been forced to take the Dark
Mark while he was still a minor and only acted under duress, and to save his parents' lives. She called Harry Potter to witness for the defence, and he testified with rather mixed feelings.

He despised Draco but he could not forget that, without Snape's timely intervention, he would have been a murderer at sixteen, when he stood and watched the blond's blood flowing out of him because of the Sectumsempra curse he had so imprudently used.

He meant to simply state that Draco could not bring himself to kill Dumbledore even when urged by the other Death Eaters and that he had refused to give him away at Malfoy Manor… But the Head Auror was a little too condescending. He was too intent on humiliating a Malfoy. And he obviously carried a grudge against Severus Snape.

One thing leading to another, Harry ended hotly defending Severus Snape from being a murderer, and Draco with him.

He had no choice at that point but to offer the evidence of Snape's memories to the War High Court, since they proved both his points: that Snape had not murdered Dumbledore but obeyed his requests and that Dumbledore thought Draco worth saving.

The judges were more than willing to call a halt to the procedure so that the Pensieves could be fetched. They eagerly entered them to watch Dumbledore extracting from Snape the promise to kill him. That it created a sensation is an understatement. Somehow, word had gotten out about the event and every single Wizengamot member managed to enter the courtroom at one time or another and to use the Pensieves.

Most remembered Dumbledore as a flamboyant, eccentric but much too clairvoyant wizard. They could not help shivering when they saw him smiling as he was told he had one year at most to live or when they heard the callously indifferent way in which he considered his own coming death – "well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward".

They watched him ensnare Severus Snape, wrapping his will around the younger man's uneasy loyalty... discussing Voldemort's plans... Draco's expected failure to punish his father... squeezing... getting Snape's promise to protect the students... squeezing... "You must kill me." Letting go a little, accepting sarcasm to give some relief oxygen to his prey... discussing his soul like the weather... squeezing... guilting him into doing it... squeezing... playing on his affection, pity or simple human decency...

They all felt very grateful they were not Severus Snape when his blue eyes pierced Snape... as though the soul they discussed was visible to him. None was surprised in the end when Snape finally nodded his reluctant agreement, but all felt the building of the tragedy when Dumbledore merely said, "Thank you, Severus..." looking all the while like a kneazle who has found the cream.

Draco was almost forgotten in the process, and his lawyer artfully used it to downplay his importance, his role and his culpability. She had managed to negotiate an abandonment of pursuits by Madam Rosmerta and Katie Bell's family before the trial, with a handsome compensation for them.

For extenuating circumstances and amends offered to the victims, the help given to Harry Potter and his final defection from the Dark side at the final battle, Draco was freed, the few weeks he had spent in Azkaban covering his penalty. He also got the routine sentence of eighteen months of community service.

To his mother's dismay, he elected to help at Hogwarts and work with the rebuilding workers. She
did not realise for a long time that her son had chosen what she considered degrading manual work as a chance to escape her anxious mollycoddling—and to atone for his guilt for introducing the Death Eaters into the school.

Lucius managed to claim mitigating circumstances, thanks to a brief message from Snape with dosing instructions for various pain relievers and to Healer Fleming's documented evidence on his poor state of health when he was arrested. He had been severely incapacitated due to the after effects of torture at Voldemort's hands and thus had been unable to take any active part in the war after his 'release' from Azkaban.

Combined with evidence from the other Death Eaters that the Malfoys had indeed been little more than despised prisoners in their own home – to the point that his wand was confiscated by Tom Riddle himself, it paved the way for his lawyer to plead for relax on the grounds that he had already been judged and condemned as a Death Eater; that he couldn't be condemned a second time for the same facts; that there was no evidence he had committed any other unlawful act; that he was wandless until the battle of Hogwarts and did not take part in the fighting, but left with his wife as soon as they found their son. She also claimed Lucius' steady friendship with Severus Snape as well as his efforts to save the great wizard's life as moral evidence of his true loyalties.

Yet, in the end, Malfoy's sentence was the most political to date.

The War High Court agreed that he could not be judged again for the same facts but that he had to finish serving his time in Azkaban that had been cut short by Voldemort seizing the Ministry.

It was really meant to get rid of an embarrassing man to whom every single one of them had been associated or ingratiated to at one time or another.

Lucius did not show any kind of frustration while listening to the sentence. His lawyer sported that infuriating smirk that made those who knew her deeply uncomfortable. It meant she still had something up her sleeve.

As soon as the complete grounds for the decision had been registered, legal minutiae enabled Madam Yaxley to petition for the annulment of the sentence due to procedural errors. She produced the proofs that all the appropriate red tape for grace and anticipated liberation had been duly and regularly filed, accepted and registered by the Ministry in 1997, just before Minister Scrimgeour's murder.

It sounded all very suspect—as it indeed was—but Lucius paid his lawyer all year round just to make sure every bit of legality was proof tight in all his businesses and dealings, and she did it. Even if Voldemort had broken Azkaban's security to free him and a few others, favours called here and there had made it all right and tight at the time. You could not tell it was anyone's fault that a typing error on the date had not been spotted but written out again and again before being fully endorsed by all parties concerned.

The minor officials who had treated Lucius' case at the time could only agree to the validity of the procedure and fight tooth and nail to defend themselves at the same time. They could only be grateful that Madam Yaxley –that old fox!– had the foresight to insist and make it appear that it was under Scrimgeour's administration that Lucius had been graced, because now it saved their own necks. No one wanted to be questioned ever again about the way they had done their job under Pius Thicknesse, Voldemort's puppet Minister.

So, the administrative machinery complied, to Minister Shacklebolt's absolute disgust. A handful of people were transferred in less sensitive jobs. Lucius left Azkaban after another few weeks, as the Ministry dragged their feet, vainly trying to find a way out of their own failure. It was very discreetly
engineered by all parties concerned. The Ministry did not relish the idea of a scandal over procedural errors and Lucius very much preferred to play least in sight for as long as he would be able to. He had had enough of the limelight for a very, very long time.

§§§

There were rumours that the students who had missed their seventh year’s schooling or the exams for fighting would be awarded Passing NEWTs calculated on their OWLs and the best marks of their last three years schooling on demand. Those who elected to return to Hogwarts and take the courses and final exam would all get a Ministry scholarship.

Ron was relieved he wouldn't have to return to the boredom of school. Harry would have refused to return because the present Hogwarts was only a place of death and mourning for him now. Hermione was positive that she would go to finish her schooling and take the exams. Nobody was surprised.

One evening, Hermione and Ron went alone to the garden. It was Hermione who took the initiative, and Ron was slightly apprehensive. Insensitive he might be – she had repeated it often enough to his face– but he was not such an oaf that he did not know that she had trouble getting over her torture and worrying herself sick over her parents. That she meant to go to Australia to look for them, he had already guessed. For the rest, it was up to her. If she wanted him to come, he would come.

But she wanted to go alone. "I don't know how they will react, but whether they forgive me or not, you'll be in the way for what we'll have to say each other."

"I can't help worrying, you know." He sighed. "I shouldn't have left you and Harry. I don't like the idea of you going and dealing with your parents all alone."

"They're my parents. I have to deal with them alone."

He took her hand and kissed her fingers. "I'd like them to be my parents too one day."

Her eyes were bright with tears now. She smiled but took her hand away. "I... I'd like it too, Ron, but I need time. I love you, but I'm not ready for anything right now."

"I know. I haven't pressed you for anything and I won't. You'll set the pace in this relationship."

She gave him her brightest smile. "Thank you. I need to clear things with my parents first, before thinking of me."

She hugged him, and he returned it with much feeling. She cried a little, but she also laughed, so he supposed it was all right.

As they returned to the house, Hermione announced she was leaving for Australia by the Monday Portkey but that she would be back at worst by the end of August to return to Hogwarts for her final year.

§§§

Hermione: August-December 1998

Hermione stepped carefully in the hall of 12, Grimmauld Place, wary about catching Mrs Black's attention.

She hurried to her bedroom. Harry had warned her that the house would probably be empty when
she arrived, and she was glad of it. She was just as glad that Kreacher did not deign acknowledge her presence. She was so tired and felt like she had cried all the way from Australia, though she knew she had not. It was her heart that cried and her mind, not her body.

Hermione dropped her bag, put herself to bed removing only her shoes, and fell straight away to sleep.

When she woke, it was to the heavenly smell of hot cocoa. She found both Harry and Ron grinning at her. It was Ron who was slowly moving the steaming cup under her nose to tempt her.

She grinned too, instantly awake, and grabbed the cup.

The reunion was just what they had thought it would be, with lots of catching up to do. Still, there was not much hugging. Hermione was strangely reticent to allow close physical contact. Ron did not know right now how to act towards her, but she was the same with Harry. So it was not just him - and he had promised to be patient.

There was nothing left for her in Australia, she told them in the definitive tone they knew too well to argue. She could not revive her parents’ memories. Mr and Mrs Wilkins had been sorry to see the last of that nice English girl they had befriended two months ago, but she had to go back home in utter failure.

Harry and Ron understood her sorrow and made it their business to prove her that she still had a family, with them. Still, being boys, they did not really know what to say or how to react when she came home the next week with her hair cut. They prudently elected to say nothing, although Ron felt unaccountably sad that she had done it, and that she had not told him beforehand.

By the time Ginny, Molly and Fleur saw her, she had grown totally comfortable with it and had irrefutable arguments, like a much easier grooming and the economy in expensive hair care products like Sleakeasy.

Molly looked her over with wise, sad eyes but just hugged her and said it became her since she was not a child any more.

Fleur and Ginny mostly insisted that she had to use light make-up now, because with such a neat haircut she needed to be a little more sophisticated. She shrugged but under their tutelage and persistence, she accepted to add it to her daily routine. She liked routine. It helped to cope with things while avoiding thinking, and it had the added bonus to fool the boys’ eyes.

Harry and Ron had comfortably settled in Grimmauld Place as only a pair of young bachelors can when they escape the over-attentive care of a Molly Weasley, with the added bonus of Kreacher to hold house. With Hermione back, however temporarily, it felt almost like the old days of the trio at Hogwarts.

Except Ron and Harry worried seeing how thin Hermione was, with huge dark marks under her eyes, though she dismissed it as temporary and due to her journey. Ginny would have said the proper word was gaunt, but then the boys did not see the truth hidden under her comfy clothes and Ginny now shared Harry’s room when she came to Grimmauld Place.

Except Ron and Hermione noticed how serious Harry was. When he thought nobody was watching and let his guard down, he looked lost and worn. Auror training was just fine, something of a logical ambition and conclusion for him as well as for Ron, and everybody said they excelled at it, but Harry sometimes reflected that it was not as if he had much choice for another career. He had mentioned once that he would like to play professional Quidditch, just to be immediately censured and called to
order because he would be plain sitting ducks in the confined area of a Quidditch field where vengeful supporters of Voldemort could hide amongst hundreds of people.

Ron, dear Ron, seemed to be pulling ahead, maturing and blossoming now that he was recognised as a war hero and a young Auror with great potential, and not simply the youngest, insignificant son of the Weasleys or Harry Potter's shadow.

Unfortunately, the other two felt left behind. Sure, they were happy for him, but it did not prevent them from feeling envious when they saw how easy and natural it came to him.

But then, in spite of the mourning that had hit the Weasleys and was not over, Ron was the only one of them who still had a true family and the luxury to feel fed up at times at his mother's fussing, at his father's still treating him as a child or at his siblings' interference.

For all the assurances of their welcome at the Weasleys, Harry and Hermione really only had their triad for close family. They both were orphans now and tended to cling to each other – more than they did during the weeks after Ron left them alone with Slytherin's locket.

None of them admitted that they would cast silencing charms when they went to bed, or seemed to notice that the others did too. Yes, the three of them cast the spells. The boys knew that Hermione did because they had tried to check on her on her return from Australia when she always looked so down. They found her room guarded as tightly as their tent when they were hiding from the Death Eaters.

Hermione and Ron had found one morning when he overslept that Harry cast them even when Ginny did not come.

But neither Hermione nor Harry ever thought to check about Ron. He was always so cheerful, no?

Yet, for all his outward stolidity, Ron had his own bad memories.

He still had to get over his guilt about abandoning Harry and Hermione during the quest for the Horcruxes. He spent solitary hours reliving the horror of facing the locket-induced hallucinations and, even more often, hearing Hermione yelling under torture. Strong noises and high pitched voices made him wince now—though he never told anyone but the Auror team counsellor.

He also had his own nightmares. He would wake up, paralysed with his own helplessness to rescue Hermione and by the memory of her look of terror as Fenrir Greyback pawed her in lust. He had tried to imagine what had been done to her. Could his imagination be worse than the evasive testimony she'd given them? He always wondered, what with all they heard and witnessed as Aurors about the deliberate policy of rape as an arm of war against muggleborn females, and the tangible proof of Bellatrix Lestrange's perversion on her arm...

He could never approach her any more without considering her as very fragile china.

There was nothing about it in Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches. Disgusted at his own teenage delusions and vaguely shameful, he had throw the well-worn book in the paper basket of the Junior Aurors' office.

When he returned from lunch, the book had vanished.

§§§

Hermione had not been able to restore her parents' memory. They had settled too well in their new existence, making a host of new, significant memories that took roots in place of the Obliviated ones.
She had been too thorough when locking away the old ones.

Even when she had been able to restore a very few of them, it had only left the Wilkins confused, with what they thought were shared dreams and the uncanny feeling that something ominous and supernatural was happening to them. When she left, they had reached the conclusion that they had been "warned" and had to give a religious meaning to their lives.

Hermione had immediately realised that trying to go further into their blended memories could only result in psychiatric troubles. So, her parents would remain forever oblivious of the daughter who had tried to save them—who had indeed saved them. The past still belonged to her, but their arms would never make her feel protected again. How delusional the thought had been with Voldemort roaming the country – but it always comforted her then.

She had gone to Australia hoping to get her parents back, and that it would help her to go on. She had been able to keep at bay most of the shock waves of the last days of the war with that last hope—that Mum and Dad would make it all right for her again.

Instead, she came back with the additional heartache to know that they were forever lost for her, and that it was no one's fault but hers.

Now she was back, she had panic attacks. She knew she was paranoid, that there were no gangs of Death Eaters or Snatchers ready to pounce on her around every corner, but she was frightened to go out.

She tried Diagon Alley, telling herself nothing could happen in such a public, frequented place—but people recognised her, pointed at her, saluted her, even came to speak and thank her. Parents would encourage their children to kiss her. She tried to stand it, to feel the warmth of it and to convince herself she was secure but instead she felt she was being spied on. When she was in a crowd, she imagined they were going to suddenly close on her, that she was going to be seized and pawed all over, that they would insult her, caress her—all over again. She had been threatened and mistreated almost every minute during their brief capture and she could still feel hands on her at the mere memory.

She tried to go to muggle London where nobody would recognise her, but she inevitably had to take the bus or the underground. If someone sat beside her, she would begin to sweat and to shake, frightened that she would be touched.

And there were the nightmares, when she would wake up screaming… Screaming in her head because she did not think she really did more than cry and whimper like the coward she was but do not take chances, the boys must not know—she always checked and rechecked her silencing wards, trying to delay the time to go back to bed and remember.

Because worse than the nightmares, she had the memories.

_The snatcher binds her with her own scarf that he somehow carries around his neck._

_It must be a sign that she's dreaming—another Horcrux induced nightmare. Or is it that her fate is sealed for all eternity for this very moment? Because he is pawing her and it feels just too real, and she can't stop it. Nothing has ever prepared her for that, even if she has always known intellectually that it could very well happen, because there's a war on and they are running around Death Eaters, and she’s just another mudblood—but she's paralysed._
Suddenly, he rubs against her, he rubs right on her—she can't even think the word... through her jeans, and she jolts back. It's terrifying because for a brief instant it sends a heat in her belly and along her spine but it is not true, she can't be feeling that, she doesn't want to feel that—and she doesn't feel it any more. Just fear, as she's told they won't kill her if she's a good girl.

The fear turns to full terror as he says she will like it with a real wizard. No, no, no! It's not true. Not him, not ever. He's not Ron. It's just a nightmare. She has saved herself and waited for Ron for such a long time. The boys will arrive in the nick of time, as always. Harry will tear the locket off, and it will end, and...

And the man, the one they call Scabior, rubs himself on her again and says that she's excited, that she likes it, like the little mudblood slut that she is but no! It's not true. She's just shaking like a leaf. His mates propel her on her knees and hold her painfully tight while he orders her to suck him.

It can't be true. It can't be happening to her, but it is. For the first time, she sees an erection. He stinks of sweat and urine, and of something male and wild that is terrifying. She feels like retching, but he pulls her hair violently and drags her to him. She's so afraid—so afraid. Everything is wrong. She doesn't understand what she's told, even if she will later remember the crude words and the threats to behave, and play the scene in her mind over and over again.

The world seems to recede around them. There is just that man left, that piece of a man in front of her, and she's there, and she will surely die. She feels like a puppet on strings when he pulls again much harder on her hair and orders her to mind her teeth or else... And she does it, and she doesn't know how to do it, so of course she chokes and gags and they laugh. Tears are running down her cheeks but she doesn't feel them. Just the shame, and the awful disgust, and the fear.

Suddenly, he orders her to stop and he jerks her head away.

She's being held straight against a tree. She doesn't realise how, but her trousers and knickers are down her ankles and his fingers are inside her now, and it burns—it burns awful. She's so terrified she thinks she will pass out, but of course, she doesn't pass out.

She's just there, unable to feel or to think or to do anything. She knows she should be fighting, screaming but she just can't. Time has stopped. There is only this nightmare here and now. She doesn't even feel disgusted when he spits several times in his hand and coats himself with saliva because she's not really there and she doesn't feel anything any more.

But she's really there and she cries out as he grabs her and penetrates her by force. She hears herself pleading him to stop, because it burns and hurts ceaselessly as he thrusts again and again on raw flesh, though it mercifully ends rather quickly. She doesn't know it, but it's not comfortable to rape a virgin.

She watches him take a few steps back and wince a little as he readjusts his trousers over his own sore flesh, but he still looks smugly down at her bloodied thighs. He laughs and says she's done well to save her virginity for him, and that he's given her good seeds.

Her mind doesn't register his words, because another comes to her and it begins all over again.

She feels like a spectator to her own violation. She hysterically realises that she doesn't suffer so much from the others because his semen has lubricated her.

When Greyback arrives with his other acolytes after interrogating the boys and trying to determine if Harry is Harry, he just grins sardonically at his smug snatchers and sniffs her greedily. He sneers, licks his lips at her and only mouths, “later.”
The terror of being impregnated by one of them comes only when they arrive at Malfoy Manor, when she is briefly reunited with Harry and Ron because she feels so dirty... But she knows that she can't ever tell them—even if she's dying inside to be held and to cry and scream her anguish and her hurt.

Greyback waits for his time with pure sadism, pawing her and bartering with Bellatrix—but in the end it is the madwoman who makes her suffer and scream when she pins her to the floor for a “girl to girl” interrogation.

She would turn and turn in her bed in utter terror, unable to shut them out, covered in iced sweat. The echo of the Lestrange madwoman roaring wouldn't go, nor the memory of her spluttering into her face, and the pain – the pain of the Cruciatus and of the marking – the pain she could not take, begging, screaming, pissing herself on top of the blood and semen still all over her knickers. Thank God they never had enough to eat or her bowels would have let out too.

It was strange how the shame of soiling herself, feeling and smelling it was even worse than that of being raped or branded like a slave.

She touched the scar on her arm – the tangible proof it really happened.

Sometimes, she would plant herself in front of her mirror and watch it, tracing it with her finger—unable to believe the pain was over, even if she was forever marked as an Untermensch. The worst part was that most wizard-born could not even understand the reference to Nazi beliefs. It proved that she did not really belong to either worlds.

Then, she would take her wand and try to burn the scar. Of course, it had been made with a cursed knife, so nothing could make it go away but she had to try. She had to try... and the searing physical pain kept the anguish at bay for a while. Afterwards, she always felt even more ashamed because of her weakness. She always healed herself carefully before leaving her room.

At times, she poured alcohol on her sex because somehow she had to feel the pain to prove to herself that she hadn't dreamt, that it really happened... and that her female parts weren't totally dead.

She wondered what it was in her that would attract predators and make her unable to stop them.

Viktor had been kind and considerate but despite his self control his new-found manhood was exacerbated by the stress of the Tri Wizard Tournament and had been too frightening in the end for a totally innocent teenager. It had sent her right back to Ron and Harry after the excitement of a few kisses, just before it escalated in the heavy petting she was not yet ready for. Viktor had genuinely offered friendship afterwards but Ron's jealousy had not helped her to put things into perspective, not with all the violence and tragedy catching up and Cedric Diggory's death.

Cormac McLaggen had been his usual selfish being during their brief date. When he had tried to snog her under the mistletoe, she'd felt nothing but repulsion. She managed to hex him with a Vomiting Hex and he had left hurriedly, only to throw on Professor Snape's shoes. She had always felt nervous around the complacent idiot after that. She understood why now. He was that sort of boy – of man.

The Snatchers, Greyback, Bellatrix, they had treated her like a chattel. Scabior had treated her like a whore but even worse, he had told her on the way to Malfoy Manor that she would learn to like it – that she would not always be frigid.
Not bloody likely.

She imagined there was a pattern, a spiralling down, worse and worse and that she was hopeless—that it was her fault somehow, and that she would never be able to fit in and to escape the taint of being a Mudblood and a female—and a slut as they had called her. They were right, she had not fought. She must somehow deserve what happened.

Even Ron was not really interested in her, she was sure. She had waited years for him, taking him as the measure of her own worthiness after he had managed to accept her in first year, because he was a pureblood, born and raised in this world.

She had put up with his selfishness time and again, because after the troll incident in first year, she was so grateful for his acceptance, and for Harry's of course—but Harry was as much an outsider in the magical world as she was.

She needed Ron's admiration for her intellect even if it was only for the sake of her doing half his work for him. She needed his down-to-earth approach to life because nothing else made her feel more like she belonged in the magical world.

She loved that when everything got wrong around them, he managed to be strong and she admired him for it. But she also had the constant, nagging feeling that she was just a disposable kind of friend for him. Time and again, he put his pride, his prejudices and every selfish need of his over their friendship.

He never hesitated to berate her and even if he had never told one himself, Hogwarts had taught her soon enough that when you are a Mudblood, you have to take racist and cultural jokes with a smile even from your friends, and that you will always have to apologize for something in the end.

If Harry had not been so lost and troubled, she might have walked away for good after Ron did not react to her disastrous date with Cormac McLaggen. Ron had taken to Lavender as if she did not exist and made fun of the way she was always over-eager in class. The Slytherins' nastiness and jibes had never cut her down as cruelly as Ron's top-on-the-spot mockery. Ron may have been the butt of the twins' jokes, it did not make him any more sensitive or more empathetic.

To top it all, he had hardly hesitated to walk away when the Horcrux made him believe she was siding with Harry, and sleeping with him behind his back. He had simply abandoned her.

When she had those gloomy thoughts, she remembered that it did not happen once or twice but repeatedly. He would no doubt do so again—every time it was convenient. She certainly was not worthy enough... Worthy of more.

She was disposable for those she cared for, and she was just an insufferable swot or a Mudblood for all the others.

She was drowning in depression and did not know it.

§§§

She went back to Hogwarts for her final year and felt utterly out of place.

Hogwarts in the process of rebuilding did not look like good old Hogwarts any more, even if Ginny was delighted to have her. The youngest Weasley tried her best to make her belong to the close-knit band of survivors of Dumbledore's Army, despite the awed looks other students sent Hermione. The Trio was already a legend at the school. What is more, Hermione herself had mentally parted ways with Hogwarts after Dumbledore's death just as if she had already graduated.
In the other students’ mind, she was a graduate. A member of Harry Potter’s team. A war heroin—and they looked up to her. It certainly did not help her feel home again.

They all were war veterans but their experiences were too different.

Thankfully, Ginny could be depended on to tear her out of the library where she spent all her free time, feverishly accumulating knowledge as if it could fill her to the brim, and take the place of feelings. She would drag her to Hogsmeade, force her to socialize.

Poppy Pomfrey had a special routine for the likes of her and fed most students with Calming Draughts and various sleep potions.

Many had nightmares of Snape walking about Hogwarts as a vengeful god of death who did not always keep his wild beasts at bay. Indeed, Alecto and Amycus Carrow were often described by the younger students as unpredictable predators. Usually, the Headmaster stepped in and called them back to heel… But sometimes they roamed free and woe betide the student who crossed their path!

There were so many students who cried or moaned in their sleep, who could not sleep or eat, who had panic attacks in random places or at random times that, in the end, the Board of Governors and the Ministry allowed the students’ food to be laced with restorative and soothing potions. Parents had to be informed, of course, and where sent prescriptions to pursue the cure at home for those who Poppy estimated would need it.

Unfortunately, the letters and vials sent through muggle post for discretion sat unheeded in the Grangers’ letterbox. Hermione had not told the staff about her parents, and if there was a time she would avoid her parents’ home like the plague, it would be Christmas.

§§§

She went to the Burrow of course. They managed to live up to the usual Holiday spirit, and there was fun, and nice food, and lively parties, and Quidditch free for all with Ginny and the boys while she shouted encouragements to every one safely from below.

Once, Ron pinned her on the couch, and tickled mercilessly until she laughed and laughed and begged him to stop… But he tickled her again and the laughter took a hysterical quality, and she panted a little too much—and then she wanted to yell but choked, and Ron stopped abruptly. Ginny conjured a glass of water, and Harry patted her on the back while she was coughing, choking and crying in panic. Ron asked in anguish, "what did I do?" They were all baffled by her reaction.

Arthur Weasley, mercifully oblivious to what was happening, called from afar to send the boys on one errand or another. Hermione quickly composed herself and set to speak with Ginny about what they would wear for the Order’s New Year party at Grimmauld Place and the coming Ministry New Year Ball where they were all invited, what kind of make-up would best compliment their outfit—and all the usual gossip about order members.
Chapter 5

Take all I know, turn it into darkened shadows

(Blackmore's night, gone with the wind)

Hermione: December 1998 – May 1999

It was the middle of the afternoon and everybody went out for Quiddich once more, except Hermione, who said she was tired—tired of attention, in fact—and Molly, who had to cast Reparo on too many clothes and shoes and things, even if she would have none of Hermione's help.

Hermione was buried in Arithmancy homework when Molly entered her room and looked her over with a sad smile. "I'm sorry, I never noticed how thin you are."

"Since we seem to be eating all day long, I rather think I will be much less thin when I return to Hogwarts," joked Hermione.

Instead of answering in kind, Molly surprised her by sitting beside her, and shifting subtly like she didn't know what to say.

To see Molly Weasley at a loss for words was rather unsettling, to say the least.

"Arthur tells me he witnessed something disturbing this morning."

As Hermione just kept watching her, uncomprehending, she specified, "on the couch, with Ron."

The girl's eyes fell to the floor and goosebumps erupted all over her, and she prayed she was not blushing or disgracing herself by shaking, because she felt like she was.

"Oh! This is so difficult! Hermione... Arthur has had many occasions to witness that kind of situation when a woman... When she's had bad experiences with men."

No. Please. No. I don't want to have this talk. Hermione frantically tried to keep her composure, but Molly did not miss the trapped, panicked look that passed in her eyes before she forced herself to speak in a light tone. "I don't have any trouble with Ron. Honestly. It was just fun. Totally innocent fun. Please, do not imagine-"

"Of course, it isn't Ron! It is about you, Hermione!" cried the elder witch. "It's been months and you hardly babble any more about your books. You're so thin I could see through you. We hardly notice you because you try so very hard not to be noticed, burying yourself in school work more than ever... And in these clothes that are too big for you."

She took a hard breath and looked expectantly at Hermione. As she did not look like she was going to say anything else soon, but kept looking warily at her hands, Molly went on. "Everybody has had a hard time, but something is very wrong with you, and let me tell you it won't get better if you bottle it up. It will only get worse."

But the girl still did not look up or volunteer any word. "I have lived through two wars, fighting for the Order. We joined, Arthur and me, shortly before my brothers' death. Before I was sworn in, I was made to understand the risks. The risk in fighting but above all, the other risks: to be caught and tortured, to be broken—to be raped. It was Mad-Eye Moody who did the talk, and I can assure you
he didn't sugar coat the pill for us. I understood and I signed for it. We all did, all Order Members. You... You children, you've just been thrown into it."

Molly took a deep breath and pursued, "I... I've gone through everything they warned me against. I know how it feels."

Finally, the older woman's eyes met the startled ones of the younger.

"I know how it happens... How it feels when you're powerless under the spells and the torture and when a stranger makes what he wants with your body while the others hold you, and laugh, waiting for their turn of fun. If it hadn't been for my team partner who refused to shut up and had us both tended and cared for... And sharing feelings... I may not be here today. I felt so lost... And so dirty! I just wanted to curl up and die. I'm sure you know the feeling."

Her eyes still glued to Molly's, Hermione experienced for the very first time that brief, intense moment when two survivors suddenly bare themselves in front of each other, admitting to the same hurt, which instantly brings tears to the eyes, tightening to the chest and bitter communion to the souls... Before they shut the door again and go on with their lives.

"I felt so dirty," Molly repeated, "and so empty. I thought my life was finished... That Arthur would leave me... That I would leave him first... That I would never feel anything good again. I thought I wasn't worthy to tend to my children because... Because..." She stopped to exhale loudly. "I was pregnant at the time and I admit it made me careless. It was my fault we were caught."

Hermione frowned, wondering which child she had been pregnant with. "Percy?" she asked. There was no denying he was different from his siblings.

Molly shook her head. "No, it's not Percy. I..." She took a big breath. "Did you ever wonder why there was a gap between Charlie's birth and Percy's?"

Hermione could only squeeze Molly's hand, unable to speak. She already knew what the older witch was going to say.

"They were so brutal, I lost the baby." They both closed their eyes. Hermione listened, even if she wanted at times to put her hands on her ears - but there is certain fascination in horror and she needed to hear what happened next, but also that it ended well.

"And I've lived through it, and Arthur didn't think less of me or love me less. If anything, he's loved me more. He's always been so patient with me, even when it seemed over for a time and I would suddenly panic again and tell him to... To leave me alone."

After an awkwardpause, she tried to smile. "Now, I am proud of my life. You can live through it too. I will help you and I will be proud of you. I will..." Suddenly, she was hugging Hermione fiercely. "Oh! Minnie," she said, using the pet name for the first time, "I love you so much!"

Hermione began to cry. Molly was encouraging her to let go now. She cried and cried, until Molly began to softly ask if she wanted to tell her.

Once Hermione finally began, she could not stop speaking and hugging Molly back like a lifeline, as she had longed to be able to speak to her own mother and to hold her, and be held by her.

She spoke haltingly at first and then words pressed out of her like the release of a flood: about the Snatchers, about Scabior, and the humiliation of being pawed by Greyback in front of Ron and Harry, and Bellatrix and the torture, and the blood, and the Mudblood brand, and the panic attacks, and the nightmares, and her parents... And just everything.
She was sobbing against Molly's chest, embraced in Molly's arms—and Molly was sobbing just as hard and rocking the both of them.

"Oh! My! That's why I didn't want you, children, in the Order... You were already in enough danger... I wanted you safe... You, the boys... I wanted you safe..."

Sometime later, the Quidditch troupe came home. When Arthur burst in the kitchen to catch a hurried snack before rushing to yet another emergency meeting, he found them busy cooking. Everything seemed all right, except for suspect red rims around their eyes, but it might have been the onions.

Molly simply nodded to her husband in answer to a mute question and when he kissed her goodbye, she whispered, "you can tell Minerva."

§§§

An appointment had been taken in St Mungo's with Healer Alfred Constanz.

As Hermione wondered at the foreign sounding name, Professor McGonagall had explained that he was German. Dumbledore had met him during the war against Grindelwald and they became friends. She knew his wife had been killed and that they had both been specialized in curse breaking and counselling war casualties and victims of aggressions. He also belonged to various muggle Societies of Psychosomething and had worked with people like Sigmund Freud, Marie Bonaparte and many others since.

When Voldemort and those who were then the Knights of Walpurgis began their terrorist attacks, Dumbledore had contacted him again. St Mungo's had no real experience with the extensive breaking of dark curses. There was no counselling either, despite the growing number of people who suffered all kinds of violence, and they needed someone to train volunteers.

Constanz was willing to come to Britain and finally made another life there for himself. He headed the Dark Curses, War Traumatism and Incurables Division, which was a secured part of the Spell Damage Ward in St Mungo's. He also worked with the Ministry, acting as an expert with Magical Law Enforcement and the Wizengamot.

Hermione entered the Headmistress' office. She was still nervous at the memory of the meeting there with Molly, the Headmistress and Madam Pomfrey. She'd been glad for once to let Molly do most of the talking for her and tell about the rape and the extent of Bellatrix Lestrange's torture. That she had met with only kindness and understanding didn't mean she felt as much at ease with the other two witches as with Molly.

She started at the sight of Professor McGonagall with her hat and cloak on, waiting for her.

"Surely, you didn't believe that I would let you go all alone?"

As Hermione bit her lip, not knowing how to tell her that she would in fact very much prefer to go alone, the Headmistress said gently, "Hermione... Child, it is not safe nor right for you to go by yourself. And we don't want anybody else to know, I'm sure."

Hermione nodded reluctantly.

"I will be there for you all along. Well, not during the actual sessions with the healer of course, but I'll not let you travel alone to or back from St Mungo's. I know how... Emotional you'll be about most sessions. I had need of counselling at a point in my life too. I remember very well how it feels."

She insisted, "I'm on your side and I understand everything. I'm a woman and I've seen two wars."
Feeling Hermione wavering but still unconvinced and yes, slightly hostile, Minerva sighed inwardly. There we go.

"I know Molly told you what happened to her and to her partner?"

Hermione just nodded.

"And it helped you to know that she could understand what happened because she had experienced something similar?" Hermione nodded again, still tight-lipped.

The prim Headmistress told casually as if commenting on the weather, "we were teaming together."

§§§

Healer Constanz was exactly what you would expect a German wizard to be: tall, well-built, clear-eyed, he was blond—or rather had been, there were more streaks of pure white than of actual blond in his hair since the man was clearly well over a hundred. He had a slight accent and occasionally funny grammar. He also had the most knowing eyes and when he began to speak, Hermione immediately felt secure with him.

He gently helped her to unravel her story. He then explained that he was now going to look for lingering traces of curses and darkness in general, and from the Cruciatus in particular, because of the risk of long-lasting damage.

It was an extensive physical examination, the healer's wand scanning her body methodically inch by inch.

"Yes, there's still lingering Darkness... It's from the Cruciatus and from your arm. The curse on your arm I cannot reverse. It is like the Dark Mark, it will fade but it will never go away."

Later, he asked, "did she put her wand on your body when she cast Crucio?"

"Yes, and it felt like everything in my body was exploding."

"Yes, yes, we will remove it. But... There is something else..."

After she had clothed again, he had her sit comfortably and settled down to discuss. "Now, Miss Granger, I have not good news."

"Tell me," said Hermione, grim and determined.

"The witch who cast the Cruciatus on you used her wand at close range – too close, in fact. It may have destroyed any unwanted pregnancy at the time," he said deliberately and watched her catch her breath at the implication, "but it also damaged the Fallopian tubes. We're going to do what we can, but you must know that you will need medical assistance to hope to carry out a pregnancy and that I can't guarantee the result. I do not say that you are definitely sterile but there are not many sound ova left either."

She listened, not sure he was speaking about her. Her period had come early after the battle, and she had indeed been frightened during those few days, when she feared she might be pregnant – but she had hardly ever thought about having children. It would take a full day, or rather a full sleepless night before she realised that Bellatrix Lestrange had also stolen from her the possibility of a normal family life.

She was more interested right now by the Healer speaking of the sessions they would have about her
nightmares and reminiscences. If they did not diminish after they talked about it and he had removed the last of the curses, he would use some kind of Legilimency to see if the memories that provoked the nightmares were not themselves surrendered by echoing darkness, as it often happens.

He would also give her the choice to have some part of the memories Obliviated or extracted if she so choose, but only after the healing and counselling protocol was over.

§§§

In the end, Hermione couldn't imagine how she could live with the consequences – sterility and probably all kind of old age ailments that would come out rather earlier than usual – if she did not remember properly.

She had ruled out Obliviate after several painful sessions speaking about Australia, her parents and her guilt. Constanz had explained that, contrary to popular belief, Obliviate did not erase everything because hard or shocking events always leave traces.

To a pureblood, he would have explained it like locking away the memories, but Hermione was muggle-raised. He told her that the more appropriate image for Obliviating was that of using a road roller before putting fresh asphalt on a road. People would remember there had always been a road there and feel a little strange at first driving on the new surface. It was the same with Obliviate: the old memories were still there, underneath, unreachable without a proper counter spell but they always left an imprint in the body and the unconscious. Without the memory to give them meaning, people would experience physical unease and unexplained paranoia, or at the very least the ominous feelings of helplessness or upcoming disaster her parents had experienced when she somehow stirred the remnants of their lost memories.

She quickly dismissed memory extraction as well, after Constanz explained that it worked when one had not dwelled and rehashed the same memory over and over again. Dumbledore had made it sound to Harry as if removing a memory to put it in a vial left you with only traces of it, like something you have read about a long time ago, but of course it could not be that easy.

It made her think of Professor Snape in the Shrieking Shack, tearing his memories out for Harry as he was dying on them. Well, he was not actually dying but they all thought he was. She wondered if he would be grateful to be rid of them—or not. And then she realised that the man had probably spent so many years agonising over them that he certainly could never hope to get rid of any of them.

In the end, she kept her memories. She would never forget. Not like her parents who had their choice taken away from them. Even if she couldn't regret it, she owed it to them to remember when they could not, and she owed it to herself for being their daughter. They taught her to never shy away from what has to be done or from what you are.

By Easter, she was done with the formal healing and the counselling. Through Legilimency, Constanz had also witnessed what happened during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries. He was able to remove the remnants still lingering from Doholov's sadistic attack—dark magic that had settled so deep inside, almost to the point to be undetectable by simple wand examination.

He was sorry they had not been able to detect it at the time but she had been unconscious and they had been unable to reconstruct the facts, focused as they were on the emergency of healing her wounds. He also explained that such residues tended to attract or to channel further dark magic and had somehow magnified the power of Bellatrix Lestrange's curses.

Hermione felt like she had just been set free from a thick layer of mud, or as if she'd emerged from deep waters. She was deeply thankful and tried to convey it to the old wizard.
He dismissed her thanks, not as if he'd done nothing out of the ordinary, but as something very important that just needed to be done, emphasizing the fact that he was only the instrument and that she did it herself, and that the process would continue all her life.

*It is important and it needed to be done.* Hermione was thoughtful and looked around her. Her comrades, even the teachers... There were so many people who did not get any help because they were ashamed, because there were other emergencies, other people who seemed more badly hurt—or simply because they did not know there was something to do to get better.

Hermione could speak about her ordeal now. She frankly explained to Ginny what had been the trouble with her. She asked her friend to break the news to Harry. She did not want to face him or Ron before they had time to assimilate it, she explained. They had been there, even if they did not actually witness the rape and the torture. It would be too hard to tell them face to face, but they deserved to know why Hermione had chosen to cut herself from their relationship for a time, and she somehow felt it would not be right to just send a letter.

Of course, she would have to discuss it frankly with them, but could Ginny – please! – make the first disclosure to Harry? Hermione was not sure if she would be able to deal with the first, expected brunt of reaction—*incredulity, denial, fear, anger and guilt.*

She shamelessly manipulated Ginny by telling her that she would of course ask Molly if she did not feel up to it.

Ginny sucked her breath when she heard of the rape and again when she learned that her own parents had been the first to notice Hermione's trouble, and that they had taken her to get help.

She consented to tell Harry at last, as Hermione had known all along, because she refused that her mother could have that kind of conversation with her boyfriend.

Of course, Ginny shied away from disclosing it to Harry. She let several opportunities pass, and only managed to tell him just after a Saturday's afterglow in Hogsmeade. It was a difficult subject to discuss at all times, because it concerned Hermione, who was the sister Harry never had... But also because of Harry's own inhibitions about talking about "that kind of thing".

If truth be told, nothing in his upbringing or experience had prepared Harry for the reality of sex. Certainly not the way the Dursleys treated him—like something disgusting one avoided to touch at all costs.

The strange noises and moans he occasionally heard coming from Vernon and Petunia's bedroom when he was in his noisy cupboard were just terrifying in the night when he was a child. He always worried if it would turn to be his fault that they sounded to be in pain and if it would earn him yet another punishment—though they surprisingly tended to be more mellow the next morning. In fact, he had totally forgotten the noises in question since they later put him in Dudley's spare bedroom. He did not put two and two together until Victory night, when he drifted along the corridors and lawns of Hogwarts in shock and found it impossible not to stumble on frantic couples everywhere, proving to themselves that they were still alive.

Until Ginny dragged him to her father's shed after Fred's funeral and begged him to "*make us feel good again, please, Love, please... I need you,*" he had known nothing beyond a few kisses. Well, there had been the wet dreams about Ginny and the overwhelming feelings of longing and jealousy when she dated Dean... The desperate wanks to release tension in the tent while Hermione took her turn at guard, but he had been so frightened about his fate and so sure he was going to die in the end, that the rushed pleasure had hardly ever been more than a way to help himself to go to sleep.
Because of his personal history, sex was something secret and still vaguely shameful for Harry, and certainly not a subject to be discussed casually. All the more since he had begun his Auror training during the most horrific revelations British wizards could remember as the war trials unveiled a deliberate policy of terror, rape and torture against the muggleborn part of the population.

So, his reaction was as bad as Hermione had expected. It quickly took the form of an enormous wave of guilt that sent him straight to Hogwarts from the room in the Three Broomsticks, to cry his heart out with Hermione and then on Hermione’s shoulder as he hugged her fiercely, repeating that he was "sorry, oh! So sorry" for having caused the Snatchers to find them; for refusing to even wonder, when he should have seen... He should have known... He should have cared.

She took him to task. "Don't you dare feel guilty, Harry! They always raped the muggleborn. Always. You know it now. And we would have met them sooner or later." But she was not above sending him home with the unsavoury task to break the news to Ron.

Ron cried too but surprised Harry by standing his ground, proving how much he had matured lately. After a very long round of very awkward silence, while they did not dare look at each other, Ron confessed that he had wondered from the beginning.

They both agreed that they would do everything for Hermione to feel safe when she left Hogwarts.

Ron just kept to himself that he did not know where it would lead them. He had serious doubts about his own relationship with Hermione—what was left of it—but he could not imagine how to discuss it when everybody expected them to become a couple—not when Hermione needed all their moral support. He was not sure if he could be up to it.

Even without the weight of her trauma, he often doubted if he would ever be enough for a woman as brilliant as Hermione. He liked that she was muggleborn, because being an outsider made her somehow dependent on his inside knowledge, just like Harry, but there was no denying that, muggleborn or not, she was much more clever than he was.

She also came from a much better-off family than him—with all the advantages and the confidence brought by money and status, even if there was not much left right now.

She would recover, because she was Hermione but how was he going to help her do it? Self-doubt and the need to restrain his much too spontaneous nature gnawed at him, at a time when he was supposed to discover life with his girlfriend, and making plans for the future. It was so confusing and unfair.

Harry kept to himself that he was not sure any more that Ron was the right person in the long term to take care of Hermione and challenge her back to all her potential... Or that Hermione might be the best person to help Ron grow into the confident, reliable man he had the potential to become if he felt appreciated enough.

There are places where even angels fear to tread.

Oblivious to her almost-brother and seldom-boyfriend's dilemma, Hermione noticed three muggleborn girls in whom she thought she detected the same kind of attitudes and problems she used to have. It was awkward because she knew them only by sight but she somehow found the courage to go to each of them. By talking herself freely about what she had gone through, she coaxed them to admit that they had been Snatched too. Two of them confessed having to go through an abortion, too. She explained how she got over it, making herself an advocate of professional help.
The Headmistress had been a fountain of wisdom as usual and St Mungo's had answered speedily enough, to her profound relief.

Hermione had doubts about one or two boys as well but she did not have the guts to approach them. Boys psychology she knew pretty well, but male sexuality was another planet entirely – one she preferred to return to ignoring for as long as possible.

Professor McGonagall suggested to send the boys to Poppy Pomfrey, on the pretext of routine examination, to try to detect any kind of damage, and see if she could get some response from them. Not for the first time, she bemoaned the absence of Severus who "would know just how to handle that kind of situation." Which left Hermione quite surprised considering the issue, until the Headmistress reminded her that he had been Head of House for sixteen years and a very good one at that. "Or did you think it was only for the sake of the points he awarded that his Slytherins worshipped him?"

In the end, it was rather frustrating for the three women. One of the boys, a sixth year Slytherin, spat to the aggrieved Matron that, yes, he had gone through all kinds of abuse at home for years but only Professor Snape had ever seen or cared about it, and he was not there any more to intimidate his father. It was too late for them to suddenly notice he existed. He was soon coming of age and not setting foot again at his parents', so they could take their help and stuff it...

The other denied everything but Poppy insisted, so he left with at least the leaflet from St Mungo's.

Hermione was surprised to discover, as she interacted with the staff, that they suffered from after-effects of the battle too. (Constanz was the only person who used the muggle term of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but as he told her, it was only a phrase: the important thing was what one did in front of the pain). She felt somewhat silly to have imagined that the teachers, simply because they were older and authority figures, would not suffer just as intensely.

With her newly exercised empathy, she noticed that Argus Filch couldn't be prevailed upon to go in certain parts of Hogwarts without the presence, not only of Mrs Norris, but that of at least one of the ghosts. Professor Sprout tended Hagrid's garden obsessively since he left for France where Olympe Maxime and a special team were helping him to learn to live with his disabilities. The remains of his hut were covered by the rarest flowers and plants and unexpected, orphaned beasts could be found sheltered in her greenhouses—a testimony of the shared closeness to nature which had been the foundation of the deep, though discreet, friendship she had shared with the gatekeeper for decades.

Professor Slughorn did not even have the heart to carry out his Slug's Club and he now tended to stop abruptly and mumble when he caught himself speaking about former students when he suddenly remembered they were either dead or in prison. He had to turn and surreptitiously wipe... His brow, he pretended.

Poppy Pomfrey who relentlessly cared for the students and the staff now looked guilty for everything she could not cure at once. The episode with the two abused boys seemed to have shattered even more of her professional confidence.

Hermione witnessed, with her own eyes, the Matron crying after Horace Slughorn asked her to bring to the Infirmary the fresh batches of medicines the NEWT class had brewed. Madam Pomfrey asked if she would not mind helping her with the inventory and restocking. There were still a few vials of rare specialities like Anti-paralysis potion, Draught of Peace or Revive Potion that had been brewed by Headmaster Snape, as attested by the unmistakable handwriting on the label.

"They're nearly past use-by date," she pointed to the Matron.
"Yes, I know."

This was surprising since Hermione had always seen the Infirmary well managed and the stock used on the first in-first out principle. It did not make sense, since these potions should have been used on the wounded of the Battle of Hogwarts. They must have been much needed then.

Sensing that Hermione was wondering, the Matron took the vials, a little awkwardly, and put them in the drawer of her desk. "These are a... A memento, if you want."

She bit her lip, and feeling she was displaying too much emotion, covered her mouth with the back of her hand. It did not hide, however, the anguish in her eyes.

"Madam Pomfrey..." Hermione was not sure what to do with someone so much older and who had authority while she was still as student... But she had to ask. "Is there... Do you need to speak about it?"

Poppy Pomfrey shuddered and looked at Hermione as if she saw her for the very first time. "You..." Her shoulder slumped. "I'm not much of a Matron now, am I? But you're not really a student any more. You've seen too much, too many ugly things..."

She braced herself and said, "It's my fault. I refused to use Severus' potions, because I thought he could have spiked them."

"Surely not! Not Professor Snape."

"He wouldn't do such a thing, of course. The fact remains that I let students suffer after the Carrows had their hands on them... And I let people suffer after the Battle, because I was too proud to admit I could have been wrong about Severus. Can you imagine that? A mediwitch who refuses to give potions to her patients? I just couldn't believe he would bring me proper medicines if he was... One of them. I should have known. I've known him since he was a brave, little first year. He'd never given me reason to doubt him until..."

Seeing she was quickly getting herself in a state, Hermione cut her gently, "It was difficult not to doubt him after he killed Professor Dumbledore."

"But it was Severus!" she cried, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I tell you, it wasn't fair what the Headmaster required of him." Hermione could not contradict her. She had her own reasons to question the sense of Dumbledore's instructions. "We've all been so stupid... The proofs that he cared were right there in front of us."

Some private thought seemed to struck her, and Poppy cried even harder. Hermione dared put her hand on the older witch's arm. She managed to collect herself and looked up at last. "I didn't lift a finger to save him. I have to thank God he's alive, because I don't know how I would be able to live with myself if he'd died."

Hermione swallowed thickly. "I didn't either, you know. I was in the Shrieking Shack, and I just watched."

"You're not a professional. You couldn't know."

"But I could have tried. I thought to use a vial to collect his memories for Harry but I never thought to try to use any of the medicines I had in my bag. It just seemed... Natural... That he was going to die."

Hermione soon discovered that Poppy Pomfrey wasn't the only member of the staff who felt guilty
about Professor Snape. Once, when she was waiting for Luna Lovegood outside the Ravenclaw common room, she surprised Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick staring to the large repaired patch in a bay window – the very one Professor Snape had escaped through just before the Battle.

Distress was clearly written all over the Headmistress' face as she tried very hard not to cry. Professor Flitwick exchanged stricken looks with her and patted her hand in comfort, though he was obviously very much close to tears himself. Both teachers swiftly straightened and left when Luna cheerfully greeted Hermione and they realised there were students around.

It was not long after Harry and Snape made the headlines of the Daily Prophet again, when a hostile group invaded the former Headmaster's hospital room to be driven away only by the Aurors. It provoked a streak of fresh gossip and debates amongst the students.

Hermione was shocked that people had actually meant to harm the helpless hero in St Mungo's and she voiced it clearly at the Gryffindor table, making herself heard by most at the other tables.

She felt guilty that she had never thought to inquire about Professor Snape before, as if she did not know how it felt to be abandoned by the world and treated like garbage—and all the more angry that an attack had actually been carried out.

Harry and Ron only managed to mollify her by swearing that they could not give her details without breaking professional secret but that it would never happen again since security had been doubled around Snape. The two junior Aurors were not dupe for one minute, though. They both knew they were off the hook only because she was already chin deep in revisions for her NEWTs exams.
Chapter 6

Gone are the days when you were protecting me

(Dead By April, Losing you)


Admittedly, magic can generally repair overnight or within a few days any single bone or damaged organ, but when you have to actually patch, replace or re-grow nearly everything in a body, it can only be done very slowly since you have to take a few days to make sure of a proper interaction between the newly healed part with the rest of the body. Besides, regenerating nerves is tricky, even for wizards.

Severus Snape's body was like an old, neglected garden where the Healers found buried garbage at every turn.

The team in intensive care had their hands full with him. First, they had to purify his body from the venom of course, but also from an accumulation of various toxic substances. It was soon diagnosed as the result of a years-old addiction to most sleeping draughts and pain killers. The healers shook their head. It was typical of Potioneers to self-medicate without an overall awareness of all the consequences.

Still, Snape's body spoke of even more evil deeds.

There was ample proof that his body oozed with residues of a very illegal potion – one that had men shudder inwardly and women wondering. Someone had apparently gone to great lengths to imbalance Snape's hormones and neuter him chemically.

It seemed impossible that he, as a Master Potioneer, had not realized what happened to him since the potion had to be ingested regularly. It was so difficult to brew, very few people besides Snape himself would have been able to do it. It could only have come as some perverse requirement or punishment from He-Who-It-Was-Still-Impossible-To-Name-Without-Quaking. It was entirely in character for the tyrant to force Snape to brew himself the means to destroy his own virility, or to force him to test his own concoctions. It shed a horrifying new light to the reasons that must have driven Snape to stuff himself with increasingly addictive substances.

One (female) healer suggested that Snape could very well have done it by himself, but her (male) colleagues were too horrified to consider it. Who would do that willingly to themselves?

The unconscious wizard also had a hectic growth as a child and a history of violent traumas. He had suffered many broken bones, hurts and various damages that had obviously been too hastily or too partially healed or even worse – healed the muggle way. Every one shuddered except that needle freak, Healer Pye, who made it his business to spend more time that was required of him on Professor Snape's injuries. The young healer determined that their patient's nose alone had been broken at least five times before he reached adulthood, and left to heal "naturally".

Pye had to reluctantly give up on the nose as even more breaks were due to Dark spells and so could not be totally healed due to the malicious intent they had been cast with, but he refused to give up on the ugly, ropy facial scars.

So many people needed plastic surgery these days, Pye argued he had there the perfect practice case:
he could hardly do worse with Snape's face and neck than Nagini and since the Professor was deeply unconscious, he would be able to heal peacefully.

Snape became the healer's personal work of art as he perfected his stitching techniques.

The rest of the staff watched in horrified fascination as Pye enrolled an American squib surgeon to teach him and help him practice zealously "try, try, try again" on the mangled side of Snape's face and neck.

Junior staff in particular gave them a wide berth for quite some time, afraid that they would be 'volunteered' to assist. They were happy to leave the duty to the very few nuts who shared Pye's fascination and drive.

The fact that a wizard as usually pleasant and jovial as Augustus Pye turned into an absolute monomaniac when his hobby horse with muggle surgery was concerned did not help his popularity either.

Of his painstaking progress on Snape's scars, people chose to retain only their invasive quality, not that the patient would –might– wake and ignore that he had been totally disfigured for months. Never mind that Snape was unconscious, for Pye's detractors, it only meant that he was unable to agree or object—and that was the heart of the matter.

Most considered that Healer Pye was overstepping the ethical limits of healing and wondered how he had managed once more to convince the Hospital's Board to fund his disgusting experiments. It was even more infuriating that the Hospital grapevine buzzed with rumours of a new ward dedicated to surgery and muggle therapies, with Pye as the Head.

A few argued that Pye was opening a new field since they had reached the limits of what magic could do for the people who had been mutilated or disfigured during the war. It was time to find a way to bypass the magical law that prevented the full healing of hurts inflicted with Dark magic. If using non-magical means was the way, why refuse it?

The cons countered that patients were not guinea pigs and that there was no life threatening issue to justify Pye's cutting, stitching and re-stitching Snape's face without his consent.

It was inevitable that someone expressed at one point that Snape was a Death Eater and a murderer, that he did not really deserve the time and money wasted on his care and that it was a way to at least make him useful for something.

The general outcry that followed said much about the ethics and dedication of St Mungo's staff, whatever their personal political opinions, but it did not help with the inside rivalries in St Mungo's.

Of course, no one admitted about professional jealousy—only that it was unseemly for one as young as Pye to carry himself as if he was the sole recipient of truth.

Healer Pye might have been the first (and so far only) healer able to perform plastic reconstruction, he would have met with greater acceptance if he did not show everyone that he was very much aware of the fact by writing as many documented papers as possible for professional publications, and not humble ones either. Or by using words like "obscurantism", "retrograde" or "blinkered" when speaking of his colleagues.

Not unlike a certain insufferable, youngest Master Potioneer of Britain… And see where it brought Snape?

In the end, a pair of colleagues confronted Pye publicly and questioned his right to experiment on an
unconscious wizard who had not signed his consent.

Pye merely raised his eyebrows and mumbled that of course he had consent. Consent galore, he sneered. He produced not one but two letters. One came from the Order of the Phoenix signed by no less than Headmistress McGonagall. The other was from Narcissa Malfoy and came with a commitment of the Malfoy family to cover all necessary costs.

Now, would they please give him peace and quiet to work?

Apart from Healer Pye, there was a rather large team of healers around Snape. It was as much to defuse the emotional involvement as to cater to some medical egos.

Severus Snape was a challenging cas d'école for St Mungo's, one that would gain him another very unwanted kind of fame amongst healers and mediwizards the world over.

Healing old wounds in depth often involves cancelling the original emergency healing spells to restore the wound to its original state. It feels too much like inflicting the initial hurt all over again. It is the main reason most patients never have the guts to go through it. When the healers dare give them the option to begin with, as they are the first to drag their feet to do it.

So, the team assigned to Snape settled on repairing the most obvious damage, say that which would cost the patient more than fifteen years of his life expectancy or leave him disabled prematurely.

St Mungo's fortunately could rely on a steady influx of foreign volunteers, who came to help cleaning the aftermath of what the rest of the wizarding world plainly called civil war—but that the locals stubbornly referred to as the Death Eaters War, clinging to the idea that it had been only a fight between good and evil, and not a deep rent in the fabric of British wizarding society as well. The collective guilt was too heavy to bear as it was.

Meanwhile, the virtual garden that was Snape's body had to be weeded, ploughed, planted and grown again. And there was no way to hurry the process if you did not want to get a cripple or a mindless vegetable in the end instead of the same fully functional wizard you had before.

He was mercifully unconscious, but they still kept him sedated while damaged nerve endings, spinal and brain connections were repaired or re-grown and painstakingly tested, one by one, in a very slow but thorough work of trial and error.

It takes nine months to wave the fabric of a child. It took just as much to re-grow and replace all the damaged vessels, nerves and tissues that had been destroyed or damaged by Nagini's poison, and as much as possible of the damages of a very violent life.

Oblivious to the rest of the world, to the passing of time, and even to the end of the war, Severus Snape was kept in stasis like a giant fetus, slowly re-growing into a body 'as good as new' as Healer Pye jovially called it.

It was a way of putting it.

An optimistic way.

Another approach admitted that the wizard, just like a newborn, would have to learn again most bodily functions once the extensive damage had been dealt with. His brain would hopefully remember, but the virgin nerves would not, his muscles had gone unused and a long, heavy re-education was inevitable, with predictable and yet unforeseen side effects.

The team members shook their head to one another. Snape was still out and unable to voice his
opinion, but most healers had been students of his or had to call at one time or another on his expertise in experimental potions. None was looking forward to deal with a forcefully slowed down version of the stringent wizard.

§§§

Outside of St Mungo's, very few people were interested in the state of health of Hogwarts's previous Headmaster once he stopped making the newspapers headlines.

Unbeknownst to each other, Minerva McGonagall and Narcissa Malfoy had both registered as 'next of kin' after the Battle of Hogwarts in order to be alerted of any change in his condition, though Narcissa never dared to actually show up in St Mungo's and made all the necessary red tape via the family lawyer.

Minister Shacklebolt wanted to be the first to know when Snape regained enough consciousness to report and give confidential information, and his services wanted Snape for various reasons, ranging from murder inquest to education statistics.

Harry Potter had not really thought about the real, surviving Severus Snape at first. He was too busy revisiting the man's memories and his own, and coming to terms with the way he had misjudged most of the events of the past.

He knew Snape was still caught between life and death, but the image of the harsh yet vital demi-god who had dominated his school years was unforgettable. He refused to think the man could actually die before he could make his peace with him.

Harry was not as uneasy as one would have expected about Snape's love for his mother.

He had never known his parents so he did not mind as much as another boy would when he realises Dad and Mum have a love life too. And it was not as if Snape and his mother had really… Was it?

Almost all he knew about his mother as well as the only clear views of his father came from his frequent immersions into Snape's memories.

Sirius and Remus had mostly spoken of James of course, though in a rather embarrassed, convoluted way when it came to their interaction with Snape. They had always tried to tone down what happened. Sirius had unfeasibly thrown the responsibility at Snape's door, while Remus pretended to believe in a fiction of mere childhood pranks. Besides, they did not really knew Lily that well before she officially became his father's girlfriend.

Harry had always heard from them that his mother was kind, forgiving, ready to see the good in everyone—but how could it be possible when she had left her supposed best friend debase himself in front of Gryffindor House for all to see, only to refuse to forgive him forever? Snape had excuses, for God's sake! What teenage boy would be able to restrain himself after being so thoroughly humiliated in public? Hermione had forgiven far worse from him and from Ron, and they had much less excuses than Snape ever had.

It seemed both his parents had much to answer for their treatment of Severus Snape. Being himself a sensitive boy who knew much too well how it felt to be despised, bullied and treated like a freak, Harry had not only forgiven his former teacher, but he also believed he had somehow to make amends for his parents as much as for himself.

In the aftermath of the shock of Snape's memories, he had been so much guilt-ridden by his treatment of the man that he had placed him on the pedestal the Marauders had definitely to step down from,
even if he still loved and regretted them.

So, it was quite a shock when he found himself on the planning for vigil duty in St Mungo's, teamed with a seasoned colleague, and when he realised he would be there again every week, once by day and once by night.

Ron had a similar schedule of course, but he was not very interested in Snape. Sure, he was sorry for him. It gave him the creeps when staff entered or went out of the room, because it reminded him of the time they had nearly lost his Dad, but he occasionally managed to open the door, as if it was mere Auror routine to have a look at patients of the Janus Thickey Ward. It just plainly reassured him that the man inside looked nothing any more like the old greasy git. He did not begrudge Snape his hero status—Harry and Hermione had hammered it in his mind—and he had more important things to mind that old school grievances, but really, he did not care much for a man who had done all he could to be hated, even if he had his reasons.

Harry's feelings were definitely on another level when Snape was concerned.

Had the professor actually died, he would have lived with the regret of misjudging him but there are so many kinds of regrets one lives with and so many ways to deal with them... He would have pronounced eulogies and erected monuments to Snape's memory. He would have dreamed, when introspective, of being able to apologise and to learn to know the man behind the spy, and to earn his respect. He would maybe even have named one of his children after him...

He was not to have that kind of comfort.

He had always found St Mungo's creepy, but now that Snape was transferred from the first floor (creatures' damage) to the fourth (spell damage), this particular division was full of half dead and half mad.

It brought painfully home that Snape was there for a reason. *Dark Curses, War Traumas and Incurables Division*. The name alone was frightening enough for people to only refer to it as the Janus Thickey Ward. Neville's parents were there too. Harry understood that it must be even worse for his friend when his turn came on the planning. He could understand why Neville was beginning to question his motivations in becoming an Auror.

It took several weeks before Harry dared take a deliberate look inside Snape's room, and only because Savage told him tiredly, "Open that door. You've been dying to do it since I don't know when. It's not like you're breaking any rule—or like he's going to give you detention."

In truth, Harry had tried to get glimpses when a healer or a nurse entered, but as they promptly closed the door, he had never actually seen anything.

He did not know what he had expected or looked for but certainly not what was left of Snape. The man was unconscious and floated naked in the middle of the room, surrounded by a myriad of wards and alarm spells he felt pulsing. He looked like some kind of fetal, skeletal mummy with an entire side of his face and neck horribly red or black and blue in places, and puffy, and covered with stitching thread. He did not remember the disfigurement from Nagini's bites but then, there had been so much blood all over Snape and he now understood why. They had also shaved his head and the only blackness left in the man was his body hair – that made Harry blush and promptly look away – and a pronounced stubble on his cheeks.

Snape looked so...

He looked dead.
Harry was inwardly shaking when he closed the door, feeling that he had stumbled once more on Snape's intimacy.

He did not get the nerves to look again, but some time later he inquired how he could get regular information about a patient. The helpful witch at the entrance desk fell all over herself for the great Harry Potter and handled the red tape for him. In no time, he was registered as next of kin of Severus Snape, never mind that there were others.

For weeks, there was no information other than that his state was "stationary with little progress in bodily functions" until that day in late November when he was informed that Snape had been placed under the sole responsibility of Healer Alfred Constanz who now headed the multi-disciplinarian team treating him and that he finally graded "positive prognosis of life".

Harry was relieved but definitely frightened.

Snape would wake up one day, even if they did not know when.

How do you say "sorry" to a man like Severus Snape? How do you get over such history, such baggage as they had together?
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Dialogue in bold italic is from the original HP books. Sentences in italic are Snape's thoughts and hallucinations.
Of course, I do not own anything in the Harry Potter universe, and I make no money.

The dreams in which I'm dying are the best I've ever had

(Gary Jules, Mad world)

Severus: February – March 1999

As he recovered some instinctive consciousness of his surroundings – but not yet conscious awareness – the hospital routine settled in Severus Snape's mind.

At first, he could not move and did not feel his limbs. He did not feel anything for lack of functional nerves. He did not know when he dirtied himself, but he was under the equivalent of dialysis and was fed nutritious potions. He could not know nor feel when they wiped him or when they washed him.

Hearing came back first. The great hum of St Mungo's. It did not bother him, rather the contrary. He had been used to the noise of tens of people in the same place, it seemed. They were like an old cloth, like familiar surroundings. Sometimes, there would be yells. That, too, he knew well. He instinctively knew that they would always stop in a burst of colour erupting from the wands that provoked and then silenced the yells. Somehow, he remembered the colours. He hated the green one that flashed in his subconscious.

He knew when people came in the room, and he wondered each time out of purely animal gut instinct if they came to kill him.

One day, the meaning of words came back; the synapses in another area of his brain had reconnected after the detection of several errors in the regrowth. They had put him back in stasis for a few days to repeat the process and made an adjustment of the Mind potions that enhanced his neurotransmitters. It did not help that his memories were all over the place, like they had been placed in a blender and well shaken.

People were speaking around him, calling him Professor Snape. It felt familiar.

His brain knew he had once known how to use words, but there was a little something missing, he never could manage to remember how to do it. He had the concept of words, he heard them, but they did not register and he could not even speak in his own mind. His mind was like a house full of rooms, and he was trapped in one. A dark one. He had to escape from it, there was light... words... knowledge just within reach... Just out of reach.

St Mungo's stank. It stank of body fluids, of myriads of potions, of the ozone and heat produced by continuous spells... But once he got his smelling back, the Potions maker in him revelled in the one
sense that never betrayed him, that always soothed him and made him feel alive and worth something as his potions simmered and transmuted into pure magic.

There was also the hurt of light. His mind only registered the violence of the blinding light through his lids and reflexive eye moves. Thankfully, they dimmed the lights at sundown. Constanz had long noticed that his patients were less restless with a circadian cycle of light and dark, and selfish convenience of the staff be damned.

Slowly, he would feel again.


One day, touch. On an unconscious level, his brain registered the feeling of textile on his flesh, and of cold as they changed his clothing and his sheets.

Wet as they washed him or wiped him according to the place. Itch was from the tubes or his pouches; sting or burn came with the potions or wand cures.

Hurt, often – great waves that randomly submerged him in the hours after physical, wand or potion treatment.

Touch, the towels, the healer or the nurse that would feed him or massage him. There was always a tensing up before his body reluctantly accepted the gentleness of the touches.

He was so very much like a new born, overcome with feelings, but frustratingly incapable to express himself. Sometimes, he yelled primal yells inside his mind for being so helpless, powerless and alone, because he knew it was not meant to be like this and that he had lost something vital. They just felt faint moves from him, but it was very encouraging for the team.

The helplessness now met gentleness. His body was manipulated with care and soft touches. It seemed odd coming from the almost forgotten touch of human hands, but welcome.

The silvery strands which had lifted from his brain cells in his last conscious moments managed to settle definitely back home.

Care.

Surely, his mother had done it—she had done so much more...Was it a dream or a hallucination?

*Mum?*

Vision of a woman flinging herself in front of him.

*'Don't you dare touch him.*'

The words had come back, at least in his mind. He was unconscious, as far as the world went, but very much aware on some brain level of what happened around.

And as gentleness became a part of his life, the few loved faces came back and found their place in the flashes of his mind—ravings, dreams or memories all entwined as he would wake up and doze and blank.

*Mum.*

*Lily, the enchantress.*
Blond Malfoys surrendered him, smiling and raising their glasses in salute and he smiled back as they sang that "happy birthday to you" he had never heard sung just for himself before.

Laughing wrinkles artfully dissimulated as sternness, beautiful hair tightly contained in a deceptively austere bun he delighted in undoing... a tabby cat nudging him and purring in his lap.

He hesitated, knowing he had a reason to be afraid to remember her... But the memories were too sweet to unravel.

Sharing books... Research... Eyes sparkling with wit and passion for their subject as they argued for the pleasure of arguing...

Her eyes brightening as she mouthed precious wines in sparkling crystal, smacking her sensuous lips in appreciation... licking them of that errand drop he ached to be - or to be able to lick himself...

Sharing a desk, correcting copies... eye to eye... foot to foot... m outh to mouth... hands to hips... sweat to sweat...

Her wand raised in hate to kill him.

Minerva.

It hurt, as much from betrayal as from guilt. Because with Minerva came Albus – Albus who had invaded his life more than Minerva, because she never really allowed it. More than Lily who had chosen his enemy. More than Lucius and Abraxas - more than Voldemort himself. Albus had taken the place his own father should have had in his life—and used him, and thrown him away just the same.

But strangely, it was not the many betrayals of Albus that came back first, but glimpses of little happy times at Hogwarts: days of silly jokes, infuriating little pranks when he was too full of himself or too miserable; admiration and encouragements for his research—and no small support and tolerance of his nasty ways and spleens.

And then he remembered the fierce jealousy and hurt he had felt every time another of his pet Gryffindors—any Gryffindor if truth be told—came to the Headmaster's attention. Then, he was subtly depreciated, his opinions dismissed or ridiculed in front of others to remind him of his mere usefulness as a tool—because for all his mentor ways, the great Albus Dumbledore never failed to remember and to remind him that he was no more in the end that his vassal, just as he still sported the slave brand of his other master.

More than once Albus even had the front to tell him that he was just doing what he'd been asked: never let people suspect he would help protecting Harry Potter.

But Albus had been all he ever had of a father figure after Abraxas' death.

All he ever had...?

He found a very blurred but unmistakable memory of his father fondling his little Russ.

Dad?

It was as if he had just re-opened a very old tap full of rusty water and suddenly got himself a growing trickle of buried memories of Tobias Snape as a father. A real father.

And he had forgotten...
How could he have forgotten?

_Mummy!_

"Don't cry, Mummy. Don't cry."

"I hate him too," echoed a child Severus who did not want to betray his mother – just as he would have clung to his father if he had been able to see him in the pubs where he found easier and easier to drink his failures and sorrows away... But little Russ Snape could not understand that he had not to choose between his parents; that his mother's erratic moods and depression were not his fault—not even his father's; that his father's unleashed hurt and anger and drinking bouts were not his fault either.

He did not know that no child should have to be caught in his parents' shouting matches and made alternatively the prize or punch ball of their battles as they spiraled down into a cycle of abuse and dragged him with them.

All he could remember right now was the sickening sound of his father slapping his mother's face, her betrayed cry and crimson cheek and chin, and his father's panicked face as he yelled, "Don't look, Russ! Don't look! Bed! Right now or I'm going to smack your bottom!"

And the slamming of the bathroom door and his father's fist hammering at it while he listened, curled up and terrified under his blanket.

And the shouting, and his father's voice imploring, "I didn't mean it! For God's sake! Eileen! I'm sorry... I tell you I'm sorry! Please, don't cry! Please! Eileen! Eileeeeeeen!"

And his kicking in the door, shouting and threatening, his accent thickening as time went by and his wife did not relent. "Open that door! D' ya 'ear me?! Open that door! What're you doin' in 'ere? Eileen! Eileen! Open the door or..."

"Don't cry, Mummy. Please. I hate him too, I promise."

He was much too young to be able to say that he did not mean it like that, not while his mother was shouting at his father, "See what you've done? Even your son's afraid of you now!"

It was true that he hated the violent man who came home each Friday night but it was because that man was not his Dad any more and he wanted his Dad back – but his father's hurt face distorted into the painfully familiar, older version he remembered too well.

The father who was never home when other fathers were. The father who did not even look at his nearly perfect scores at school, even before Hogwarts. The father who stumbled up the stairs on pay night with rather depleted pockets and who yelled at his wife, because only then, only when he hurt her enough with words, and hands, and fists, only then would she seem alive in front of him – both depending on Tobias's steadily increasing abuse to feel, as if it was their needed high. And then they lost themselves in despair and shame, in self-pity and guilt, in discussions… And in each other, because they were still drawn like that – but hating themselves all the way and making the other pay for it.

There just was not any place for him in that age-old drama but they made him the centre piece of it.

Sting... Hurt... Burn... His father had done it – and Russ had even welcomed it at times, as the only proof that his father saw him, even if it was to beat his magic out of him because "I want no trouble with the neighbours."
So many had done it too, faces looking like masks, or wearing masks looking like ghosts.

The hateful, sneering and jeering boys who taught him that he would never fit.

The friends who did not apologize when they hexed him on orders, nor him when he had to do the same – knowing all along as he taught and mentored their children, that he was working to destroy all they believed in.

They all visited him when his body hurt, and he could put names to the faces.

Only by conjuring Lily's face would he chase them.

He really believed he had found a fairy of his own when she had accepted to become his playmate. He had known that his life was changed forever.

"She's my best friend and you leave her alone."

He certainly was not the fiercest of the boys from Spinner's End, but the reputation of the place helped as it made the boys of upper Cokeworth a little too wary for their own good... In the end, the black eye and bruises had been worth it, when she fussed over him and said that, yes –yes! – they were "best friends for ever", and how wonderful he had been to step up before her like that, "not that I needed help, Sev... but thanks." He had felt ten feet tall after that kiss, any lingering pain totally anesthetized.

Still, it was impossible to suppress the jealousy that came back and settled at home, in their old holes in his mind, each time he remembered the last months with Lily.

"...thought we were supposed to be friends? Best friends?"

Since she had grown these fabulous curves, she always was a little too coquettish, a little too sure of her power over him, a little too satisfied to feel other boys greedily watching her walking by.

"You think he was playing the hero? He was saving his neck and his friends' too! You're not going to – I won't let you-"

"Let me? Let me?"

"He fancies you, James Potter fancies you!"

The way she looked at Potter! Even as he was humiliated, degraded right in front of her, she took the time to discuss with a drooling Potter instead of hexing him. As usual, she listened to the prat's banter, secretly flattered. How Potter had enjoyed to rub it in!

It had gone out much too spontaneously, for all the rage and jealousy... and humiliation.

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

Oh! God! No!

The shock on Lily's face.

And the so familiar smugness on Potter's, as clear as if he had yelled Gotcha!

What have I done? It's not Avery or Mulciber!
"I'm sorry."

"I'm not interested."

"I'm sorry."

"Save your breath."

He could not. He could not stop. He did not mind the Gryffindors’ jeers as he camped in front of the Fat Lady's portrait.

Without Lily, nothing had meaning. Nothing was worth it.

When your fairy dies, all the warmth of the world disappear.

Lily always smelled of life. She smelled of hope. She smelled of all possible futures, and he drowned and drowned in her and could not live without her.

But.

"Best friends?"

'You've chosen your path and I've chosen mine.'

'James asked me out and I said yes.'

Of all people—Potter.

Potter!

Lily's sad little smile but stubborn, determined brow.

'You're right, Sev. It's for the best.'

You could at least protest a little. Just a little?

A handful of ashes in the back garden. Two kicks, a little gust of wind... He felt numb and it was really for the best to get rid of it all, because the agony of the mix of such longing and such anger...

And then, Albus.

"You disgust me."

Please!

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"
"In– in return?"

He had not been prepared for that. What could he have to give that could be of any value to the most powerful wizard alive, the wizard even his master feared? The wizard who never had anything to do with the likes of him and made it abundantly clear every time the Marauders humiliated him or sent him to the Hospital Wing and only got from him a formal slap on the wrist. He had just expected to be carted to the Ministry’s infamous yellow room – the interrogation room – and from there to Azkaban.

"Anything." Oh! God! Will it be enough?!

Albus looked at him benignly. Of course, he could afford that luxury now.

"Severus, you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready... if you are prepared…"

Return to Voldemort, yes. How could anybody be ready for that?

"I am." Am not!

He preferred to shut him down, but even Lily could not help him with Albus, because the Headmaster had insinuated himself everywhere in his life, hooking him with memories of Lily, training him like a lab rat to run at his command when he pushed the right buttons. And he had been only to eager to do it, for Albus’s approval.

"Remember Lily's eyes, Severus?"

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

More often than not his other master would tag along.

He had totally lost it. Everything: his wits, his mind and his bowels when his once and future master, with that soft, sibilant voice of his and his new horrifying and less than human face... When he had murmured his deep displeasure at Severus’s unexpected and very late return. Without Barty Crouch Jr.

But when the alternate rounds of Cruciatus, sadistic curses and mind rape ended, and he realised he was not going to die right now –even if it felt like it- he had kept at least one thing. Red eyes burning their way through his brain, uncaring of possible damage, trying to tear out his secrets—but he guarded his red and green treasures well, just like a miser, offering false secrets like false gold on the plate of his non-existent pride and dignity.

He had kissed the Dark Lord's feet. Really, in the flesh.

For Lily.

For Albus.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

The Dementor laughed—and Severus conjured his Patronus.

The doe sprinted around chased by wild beasts of the forest, stag, dog, wolf...

The Dementor cried,"after all this time?"
You too, Albus?

"Always."

But under his eyes, the doe slumped on to the floor and he could see that its throat was torn by a wild animal. A werewolf howled, and the cold sweat of terror dripped along his back. As he clung her to his chest, the doe morphed into Lily.

His broken, dead Lily.

Not again.

"I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe..."

His knees buckled and he grabbed her, tried to... Nothing. She was dead, and refused to answer, to forgive him another time. He knew it was the end of life as he knew it. Surely, the stars were falling or the sun exploding. Only it went on and on.

Lots of love, Lily.

'James asked me out and I said yes.'

She had not even tried to hide the triumph in her eyes.

The pitifully little stack of letters, photographs and cheap keepsakes burned all too quickly—even the muggle way.

He was still on his knees, cradling Lily's corpse. Somewhere, a baby was crying. The cries seemed to grow in intensity, to turn to howling, and it reverberated in his head, his whole body.

He wanted to make the child shut up, to shut the crying, the howling—but it was his own... Until he was not holding on Lily any more, but on Moppy—his head on the elf's chest as she purred soothingly in his ears and Apparated them away.

"I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe..."

He had grasped Dumbledore's offer to protect the child, because it was the very last strand left of Lily's existence, the last thing giving any meaning to his life... Even as he realised it possibly topped his taking the Dark Mark as the most stupid decision of his life.

Where did he find the last vestige of pride to ask, "No one can know"?

Until Minerva insisted, he had hardly ever worn anything other than mourning black after that day.

He really has Lily's eyes.

He had looked often enough into Minerva's eyes to will himself to forget Lily's eyes until now, but he had not forgotten at all and they pierced him like a blade coming through James Potter's very face – straight to his heart.

Straight to his guilt.

"Mr Potter, our new celebrity."

Potter's son has Lily's eyes. And I will have to look at him for seven years.
Seven years—like all worthwhile penance in the old tales.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches."

He had hated the boy almost on sight for reminding him that his comfortable little life since the end of the war was a lie full of unresolved guilt and shame, of raw hurts that scared only on the surface.

"Coward."

He had been quite brutal with Minerva after that first class with Harry Potter, though he had sworn to himself he would never be. Oh! She had been willing—more surprised than anything else but definitely willing. Still, when he realised how angry... How close to act like his father he was—he had just lost his hard on. Fortunately, Minerva had just thought he had taken his pleasure too fast.

"Coward."

For days, he had not been able to even let her touch him. He feared too much what he was capable of, now that Potter's son was inflicted on him. All that first year, he just could not speak of it because every time he looked at the boy, his guilt and his hurt erupted and brought him back to that day.

But in the end, Minerva had said it, just like the others.

"Coward. COWARD."

Minerva looked dark to most people, but in truth, her hair and eyes were only a few shades darker than Lily's. He always thought Minerva the embodiment of Autumn, a more sombre fairy than Lily, who had been young Spring... And would always be, because of him.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches."

How he would have liked to die at Minerva's hand.

"Coward."

Every one called him a coward in the end.

Minerva.

Potter.

"Don't call me a coward!"

But by Dumbledore's will, he was one.

"Coward."

And a traitor.

"Coward."

And a murderer.

"Coward."

Deep inside, he knew they were right.
Guilt had the taste of despair and death...

"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."

... Of ashes and blood...

"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you."

…The taste of bitter tears.

"So, the boy... The boy must die?"

That odious, insolent Potter son of Lily's with her damning green eyes and her smile.

"If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear..."

Thank you, Albus. The Dark Lord only does Crucio.

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and colour of Lily Evans' s eyes, I am sure?"

"DON'T!"

But it always came back to the same thing: guilt had the colour of Lily's eyes.

"So, the boy... The boy must die?"

Making him a failure.

"All was supposed to be done to keep Lily Potter's son safe."

A dupe.

"You have used me."

How was he to explain that to Lily?

Dumbledore cried in his resplendent robes, the stupid colours flashing painfully against his own black. The old wizard slumped on his seat, exposing his nearly charred hand, death coursing his body—and he found himself babbling in panic as he frantically wondered if his counter-curses and potions were working.

"Why, why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

"I... was a fool. Sorely tempted..."


NOT YOU!

You have no business being weak, no right to fail. No right to leave me...

...Alone.

I have only you this side of truth.
"If you had summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!"

 Damn you!

 On the rare occasions he seemed unable to hide from himself, Dumbledore used to call him "Son" and to trust him with his life.

 But what kind of a father will demand to trust you with that kind of death?

 "Maybe you take too much for granted. Maybe I don't want to do it any more."

 Albus... Please...

 "You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation."

 What do you know of pain and humiliation, Albus?

 "Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

 "Lately, only those whom I could not save."

 You certainly can't say as much, Al- Dumbledore, since you don't dirty your hands.

 No choice; no control; no future.

 Potter.

 Dumbledore.

 "Help me protect Lily's son."

 Dumbledore.

 Potter.

 "But this is touching, Severus. Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"

 You were supposed to be the one who cared for him!

 ...So that I didn't have to.

 So that I didn't have to!

 He was so frustrated, he indeed cried. And once he began, he could not stop.

 As they could not dose him again, they tied him.

 "I wish… I wish I were dead…"

 "And what use would that be to anyone?"

 What use would I be to you, Dumbledore?

 "Severus... please."

 No!
"… to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation."

His black hand, shrivelled like an old prune.

"You trust him… you do not trust me."

"Severus... please."

He had seen -felt- only Albus' exhaustion, heard only his plea on the Astronomy Tower while he made his way to face him, to step in front of Draco.

It was only later that he remembered, in the haze of a rare bout of drunkenness.

Dumbledore's irony at his black robes as he was forced to attend his first Ball as a teacher.

It had been a long time before he realised that the Headmaster hid his own blackness so carefully. People bought the seeming benevolence with the eccentricity and the queer robes, and the legend of the Light wizard who vanquished Grindelwald. But deep inside, Albus the misnamed was, if not dark, at least really shady when you practised him every day. He would have been most aptly named Niger - Black.

Black.

Black!

Lily had written to Sirius Black just as she used to write him – and it had broken his heart to read it.

Lots of love, Lily

It was not even a betrayal from her part—but so soon after Albus- Dumbledore's death, it broke the camel's back.

Black!

"Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of sixteen. You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster? You haven't forgotten that he once tried to kill me?"

One sign that you care, Albus.

One.

Please?

"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus."

Mine too!

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine!"

What was I ever for you, Albus?

He hated it. He hated Albus. He hated himself and all of them, but he could not stop it—crying.

"Avada Kedavra."

No choice; no control; no future.
"I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?"

Like you protected the likes of me?

But he had not fared better than Dumbledore.

Cedric Diggory.

Colin Creevey. Penelope Clearwater. Hermione Granger. The pathetic little figures turned to stone, almost lost because he failed to realise that the Dark Lord was the Heir of Slytherin...

Granger again... Lying in St Mungo's like a broken little doll, artistically sliced by Antonin Doholov.

Draco, almost bleeding to death because that idiot Potter had dared steal his own spell without a single thought for the consequences, as usual.

And his poor Slytherins that he tried to handle and care for, like Hagrid with his deadly creatures...

Sarah Bartolomew and Allison Hatter, the little muggleborn stupid enough to return to Hogwarts, crying and pleading, as Amycus Carrow inexorably dragged them to their fate through the Floo.

An unconscious Michael Corner, covered in blood and bruises, clutched to Ginevra Weasley's chest, the power of anger and hate crackling around her as she looked him straight in the eyes.

Terry Boot... Seamus Finnegan... Defiant and stupidly courageous boys that he had to abandon to his deputies. Just like Neville Longbottom. To the end, the boy had been almost as big a nail in his flesh as Potter...

Luna Lovegood, snatched from the Hogwarts Express to the dungeons of Malfoy Manor. He had rarely been more thankful than when he heard that rapist of Rowle complain that Yaxley had forbidden them to touch the blond until there was no hope left of bringing her father to heel.

He tried to console himself with the thought that at least none of them had died under him – but he still had to live with rows and rows of students, hateful and defiant or beaten-up and spiritless – all barely daring to eat or breathe while he stared them down from Dumbledore's seat, holding their lives in his soiled hands.

He did not eat much either these days, out of sheer disgust of himself.

They stared back now, accusing him, loathing him, condemning him – as they had the right to do.

There was no place secure enough to hide himself from their stares.

It was Azkaban and the Dementors all over again.

Sparks would fly all around the room, winds would sweep, sheets would get torn.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

Even with all the massaging and the soothing oils, it was hard to ease him out of the muscle knots he managed to inflict on himself.

He heard sneering voices, as the same nightmare sequences hit him again, all fangs, and fire in his throat... In his body...

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine!"
He was back again in the place of all terrors – the Shrieking Shack.

"My Lord! Let me look for the boy for you."

Lily! Help me! Please... The old fool's failed and let us down again.

He had screamed when Nagini's fangs had torn him repeatedly, each time infusing the burn of her venom, when he realised that all was lost... Just as he had screamed when the werewolf had reached for him, before the stag ran between them.

The werewolf appeared at the end of the passage, drawn by the light of his wand, smelling... Sniffing... Sniffing his blood... Trying to reach him...

He fell back... Back... Back... While the werewolf pointed his wand at him.

The stag snorted mockingly behind him.

"Who wants to see me take off Snivellus' pants?"

"Ridikulus... Snivellus."

He knew the students had laughed and laughed behind his back as soon as Lupin was back at Hogwarts, still playing cheap tricks with good conscience, even if it meant breaking the unwritten law of never undermining another teacher's authority in front of the students.

Hogwarts had never been the same for him once Lupin came back.

And he had just known that Black would follow too, as had always been his fate.

He was sixteen. He was walking the halls of the school, trying very hard to look confident but scanning his surroundings.

He was used to it by now. They would find him.

Whenever he was alone, they would find him. He did not know by what kind of tracking spell. He had tried everything—everything! Disillusionment spells, every cloaking charm to be found in the Library... They always found him. They always knew where he was and when he was alone.

They told him so.

It was a permanent nightmare.

"No safe place for you, Snivellus."

"Watch your back, Snivellus."

"Oddball."

"Greasy git."

"Piece of trash."

"Scumbag."

"Didn't I tell you to stop looking at Lily Evans, Snivellus?"
"Amusing man, your father, wasn't he?"

He had recognised the taste of Harry Potter's fear during the Occlumency lessons, as he watched the muggle boys cornering him.

Nothing Petunia's son did to you ever came close to what I had from your father and Black. I will not be sorry for you.

I will not.

But the cupboard in Privet Drive looked so very much like the cellar at Spinner's End he had almost-

Almost.

"Who wants to see me take off Snivellus' pants?"

That memory had at least saved him from making a fool of himself. The boy, with his usual, absolute lack of respect comforted his resolve.

"I told you to shut up about my dad! I know the truth, all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me! You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for my dad!"


"He has her eyes, precisely her eyes."

And he has his face. Precisely his face!

"Get out, get out, I don't want to see you in this office ever again!"

"Dumbledore told me!"

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

He was cold, so cold... He was in hell. Hell or Azkaban, which was the same thing. He knew since Azkaban that hell is not scalding hot but scalding cold.

They would come for him and then try to patch him up, the bastards, the lying bastards who looked down their nose at him as they had always, always done—while he was spilling his heart and his guts out on the freezing floor.

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

He heard Slughorn's pompous voice, "extreme cold has the same effects as extreme hot. The Cooling Draught..."

People were discussing in the classroom as if he wasn't shivering uncontrollably on the floor while Marauders and Death Eaters alike laughed at him and kicked him and took turns hexing him.

Slughorn never had any authority.

Not that he didn't deserve the torture, mind you, as Yaxley informed him with a leery smirk as he held him to the ground. He whispered fondly in his ear, "you will just love it, Severus..." as he signaled to McNair who lifted his axe with jubilation. Making minced meat, they called it—but he did not feel anything but the cold as he watched his own blood fountain out of him while Yaxley laughed
and laughed.

The people around went on discussing about withdrawal effects and seizures and psychosis as if he was not there.

As usual, Slughorn did not even bother to take part in a discussion that concerned him. Neither did Albus.

"You have used me."

"I thought… all these years… that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."

For your own partiality for James Potter and all things Gryffindor.

"You have used me."

Because I was foolish enough to trust you...

…and to believe that you finally liked me...

At least a little.

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

He felt it when the healers came to still him and bind him so that he didn't hurt himself as he tore at his bedclothes and at his flesh, clawing at it like another victim of the tunic of Nessus, trying to rid himself of the pain and the guilt.

The guilt...

It would break him and what he could not say, what he could not do would erupt out of him, and he would fight them, fight the falling into darkness, and he could not, and he hated them even more. He hated them all.

He hated himself so much.

He had been such a fool.

A fool for the tiniest crumb of approval... Of trust...

Of forgiveness.

"I'm not interested."

"You disgust me."

Because it was delusion to think there could be forgiveness for the likes of him.

If Albus doesn't care for the life of Harry Potter that he likes so much, what chance is there for me?

"Avada Kedavra."

There was so much despair and hate of life and everything in him as he cast the curse that he was not surprised when Dumbledore did not just crumble on the floor but was projected over the parapet.

He had watched what was left of his life and illusions fall from the tower with Dumbledore.
And then he had hated him.

He did not mind any longer being set up to die—and to die the most hated figure of all: a traitor.

The old liar had finally taken everything from him as he abandoned him.

Dumbledore.

Never, ever again: Albus.

"Dumbledore told me!"

He had cried his heart out most of the night, and come dawn, he had opened his eyes only to drink himself numb. After the first bottle, he was not sure any more who he had killed: Albus or Dumbledore?

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

"Coward."

Now that spontaneous outbursts of magic erupted so constantly, they put new alarm spells in the room. His mattress had been nearly consumed by fire, damage avoided only by the swift intervention of the Auror guards who had smelled the smoke.

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

"You disgust me."

Nothing new in the Curse and War Damage Division. The staff was used to work under shielding spells.

When the sun managed to reach London and filter in his room, there were nice hallucinations: Lily and their secret spot by the river.

His memories of Lily were full of sunny days... As if it was possible in Cokeworth where the Met Office registers an average 190 rainy days a year.

But every time he had Lily again, as he had done every night in his Pensieve in the Headmaster's private quarters, he thought he would die of happiness as his heart almost stopped in its frenzy.

Much too often though, the sky was grey.

And there was nothing but the cries and the yells and the red of the blood—and the faces of the people he watched die. And he could not move as they closed on him, grasped him with their cold, dead hands and dragged him yelling and kicking to a broken, dead Lily who would never forgive him.

"I'm sorry."

"Save your breath."

Every time, the ghost of Harry Potter joined his mother.

"Look... at... me."
But death had stilled the unseeing, emerald eyes and the bloodied face on hate.

"Coward."

"Don't call me a coward."

"Dumbledore told me!"

He had no right to protest: he had been no better than Dumbledore, helping to raise the child in hate only to send him to his death in the end.

"Now you tell me you've been raising him like a pig for slaughter."

"But this is touching, Severus. Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"

He had never wanted to even hear about the brat until he would have no choice.

Because if he had let himself care...

"Coward."

Lily's son, who served him all the contempt and the unforgiveness that he deserved.

"Kill me like you killed him, you coward."

A sudden gust of wind dispersed the last ashes lingering in a dirty back garden somewhere in Spinner's End.

There was always wind on top of the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts.

"Severus... Please."

When he made his round of the school, discreetly spying on the Carrows, he could not stay away from the place, just like he could not stay away from his Pensieve.

They all thought that he climbed there to gloat to himself: the place of his deed and where you have the best view of Dumbledore's grave without leaving the castle.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

He was almost relieved when Nagini tore his throat – again – and sent his body on fire.

"Nagini... Kill."

He could not speak properly—what with his vocal cords damaged by the fangs and regrown in rough, totally unused ones, but he moaned very well. Later of course, he would babble in his ravings and yell too. And they would let him, congratulating themselves that it would at least help healing his voice. They were trained not to listen, not to care too much – and he was not conscious, was he?

Sometimes, he even welcomed the werewolf.

§§§

The cries always made one junior Auror want to get drunk when he went home to Grimmauld Place—to drown his own guilt.
What I've felt, what I've known never shined through what I've shown

(Metallica – the Unforgiven)

Severus: March – April 1999

Word had leaked out of St Mungo's that Severus Snape had regained consciousness - if you could call it consciousness, when he was constantly drifting between states.

He was aware of people arguing close. Someone was trampling his mattress, making him nauseous and imprinting bruises on his skinny legs and thighs, and there was shouting from a lot of people in the room, with strong smells of sweat.

They were finally going to kill him.

Vital instincts shot in, and the alarms started, as his heart rate reached heights. He heard many words that still held no meaning, an angry, commending voice he knew, and the repetition of two words, clearly forming a name resonated in his mind. They meant something terrible he did not want to remember.

Much later, once quiet had settled again—the more profound quiet that was linked to subdued lights and signaled night rather than the end of visits—he took that name, and tossed it in his mind. It finally got through parts of his memories he had tried to avoid carefully until now. It echoed endlessly in his mind, bringing visions of dark clad, evil ghosts and even darker deeds.

Death Eater.

The panic made his heart slamming against his chest and triggered the alarms once more. The staff ran in but there was such a spontaneous eruption of magic, everybody ducked in the room through sheer reflex despite the shields.

The last dam had broken.

1978

Lucius and Severus were not so naive when they took the Mark that they ignored what happened during raids.

Lucius was on intimate terms with the Lestranges now. Bellatrix was ever the boastful one. She was the most insistent and biased public relations agent of the Dark Lord.

Severus had shared rooms with Mulciber and Avery for seven years, and had to listen when they boasted about their fathers' deeds. The two Death Eaters were not careless enough to share their stories home, but it was easy and fascinating for Mulciber to spy on his father and his mates when alcohol flowed a little too much and they grew careless and congratulated themselves on their exploits.

Avery Senior was a cold, discreet wizard and would never say a word at home, but he often
partnered with a certain Goyle as his henchman for special, discreet assignments. Goyle was thick as thieves with another Death Eater named Crabbe, who often took him to Mulciber's to let off steam. He did not mind trying to outstrip their tales with some of his own.

The Ministry and the adults could pretend all they wanted, the students at Hogwarts knew very well who was a Death Eater or a sympathiser and how high they rated in the Brotherhood, because their status extended to their kin.

More subtly, it attracted the more ambitious or independent-minded because standing for the Dark Lord promised to be a fast track to power and to independence from their family – sometimes four to five generations of them, considering the life span of the average wizard. Oh! To be able to chuck the weight of family tradition, or to shut one's elders up...

All in all, the seventh years basked in a glow of expectancy for a glorious future that the defensive attitudes of Dumbledore's partisans could never match.

Most people on both sides abhorred violence but it had become inevitable. Lucius reasoned, and Severus just knew from experience, that some people have baser instincts – look at poor Mulciber – and that it was the way to put them to good use since things had to be done to put opponents back in their place.

They were not the first nor the last young idealists with delusions of grandeur but it was easy to get drunk on dreams of Glory in the quiet luxury of Malfoy Manor. Amidst the portraits of past warlords and warriors tracing back to the Norman warlock who came over with the muggle Conquest, war did not look dirty or bloody. It was a necessity, and it would bring rewards.

Besides, Severus did not really care at that point. Violence had always been in his life until very recently. He just liked it to be aimed at somebody else for a change. Rabastan insisted that the "first times" were difficult, of course, because you have to toughen your inner warrior but that you always get over it.

Severus had had his whole life to learn it was true for pain and for humiliation. It made sense that it must be true for everything else.

After they took the Mark, they had the usual training in duelling, combat spells and a little hand to hand fighting that all new recruits went through. They both knew they would have sooner or later to join one of the cells specialised in field operations. Every Death Eater was to take part at one time or another, as a training for the real warfare to come. The two of them wanted to excel, of course, and made regular use of the duelling room.

Lucius might have had a few months ahead on Severus as a Death Eater, Severus knew he had not taken part in any expedition until now, since he was too precious at the Ministry and needed to consolidate his position there. They were both supposed to belong to the "brains" of the movement and hoped to escape dirty business and leave it to the less clever.

Neither realised that it was just a lot of rubbish. Lucius was only spared until Severus and all his Hogwarts mates were safely hooked and sworn in too, to avoid any last minute change of heart and defection.

They had hoped to do their required bit of war together, but it was not to be.

Severus did not know what Lucius's assignments had been since his blond friend was skilled at eluding questions when he did not want to speak of something—but of late he was more on edge than Severus had ever seen him.
Lucius had been appointed Minister Counselor, an independent but revered position that all Malfoys deemed necessary to their dignity and to make a mark in the world, until they were old enough to take a seat in the Wizengamot. It had been his goal to achieve it before getting married, but now he did not seem to plan his wedding with Narcissa as soon as he was supposed to. He had even encouraged her to pursue her studies in Italy for another year.

Lucius also downed strong alcohol a little too regularly, and a little too easily. He knew how Severus felt about alcohol, and yet, he could not help himself. If it was not a warning bell, what was?

As soon as Abraxas portrait awakened, he had immediately made known the depth of his displeasure at his sons' taking the Dark Mark – he might be dead, he had meant to adopt Severus in the Family and he treated him as such. He was still his usual mulish self and insisted, without proof but utter conviction, that the time and manner of his demise was much too convenient not to have been arranged.

On common accord, neither Lucius nor Severus voiced any regret or critic about the Brotherhood, only justifying that it was done and that they were decided to make good of what they had.

Abraxas was a cynic at heart and admitted the necessity of it. He even insisted for Severus to resume his sessions with him to polish his style, manners and language. Severus complied willingly. He enjoyed the sarcastic personality of Abraxas Malfoy, who was an unrepentant bastard and rather proud of it, and one of the cruellest gossip he had ever met.

Since Abraxas was part of the family again, Lucius had been several times on the verge of saying something to Severus; something obviously very serious and emotional. The younger man had decided that he did not want to hear his friend say he was sorry to join or worse -because it was true- that he was sorry he had lead him into a trap. So, he tried to prove that he really was very comfortable with the whole thing.

Because for all the unpalatable things they now knew they would have to do, there were at least parts that made it worth it for Severus Snape, the half-breed from Cokeworth.

Status.

Recognition.

Notoriety.

Power.

Lucius himself might have been born to it, he was still young enough to appreciate it and to realise he got more from belonging to the fellowship of the Death Eaters than he would as the much-too-young Head of the House of Malfoy, on whom people spied to take advantage of his inexperience.

As for Severus, he was clearly on a high every time they came back from one party or another, now that he always received some kind of recognition or appreciation.

Thankfully, Abraxas had impressed on him in the early days of their association that coldness and holding himself proud would do better for him than to eagerly seek approval like a starved puppy.

It had been exhausting and bewildering to learn the subtleties of pureblood social codes but he understood that you could never be too proud, as long as you were discreet in company—otherwise you would be labelled a half-breed upstart.

Thanks to Abraxas's training and Lucius's constant favour and support, people now watched his
coldness and stiffness appreciatively, and even approvingly. Granted, they watched him like they would watch cattle at the market. Still, they did not dismiss him—they just wondered when he would be worth investing in.

It was already whispered in the Brotherhood that, for no discernible reason, the Dark Lord had a vested interest in the young Severus Snape and often inquired about his progress. After the Malfoys' sudden attention for the brilliant but socially insignificant student, it could only mean that there really was something in the young man, and that he was destined for great things.

They would never dream that Voldemort carried a well hidden but overgrown inferiority complex and that he was looking forward to having another half-blood within his inner circle. He was very curious of the similarities in their history, which was the first thing that caught his interest in the young wizard.

Above all, he relished the idea that, were he to favour him, Snape would owe everything to him and would have to be even more faithful than the others to deserve it, since he had no fortune and no status on his own. Ridding himself of Abraxas Malfoy had enabled him to catch Lucius and his fortune for his own use, but Snape was an added and much welcome bonus, no doubt eager to please since he had seen and tasted the Promised Land—Malfoy's willingness to adopt him—just to lose it.

Voldemort would have been deeply offended if he had realised he was not even original in this thought—Abraxas had been the first, and Dumbledore would believe it, too, when he had the opportunity.

§§§

While waiting for the 'great things', Severus had taken part in a surprising number of burglaries, three ambushes on people who got cold feet after promising to commit themselves to the Cause or to finance it… And one attack and execution of an opponent.

The burglaries had been rather fun, not unlike what he had done on occasion with other bored-to-death Spinner's End teenagers to garner enough alcohol and food for a proper party, but with the added bonus of unrestrained destruction that helped to unwind the high adrenaline.

With his inquisitive, scientific mind, he quickly learned how and where to search for valuables and strategic information hidden in a wizarding home. He understood at once that you cannot do too much preparation in advance.

Treasures of famous Wizarding Homes or The Magical Housewife's Guide to Home Transfiguration along with stacks of magazines like Magical Home Vogue suddenly held a prominent place on his bookshelves. It also never failed to surprise him how much you could learn about people's intimacy and family secrets, simply by listening to a boring discussion between ladies trading tips about holding house, gossiping on absent friends, or tracing back family relationships, dowries and inheritance. You learned even more than by standing around their husbands, listening to their crude jokes and boasting.

Once the novelty wore of, it was clear he would never be much of a socialite and that most hostesses invited him more to ingratiate them with Malfoy than anything else—unless they had daughters of marriageable age. Filing away bits on information for future use took the edge of boredom.

From a good listener, he was growing methodically into a spy, which suited him just fine.

At no time had he been told what they had been looking for or why the victims had been targeted. He was just a follower, and his seniors acted no nonsense and all business though some visibly
enjoyed themselves more than others. There was no moral issue involved since no one questioned what had to be done. It was necessary and their targets deserved it. Soldiers obey, they do not think. Full stop.

So, nothing unusual, all in all, though the beatings and hexing had been rather severe, and Severus had blanched at the treatment of one of the victims and wondered if the man would survive. He had been expected to hex, and had done it. He had felt uneasy at first to send curses at unknown people, until he found the trick to imagine one of the Marauders at the receiving end of his wand. He had then been able to enjoy the opportunity of using some fascinating spells. Nasty things to be sure, but nothing irreversible and never the Cruciatius, he justified to himself. All in all, nothing more than he had himself received from the Marauders or even from his father.

The execution of the opponent had been something else entirely.

Violence, he knew very well but he had never witnessed someone dying before. And it had been a woman, which made it even harder. A plain woman, well past her bloom, but a woman. She could have been one of his parents' neighbours so shabby and ordinary did she look, and her place was shabby too. He had often felt like he could blow Spinner's End to dust, but he had never really thought of actually killing the people there.

His only vision of death until then had been Abraxas Malfoy's body turned almost unrecognisable by the Dragon Pox and his mother's corpse, when he had arrived straight from Hogwarts for the funeral during his sixth year. Eileen Snape had looked peaceful before they closed the coffin, even in the anonymous mortuary, and strangely so for someone who had taken a whole night to die of internal injuries after falling down an entire flight of stairs against a brick wall. The rigidity of death had already begun to alter her mouth and the skin around her eye sockets, so much so that there was something unnatural in her otherwise familiar face, and she had looked almost like a stranger to her son.

But this woman was very much alive.

Old Avery and Goyle had been bent on having fun, as they phrased it. They ordered him to cast the silencing charms and then search the place while they hexed the woman in her own little sitting room for what had seemed hours - though the clock proved in the end that they had been away just under a half hour, so it couldn't have lasted more than eight or ten minutes he reasoned afterwards.

He had concentrated on not shaking while watching the impossible angles the woman's body could take while she was jerked as a rag doll or thrown against the walls, the furniture and the floor. Her shrieks he blocked easily enough, out of life-long habit, particularly once he set on ravaging the flat. They called him before the final killing though, since this was meant to be educational too.

Released from the Cruciatius, the woman was left whimpering on her own floor, with a little pool of urine under her and blood flowing freely from her nose and various cuts. Avery had slightly inclined his head to Goyle who had then sent the final curse. Severus had braced himself but was surprised when Goyle cast a simple Engorgio at the heart, rather than the feared Avada Kedavra he had never witnessed yet. It did not stop his knees to falter as the woman's chest exploded, her swelling heart pierced by her own snapping ribs and bursting blood all over the place. It had taken all his will to avoid vomiting in front of his seniors. They later congratulated him, because they had expected him to actually be sick or even to faint like some recruits had been known to do.

He did not realise that he had discovered how to cope, by analysing events in order to detach himself. The dead woman had stayed there with glassy open eyes and mouth, and the stench of blood and emptied bowels. He did not know yet that death was often a messy business and that nurses and undertakers wash bodies and close eyes and jaws as a routine before letting the family in.
And he had not yet experienced either the way your own body betrays you under Crucio.

Avery and Goyle had both been all at once elated and full of despair, after they all Apparated back at the meeting point. It was an effect of Dark Magic he already knew. It was caused by an excess of adrenaline and endorphin as well as by a loss of psyche and the difficulty to cope with the backlash of Dark spells.

Goyle was visibly more aggressive than his usual self at the debriefing and snatched Severus’s meager findings with a growl.

Avery had been gruffly kind, no doubt as the father of a boy the same age, and reviewed the different curses they had used and why. Visible damage to the body was good, the bloodier the better, as it helped strike fear, long after the Dark Mark had faded in the sky. He also explained that there was just so much Dark Magic one could take on one go and that Avada topped on Crucio drained really too much of your strength. He did not add, "too much of your sanity" but they all knew it. His clinical manner was his way to ground himself. Snape, being of a similar temper, mimicked it as best it could.

"Pay attention. One of these days, it'll be your turn."

And the lessons went on. Simple spells, like causing arteries or major organs to explode through Engorgio or cutting and slicing spells that quickly exsanguinated a victim were just as effective as the Killing curse, and helped for a good management of your magic. Sometimes, Reducto, which disappeared the body, was good when you needed to suppress evidence or to blackmail a family.

When dealing with a woman, a very simple trick was to Evanesco her clothes. Many a witch (and a surprising number of wizards as well) would break just at the indignity of being naked and the implied threat of rape, even if you had no time for that kind of fun.

"And no fooling around, Boy," Avery said in a stern voice. "It may disappoint you, but most of the time you'll seldom find that extra time, not if you want to be away before the Aurors or Dumbledore's lackeys arrive."

Those simple spells were a very effective tool of terror, which was the purpose. It was even more effective than the Morsmordre.

Goyle snorted and added, "you can always ask to go with Crabbe and Mulciber's people if you want fun." He looked defiantly at Avery. It was an old argument between the two of them as Crabbe’s and Mulciber’s squads liked to "play with their food".

"Yes," admitted Avery. "But look at us: all done, finished and home in less than one hour. That's what I call efficient. Besides, you won't make me believe that old goat tempted you."

"Of course not, but I enjoy being able to think 'I've had your witch' when I meet blood-traitors like Arthur Weasley," joked Goyle. "And the man's face when he sees us always sends Crabbe into stitches."

Avery shrugged. "It was all well and good when you were a bachelor. I know you're just like me and that you prefer going back to your wife and kids without more to explain than being a little delayed at work."

Goyle shook his head and answered hotly, "you know as well as me that it's sometimes too hard to... abstain. Better go with Crabbe or Mulciber then than get too wild at home. You've done it yourself, Brother, so don't act holier-than-thou with me or the boy."
"And what will you do the day you can't go with them?! Don't imagine you'll be able to just turn off the Dark when you get home. Better not too unleash more magic than you can tame."

"There's always Knockturn Alley."

It was Avery's turn to shake his head. "For your family's sake, I must hope you'll always have the money for that."

Goyle reddened in anger. His was not a very gainful position, and Madam Goyle, née Crabbe, was a well-known spendthrift.

Severus wondered for what would be the first of too many such instances how they all managed to make it sound so natural and easy – professional was the right word – despite the undercurrent of violence and madness they were all fighting.

He began to understand what eating death actually meant.

All too soon, they asked him to do the killing.

Tightened behind his Occlumency shield, he tried to think about the one person he really wished dead...

_Sirius Black._

...And his cutting hex sliced the throat of his unknown victim with absolute accuracy. He watched consciousness drain almost instantly out of the man's eyes with his blood and observed seconds later the reflexive spasms of agony documented in *Painless: How to Preserve the Purity and Magical Properties of Animal Parts or Advanced Methods of Cutting and Slaughtering.*

Thankfully, they did not find much to criticize, despite a much too swift and painless death. Dead is dead, after all, as Avery had taught him and he had the presence of mind to say it.

Goyle snorted, and looked sarcastically at Avery. "Our little know-it-all has sucked your ways it seems – not that I expected otherwise."

They congratulated him, calling him ostentatiously "Brother" and declared that he had earned his first Revel. They also said that He would be happy to learn about his progress.

"Mark my words, Snape, He has His eyes on you!"

Snape simply Apparated to the room he was lent above his Master's offices for the times he just had quick breaks while difficult potions simmered for hours and he couldn't go home to Malfoy Manor and back in time. He did not want to see Lucius right now.

He had not been able to eat the whole day, knowing what would be expected of him tonight but it did not prevent a painful session of dry heaving in the loo.

For three weeks, he had a bout of anorexia, the likes of which he had not gone through since the incident in the Shrieking Shack in sixth year.

And then, life resumed.

As usual.

§§§
Severus Snape learned how to detach himself from his body mentally when he was required to take part in some kind of raid. He even came to like the thrill of anticipation and danger, but he hated being begged at by people whimpering at his feet. He had always been the one to beg when he was a boy—for whatever little good it ever did him.

No matter how hard he tried to distance himself, no matter that he was most generally there for his skills at searching a place, he could not help remembering what it felt like.

Sometimes, when his Brothers were just too sadistic, he got angry enough to end it. He would then step in and kill the targets.

All he ever did, even if the face of vengeful disapproval and discipline was sneer that he had "better things to do than waste precious time with useless mudbloods and blood traitors".

Even punishment and Crucios did not seem to affect him beyond the immediate physical impact. For the other Death Eaters, Snape was no fun at all— earning for himself the reputation of being a cold fish and a spoilsport.

Snape watched himself in his mirror after the raids, wondering each time that there was nothing visible on his face, that he had not yet dried up like the Dark Lord, whom the older Death Eaters like Avery still described as one of the most handsome men they had ever met—which was hardly believable despite his obvious charisma.

Mulciber took such a dislike of Snape, despite his being one of his son's mates, that he went so far as making his point to the Dark Lord himself. He never wanted to have Snape on his team again.

Crabbe complained as well and only Avery's intervention and the understanding that Snape was some kind of apprentice of his prevented things to go farther than a disciplining round of Crucio, for the principle.

Avery coldly stepped besides Severus' shivering and whimpering form and challenged them. "So, the boy's too efficient for your taste, Brothers?" The cheek of it made the Dark Lord laugh, and he dismissed the pair.

As you brewn, so you must drink. It was so exquisitely fitting for a Potioneer's apprentice.

He felt uglier and uglier when he looked at himself in the mirror, and somehow needed to prove it. Consciously or unconsciously, he began to stop washing the protective grease between his lab sessions. He knew it disgusted most people but he did not care. He refused to admit that he was punishing himself.

§§§

Sooner rather than later, Avery's group found themselves face to face, or rather mask to face with Potter and Black and several other members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Snape had expected it – wished for it really – and carefully practiced the spell he had created during one particularly miserable period after the Shrieking Shack incident. If possible, he hated the Marauders even more now, because the bastards did not deserve it but were on the morally right side.

He had lashed Sectumsempra with the force of an Unforgivable, but unaccountably missed his prime target. Potter and Black had backed each other and their joint shielding must have deflected it. Then the barrage of spells they sent was enough to ensure a draw. Both team leaders ordered almost simultaneously to Disapparate and abandon the fight as every fighter retreated with some kind of injury. The Order had nearly lost an Auror, so severely hurt by the deflected Sectumsempra that they
barely had time to Apparate him to St Mungo’s before he bled to death. Still, the healers tore at their hair for days before being able to properly heal the cuts.

The fact was reported, and Snape was called once again in front of the Inner Circle, this time to be praised. He took it with icy politeness and stiffly apologized for failing to kill Potter and Black.

Voldemort was in high good humour and did not push very hard his Legilimens, just curious to see the curse. When he gave a cursory glance in Snape's mind, he was flooded with visions of Severus endlessly slicing, cutting ingredients... Then, the Marauders... The werewolf... Snape practicing again and again the wand movements of his Sectumsempra until he could cast it with the sheer elegance and swiftness of a fencer... Avery instructing the young man, of red blood flowing from a severed throat as Severus spied from a hidden corner of the Jewish butchery every single move of the Shochet to reproduce it later.

He laughed delightedly and called him "our vicious little slicer. No crude work for you, I see. I like your style." He turned to Avery with half-closed lids and gave him his heartfelt approval.

Afterwards, Snape stayed long enough under the shower spray to get his hands and feet wrinkled like a prune but he could not wash away the feeling of having his thoughts brushed by evil. He knew he would not be able to forget it soon, and certainly not if it was to happen again.

He had been lucky that Voldemort had not entered his mind in a rough and ready way or he might have revealed his disgust and guilt. Instead, he had felt the method and style of his invasion and acted accordingly, pushing front his hate for the Marauders, his traumatizing memory of the Shrieking Shack and several layers of politically correct memories and emotions. He would have to ask Abraxas to drill him and Lucius some more.

Later, as they reclined in the South sitting room, Lucius eyed him curiously. "I know your skill but I didn't think you could turn a common slicing hex into something so vicious. I'd expect something like that from Dolohov or McNair but I didn't know you had it in you."

He coughed uneasily. "I may have let myself being carried away by the fact that it was Potter and Black."

Lucius barked a laugh. "Just remind me to stay on your good side."

"Just remind me why I bear with you, Lord Malfoy."

His friend just smirked. "It is no ordinary spell."

Snape smirked back. "Quite the reverse, it is -or was- a very ordinary spell."

"I knew it! You found another Dark spell in the Library. Why didn't you tell me?"

"In fact, I found it while still at Hogwarts, in the library there."

Malfoy's eyebrows shot to his hairline. "They have things like that in the Restricted Section?! Dumbledore must be slipping."

Snape shook his head. "Of course not! In fact, it was not even in the Restricted Section. It was in a medieval book of very practical spells for Craftsmen that no one certainly read in centuries. It was commonly used by butchers and hunters for its precision and the fact it doesn’t damage the pelts and leathers. Potioneers routinely used it for slicing before Zygmunt Budge discovered that magical slicing interferes with potions life and that you can keep them for weeks or months on end if you slice by hand."
"I'm sure you perfected it."

"I... experimented."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Of course you did. What kind of experiments?"

"Mainly how to create a counter-curse. You've heard what it does to a living creature."

"You have a counter-curse?"

"Honestly, Lucius! Have you ever seen me use a spell without the means to undo it?"

"So, the unexpected breakthrough in St Mungo's, when they finally managed to heal your victim?"

Snape winced at the last word but looked squarely at his friend. "Tell me that you would have let a mere bystander suffer and die? Even a follower of Dumbledore doesn't deserve to be disfigured for life for another's quarrel."

"You always say you don't like foolish wand waving but there was nothing foolish either in the curse or the counter-curse."

"It is foolish wand waving when people like Mulciber are forever ready to brandish their wands in a show of virility. Just like Gryffindors. Just as if the wand itself was magic."

Lucius laughed. "Efficient as it is, don't be too partial to that spell. It could land you in Azkaban if it were to be recognised as your signature spell. In fact, until now I didn't see you as the type to relish in that kind of hex. It's quite sadistic."

"I was angry at the time."

"I can imagine. It looked not only dangerous, but messy."

Snape huffed a little. "It isn't messy at all, Lucius. I don't do messy."

"What I heard about the man's scars makes me somewhat sceptical."

"The cutting has the precision of a razor; it's the healing that is messy since it isn't supposed to heal... At least if you don't know the proper counter-spell."

"What made you choose a spell like that?"

"I wanted a curse than would leave a wizard looking like he had been attacked with a broken bottle."

"WHAT?"

"It's what the worst of the scum use for street fight in Cokeworth. It's crude... frightening... It leaves ugly scars... It's messy and vulgar. And oh! So muggle! I found it fitting for people who profess to love muggles so much."

Lucius knew him well. Severus was so impassive, it could only mean... "The Marauders! You meant it for the Marauders, and when you saw Potter and Black..."

Snape cut him, with just one word. "Yes."

Lucius could not help putting a consoling hand on his friend's arm. He was surprised when Severus
wrapped his own hand on it, squeezed meaningfully and said a heartfelt "thank you."

§§§

The Marauders had humiliated him at every turn and slandered him whenever they could. They repeated ceaselessly that he had to practice Dark Magic because no one could know and be able to use so many hexes without being Dark, and that he would not be so ugly if it was not for the Darkness seeping out of him. They repeated it until even Lily, even supposedly discerning adults like their teachers believed it. It was so easy. He was a Slytherin ergo it had to be at least partially true.

What grated on them was that their favourite target—a lower-class, unfavoured Slytherin... A defiant loner hardly anyone would side with in his own House... That he could give the four of them as good as he got.

In the self-delusion of their Gryffindor and class pride, they did not imagine it was the simple surviving instinct of a cornered rat. Rats were good at surviving in places like Spinner's End.

They were too crass and too prejudiced to wonder how and where he could have learned Dark Magic. Maybe they imagined he was taught by the Prince relatives he had never met? That they graciously gave him access to the family library? That his mother, who could hardly remember him some days and often had to be kept from her wand for her own safety, taught him how to duel? Those overindulged idiots never realised that they were the reason for the unleashing of his violence. Lucius Malfoy, who always thought that noblesse oblige and made it his business to help him fit in because the pride of Slytherin was at stake, invited him to the Slytherin duelling club. He needed to learn discipline, he explained.

Severus did not want to let Malfoy down, after all the Prefect had done for him, even if it was more out of duty than real sympathy. And he wanted to show the others. His desperate search for knowledge and protection made the rest.

He spent most of his free time in the Library and he soon learned how to slip in the Restricted Section in the Library. He lost himself with delectation in this temple of knowledge, without discrimination or prejudice, since he had very few notions of good and bad anyway.

After the Shrieking Shack, he only dreamed of revenge. Of murder. On the Marauders and even sometimes on Dumbledore.

The Sectumsempra looked like some sort of poetic justice at the time. He fantasized about using it on the werewolf and then on Potter and Black, watch what it did to their famous good looks, even if it would probably be the last thing he did, courtesy to the life debt Dumbledore pretended he owed Potter. He had even researched the possibility to empower the curse with the properties of silver to make it even worse for Lupin.

Only the fact that his relationship with Lily was coming to an end had prevented him from implementing his revenge.

After he realised they had no future together anymore, he just knew he would have to cut all ties at once, rather than slowly drift away from her and having to watch her dating and marrying a pureblood idiot.

Still, he had never imagined that she would choose James Potter.

"James asked me out and I said yes."
She thought herself very clever, trying to make him jealous with Potter. It might have worked with any one else, but not one of the Marauders, and certainly not James Potter, who had managed to earn a life debt from him. Dumbledore had made a point hammering it into him while he was still in shock – the worst being that saving him was only an added bonus for Potter, who had only meant to save his own friends and his own reputation.

Lily knew how he felt about that swine but she still chose to go to Hogsmeade with him.

He knew her like the back of his hand – better than she knew herself probably. He refused to wait and watch her realise that Potter was the perfect wizard for her goals. Pureblood but liberal, rich, popular… And handsome.

What would she ask next? That he give her away at her wedding? Lunch on Sundays with Black, Lupin and Pettigrew? To be godfather to one of Potter's children? He sneered, trying to imagine Potter's face…

And the torture of being friends with Mrs Potter, while all he wanted to do was grab her and make love to her… And ask her if it was half as good when it was Potter.

He would rather die.

He had been too devastated to research the Sectumsempra properly, and anyway, he had to find a place and a living for the coming summer break. He would be lucky to find a job slicing flobberworms for a third rate Potioneer and a hovel in Knockturn Alley.

He was ready to go and commit any stupidity. Fortunately, Lucius had been there to catch the pieces.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What's worth the fight is always worth the price

Every second counts 'cause there's no second try

(Nickelback, If today was your last day)

As usual, dialogue in bold italics is quoted from the HP books.

Harry was late, and he would have missed it, if Ron had not shown him the small headline on the back page of the Daily Prophet: *Ex-Death Eater Severus Snape is recovering*. The article was quite short, simply stating that St Mungo's had informed the next of kins that the man had regained consciousness earlier in the week but the question was asked: why not send him to the Hospital Wing of Azkaban since the inquest for Albus Dumbledore's murder was still pending, until Snape's full recovery?

That there was no such thing as a Hospital in Azkaban but only visiting healers in a dingy infirmary was not pertinent. The real problem was that someone had looked out for the information, passed it to the press and was trying to raise a scandal about Snape. It stank of manipulation and low-level politics, possibly of personal revenge too.

Harry applied for a day off, and left straight for St Mungo's.

He had indeed received a brief notice from the Hospital, but it only stated that the patient Severus Snape had reacted to his name and regained full consciousness for a few minutes. Longer episodes of awareness could now be expected, but with no prediction about the timing and frequency. Either St Mungo's did not give him the truth, or someone was playing games with Snape's reputation, which was more probable.

He was asked to wait in the visitors' room. Healer Constanz was on his consulting tour, a disapproving nurse told him, pointing at the signpost with the visiting and consultation hours. He was faced with more than two hours kicking his heals.

Never one for patience, he finally decided to go say hello and chat with the colleagues who guarded Snape's door. He never said he was there unofficially and they never asked. He wanted them to send him a Patronus at once if anything suspect happened. He also made a mental note to do the same with the Aurors who were assigned for the next shifts.

At long last, Healer Constanz arrived. They had occasionally sighted each other while Harry was on guard duty but had never actually spoken. The healer was friendly and Harry found himself genuinely welcomed in his office, with coffee and buns, while the old wizard explained that he had often heard about Harry from Albus Dumbledore.

Harry had also been a central figure in Hermione Granger's tales, but Constanz would of course never mention it.

Dumbledore was not the best recommendation with Harry any more but it still helped. Whatever the
many unresolved issues he had with the memory of Dumbledore, he had genuinely loved the old wizard, who had, at least, been on the right side. One could even say he had been the right side.

The healer had also been acquainted with Snape for nearly twenty years. He had regularly worked with the Master Potioneer, relying on him for special potions of course, but also for information about Dark curses and new spells developed by the Death Eaters.

Harry was hardly surprised to hear Constanz confirm his growing suspicion—that he was a member of the original Order of the Phoenix. In fact, he had worked with Dumbledore since the time of Grindelwald.

They discussed Snape's health and how someone with an interest in a particular patient could get information - sensitive and supposedly private information. Constanz had no particular confidence in the discretion of the administrative staff, especially when nearly anybody who cared to fill a few forms could ask to be considered as next of kin or person to be informed, as Harry himself had done.

They went together to the appropriate office, and the Healer requested the list of people registered as persons to be informed for Severus Snape. They were presented with only four names. Minerva McGonagall (next of kin), Narcissa Malfoy, Harry Potter, and one William Fawley, who apparently lived in a small place in the back of beyond - Meryton, in Hertfordshire. Harry had never heard of the place. The wizard's name was slightly familiar though, but he could not place it right now.

Constanz was quite solemn when he agreed to inform Harry at once about anything he noticed that might concern the former spy.

"I don't like it either, Mr Potter. It reminds me too much of the kind of rumours that were planted on the Continent after Grindelwald's fall in 1945 to get rid of rivals. I have been only too happy to leave all this behind but history seems to repeat itself."

Harry requested an audience with Shacklebolt, but had to be satisfied with the fact that the Minister had a full day with the Wizengamot, would meet the other European Ministers the next day and so would not be available before Thursday... Where he had a small time slot around 06:30, if Auror Potter cared to share breakfast with the Minister?

The young wizard retreated rather frustrated. His mood did not improve after a brief inquiry in the Personnel Office. That William Fawley sat in the Wizengamot and happened to also be a senior lawyer often working with the judicial division of Magical Law Enforcement did not provide much insight. Politically, the man sat in the pureblood benches but he was a liberal. He used to align himself with Dumbledore in most votes, but one could not call him a true ally. Professionally, he was an expert in leases and urban development, not in criminality. Harry could not find any link with Snape's former Death Eaters or radical pureblood associates. Yet, it was undeniable that he had an eye on the former spy, and considering the leaks to the Prophet, certainly not a kind one.

The following day, Harry was hardly stepping into the Ministry's elevator when a Patronus reached him. His colleagues in St Mungo's were informing him that there was a threatening group marching on them. They did not think that the shields they had installed would stand since they were forcefully outnumbered and they needed reinforcements now. Harry swore, asked for emergency units and Apparated straight into Snape's room - regulation be damned.

As the little mob of angry wizards finally overwhelmed the affronted staff and the Auror guards, and stormed inside the room, they were confronted by new shields and two wizards with their wands raised. One was a tall, old Healer whose stance proved he knew his business in a fight. The other
was none other than Harry Potter himself, standing on the bed. He had pushed Snape protectively behind. The man was slightly shifting but otherwise totally oblivious to what was happening around him.

There were fifteen to twenty of them—ordinary looking people, registered the exercised Auror eyes in a flash, as said people shouted revenge on the Death Eater who killed Dumbledore and tortured children. Some demanded for Snape to be thrown in Azkaban right now, others threatened to do justice themselves if the Aurors did not do their job.

Green eyes flashing, jaw set in a way that was alarming even to people who had never actually watched Harry at his most stubborn, he just said, "You'll touch one of his hair over my dead body."

That Snape’s head was shaved did not strike any one as funny. Rather, the mob stopped and even seemed to retreat a little, and then went out like a tidal wave when the alarm spells around Snape all erupted in a loud, painful howling. The healer quickly silenced them but did not dare lower his wand to attend his patient.

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he noticed a reporter conveniently placed behind the retreating protesters and flashing madly at the scene.

§§§

The front page of the Daily Prophet was quite dramatic. There was a photograph of the mob halting in front of a very grim and menacing Harry who was towering over them from Snape's bed. 'Over my dead body claims Boy-Who-Lived' was not signed by Rita Skeeter or any of the prominent noms de plume who usually signed first page columns.

This fact in itself was certainly the best clue that something had been staged but turned slightly awry. The article was rather mild for the Prophet, stating that an unknown group had invaded St Mungo's and had stormed into the room of ex-Death Eater, ex-Hogwarts Headmaster and Controversial Spy Severus Snape. The writer chose to note that the Auror reinforcements arrived too late to detain the protesters who had left as swiftly as they had come.

It was another song in the inside pages. "Are we really safe in St Mungo's?" was the first big question. There were others, and they were directly aimed at Harry. Why was Harry Potter there in the first place in Severus Snape's bed? Why was he listed as next of kin of said Severus Snape? And why would the Boy who lived show so much passion in defending a former teacher who had been notorious for his affair with Death Eater Lucius Malfoy at the end of the 1970s?

The rest of the page pertained to declarations of staff members shocked that such violence and breach of security could happen in St Mungo's. Another page quoted hospital visitors worried or indignant that the presence of the wizard accused of the murder of Albus Dumbledore was endangering the other patients.

Harry stormed into Shacklebolt's office as soon as the assistant gave him leave to and produced his Daily Prophet. "Have you seen that, Kingsley?"

"I've read it, Harry, and a good day to you too," was the Minister's greeting. Harry flushed and mumbled a greeting in return. "The only thing I can do, and is already done, is to publish a statement saying that you're in charge of Snape's security due to threats on his life. I just wished you had asked me before making yourself the man's bodyguard."

"I tried but you were occupied," answered Harry with some asperity.
He almost immediately regretted it and accepted a glass of fresh juice with a sheepish, apologetic grin. Kingsley's tired stance was proof enough that the man did not shirk any of his responsibilities, far from it.

"It all went so fast," Harry explained to the Minister while they ate. Contrary to what the Prophet pretended, there had been no breach of an angry mob in St Mungo's. People had arrived quietly on their own or in pairs through different ways and had met at the same given time outside the Spell Damage Ward. They had left swiftly the same way, just as the emergency teams were Apparating in the Ward.

It was difficult to be sure what they really wanted. Would they really have killed Snape if the man had been undefended? He did not think so because he had noticed there did not seem to be any leader, and they had left so quickly too. Still, a killer would have played least in sight until the crucial moment.

Shacklebolt was of the opinion that the whole performance seemed more probably staged to get media coverage and try to sway the opinion by making Snape controversial again.

The Daily Prophet's embroilment was an evidence, what with the convenient presence of the photograph - but as usual, it was impossible to prove it.

Harry worried about the Prophet's insinuations. Where did this ridiculous idea of putting Snape in Azkaban come from?

"Can't you just pardon the man, and let him be?!"

Shacklebolt pursed his lips before speaking. It was out of character enough to trigger warning bells in Harry's mind.

"I'm sorry, but I can't stop the procedure now. The prosecution for Dumbledore's murder has been opened since his death, and you very well know you were only one of those who pressed us for better efficiency and craved expeditious justice for Snape." Harry sighed. "You may have changed your mind, but the wheels never stopped turning. The inquest was frozen under Pius Thicknesse but has been reopened with all the files about war crimes."

The Minister drained his cup and set it a little more forcefully than necessary. He looked Harry in the eyes again until the young man wondered what made the usually benevolent wizard so grim. He spelled the remains of breakfast on a side table, grabbed a thick file and put it in front of him. "Harry... I haven't told you yet... I classified the information for the time being but there are also seventeen registered complaints against Severus Snape as Headmaster for abuse against students."

"We know what the Carrows did..."

Shacklebolt shook his head. "Some complaints are very specific. In fact, they remind me of some of the most unsavoury scandals the Prime Minister had to deal with when I worked as Muggle liaison officer."

"Ah! Do they accuse Snape to steal in the budget now?"

"Nothing so trivial, Harry."

"So what? No more suspense, please. What is he accused of, now?"

Kingsley sighed and had Harry pinned to his seat with his next words.
"Abuse - Sexual abuse - on minors."

Harry swallowed. He had investigated and followed enough cases during the war trials to know that Voldemort's unrestrained sadistic madness during the second war had made rape and abuse an integral part of the Death Eaters' terror tools - a compulsory part. Even when they were not already so inclined, the recruits had to maim, rape and kill or would be disciplined with Unforgivens. "You mean that as a Death Eater-"

"No. As Headmaster. On his students. We're speaking of paedophilia, Harry."

"This is absolutely ridiculous."

"It isn't."

"I refuse to believe that of Severus Snape."

"This is not a question of what we believe!" Shacklebolt slammed his hand on the file. "There are official charges here that will have to be answered in a court room. Do you imagine what it will be like, the scandal of children molested at Hogwarts? Whether it is true or not, whether it was at Voldemort's orders, the reputation of Hogwarts will be tainted and maybe destroyed just like Snape's if it isn't addressed publicly!"

Harry felt like he had got punched in the guts. He croaked, "So?"

"So, for the man's sake and our own, we can't simply dismiss the charges even if it were possible." In a placating tone, he added, "You know as well as me that Snape would never be free to move on without a complete and public clearance. The charges must be answered fully and openly. He's safe for now, and we can rely on the Healers to keep him for as long as necessary until he's ready for his defence."

"You don't believe he's guilty then?"

"Healer Constanz in St Mungo's assures me he hasn't the profile of a paedophile and that there's material evidence that he couldn't have done it."

Harry closed his eyes in relief. "Then, it will be easy to refute the charges."

"No, it will not! Public opinion will demand details, witnesses and proofs. And believe me, the complaints come with details. Disgustingly precise details."

The discussion had gone pear-shaped so swiftly, Harry knew he would have to re-play it in his mind later. At the very least, there was collusion between Constanz and the Minister, but as it was for Snape's sake, Harry did not feel he needed to press the matter right now. There was enough to fume about, even if he now understood much better the judiciary system from the inside. He had suffered enough himself to know how hearings could be biased by partial witnesses, partial statements... and partial Wizengamot members.

"Let me conduct the enquiry in Snape's case."

"I knew you'd say that, Harry, but you must realize we're walking on eggs. Good intentions will not be enough."

"What do you mean?"

"You're still a junior Auror. Properly speaking, you have only a few months of service, though we
both know you already learned the hard way most of what the training could teach you. There would have been outrages for you, Ron and your friends from Dumbledore's Army being made Aurors so soon, if we hadn't had to rush things to replenish the Auror's depleted ranks. I will be criticized for giving you such public stand, since there will always be voices to accuse me of favouritism when The Boy Who Lived is concerned."

Harry pulled a face at the hated nickname, but Shacklebolt did not let him time to say anything. "Make no mistake, this is highly political. Snape is the man to kill for several reasons. Some will want his head for ruining the pureblood cause. Too many others will be glad to use his story as a way of discrediting Dumbledore's legacy. You've already seen how they try to link you to Snape?"

Harry nodded grimly. He could see the link with the accusations of abuse.

"When they'll be done with suppositions of an under-age affair between you and Snape, they will use again his connection with your mother. We haven't yet heard rumours that you're his hidden son, but I'd be surprised if it didn't come to that too."

Harry dismissed it with a flick of his hand."It isn't the first time gross lies will have been told about me. I can take it. I owe the man so many life debts the children of my children may still be indebted to him. I will clear him."

"Yet, exonerating Snape may well lead to question some of Dumbledore's decisions. Not all were orthodox or perhaps really wise," said Shacklebolt and they exchanged wary looks. "And Snape always followed his orders. Snape's very loyalty will be the main way to attack Dumbledore's reputation because of the collateral damages created by his orders. He always told Snape to maintain his cover whatever the cost... And you know that acting as a Death Eater means committing crimes as a Death Eater. We may be able to vindicate him because of the general amnesty for the fighters of the Light... Ultimately those crimes will lie at Dumbledore's feet."

"Dumbledore is dead and he was controversial at best... Even if we all danced to his piping without question. I won't shed a tear on his reputation," said Harry between gritted teeth. "Particularly not when it's deserved."

"Harry... This is not a case of having to choose between Snape and Dumbledore. It's about all of us," said the Minister carefully. "Snape is the only living member of the Order of the Phoenix who is in a position to have his hero status contested. If he goes down, the mud will be used to dirty us all and contest my own position as Minister. I don't give a damn for it – well, a little but not that much – but the Order of the Phoenix has always been considered by the Ministry as a state within the state... A law unto itself... Now, an Order Member is Minister. Order Members have filled in key jobs... It would be so easy to make it look like a conspiracy."

Stubborn, Harry shrugged. "You told me last year, when the conservatives began to contest and harass you that it was part of the job and that you're not Fudge to want to be loved by all."

"Still, there is a level of opposition that could paralyse the Ministry and the country," Kingsley insisted. "I don't want to be Fudge but I don't want to be Scrimgeour either and have to bully my way with the Wizengamot like he did! This country needs reconciliation and healing, and Snape's trial will be the last public occasion to do it! The last occasion to acknowledge that people on both sides suffered, that there is no good or bad suffering but that we were fighting real evil and that every sacrifice was worth it. We can't afford to botch it!"

"I won't botch it, Kingsley, if that's what you're warning me about."

The Minister smiled at his eagerness. "What I'm telling you is that you won't do this alone this time."

Actually, I forbid you to work alone. You will head an investigation team, but you'll have to do it as secretly as possible, and to accept expert help when available. In fact, I order you to find the best expert help. Do you feel up to the task, Harry Potter?” he taunted, though not unkindly.

Harry smiled back. "I may not be the best or the most experimented-"

"Yet."

Harry shrugged it off, "-but if I could find the Horcruxes with next to no clue from Dumbledore, I think I can do that with... What did you call it? The best expert help available."

"Remember you must be absolutely thorough and investigate every complaint, every suspicion or rumour that has ever been heard against Snape. We don't know what can be brought to light during the hearings – just do not expect them to fight fairly."

Harry nodded grimly.

"You'll report to me every week, and as I said, you're free to enroll any type of help you deem appropriate and you feel comfortable with..."

As the Minister's voice lingered meaningfully while grinning at him, Harry finally caught his meaning. "Hermione?"

"I guess it would be difficult to find someone more thorough, wouldn't it? And she's still at Hogwarts, which would be ideal to get information about possible abuse."

Harry already knew that Hermione would have her own reasons to help. "You're right. Ron will want to help too, of course. And maybe some people from Dumbledore's Army."

Harry was already beginning to plan. He would ask first those who were Aurors now, like Neville and Seamus. There was also Ginny and Luna who were still at Hogwarts and could work with Hermione.

Shacklebolt interrupted his musings.

"Make sure to get wand oaths from everyone to keep the secret until the trial."

Harry’s surprised look prompted Shacklebolt to add, "This is an order, not an option. Don't make the mistake to assume you'll not be followed or watched because you're an Auror or that our mysterious foes will not try to torture the truth out of you if they hear about your inquiries."

"Please. I'm not that green."

"No, you're not... But you can't be too much prepared. We all have to be prepared. I expect that the next step will be to paint the Order as a machine that leads to the same excesses and corruption that previous tenures like that of Fudge or Scrimgeour... Not to speak of Thicknesse. Dumbledore's death is the perfect example, and there is too much political pressure for us to be anything less than totally transparent during the trial. We'd never hear the end of it."

Harry nodded grimly.

The Minister pursued, "If Snape falls, it will be like a domino game to make us fall one by one and restore the previous state of things."

There was a deep silence. Shacklebolt broke it. "We have only two options. Either the whole Order
stands in support of Snape or..." the Minister let his voice trail menacingly, "We help make him a scapegoat and pay for all of us."

Harry glowered at that last statement and started to protest hotly. Kingsley pacified him but pursued ruthlessly, "even in the Order, some people wouldn't be loath to let it happen, unjust and short sighted as it is. It is a great temptation to buy peace at a bargain."

"We're speaking of a man's life!“ shouted Harry in outrage.

"We're speaking of one life to get closure for a war that cost us one fourth of the population!" Kingsley shouted back.

He suddenly deflated. "I can understand the temptation," he said tiredly. Harry glared at him but he added without flinching, "Don't believe I didn't consider this a possible option. I know Snape well enough to believe that he accepted a long time ago that he is expendable. When he agreed to kill Dumbledore, I'm sure he never expected to survive – that he hoped he wouldn't survive."

"And that makes it all right?!" Harry knew Kingsley had a point, but he refused to listen to any suggestion of giving up on Snape.

"Please, Harry! I have the responsibility in front of the people of this country to at least consider all possible solutions. Snape would probably be the first one to raise the subject. He willingly sacrificed himself for years – even if we agree that he deserves to be left off the hook at last."

Harry remembered all too well every kind of injustice he had seen from the political power. Sirius sent to Azkaban without a trial. The poor, nearly dumb Stan Turnpike sent there too, for the sake of a few supportive headlines to comfort Scrimgeour's reputation. His own hearing for the use of underage magic that had been staged to shut him up and Dumbledore with him...

He remembered the endless nightmare of being doubted, slandered at every turn after Cedric's death. He thought of Snape's desperate attempt to convince Fudge by shoving his own Dark Mark under the Minister's nose at the risk of being arrested on the spot and fed to the Dementors like Barty Crouch Junior.

And above all, he remembered the terror Umbridge had descended on Hogwarts for that very same Ministry, and the nightmare of her Muggleborn Registration Commission.

His hand twitched as a reminder. The old blood quill scar was barely identifiable for the people who did not know – but it was more than fresh in his mind. I will not tell lies. He balled his fists in a last attempt to remain calm. He announced,"I'll do it. Even if it's the last thing I do, I'll still do it."

"That's what I expected... But, calm down, Harry. It isn't a matter of life and death any more. I very much doubt they'll do more against you than a few libelous papers, irritating as they are."

"For Snape, it may be a matter of life and death."

Kingsley was studying his nails. Without once looking up at Harry, he said very casually, "there is just so much I can do as Minister for Magic with regard to a legal procedure... I can't stop it and I can't dictate the issue of the trial... but I'll have full latitude in the carrying out of any sentence."

Their eyes met at last. Harry sighed in relief as the Minister's words sunk: it was as good as a promise that Snape would be spared if worse came to worst.

Shacklebolt nodded, with a lopsided smile. "Funny to think how you used to hate the man."
He waved aside Harry's protests. "I just caution you not to go too far on the other side. Do not idealise him. He was probably the most strong-willed man of the war but that strength had to go with utter ruthlessness. Snape is a hero, not a saint."

"Don't tell me some stains can't wear off? I won't buy that one any more."

"I don't. I just warn you not to try to force him into a father figure, Harry. I can't imagine he would relish it."

Harry just shrugged.

"Whatever..." said Kingsley, unwilling to pursue that line, not with Stubborn Harry. He changed the subject. "You'll want to find Snape a good lawyer, because he doesn't stand a single chance if the trial is brought in front of the Wizengamot as it is."

"WHAT?"

"Unfortunately, the original inquest was opened under civil law which allows no exception and very little atonement for Unforgivables and murder as you well know." Kingsley smiled thinly. "Everyone was eager for Snape to get the Dementor's kiss at the time of Dumbledore's death and it's not as if the Ministry needed any encouragement."

Harry coloured. He had been one of the most vocal at the time, harassing Moody, Kingsley and Tonks to find Snape. Expressing his hate of Snape and pursuing revenge had been his way to deal with his grief – and his own guilt.

The Minister went on, "we have to bring the procedure under the War Exceptions to hope to win. The War High Court has been dismissed – not my doing and I still wonder if it wasn't done intentionally with Snape in mind... But at the time it was still doubtful if he would survive and I thought I could get away with a simple pardon for him. We'll have to pull out a nice bit of judicial procedure to get a War Court revived at so late a date. It is possible, but we'll have to be sure to pull the right judicial strings... and we will need a hell of a good lawyer to avoid any technicality or procedural error. Know any?"

"No, but there is someone who does and who may be anxious to help Snape, I think."

Kingsley nodded sagely. "Malfoy."

"Yes. Malfoy."

§§§

Eating death again and again while he lay helpless in his hospital bed, trapped in his own mind, was much, much worse than the first time around when Snape could focus on his apprenticeship and drown himself in work. On the whole, the Dark Lord had kept him at brewing potions and on burglary and spying, acknowledging that people like him and Lucius were not to be wasted as mere thugs.

Now, he was alone with his memories.

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

How many times had he fractured his own soul, without even knowing it? Why had he ever bothered to ask Albus to spare him?
"How many men and women have you watched die?"

"Lately only those whom I couldn't save." Had he really said that?

He had not been able to forget any of them, even if he did not always remember their names. Their faces visited him much too often in his nightmares for him to forget.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

He knew that there is no redemption for the likes of him. Since he had fled to Spinner's End after killing Albus, every day, every time he paused to think, he felt something like the ticking of a clock. Dilys Derwent tried to reason that it was his own heart he heard because he was much too stressed. Whatever it was, he knew it timed the hours until his own death and it reminded him of what he had done... done... done - although it often sounded as damned... damned... damned!

"Severus... Please."

He could remember at least five people who had recognised him, from Emmeline Vance to Charity Burbage, and begged him for help right in front of the others.

And it was their death warrant. You could not recognise a Death Eater and live.

Emmeline, he had killed himself and by her own choice, his only consolation being that he had spared her all the indignities they generally reserved for Aurors and for females. Moody's deep hatred had never left his face as Snape told the tale. Dumbledore had thanked him for his mercy, only to be interrupted by Moody's short "Oh! Cut it, Albus!" And for once, he'd been grateful to the Auror.

"Severus... Please."

"You'll do what you have to do to keep your cover." Dumbledore had spoken, once and for all. It was for the Greater Good, so why would his feelings matter? He was not supposed to have feelings. He was not supposed to have a soul left. He was a Death Eater. He was supposed to suffer to atone and patch his soul up. Utter remorse and suffering, Albus repeated him.

As if.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

"Severus... Please."

Suddenly, he could not keep any food. He vomited helplessly, fighting and choking when they tried to feed him. He used to throw up too when he came back from certain summons – and to cry, but back then, at least, there was no one to witness how weak he truly was.

For a time, the Healers debated if he had gone insane.

He was sure of it, the day he found the courage to look at his left forearm and saw the skull and snake still imprinted in his flesh. The Mark had turned a light pearly colour, like an old scar, but was still branding him for the soulless bastard that he was.

Dark curses always leave a scar. It was worse than when the Dark Lord was alive, because it was dormant most of the time back then... And he still had the hope it might disappear one day if they won.

Well, now he knew.
He could not stop scratching his arm raw until they had to tie him down.

Another humiliation.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

Certainly not enough.

Never enough, since the Mark was still there.

*How could it ever be enough?*

The Mark would stay forever, subdued like a turned-off neon sign in broad daylight but unmistakable. Until death. Until the real kind of hell. He was sure he would still be branded with it in the after life.

When the nightmares had settled into another new routine and they did not dare give him Sleeping Draughts for fear of his becoming dependent again, he woke up one morning to an old, known face.

"Hello, Snape."

He managed with his new, hoarse, uneasy voice, "Costnz? A muss reely be a dess'rate case if 'u're 'ere."

"Quite the reverse," answered Alfred Constanz. "You've just ceased to be a desperate case."

Chapter End Notes

Harry's dramatic intervention in St Mungo's is directly inspired by Yves Farge, a French journalist and politician, appointed by General de Gaulle to supervise post-war trials in France in 1945. He is said to have saved hundreds of persons from the last Nazis but also from popular revenge on real or supposed Nazi collaborationists. He really threw himself on a prisoner's bed to prevent him from being lynched by the mob who had erupted in the prison, angered that the man had been graced from death penalty. He later died in a car accident, with quite a few rumours that he had been framed. Reality is definitively weirder than fiction.
Chapter 10

It's a cruel, cruel world to face on your own

(Gossip, Heavy Cross)

Professor Snape on trial? Surely, Harry was joking.

As expected, Hermione did not take it well. She had always respected the teacher and the scholar in him despite his nastiness. She was furious with herself for failing to recognise that he was not dying in the Shrieking Shack but falling into a coma.

She had summoned the vial for his memories quickly enough, so, as she had told Poppy Pomfrey when the Matron broke down in front of her, she could not forgive herself on the grounds of surprise or of being unable to act through shock. Had it been any other person than Professor Snape, she admitted that she certainly would have frantically rummaged her bag for vials of potions and raised her wand to scan vital signs or at least cast a Patronus for medical help.

There was simply no excuse, no way she could forgive herself because… Because...

Madam Pomfrey had told her honestly, at some risk for herself, that she had mistrusted Severus Snape to the point of refusing to treat him.

Hermione could do nothing less than repaying her honesty and trust with equally candid truth.

"I did nothing," she confessed, "because I was glad that at least one of them was paying for what they did to me."

At the same time, it had been so horrible to watch that she had felt awful to wish this when it was happening to Professor Snape, whose intelligence and courage she had always admired, no matter what.

When she learned that, far from being a foe, he had sacrificed himself and his reputation for years to save them all, she was so ashamed! She had been wishing death and suffering on the only one who did not deserve it.

This confession was a turning point for Hermione in her healing process.

Until then, she had beaten her breast, repeating to herself that in many countries there is a duty to rescue and that she had failed to render what assistance she could. She had just watched fascinated, handing the vial to collect Snape's memories and turned away without a thought to do more.

It did not help either that she had never seen so much blood before – so gory a sight. It had struck her much more than the bloody confusion of the battle itself. If there was one image of that fateful night that she would never be able to forget, it would certainly be the vision of Professor Snape, covered in blood and getting weaker and weaker but still urging Harry to take his memories. Not to mention his blood-curling screams as Nagini tore his throat and infused them with corrosive venom.

The moment had been so dramatic, so fateful that none of them had questioned the value of the memories of a traitor or that they would be indispensable for Harry to win. Such was Severus Snape's charisma, even in dying.
After discussing with Poppy Pomfrey, Hermione could finally admit that, had she tried to save him, she could easily have killed him in the Shrieking Shack while believing she was helping.

Soon enough, her past guilt turned into muted anger and then deep resentment against the person who had actually made matters worse, and for what? For the sake of exercising total control where he could – Albus Dumbledore.

Just like Harry, she came to consider Severus Snape like a fellow sufferer. But unlike Harry, she had never been important enough for Dumbledore to bestow on her true attention and sympathy. So, she had no sentimental hesitation to consign the late headmaster to hell, for being a closet autocrat who enjoyed playing the puppeteer and imposing excessive, sometimes pointless ordeals on them all – just because he did not want to share information and discuss options.

At this point, she did not find much difference between Dumbledore and Voldemort, but it was wiser to keep her opinion to herself.

§§§

When Harry asked for her help, Hermione's resentment resurfaced. All the adjectives she had used during her ill-fated S.P.E.W. campaign were recycled when she was told of the coming trial... All the indignation she had collected in years resurfaced. It was disgusting. It was an injustice even before it began. It was...

"-Political above all else," interrupted Harry, with new-found authority.

Ginny listened in silence. In her opinion, Snape had it coming even if it was theoretically unjust.

She had been the only one of them to stay at Hogwarts while Snape was Headmaster.

She knew she was lucky when he sent them to detention with Hagrid or with Filch for mindless, stupid chores when he should have handed them to the Carrows... But she had also spent months being called a blood traitor and hearing every day her convictions about magic and equality being ridiculed, while Snape lorded from afar and looked at them down his long nose.

She had gone through the Carrows' indoctrination and Snape's perpetual warnings to 'behave' and to submit. She had taken turns with Lavender to nurse and comfort Michael, Seamus, Neville and all the others who had been Cruciated and tortured by the Carrows while the Gryffindor common room was almost turned into another hospital wing.

It had been awful, nerve racking—all the more because Parvati, despite her Prefect's authority and her way with children, could not always distract the youngest and keep them from watching and shaking in silent shock and anger. The once futile girl had her hands full trying to soothe and heal children who returned from their Dark Arts lessons having been hexed by their own "teacher" and their own schoolmates.

The worst had been that, simply by having the Carrows repeating it every day, the younger students were coming each time closer to the final acceptance of the power of the Dark, and they had to watch it happen. Parvati had to explain again and again that it was bad and that they had to resist, but the terrified younger years looked at their tortured elders, at Ginny's impotent anger, and you could see their courage and convictions were beginning to falter.

So, the overall memory of the last school year left Ginny deeply resentful. She had been there. No matter what, Snape was their Professor, their Headmaster, the authority they looked up to and he had outwardly betrayed all they believed in for months. To her young mind, it had seemed to go on for
years.

She could understand how he had managed to hold the school together. She could even feel grateful to have been spared the full sadism of the Death Eater teachers, but the habit to fear and despise the greasy git was of too long standing for such contradictory feelings to be anything other than painful.

What stung the most was that she had no better argument that “but he was still a bastard.” It sounded weak and spiteful when compared with the man’s total sacrifice and accomplishments as a spy, even to her own ears—but how it rankled!

He was untouchable as far as Harry was concerned, so she contained herself. She focused on the admirable fact that Harry had once again a mission, something to fight for. He had not been so alive, so passionate in months. He seemed unstoppable in his fury for justice... If clearing Snape’s name was what it took to have old Harry back, it was all right with her. She was following him down that path with her eyes closed. Only, do not ask her to like Snape.

She exchanged looks with Ron, which silently proved her that her brother tagged along, as usual, but did not buy it more profoundly than herself. Still, Ron was not here entirely by choice: he was on duty.

It was surprising to think of the youngest of her brothers as an Auror. She would have thought that he was more suited to help George at the shop. He had done it very well during the summer, so that the bereaved twin could gradually return to work and get out of his breakdown, but he had been eager to leave for Auror training in September.

Ron had never known tame and quiet, and working in a jokes’ shop during the week and play Quiddich the week-end could never compare with the rushes of adrenaline he had felt following Harry all these years.

He did not say it, but he was also perfectly aware that getting the necessary NEWTs scores for admission in the Aurory would probably have been beyond him in regular exams. The generous passing NEWTs he had been awarded as a war hero were an opportunity the strategist in him did not mean to squander. He was seriously studying for the first time of his life – because, for the first time, he was really motivated.

Ginny realised that she had always taken Ron for granted, thinking that he was made for an unambitious family life: Saturday Quidditch, beer with his mates and fun with the wife and kids...

Not unlike their father. She saw that he might not feel things like Harry but that he was resolute enough to do his duty, and Ronald Weasley resolute on something was a force to reckon with.

She suddenly remembered that their kind, quiet, seemingly unambitious father was also another Gryffindor war hero who had risked his life, and stubbornly expressed his convictions in the face of opposition, career hindrance and insults. Ron was his father’s son, in more ways than one.

Shaking out of her musings, she noticed that Ron was looking at Hermione. She needed this cause too, just as badly as Harry, and Ron would put all his weight in it for both his friends.

The Trio was back.

Ginny was more than decided to make it a Quartet.

"We've reviewed everything with Kingsley," Harry explained. "Whoever is behind this demolition campaign is not just set on exacting revenge on Snape. They want to discredit the Order as a whole,
and if they succeed, even the Minister may go down. I let you imagine what kind of faction would fill
the power void and restore the corruption."

"It is not only political, Harry!" pleaded Hermione. "Humanly, we must ensure that Professor Snape
never has to set foot in Azkaban."

"We'll try. At worst, it will only be for a few days on remand." As her eyes flashed, he said
soothingly, "Don't worry, there aren't any Dementors left."

It certainly did nothing to calm her. If anything, Hermione's wrath became even more palpable, the
tip of her hair writhing like snakes. They all hunched instinctively, waiting for the hurricane.

"Harry James Potter!" she spat. "You've been raised by muggles! The wizards may be too
hypocritical to name and acknowledge it, but you know as well as me what happens in prison to
people who are even only suspected of child molesting."

They had all been shocked by the accusations of indecency and abuse on students but had not dared
to speak openly about it so far. Harry paled then flushed, proving he had not thought about it.
Hermione rolled her eyes in disgust.

Ginny beat Ron at the question, both consumed with curiosity. "What happens to them, Hermione?"

"All kinds of violence, including sometimes rape or murder," was the sober answer.

Seeing them nonplussed, she went on mercilessly, "it seems a universal practice in the muggle world
for other convicts to have a go at child molesters. I would like to believe wizard criminals are above
that," her tone was now dripping with sarcasm, "but I think I'm entitled to question it. And I do not
speak of his former allies who rot in prison because of him and would certainly be glad to lay hands
on him too. You won't make me believe that security is so tight in an overcrowded prison that you'll
be able to ensure his safety."

They did not dare do more than mumbling some sort of agreement. She glared even more fiercely. "I
won't have you feeling sorry for me again. I just want you to understand that I'll never sit and watch
anyone suffer any kind of abuse – and certainly not Professor Snape. Not after all he's been
through."

When they prepared to leave, Harry caught her wrist, forcing her to drop behind with him. "I
promise you I'll never let Professor Snape set foot in Azkaban. Even if I have to hide him myself."

She hugged him tightly, turning her face so that he would not see it. He hugged her back. She closed
her eyes to keep the bitter tears at bay. "I suppose... It's just like when we saved Sirius."

"Oh, no, it isn't. I'm a sworn Auror. It won't just be aiding and abetting a criminal. It's high treason
now," he said cheerfully.

As she gasped, he whispered wickedly in her ear, "or it would be if I hadn't been given carte
blanche by Kingsley. Don't worry. We'll do it."

§§§

Harry and Ginny were listing the people who could help, mainly members of Dumbledore's Army.
Hermione was writing down their planning of investigation while Ron reread the list of charges,
trying to find a pattern.

He was annoyed. Something did not fit. The charges concerning Snape's supposed betrayal and
Death Eater activity could be repelled easily—even Dumbledore’s death. The Wizengamot had definitely extended to the Order of the Phoenix and anyone who actively fought Voldemort the immunity that the Aurors had been granted, Unforgivables included. There was no question now that Snape had been an Order member all along and acted under Dumbledore’s direct orders. Provided that his lawyer managed to get him tried by the War High Court, he was assured to be legally vindicated, whatever the controversy or protestations of his enemies.

Still, some of the charges were so outrageous, it could only mean that someone was going to length to drag Severus Snape’s name in the mud.

Ron was certainly no Snape lover, but even his resentment for years of boredom and misery in the Potions classroom paled in front of his memories of real war. There was no way he would believe the accusations of actual abuse on students. They could only have been planted to offend the public and destroy the man’s honour and credibility.

Whatever the outcome, Snape would be forced in a totally defensive position from the outset, and all his allies would have to fight hard to avoid being accused of covering for him.

However, strategy was Ron’s forte with his ability to spot weaknesses and patterns of move. His Auror coaches had long identified his talent and endeavoured to teach him method and analysis to make a prime investigator out of him.

If Snape and all the Order were forced in a defensive posture, it also meant that their opponents were putting all their forces on the attack—and probably had a weak back up as a consequence or were stretching their forces to occupy all possible ground.

Hermione looked up and smiled affectionately at her boyfriend. "Are you visualizing a giant chessboard and all of us as chess pieces?"

He smiled back quite absently. "Not at all, this is not chess. I rather think it is a game of Go."

He looked up when Hermione, Harry and Ginny all laughed.

It was Harry who asked for the three of them, "What is the difference? I thought they were both games of strategy with white fighting black?"

"They are, but the game of Go is all about links and close, active connections—group strategy if you want. The pieces are worthless as individuals. They must cluster to cover ground and hope to win or survive. They are either 'alive', 'dead' or 'unsettled'. If this were chess, the only purpose would be to have Snape and key people like the Minister removed. I agree with Kingsley’s analysis: whoever is behind this is targeting all of us and will be satisfied as long as they can keep us 'unsettled'—useless and inefficient in other words. They want to keep us running around in circles instead of changing the world."

“But the four of us are very much “alive”, and with Neville, Luna, Seamus and all the others, we’ll show them how “alive” we can be,” said Ginny.

Hermione seized her notes and began to outline and develop their planning of investigation, discussing the method.

Harry and Ron had first to get the formal testimony of Dumbledore’s portrait. This was the official motive of their presence at Hogwarts in the middle of the term.

"What about the other Headmasters? Don’t neglect them, Harry. Phineas Black was there too, and he was with us most of the time... Remember how he helped Professor Snape to find you so he could
give you the sword of Gryffindor."

Harry could only concur, but he hesitated. Both portraits would attest that Snape had obeyed Dumbledore's injunction to produce him the sword. He would probably be asked to produce yet another memory of Snape to prove the point. He feared that it would lead to the wrong questions. What if some short-sighted idiot in the Wizengamot asked why he needed the sword? He could not tell he used it to destroy Slytherin's locket because...

Hermione was nothing if not tenacious and she interrupted his thoughts. She insisted that they had to explore Snape's contribution to the search for the Horcruxes and his gift of the Sword of Gryffindor. "...Could a Patronus be considered evidence, according to its intrinsic truthful and benign nature?"

"Hermione, we may speak of Snape being the only one amongst the Death Eaters to be able to cast a Patronus as a proof of his — uh — goodness but we won't speak of Horcruxes. The Ministry has decided that the subject is classified and we're forbidden to speak of it. It's the only reason why they agreed to the Gobblins' terms after we destroyed the dome of Gringotts — so that people never hear about the Cup of Hufflepuff."

She jibbed at the idea of hiding such an essential part of the truth. "This is silly. Everybody knows about the Horcruxes now."

It was Ron who made their point. "Certainly not outside the Order. Their existence was evoked once or twice in the earliest trials but the Department of Mysteries very soon warned Kingsley to make it confidential. Polls show that most people never heard about Horcruxes in the first place. Very few remember being told about them, and even less understand the concept."

"What do you mean polls? As in muggle opinion polls?" Hermione sounded incredulous.

"What are opinion polls?" asked Ginny.

"They're a way to ask a few representative people what they think of something — anything in fact — so as to extrapolate the general opinion of the population. It has its flaws but it saves time instead of asking everyone," explained Hermione.

"Sounds a bit silly. Opinions are fleeting at best," said Ginny.

"It was Dad's idea," countered Ron, which made them all laugh. "No, really they're useful."

"I suppose they're using Arithmancy to choose people?" Hermione asked.

"I suppose they do," answered Ron a little feebly.

"Gambier's theorem on randomness, evidently... Maybe Gruby's law... And Similis's law of necessity, of course. I'll have to ask your father."

"I doubt he processed the equations himself."

"But—"

"Dad only suggested that it could be of some use to the Ministry to have that kind of tool. Kingsley approved as he's seen them used during his time with the muggle Prime Minister."

Harry interrupted, "As interesting as it may be," but not for me, he thought, "we were speaking of Horcruxes. The position of the Ministry is that they don't want to risk having people get stupid ideas,
like trying to become immortal, and generate serial killers in the wizarding world. Or to have
rumours and panic about a possible lost Horcrux of Voldemort. They are strongly considering to
place a taboo on the word."

There was a very pregnant silence.

"This won't work in the long run," protested Hermione after a while. "You can hide knowledge and
truth only for so long."

" Probably, but right now that's how things are, and we'll have to defend Snape without mentioning
the Horcruxes."

" And what about the Elder Wand?"

" It's unfortunately much too famous to be ignored. If I hadn't broken the darn wand before
returning it to Dumbledore's grave, I'd do it now."

" Well, I guess Professor Snape didn't know much about Horcruxes the way Dumbledore kept him in
the dark about our own mission."

" He knew that my scar was one – but I'm sure he'll understand the need for secrecy."

Ron raised his head from his own notes and remarked that, speaking about secrecy, Snape must have
had a contact within the Order after Dumbledore's death.

He had discussed at length with his father and brothers. They told him how no one had been able to
catch Snape after Dumbledore's death, not even entire teams of Aurors tracking him from Malfoy
Manor or his own house in Spinner's End (which had been conveniently emptied of any clue and
anything of value by the time they arrived). The Order had not been more successful. They had been
hot on his scent several times, sometimes finding evidence that potions had just been brewed in a
hideout… But the man himself always eluded them.

There had been Death Eater moles inside the Aurory (just like the Order had Moody, Tonks or
Shacklebolt to inform them) but they could not have warned Snape about Order raids.

So, either he stuffed himself with Felix Felicis or someone knew the truth about Dumbledore's death
and helped him.

But who?

" It's difficult to understand how the Order survived the hunting down from both the Ministry and the
Death Eaters if there had been no one to send warning to our people. We know that Snape was our
only spy in the Death Eaters ranks – at least the only one high enough to know about the actual
planning. He had to have a contact and pass information. We must find out who it is and why they
haven't spoken up for Snape since the end of the war."

"Maybe they can't. There's no best excuse for keeping silence than being dead," said Harry. "Or
they're afraid. Or maybe, they just didn't know he used them because they were Obliviated."

They argued. Snape had Confounded Mundungus Fletcher – maybe he had done the same with
whomever he entrusted with information. Ginny's bet was on Professor McGonagall. The two of
them were together at Hogwarts all the time and he knew she was in the Order.

Hermione did not think so. "The Headmistress is a powerful, strong-willed witch. He might have
been able to Confound her once, maybe twice. More, she would have been bound to notice someone
was messing with her mind."

"It's still the simplest explanation, so it's the most probable."

"Did he pass information between the time of Dumbledore's death and his coming back to Hogwarts? If there is a gap, it is probable that he waited until he could find someone reliable at Hogwarts and it seems logical it would have been Professor McGonagall then. If not, it has to be someone else."

Hermione noted to investigate it.

They also had to list Snape's efforts to shield the students and keep them as much as possible under the care of the original staff. Ron surprised them again by asking if there was evidence somewhere that he protected the staff as well, instead of turning them out and replace them with more supporters of Voldemort?

More and more admiring, Hermione wrote with her usual dedication: *Ask the Headmistress to look in the files of the staff + applications received by Pr. Snape and answers.*

There was also the fact that the Carrows never found the Room of Requirements. Did Professor Snape know where it was or not?

"Of course he knew. I can't imagine Dumbledore didn't tell him."

"As if Dumbledore used to tell people!"

"Nobody knows Hogwarts as well as Professor Snape. He was always everywhere when he made his rounds."

"We never saw him around the room."

"That's no proof that he didn't know. Besides, it's one of the privileges of the Headmaster to be able to enter or ward any room in the Castle. It's in Hogwarts: A history...-"

They all laughed at Hermione.

Harry argued, "Dumbledore didn't really know about the room before I told him."

Hermione snorted. "I thought you were done taking all he said at face value. Do you really imagine the Headmaster of Hogwarts in need of a loo and wandering randomly as far as the seventh floor in the middle of the night like he said?"

Harry had no ready answer. He did not like doubting everything about his former mentor.

It was Ron who joked, "actually, I can, when Dumbledore is concerned."

She huffed, trying very hard to remain serious."Well... I think he was only prevaricating – even if I can very well believe he’d ask the room for... For a... A creative experience with chamber pots," she finally managed to say before she burst out laughing like her friends.

After a round of increasingly silly poop jokes, the four of them were still crying with laughter when suddenly Ginny remembered. "Draco Malfoy knew about the room. I can’t believe he didn't tell his godfather. And come to think of it, all the members of Umbrige's Inquisitorial Squad knew about it too. It's impossible that they didn't tell the Carrows before Dumbledore's Army made use of it again... unless."
"unless the Headmaster forbade his Slytherins to mention it." Harry was exulting now. "As Voldemort's right hand man, he would have had the authority, even with junior Death Eaters like Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle."

"It could have lasted only so long any way. Neville had to protect the room from the Carrows in the end."

"Or maybe he just thought he did."

As a stunned silence met her statement, Hermione smiled apologetically before adding, "Neville may have grown strong at duelling and he's certainly fierce when he wants something, so I can easily believe he'd summon the room at will but... Oh! Don't misunderstand what I'm trying to say... Neville's a great wizard now, but he's never been really thorough in his reasoning – at least not thorough enough not to leave an opening to someone as clever as Professor Snape. I always found it hard to believe that Neville, of all people, could make the room protect the D.A. at all times when we couldn't. I admit we were younger... But we faced only Umbridge who was never a true Headmistress and didn't command the castle's magic."

"And that just proves another point," said Harry with deep satisfaction. "Snape was truly and legally Headmaster, since he took possession of the Headmaster's office and quarters and of the whole castle, unlike Umbridge!"

"Still, I wonder if Professor Snape had something to do with protecting the access of the room of Requirements."

"Amycus Carrow wasn't very bright. It is very possible that he never thought long enough to try to find his way inside the room."

"His sister wasn't as much of an idiot. Remember, she found how to enter the Ravenclaw quarters, even if her brother couldn't."

"We should ask Neville's opinion."

Ron snickered. "It might be a little difficult for him!"

"He will do it for me, if not for Snape, and Luna will ensure he helps zealously. You know she's taken a liking to Professor Snape."

Ron could not help guffaw. Luna had written several rapturous articles in the Quibbler about Professor Snape. His favourite was her panegyric about Snape's health insight for instituting vegan days in the much too rich Hogwarts' diet.

Neville and Seamus had been convinced all along that this was just another way to destroy morale, until Neville had to learn to enjoy Luna's favourite food so that she would keep on inviting him to dinner... And the rest.

"If anyone can convince Neville, it's Luna," he admitted.

Ginny added, "We'll ask her and then you'll speak to Neville. Leave the students complaints to me. With Luna's help, I'll try to go to the root of every story and tidbits we can remember. Luna could pretend to inquire for the Quibbler."

"I'm sure she won't pretend and will really write something. It could be most helpful if the Prophet is hostile," said Harry.
Ron and Hermione nodded. Encouraged, Ginny turned to Hermione, "I think you should approach the teachers. They see you more like an equal than a student. They will speak more freely with you and give their side of the story."

Hermione tried to protest but it was true and Ron told her that they had no time for false modesty. She hit him but he only smiled at her. "You know you're almost as scary as McGonagall or Snape in your own way. Of course, the teachers recognise you as a kindred spirit."

As she huffed in outrage, he raised his hands in surrender to appease her before she decided to hex him. "What I mean is that you're their most brilliant student in decades – no kidding. They always liked you for it. They're bound to take you more seriously than Harry or me, despite our Auror uniform. Did you hear how Flitwick called me 'young Ronald' when we arrived?"

It closed the discussion.

Now, they were reading the strange complaints lodged by two families of Slytherin students.

"I hardly believe it: discrimination... Public disparagement of the House of Slytherin... Abuse of authority targeting and endangering the Slytherin students at the time of the battle... I'm not sure how to treat those," wondered Hermione.

"Neither do I and I don't exactly relish the idea of approaching any Slytherin to ask," sighed Ginny, with answering groans from her companions. "It will have to be another job for Luna, I guess. Anyway, I wonder what they can complain about. They were all but running the place themselves!"

Ron approved. It sounded rather pathetic to seek that kind of revenge on the former Head they used to worship.

Harry was thoughtful. "You have to look at the wording of the complaints. They're filed against the Headmaster but they concern events that happened after Professor Snape actually left the school. They will be easily countered. I rather think it is a way of seeking revenge for the way everybody treated them rather than from Snape himself."

"Revenge?"

"For the final battle."

"They didn't fight."

"I think that's the point. Everybody thinks they're a bunch of cowards or fought on the other side."

"Well, Pansy Parkinson wanted to give you to Voldemort and all the Slytherins fled like one," Ginny sneered, conveniently forgetting the senior students who had come back with Slughorn and fought along.

"Actually they didn't have much of a choice," interjected Harry.

"Eh?"

"What would they have waited for? To be locked up when McGonagall ordered them to the dungeons and maybe to be used as hostages?" Harry remembered well from the trial of Amycus Carrow that Voldemort intended to use Hogwarts as an indoctrination and training camp for the next generations of Death Eaters, but also as a powerful tool to subdue the parents by holding their children as hostages. No doubt, many senior students related to Death Eaters had known of the plan.
“The Order doesn’t use hostages!” said Ron, hotly.

“Don’t be so sure. Had it turned out differently... Sometimes, in despair...” Hermione did not dare pursue the sensitive thought – well, not loudly. She would not put it above McGonagall to do it as a last resort. Or herself, if truth be told. “At least, they may very well believe they had it in store,” she amended.

"Because it's the kind of things they would do!” insisted Ron.

Hermione suddenly declared, "we have to ask Draco Malfoy."

"Ewww!"

"Oh, come on, Ron! He's changed just as much as any of us, and he isn't half bad."

Immediately jealous, the red-head asked hotly, "and how would you know that?"

He would never admit it but it was painful to discover that, even if he was technically on the victors' side and Draco with the vanquished, he still had an inferiority complex at the mere thought of the still rich, still elegant and still confident Malfoy.

"Because we see him nearly every day with the restoration teams and he is... polite."

"Polite, mmm?"

"Yes, polite. Not ironic... or resentful... or anything untoward. Just polite. You know... Nodding when you walk by someone you know or even saying hello, asking the senior students whether they remember how things looked before they were damaged, how we would like it if it was restored this way or that way – that kind of things. He's really taking it to heart."

Ginny concurred, "That's true, Ron, as much as it pains me to admit-" Thank you, Sis, he thought ruefully, disappointed to find no support there, "-and I can't imagine he'd refuse an opportunity to help his godfather."

Harry approved. He was remembering his own visit to Malfoy Manor.

§§§

He had made an appointment with Lucius Malfoy, but it turned out that his wife insisted to be present. He was not sure if Lucius needed the support of Narcissa or if it was her who could not let him out of her reach but they never left more than two feet between them during the entire visit even if they did not actually touch.

The meeting was awkward – and it is an understatement. The Malfoys were very suspicious and elusive. He could not help stepping there in full Auror garb, now could he? He was on an official mission! But Lucius Malfoy had looked him over as if he had come to gloat about his job, before congratulating him as if he had a bad taste in his mouth and calling him "Auror Potter" every other sentence.

Harry had soon felt that his visit was an absolute loss of time. They might care for Snape but they did not trust him. They had listened to his explanations about the set up in St Mungo's and the list of charges in total silence, only a brief twitch of the mouth betraying some of Narcissa's nervousness at the mention of the abuse complaints.

When he had given the names of the four people – including himself – to be informed by St Mungo's
to see what they made of William Fawley's name, the only comment had been that Professor Snape had no family left and very few people who would care. He had briefly thought that Mrs Malfoy's eyes were a little too shiny and that she may be fighting emotion but when he had tried to appeal to her as the weaker of the two, she bit her lip and just looked away at some work of art.

He had plainly explained that he did not know where to begin to investigate to find what was behind the most outrageous complaints lodged against the headmaster, and that he hoped they could give him some insight as Professor Snape's friends.

Malfoy had simply raised an eyebrow, in a mannerism so alike that of Professor Snape that he felt like a student again.

At last, his resolve beginning to crumble, he had asked if they did not care that Snape was accused of being a pervert and a pedophile and that Mr Malfoy would have to give his testimony in court about it.

The man had drawled, with a mocking sneer, "but what could anyone fear from my answering truthfully, Auror Potter?"

"I would have thought that you wouldn't want to see your friend sullied by that kind of questions."

"I do not think he will be sullied by my answers."

"Even by questions about intimate relationships between the two of you?"

Narcissa Malfoy gave Harry a look full of reproach while her husband sneered with disdain, "I see you've done your homework, Auror Potter. A pity you couldn't help dragging it from the gutter."

It was his own fault, of course, for being so impulsive. He tried one last time and asked Lucius Malfoy if he could help unravel the puzzle by sounding out his connections, 'testing the waters' so to speak.

The blond aristocrat had almost laughed in his face. "I may have had connections as you phrase it, but in case you haven't realised, Auror Potter, people have given up their association with me these days. Indeed, I've been kindly advised by the Ministry to play least in sight as if I still resided in my former accommodations of the North Sea."

"I need your inside knowledge of the political and financial world if you prefer. Of the Pureblood grapevine."

"My inside knowledge is quite outdated since I became more intimately acquainted with the insides of Azkaban, Auror Potter."

"You won't help me to help him, then?" He was already at the door, quite fed up to be baited.

"I'm afraid I will never get used to the... Gryffindorishness of some people," Lucius Malfoy drawled again, speaking to nobody in particular – but he looked coldly in Harry's eyes when he added very deliberately, "Who said I wouldn't help... Severus Snape?"

Harry wanted to grit his teeth at the insulting emphasis – I will help Severus Snape, not you – but managed to master himself. For Snape's sake, he would even be gracious to a Malfoy. "Professor Snape needs all possible help."

"He will have it." Lucius' words sounded like a promise.
Narcissa Malfoy snapped her fingers and a tea tray appeared. "How do you like your tea, Mr Potter?" she asked with a dazzling smile as she designated him a seat. Harry suddenly remembered why he had harboured a week long crush on her the first time he got a glimpse of her.

Between mouthfuls of petits fours that she insisted he must sample and scalding hot tea that he tried to drink a little too quickly—thus being left to feel a peasant in front of the two impassive aristocrats—Harry found himself admitting to the sympathetic Narcissa that he wanted to help her very dear friend, the Professor, because he owned him and he had misjudged him so profoundly.

He barely remembered to ask if Professor Snape had a lawyer.

"Whenever he needs legal counsel, Severus goes to our family lawyer, of course," was Malfoy's curt answer but he almost immediately announced that he would set Madam Alexia Yaxley on the case at once, and pay for it. Yes, she was some distant relative of the Death Eater - "just like everybody, Auror Potter! Even you..." - but she was also an absolute authority in all legal matters, he assured. After all, she had managed to get him out of Azkaban. (He did not add that she had also salvaged the greater part of the Malfoy fortune – this was none of Potter's business.)

Harry had finally taken his leave feeling strangely out of depth. He had checked as soon as possible the lawyer's credentials with a seasoned colleague who assured him that—no kidding!— Old Yaxley was one of the very best. She was rather picky about the cases she accepted nowadays, and did she make pay for her expertise! She had been a bosom friend of Madam Bones. She used to be on familiar terms with both Fudge and Scrimgeour. She often dined with Dumbledore and people always thought she was an old flame of his – at least before Rita Skeeter's book. She had also managed to keep a least three generations of Malfoys from Azkaban time and again, except after the disastrous business of the Department of Mysteries... When it had been best for Lucius to be locked away far from his master's wrath.

Harry understood that hiring his own lawyer was also Malfoy's way to keep an eye on him and on how he would treat Snape's case.

Only later, when he reported to Kingsley and the Minister laughed at him, did he realise that he had been had like the beginner he still was and that the two Malfoys had played "bad guy, good guy" with him and extracted all his motivations and the tricky points of the case from him. Shacklebolt assured him that he had expected it and that it was a safe lesson for him (which did nothing to soothe Harry's pride) but that all that counted was that they had secured Yaxley's help for Snape… And it would not cost a single knut to the Order.

§§§

Harry came back to the matter at hand and confirmed that the Malfoys seemed ready to go to great lengths for the professor. It was Lucius who had saved Snape's life by giving the AntiVenum Draught to St Mungo's after all, even when he knew it would mean a rough ride for him for duping the Aurors into taking him to the hospital.

It seemed unlikely that he would act with any malicious intent now. Indeed, Harry had been made to understand that they considered Snape as family—and family was everything for the Malfoys.

"So, it's decided. I will approach Draco," concluded Hermione, carefully avoiding to look at Ron. "I will see what I can get from him about the Slytherin complaints... To begin with."
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

As usual, if you recognise anything, it's not mine, and I make no money.

Tra8erse was my beta for this chapter. If you find the reading more pleasant than previous chapters and devoid of silly mistakes, it's entirely thanks to her! Any remaining mistakes are entirely my own.

But there's a side to you that I never knew, never knew

And the things you'd say they were never true, never true...

(Adele, Set fire to the rain)

After the intense session with the girls, Harry and Ron's time with Dumbledore's portrait felt rather anticlimactic.

The old Headmaster had been his usual jovial self, all smiles and complete with garish socks, a knitting magazine on the coffee table and a full box of sherbet lemons.

Oh, he had been most helpful, having sworn that all Severus Snape ever did since he switched sided was obey his orders. Snape's first estimation that Dumbledore would die within the year after Riddle's curse attached itself to his hand had been confirmed by his own healer, Alfred Constanz. Yes, he was really pleading with Severus on the Astronomy Tower to kill him as he had been ordered to do, because Severus couldn't help hesitating, despite knowing it had to be done.

He attested that Professor Snape had always acted in the best interests of the Order of the Phoenix, of the students of Hogwarts and of the wizarding world in general. He even added that he, Dumbledore, could not have dreamt of a more loyal lieutenant.

Ron mostly listened, because he had never had much interaction with Dumbledore. Still, he could not help thinking this sounded... wrong, for want of a better word.

Portrait Dumbledore had no idea of what had happened between him and Harry at King's Cross. Being on a very different wavelength with his former mentor on something so life-changing was deeply upsetting, to say the least. Dumbledore was very curious about it, but it was quite disturbing to see him ignorant of what happened, having believed for so long that he was quite omniscient.

The more they spoke, the more Harry felt, just like Ron, that all of this felt artificial.

He suddenly realised that the portrait acted like the Headmaster they had imagined he was when they were twelve or thirteen, but not like the real wizard.

Harry supposed it was because the portrait was not really Dumbledore any more. But then why did the Ministry set such store by wakeful portraits if they were only a caricature of the true person and
Sure, Hermione had made a great fuss about Phineas Black’s portrait when they were on the run, but the wizard was pure Slytherin. He always sounded much too Snape-like and was therefore odious to Harry. He had mostly left it to Hermione to interact with Phineas Black.

All in all, the portraits seemed rather useless, since most of the past Heads around them were doing nothing but snore or, like Phineas Black, stare at them with a sneer.

Still, Harry could not help feeling he was missing something.

Ron had little to no experience with portraits, except for the ordinary portraits that adorned the corridors of the school, the Fat Lady who seemed to make a point of nagging him in place of his mother or the odious Mrs Black at Grimmauld Place. He did not think that Dumbledore was not who he was supposed to be, because for him he still sounded like the pleasant if eccentric authority figure he used to admire from afar.

The only thing that he, with his keen eye for detail, found strange was the way several portraits watched Dumbledore covertly—the way you would watch a miscreant child who had promised to behave but whom you do not really trust.

*Useless bunch of morons,* he thought. It was just as difficult to try to have a real, meaningful conversation with them as it was to try to talk to old Kreacher.

The Headmistress proved much more welcoming. She arrived as soon as she could get out of her meeting and put her former students at ease, saying how proud of them she was and insisting that they should call her Minerva and not Professor McGonagall.

Best of all, she treated them with her house-elves’ idea of a light snack – which was roughly the same as Molly’s and satisfied even Ron’s appetite.

The Headmistress confirmed that someone must have relayed information from Severus Snape to the Order at least from July 1997, right after the fall of the Ministry.

She had been sent words of what to expect at Hogwarts at least three weeks before Severus’s appointment as Headmaster and the promulgation of the blood status laws. It had come with a "suggestion" to visit the first-year muggleborn and explain that there had been a mistake in the ministry’s files and that they would not be able to attend Hogwarts until next year.

She had no idea though, who the contact might have been. If Kingsley did not know, only Remus Lupin, who acted as chief information officer after Dumbledore’s death, could have had any inkling of who relayed the information to them, but he had taken this knowledge to his grave. Maybe Mundungus Fletcher? Severus used him once, he could have done it again.

"It is possible," said Harry. "We are still trying to locate Mundungus. You remember he grabbed his Order of Merlin and the bonus, announced he was retiring 'somewhere sunny where they know how to make a hero welcome' and Apparated away before I could corner him and tell him what I think of his abandoning Moody in the middle of the fight. He could be anywhere."

She sighed heavily. "Still, I don't really believe Severus would have been desperate enough to use him more than once. He was too good a spy to relish the idea of working with someone as unreliable as Mundungus and I doubt Remus would have trusted Mundungus again after Alastor's death... But I have no other ideas. There was too much bad blood between him and Remus for him to place his life in one of the Marauder's hands, even if things thawed a little after Sirius Black's
death."

This was news to Harry, whose eyebrows nearly reached his hairline, but the Headmistress returned to the main point. "It couldn't have been one of the Aurors – even before Dumbledore's death, Severus avoided them like the plague because of..." She let her voice trail, "How did he call it? Ah! Yes. Because of their 'conflicting loyalties between the Order and the Ministry'."

As expected, the two young Aurors struggled, torn between outrage and amusement.

"The pot calling the kettle black!" snorted Ron.

"Well, there was certainly no love lost between Severus and Alastor Moody," said Minerva dryly.

"I thought it was Barty Crouch Junior who was harsh on Professor Snape, not the real Moody," interjected Harry.

Minerva's face fell immediately. "No. The false Professor Moody wouldn't have been able to fool us if he had acted too differently from the real one."

"Ah! Of course!"

"Barty Crouch could tap into his memories at will while Alastor was his prisoner. It was the only reason he was kept alive. Severus certainly didn't trust the real Alastor any more than Alastor trusted him. It was the only thing we could be thankful for, because otherwise Voldemort would have been sure that Severus was a spy and he would have killed him without giving him a chance to explain."

She added more whisky to her tea and fortified herself with the rest of the cup, while Ron watched, fascinated. He certainly could not drink that much strong alcohol, even watered down by tea. A quick glance at Harry proved that his friend thought very much the same.

"I don't know what really happened when Severus was arrested after the first war, but whenever Alastor taunted him with horror tales about the Death Eaters as if he was personally responsible, Severus would retort with 'holier-than-thou sadists who ascribe their own misdeeds to others.'"

She sighed. "He was thrown into Azkaban and tortured before Dumbledore could intervene, you know. I've always wondered why they refused to check with Dumbledore whether Severus was telling the truth or not."

She spoke sadly, and Harry exchanged wary looks with Ron. Of course, they heard the stories, which were on the mind of most fresh Auror recruits, even if they did not want to believe them.

Seamus Finnegan had pointedly asked about the rumours of torture when they began their training, saying they had better tell it there and then because he would quit if it were true. Seamus always went straight to the point when he had something on his mind, and after being made an example of so often by the Carrows, he was intimately familiar with torture.

The senior Aurors had looked clearly annoyed, even insulted. They had stared at every one of them very hard—though no member of the D.A. let himself be intimidated any more—and they had dismissed it as rubbish and Death Eaters' propaganda. They also stated that if any of them ever simply dared to think they might be getting a free hand at mistreating people, "Auror or not, you will find yourself on a free trip to Azkaban before you can say Crucio."

Aware she had spoiled the mood, McGonagall recollected herself and tried to speak more cheerfully. "Well, this was only to say that Severus wouldn't have trusted an Auror. Maybe you'll have to wait until he's better so that he can tell you himself how he passed information."
Harry shook his head in annoyance. "We have to find out now. We don't want to take the chance that Professor Snape's enemies will manage to pull enough strings in the Wizengamot to have him tried while he's still in St Mungo's and unable to defend himself."

Minerva once again marvelled at the way he had matured and gained so much political insight in just a few months, though she knew they had Shacklebolt to thank for it.

"There seems to be some kind of conspiracy against him," he added.

She narrowed her eyes, wondering at the same time why she was surprised.

"They won't be made public before the trial, but you should know the kind of accusations that are brought against him. We will shortly call an Order meeting to discuss them. I hardly need to tell you that the Ministry had no choice but to register the complaints."

Professor McGonagall frowned, clearly upset. She sent Dumbledore's portrait a venomous glare, making abundantly clear whom she considered responsible for the whole mess and asked cautiously, "What sort of accusations?"

Harry coughed nervously. "See for yourself," he said, handing her a very long scroll.

She settled back in her seat. Her frown grew more pronounced as she read. Finally, she exclaimed, "I don't believe it! Slytherins accusing Severus – Severus! - of discrimination... Public disparagement of his own House! And... Ha! 'Abuse of authority by specifically targeting and endangering the Slytherin students'. That's rich!"

"There's worse, Professor."

"Worse?" She went on reading with apprehension. Visibly shaken, she paled as she read one complaint after another. Suddenly, she sat bolt upright. "It can't be true!" she cried. "They wouldn't dare!"

"I'm afraid they have already dared."

The portraits were suddenly all attention. The dozing old coots, as both Harry and Ron had labelled them in their mind, were very much awake now and their stares none too gentle. Several voices demanded, "What's going on? What are they accusing him of now? Tell us!"

Minerva McGonagall's voice was venomous when she answered. "Here are complaints from parents – muggle parents, would you believe it! - who accuse Severus of everything short of actually raping their children: physical abuse, fondling, fingering... inserting... Eww! And some even claim that it happened in this office!"

Harry and Ron would never have imagined that the portraits could protest so loudly. Both reflexively drew their wands and adopted the stance for dealing with riots. The cries of outrage stopped only when Professor McGonagall shouted several times, "Silence! All of you, be quiet!"

Mumbling and grumbling, the portraits stopped taking the two Aurors to task but could not refrain from discussing between themselves, which still made a loud background noise. The Headmistress shrugged, "They resent it as much as I do. Severus may have fooled us all, but they witnessed what passed between him and Dumbledore all these years and how he managed to protect the students and Hogwarts for months, all alone."

"I beg your pardon, Headmistress, he wasn't totally alone. He had us." They turned to Phineas
Black, who sneered at them. "I am dismayed that you came to take Albus Dumbledore's testimony but not that of the other Heads. One would have supposed this to be serious enough to ensure that you obtain as many testimonies as possible to prove that nothing untoward ever happened in this office…" he coughed. "At least not under Headmaster Snape."

"Phineas! I'll have none of your innuendos! What Armando did with his wife in his own office is none of your business!" Harry and Ron exchanged baffled looks. "And I very well remember from the story that he had ordered everyone out."

"And I maintain the old exhibitionist never gave the order. At least, he forgot to bar access to those who were not in their frame at the time," said Black haughtily. Before the Headmistress could object, he added, "Be that as it may, I now speak on behalf of my colleagues. We want you to note our collective, unconditional support of Headmaster Snape and that you register our testimonies—if you please, Headmistress?" He added the last words as an afterthought, though it sounded more like a demand than a question.

"Alright. Everyone!" All portraits snapped to attention. "I give you leave to testify here or in any Court which will ask about what happened in this office under Headmaster Snape or between Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Snape."

"This is not enough, Minerva." It was Dumbledore, who, for the first time since Harry had arrived, displayed something of his old authority. "You also have to revoke any order or constraint Severus or I may have imposed on all portraits in the past. Our two Aurors will bear witness. This is the only way to be sure that their testimonies will not be contested before the Wizengamot."

"Oh, the legal mind! You're right, Dumbledore. Do you know the appropriate wording I must use?"

"I never had to use it but Harry or Ronald will surely know."

They did not, but Ron solved this soon enough by Fire-calling the Ministry.

Meanwhile, Harry was asking Dumbledore, "Aren't you bound by the same restrictions? Won't we have to take your deposition all over again?"

"No, because I'm already cleared as a former Chief Warlock, or my other portrait at the Ministry wouldn't be able to act properly."

When all was done, Ron set about taking each wakeful portrait's formal statement while Harry continued the conversation with the Headmistress.

"There is something very troubling about Professor Snape. I take it you knew him very well?"

For a few seconds, there was a misty look to her eyes. She answered with less than her usual composure, "I flattered myself that I did, until he killed Dumbledore. After that, you can guess how I felt. You can say we were very good friends for sixteen years. I can only hope…" She bit her lips, and downed another teacup in one swallow—yet another she had liberally laced with pure malt.

She did not sigh aloud, but Harry felt sure she did inwardly before she spoke again.

"You must understand that Hogwarts staff is one big family. We live here together for months on end with the same goal of educating our students as best as possible… while trying to remain sane at the same time." Harry laughed obligingly at the mild joke. "Add the fact that we were both Order members and you can understand that we were bound to be rather closer than the other teachers."

Harry nodded hopefully. "I never realised that as a student, of course, but I hoped you'd be able to
help. Professor Snape didn't seem to have many friends and I don't know who can help me to understand him – except Lucius Malfoy, but, as you can guess, I'm not anxious to ask him."

"I will try my best. Now, tell me what troubles you."

Harry blushed and cleared his throat before explaining that all previous trials and investigations had concluded that, apart from Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy, Severus Snape was the only member of the Inner Circle who did not "partake" of the entertainment at the Dark Revels. Bellatrix did not because Voldemort had always jealously kept her at his side as his acknowledged Favourite, Malfoy because of an archaic fidelity spell included in his marriage bond and Snape... because he simply could not.

"St Mungo's have absolute proof that Professor Snape was being dosed with a potion..." He cleared his throat again before going on, "...a dark potion that causes impotence, roughly from the time of Voldemort's return. They suppose that it was some kind of punishment from Voldemort, but other Death Eaters didn't seem to know anything about it. When you consider how Voldemort liked to humiliate and punish them in public when he was displeased, it sounds rather out of character to keep it a secret. Do you have any inkling of what happened?"

The Headmistress had gone rather red, and Harry didn't feel he was faring much better. He cursed himself for shying away from meeting Lucius Malfoy again. This was Minerva McGonagall, the Prude of Hogwarts, for pity's sake! Why did he have to ask her? Because you never found the guts to look Lucius Malfoy in the eyes and ask him about Snape's sexuality – and certainly not after reading all the Prophet clippings featuring the two of them before Malfoy's marriage!

He could only hope that Ron would get better answers from Dumbledore or from Phineas Black who seemed on close terms with Snape.

Suprisingly, the headmistress answered very candidly. "As a matter of fact, I know, and Dumbledore knew, of course, that Severus dosed himself with the Minui Gloriam Virilitatis potion. Voldemort had nothing to do with it. He would have killed Severus if he had known he was avoiding his... duties as a Death Eater."

"Why then?"

"Because Severus is not a rapist. He never was. He isn't even the man for casual sex, though he had many opportunities."

Harry stared at her somewhat incredulously. Had she really said what he thought she had? The old, ugly Snape?

His face must have betrayed his thoughts because she chuckled. "Really, Harry. You have to forget your childish prejudices and perceptions. You remember what Voldemort himself told you? That all the Death Eaters knew there had been women, "worthier women" he called them, in Severus's life after he’d lost your mother?" Harry did indeed remember, though he had tried to dismiss it as another one of Snape's ruses.

"They were pursuing him," she said with a strange satisfaction that Harry did not understand at first and then attributed to some bizarre kind of maternal pride. "Narcissa Malfoy tried for years to play matchmaker and she didn't have to look far to find willing witches for such a powerful, striking wizard. It was he who wasn't interested."

"So, he was celibate?" This he could easily believe of the poor Professor Snape: that he renounced everything because of his lost love. At least, this was what Harry wanted to believe of the man who
loved his mother, who had been ready to sacrifice his life for her son. Somehow, Snape's love for his mother meant more now than the fact that she was married to his father, and he wanted to hold on to that one belief and keep it.

McGonagall hesitated, and suddenly sighed, somewhat resignedly. "No."

Harry swallowed, with a sinking feeling. "Malfoy?"

She pursed her lips. "Really, Harry, just because the Prophet writes to titillate dirty minds doesn't make it true, as you should well know. The Malfoys are married in the most old-fashioned way with a Fidelity bond, and even before Narcissa left Hogwarts, she and Lucius have always been totally devoted to each other."

"Sorry," he said as sheepishly as a first year.

Silence threatened to go on, though they kept looking at each other. McGonagall looked angry, though Harry felt that it was not at him. He was raking his brain to work out how to ask questions without being too crude, when she suddenly exhaled and said, rather petulantly, "If you must know, Severus was a little wild after graduation, like most young bachelors when success goes to their head... But after your mother's death he had just... Just the one lady friend before Voldemort's return."

"A lady friend? You mean a... A girlfriend?" He asked incredulously.

Clearly annoyed, and not a little flustered, the headmistress pursed her lips again. "The lady was significantly older than him, the term 'girlfriend' would hardly be appropriate. They became involved some time in the year following the first war and it lasted until he had to return to Voldemort."

"Oh... I see." He did not see at all. It was strangely disappointing to learn that for all the love Snape had felt for his mother, he had another lover. It felt somehow... adulterous. He felt betrayed.

Then it struck him. A much older woman... Some kind of mother figure? He would never have imagined Snape like that... And yet... His imagination had led him to imagine his former teacher either as an inconsolable virgin from the Pensieve memories or as a desperate, jaded man using sex to forget his dead love... At least, before he had to take that potion. But then, all he had ever thought about Snape had always turned out to be lies or smokescreens.

He shook himself out of his mood and said with what he hoped sounded mature, "For all we took him for an old man, I suppose it is only logical. He was by far the youngest on staff, wasn't he?"

"Yes. He was a mere twenty-one when he was first appointed and only thirty-one when your lot came to Hogwarts. He's still young even if the students always imagine that their teachers have no private life and are at least one foot in the grave."

Harry swallowed uneasily at the cutting remark. He did not want to think of McGonagall's or Slughorn's private life, nor of any of his former teachers'.

Misinterpreting his unease, she said consolingly, "Do not think this ever stopped him from loving your mother, because it was the kind of love one never forgets, all the more because it was the first one and a tragedy. This... affair, it was not meant to be a life commitment for either of them. It was rather a matter of convenience and comfort... The bonding of comrades in arms if you want."

"Comrades? Was she an Order member then?"

Again, her brow darkened. "Yes," she answered at was difficult to be curter.
"Ah! That's why you know her. Did others know about the relationship too?"

"If Dumbledore knew, he was very discreet about it. Maybe Arthur or Kingsley?" She made a mental note to warn Molly as soon as Harry left, even if her friend had sworn to never tell another soul – and to have a few choice words with Dumbledore on the matter.

Harry felt for his former Head of House. He knew how straight-laced she was and could see from her rigid stance how very hard is was for her to speak about such things. She was obviously very fond of Snape, and it was no doubt as difficult for her to speak about her young colleague's sexuality as if he was her own son. Probably as hard as it was for him to speak about such things with her, whom he had long come to consider as some kind of honorary grandmother. Yet he had to prepare for every contingency. He forced himself to ask, "Is she still alive?"

She hesitated but finally nodded.

"Do you think she'd agree to come to court if necessary?"

"If there is no other way to help Severus, I suppose she will. But I can't imagine he would like to have it known and I really don't see how it would be helpful. He is accused of molesting students at the time when he was Headmaster. That relationship was long over by that time. I think that Constanz can provide proof enough that he took that potion of his and that he was... well... unable."

"Yes, but this lady's testimony or your mentioning that he had a lover would also prove without doubt that he had no psychological need to assault students. The accusations... They..." It was his turn to falter.

Now crimson, Harry nervously wiped his mouth with the back of his fingers. "Merlin! They are perverts, Minerva! Constanz warned me that they might try to imply that nobody knows for sure the effects of such a forbidden potion... That Snape may not have been able to... to go all the way, but that he still could have felt the... compulsion and... be able to feel something as he touched the children."

She listened in disgusted silence as Harry managed to continue, "He says that they will imply that, if Snape did it once, as Headmaster, this could mean he may have done it before or felt compelled to do it again. He says that recidivism is a well-known feature of paedophiles."

McGonagall was green. "Never!" She faltered, "He'd never... Not Severus... And how anyone could believe that Dumbledore would have tolerated..."

"Professor Dumbledore let the Marauders bully Snape himself to the point that he was nearly killed by Remus Lupin as a werewolf and publicly humiliated – sexually humiliated, Headmistress."

"That's not true."

"YES, IT IS!" Harry was shouting by now. "I don't know where you were, because you were a teacher yourself, but I saw it in Professor Snape's memories, right out of their DADA O.W.L.s! My own father had him upside down, showing his pants to everyone and threatening to take them off in public. He may have done it, I didn't see the rest. And they had just nearly choked him with a Scourgify raw on his mouth. I don't know what else you can call that!"

As she shook her head in silent negation, he exploded. "If Dumbledore let them get away with it because Severus Snape was an insignificant student, much less important to him than James Potter, Sirius Black or Remus Lupin, why wouldn't he let Professor Snape get away with anything when he desperately needed him as his spy?"
Suddenly conscious of her horrified, stricken look, he got a grip on himself. "Sorry, Professor, I couldn't help being the Devil's advocate." Though I could very well believe it of Dumbledore, he thought savagely. "I've been trying to anticipate every possible argument against Professor Snape. I just think it would be better to leave Professor Dumbledore out of the picture as much as possible."

She pursed her lips and seemed to shake herself out of her shock. She sounded more like her old self when she said, "In any case, this is pure slander! Slander against all of us, against the school. To think that we'd never notice if one of us did something like that! That no portrait, ghost or house-elf would ever protest or report abuse if they saw... It's... It's vile!"

Harry's voice was hard when he extended his hand to expose the blood quill scar. "And how long did it take you to learn what Umbridge was doing to us during her detentions?"

"Too long!" She cried. "And only because we didn't know that Fudge had relieved her from the traditional Teacher's Oath! But you have to understand that we were under as much pressure as the students from Umbridge and the Ministry. Dumbledore expressly forbade..." she faltered at Harry's smouldering look but went on with a deep sigh, "Well, we just couldn't attack her openly. But to think that Severus, of all people...!"

Harry kindly but firmly interrupted. "I am not trying to settle scores, but you must realise we'll really have to answer this kind of questions. You may be asked if it wasn't just the same thing again as with Umbridge: that you knew but felt you couldn't intervene."

"I'm willing to swear under Veritaserum, and I'm sure I can speak for all my colleagues, too, that we didn't see anything because there was nothing to see. You must take into account the very nature of this school, the oaths we take, the part portraits and all magical creatures play here. It is virtually impossible that anything this vile could happen without at least the Headmaster and his Deputies knowing. I don't know how you do it, Harry. To stay calm and..." She suddenly seemed to realise why Harry had those huge, dark smudges around the eyes and a haunted look. "Oh! I'm so sorry! It must be so horrible for you, my poor boy."

He looked her in the eyes, his jaw squared, and his entire body taut in the familiar stance she remembered sadly. He has always had too much on his young shoulders. "I am an Auror. We have to deal with the worst of humankind and of magic. And during the other war trials... Believe me, I learned more about perversion and sadism than I thought humanly possible. It doesn't mean this is easy, though."

"I know."

They heard footsteps and turned at the same time. It was Ron, of course.

"Hogwarts."

"What?"

"They all agree that Snape is not the only target of these accusations. Someone wants to discredit the school, to have people question the professionalism or integrity of the staff. Whether it is just personal revenge or some deeper plot to take over the school later, is unclear." He turned more specifically to the Headmistress. "I suggested that those who have access to other portraits let you know if someone happens to mention the school or Professor Snape in their presence."

She was impressed once again by the young Weasley's professionalism. He showed no hesitation in calling Severus "Professor Snape", either – some feat when you think how foulmouthed and vocal he had been at school.
"I think you're right, Ronald." She sighed. "I don't see yet where the accusations of abuse will lead us, but the complaints from the Slytherin students directly target me, not Severus. I can at least take this off your list of worries. I will publicly acknowledge that I wronged the whole House of Slytherin because of Pansy Parkinson's frightened response to Voldemort's ultimatum. It has to be done anyway. I will have to admit that I couldn't think of anything else on the spur of the moment than to imprison them in the dungeon and then to send them away."

"And how will you do that?" asked Harry.

"I'll ask Percy to arrange a press conference with the Prophet here at Hogwarts, and I'll have Prefects, representatives of the students and the decorated Slytherin Alumni attend. I will apologise of course, indeed I will offer the House of Slytherin the most formal and official apology, and for once, we'll be able to put Horace Slughorn's wide circle of relations to good use. He will so enjoy it!" She grinned wickedly. "Indeed, I think I will appoint him our liaison with the Ministry. I'm sure Percy and him are made to understand each other." Harry and Ron eyed her with admiration and no little awe at so perfect a solution of foisting both busybodies on each other for the Greater Good.

She went on, "Between the two of them, they'll manage to give the occasion the proper coverage. I will just have to solemnly acknowledge that Slytherins had no choice but to leave and that apart from very few they didn't join Voldemort. I'll also honour those who came back to fight with the rest of us. It will be perfect for the school morale. I expect to receive one or two dozen howlers, probably as many letters of support..." She smiled wryly. "The Board of Governors will so enjoy calling me a prejudiced old cow to my face."

Seeing them thunderstruck, she laughed, "Never fear, they'll just slap my wrist, and then we'll all pretend that I have learned my lesson and that all is well that ends well... Until Severus's trial."

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Minui Gloriam Virilitatis = roughly translates as "I reduced the glory of man", i.e. his virility.
...And the games you'd play, you would always win, always win

(Adele, Set fire to the rain)

Hermione stopped by Draco, feigning interest in the sketches he was holding, comparing options to repair the Prefects' bathroom.

They talked for nearly three quarters of an hour. She had long exhausted any interest she may have had in the respective merits of Roman versus Byzantine bathroom design, though Draco seemed able to drone on about the subject like Professor Binns on the third Gobblin war.

No, this was definitely unfair. Her former nemesis had in fact managed to interest her for forty-five minutes in something she did not care about at all. She just did not know how to broach the matter of Professor Snape.

Draco finally smirked and cheekily drawled, "Before you fall asleep before my eyes, Granger, or faint from boredom because you haven't the faintest interest in Byzantine stained glass, you may get to the point and tell me what Potter wants to know?"

He enjoyed her blush and added mercilessly, "It was quite difficult to miss him and the redhead cast Muffliato without any discretion in the middle of the Great Hall. Hopefully, people will think they wanted a private chat with their girls and were just showing off."

She briefly wondered if he was channelling his father or Professor Snape or if it was a truly Slytherin thing, that mix of easy arrogance, witty insults and smooth talk.

"It's about Professor Snape."

Draco straightened and eyed her suspiciously. "What about him?"

"He's your godfather."

"Everybody knows this by now."

"Are you aware of the kind of complaints that have been filed against him?"

"Have you come to gloat?" She noticed that he clenched his fists so hard his knuckles whitened. Draco had been totally impervious to taunts and personal insults since he had returned. It could only mean... He's taking hard what's happening to the Professor.

"I just thought you'd like to know... Harry is officially in charge of the investigation."

"He changed his tune then. He used to be very vocal about my godfather. As I recall," his tone turned to accusation, "he thought him to be evil incarnate."
"He had a change of heart when Professor Snape gave him his memories. Surely, you read his interviews..."

"Yes, the famous memories... A pity he didn't see them before abandoning the Professor to die alone." Draco turned hastily, but she had already seen the emotion he wanted to hide.

"I was there!" she pleaded. "I can swear to you that we saw him die—we were sure we saw him die. We had no way to know the difference, and we honestly believed he was dead! It happened so fast."

Draco was not impressed. "You know what? I'm grateful he fainted, because I'm not sure Potter wouldn't have finished him off like an animal." Hermione gasped at the insult, but he did not give her the time to answer. "You can hardly expect me to trust your precious friend when he's done nothing but insult him for years," he spat.

"You know he publicly gave his tribute to the Professor."

Draco merely sneered. "I remember Potter trying to kill Severus and calling him a coward! You'll excuse my scepticism."

"You don't know Harry as well as I do. Professor Snape revealed so many things to him, so many secrets... It's been a very long time since he said anything other than Professor Snape is a hero."

"From one extreme to another... That's Potter for you." As she protested, he added chillingly, "What guarantee is there that he won't change his mind again?"

"Harry thinks he owes a life debt to him. Surely this means something?"

It did not seem to mean much for the blond, who shook his head doubtfully.

"Would you trust me? If I give you my wand oath that we only want to help him?"

"I honestly don't know." He held his hand up to stop her before she had time to take offence. "I am not saying that I wouldn't believe your oath, Granger. I mean that I'm not sure I can trust Potter's ability to know his own mind, and yours not to be manipulated by the Ministry."

"We are very cautious, I assure you. We know there are factions in the Ministry that are hostile to Professor Snape. Harry reports directly to Minister Shacklebolt and the whole Order of the Phoenix is willing to stand up for Professor Snape."

He snorted in disbelief but eyed her speculatively.

"Please! Draco..." He started at her use of his first name. She shrugged apologetically. "We've all been dragged through that war. I don't believe any more in the old rivalries, not when we need to fight the same foes or help the same friend."

He returned her shrug but remained silent.

"This goes far deeper than the complaints and Professor Snape needs all the help we can find. We need advice that only a well-connected pureblood and a Slytherin can give."

He pursed his lips and let fall, "What do you want to know?" With a sneer, he added, "Hermione."

"Why would Slytherins lodge complaints against him? It was Professor McGonagall who took over during the battle and had them sent to the dungeons. This can be so easily refuted, it just sounds... petty."
Draco could not help smirking, but his eyes remained grave. She insisted, "I can't believe they really would do something so crude and silly. It's not very... Slytherin, if anything. There must be something going on."

Draco watched her for a while, clearly debating with himself if he dared trust her. She looked back at him, chanting in her head, "Come on, Draco! Come on. Pleeeaaase."

Finally, he said, "You're right. It will be a walk in the park for Severus's lawyer to prove that it was all Professor McGonagall's doing. She'd always mistrusted the Slytherins, but there she outdid herself. She publicly showed that to her, they were only potential traitors and hostages." He sighed. "Still, there are always many layers to such moves. The two families who lodged formal complaints..."

"The Puceys and the Flints."

"You probably noticed that they were never officially linked with the Death Eaters." He bit his lip. "If Severus is vindicated, they can always argue that they did this to get an official recognition of the slight to Slytherin House. Or for the pleasure to see Professor McGonagall taken down a peg, but..."

He let his voice trail, the note of worry quite obvious. "...Their complaints can indeed be used to harm him."

"How so? He wasn't even there."

He shook his head as if he was talking to a moron. "You don't have the appropriate frame of mind, Grang- Hermione. That's why Gryffindors are usually lousy in a courtroom. The very fact that he left the school to avoid provoking a bloodbath with the other teachers could be written down as desertion."

"This is hard to believe."

"Oh, because they didn't try to get me with the same argument?" he said with an acid resentment. "I remember perfectly how the Prosecutor pointed out to the Court that while I deserted the Dark Lord's side before the battle, I also deserted at the same time my fellow wizards who were fighting for the light, and that it was proof of my loyalties to the Dark. Don't you remember how Madam Yaxley asked you and your boyfriend if you'd seen me try to surrender and if I'd been hexed?"

She could only nod. Neither the actual accident nor Draco's trial were pleasant memories.

"If you hadn't both confirmed it, the Aurors would never have admitted that they'd fired spells at a surrendering wizard, and I may well have been in Azkaban right now, despite the fact that they had truly sliced me up."

She could not help blushing a little. "I did not even realise you had been hurt."

"Yes, it was very obvious at the time that you all thought I was nothing but a whimpering coward," he said bitterly.

She did not want him to follow this line of thought because she really did not know what to answer and did not want him to close up again. She asked, "Surely, they can't hold this against the Professor?"

"No, but it may be enough to sway some votes in court, and it's sure to make the front page of the Prophet. Even if they can't have his blood, they'll have him labelled as a traitor and a coward."

Seeing her startled look, he pressed on. "Surely, you know there are those who say that he
abandoned his post when he threw himself out of the window? I know from Blaise' stepfather that it was McGonagall herself who insisted they give Severus medical discharge before appointing her. Do you realise what this means? The Board of Governors were ready to dismiss him without a knut for dereliction of duty."

She gasped. "I didn't know that. None of us knew that."

"This is the kind of consequences that are not advertised in the press. And do you know who proposed that perfect solution? Mmmmm?"

"The Ministry?" she asked worriedly.

Draco shook his head at her with an exaggerated disappointment. "Hermione!"

She amended, "Someone related to the Puceys or the Flints, then?"

"Good, you're learning. Nestorius Flint, who had never debated a single proposition or suggestion made by Headmaster Snape before voting on them, proposed this as, I quote, 'the easiest way to cure Hogwarts of the Death Eater stench and to restore the image and reputation of the school.' No kidding."

"So, we're dealing with people who are not exactly linked to the Death Eaters but collaborated enough that now they have to prove that their loyalties lie with the winning side?"

Draco listened appreciatively to that last comment. She's more insightful than I gave her credit for. He nodded. "Just like all those old 'friends' who were so willing to send my father back to Azkaban to avoid the embarrassment of explaining why they had been fawning over him for years... Or why they'd done so many favours to the Death Eaters."

To Hermione's astonishment, he chuckled viciously. But he sobered at once: it would not do for her to relapse into her old belief that he was evil.

He did not trust her enough to explain that Alexia Yaxley's posturing and histrionics in the Court room had not been just to keep them out of Azkaban. When she managed to have the both of them exonerated of war crimes—even if Lucius apparently lost when he was sentenced to finish his time in prison—she destroyed all possible legal grounds for the confiscation of the British branch of Malfoy Industries and of the Malfoy estates.

His mother told him how Percy Weasley – who had clearly been wasted in Gryffindor – was sending withering looks to the Court members. They thought themselves so clever when his father's sentence was announced. Weasley alone realised that they had lost all claims to the Malfoy assets. He was also the only one to bow to Madam Yaxley in reluctant acknowledgement of her achievement before hurrying to warn Minister Shacklebolt.

*La Maison de Malfoy* was still standing and still as rich as ever despite the temporary bleed of their liquid assets due to various fines. All those who had hoped to get rid of the Malfoys still found themselves dependent on their money or goodwill, whether for everyday wages or for the funding of various research projects, charities or ventures.

If Lucius could not restore the prestige of the Name, Draco would—in time. It was an absolute certainty, not just a probability.

So, sure of his standing amongst the powers of today and of tomorrow, he listened politely to the little mud... *muggle-born*, he corrected himself.
In the new order of things, Hermione Granger, Order of Merlin First Class, War Heroine and Friend of Harry Potter, was another power to be and to be reckoned with.

Calling people *mudblood* was the kind of old habit he had to get rid of. Not that it would be too difficult, Uncle Severus had never tolerated it and Draco had never slipped in his presence.

So, he decided to be at least cordial to Hermione Granger.

She was actually helping him. In that incredibly eager way she always had, she confessed, "*You see, it's just the kind of information that we don't know how to find or to use. Harry's just like me: we can't help being outsiders since we're muggle-raised, and Ron just hasn't the proper set of relations despite being a pureblood. Nothing can replace the inside understanding you've had from birth. What would you suggest we should do to help Professor Snape?"*

He felt at a loss for at least five seconds. Was she buttering him up? Or did she learn a lesson which the great and mighty Dumbledore had never learnt; that the wizarding world had not waited for them to get civilized, and that they could learn one or two things from them too?

It was so Gryffindor of her to broadcast her weaknesses.

Did she trust him not to exploit it? He decided to take her words as a sop to his feelings. After all, the belated appreciation was good, coming from the overbearing, shrewish know-it-all. He had despised her during their school days, and even hated her after she got the better of him in third year, hitting him in front of Greg and Vince.

All that had faded away in his memories. What he would never be able to forget, even if he would never admit it, were her cries when he had to watch Aunt Bella torture her in his own home. He felt sick just trying to banish the memory of her then, as it tried to superimpose itself on the way she looked now.

And she was willing to forget this?

At the very least, she had just asked for his advice. It felt hardly possible, and he did not know what to do.

Now, what would Uncle Severus say in his place?

"*Just learn to consider every angle of any complaint and charge when trying to answer it. Even better, forget your penchant for the morally admirable but totally amateur ventures like the defence of house elves…*" Draco watched her wince. In fact, she was gritting her teeth because she wondered if she would *ever* live her ill-fated S.P.E.W. Campaigndown. "*..And bring your findings to a true professional like Alexia Yaxley. She knows how this must be done.*"

Hermione was ready to walk away from the arrogant prat when she noticed the eager, expectant look in his eyes and the tension in his back.

She suddenly knew that she was being tested, just like Lucius Malfoy had tested Harry.

These Slytherins were cautious, mistrustful people—downright paranoid in fact.

She forced herself mentally to count to ten instead of telling him where to go with his house and class prejudices and said a little coldly, "*I suppose that since she's his lawyer, she will know best. I've always respected true experts.*"

*Bingo!* He rewarded her with a cocked eyebrow and a little bow she would never have expected
from him. "I hoped you were really as bright as they say... Hermione." He knew he had her there. She was unable to stop the corner of her mouth from lifting. "You'll see, Cousin Alexia is the best."

Cousin Alexia?

"Bring her any evidence and you can be sure she will have it admitted by the Wizengamot." He paused. "I still have my doubts about Potter, to be honest, but since you're really on Severus's side, I begin to feel less pessimistic."

She realised at last that he really meant it. It was not another test or another mockery. He had even voluntarily shared a small bit of private information.

In the end, you just had to learn to speak Slytherin.

As she inclined her head, getting ready to leave, she was surprised to see him actually smile. She realised she was very nearly grinning herself.

"Feel free to ask whenever you think you need my modest insight, Hermione. I will love making a Slytherin out of you."

"Since one good turn deserves another, I'll give you some Gryffindor insight."

And to her utter surprise, he laughed delightedly. "Gryffindor insight? Isn't that an oxymoron? Never mind, I'll take whatever pearls of wisdom you'll see fit to impart – should I need them, of course."

"I must warn you that I tend to cast my pearls whether the swine around me want them or not."

"Yes, after dealing with Potter and Weasley for years, I quite see how you'd have no other choice. Just... If I may, my dear Hermione?"

He gave her another mock, exaggerated bow. He was surprisingly playful. Well, she had watched him from afar all these years, and knew he was like that with his friends.

His friends. Her heart missed a beat, because this was going so fast, but she did not let it stop her. She gave him a little curtsy in response. "Ask away, dear Draco."

"Your tongue is blunt and Gryffindor enough. Could you... Would you keep your blows for your favourite Weasel... Please?" He pointed to her right hand. "I know the power of your sledgehammer arguments but I'm of a more delicate constitution than your traditional associates... And I think you'll find I listen better."

"Oh? Have you grown up then?"

"Try me," he said with a wicked little smile.

"But what if you find my precious pearls unpalatable?"

"Haven't you heard? Snakes are good at swallowing things apparently too big for them. They even manage to thrive on it."

As she bit her lip not to giggle, he went for the kill. "Besides, nothing's too precious for a Malfoy," he said in an exaggerated caricature of his own former haughtiness.

She could not believe later that she had laughed with him – but there was no point denying it: she quite liked the new Draco Malfoy, and she appreciated Slytherin wit.
Maybe because I'm not used to much subtlety with Harry, Ron and the Weasleys, she thought guiltily.

A pity Ron was always so jealous of Draco.

§§§

Minister Shacklebolt was appreciative of the wealth of information Harry and Ron had gathered at Hogwarts and of the intelligence network they had deployed with the former Dumbledore's Army.

Harry had modestly pointed out that "of course, Ginny would help" and that he only had to unleash Hermione. As usual, she had been able to sort things out. "Why, she's even managed to enrol Draco Malfoy," he snorted derisively. He still had a hard time coming to terms with the Malfoys being allies now and that he would have to be as cordial to the ferret as the ferret was supposedly cordial now.

"That's fortunate," countered Shacklebolt dryly. "It will be much better if you can work together with young Malfoy at the trial. The both of you are the key witnesses about Dumbledore's death."

Harry instantly sobered. At the time, he had not stopped to consider that he had played right into the Ministry's hands with his claim that he had watched Snape kill Dumbledore. They had not simply accepted his explanation without hesitation, they had welcomed it and made Snape the most wanted man in Britain after Voldemort.

"I didn't realise it at the time but... I was the Ministry's only witness, wasn't I?"

"Yes."

Harry wrinkled his brow. He did not like the sound of it. "When I think about it, they believed me easily enough... For once."

Shacklebolt nodded his agreement. "The Ministry kept an eye on Snape. Many people there never believed in his reformation. Even worse, he'd offended key people often enough just by being Dumbledore's man. His henchman, many said."

This was not enough to stop Harry from brooding. "If not for me, he would have been able to return to the Order, tell what tale he wanted and everybody would be none the wiser. He'd still have been an active Order member and able to help."

"I really don't think it would have been that easy."

The minister's drooped eyelids made Harry suddenly very suspicious about what Kingsley knew or suspected.

He leaned towards Harry. "It's time for you to know, anyway. Both Scrimgeour and Moody had personal scores to settle with Snape. With Dumbledore gone..."

"What kind of personal scores?"

Shacklebolt again looked as if he hesitated.

"Come on, Kingsley. It can't be worse than an allegation of paedophilia."

The older man sighed. Through his teeth, he finally grunted, "Torture."

"Snape tortured Scrimgeour and Moody?" Harry sat bolt upright.
Shacklebolt sat heavily back in his armchair and looked at the ceiling. His face was grim. "It was the other way round."

Harry was horrified.

"During the first war, Barty Crouch as Head of Magical Law Enforcement harassed the Minister and the Wizengamot until they granted the Aurors permission to use Unforgivables against Death Eaters. Fighting fire with fire, he called that. In truth, they'd lost too many people to the Killing Curse or the Cruciatus Curse, while they had to go by the book and use mild hexes."

"Everybody knows it. The "War exception" to the use of Unforgivables. It's not as if the Death Eaters had any doubt about casting them."

Harry's heart skipped a beat even as he said that. Bellatrix Lestrange had not Cruciated him before he tried to curse her with it at the Battle of the Ministry. Moreover, as far as he knew, only Amycus Carrow had been wand happy and stupid enough to say "Crucio" at any opportunity, but he was not a real, good fighter.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters used the Cruciatus extensively... but mainly for torture. It was the other name of the curse, in fact – the "Torture curse".

Torture.

On both sides?

No. It couldn't have been the same.

But the Minister was now determined to make his point. "You hardly use the Cruciatus in battle because it's draining and it makes you vulnerable to other attacks unless someone else covers for you. Why would the Aurors have used it then?" He barked that last question.

"For..." Harry shook his head. "For interrogation?!

"Right."

"So... The rumours are true, after all. I should have known... McGonagall as good as told me."

It was the Minister's turn to be astonished.

"Oh, she didn't say it like that. We were wondering who could have been Snape's contact inside the Order after he'd killed Dumbledore. She told me that he would never have trusted an Auror because he was tortured in Azkaban."

"I can attest it's true, and it wasn't only in Azkaban."

Harry drained the last drops of his tea with disgust, simply to buy himself time to gather the courage to ask, "Was there really a place where the Aurors...?"

Shacklebolt was not one to mince words when he decided to make his point. "It was during the first war, before my time, but the place was famous. The Yellow Room, they called it... because it's such a cheerful colour." He snorted. "Had it been pink, I would have suspected Dolores Umbridge of having a hand in setting the thing up, but it seems she was just another pupil of the same school of thought." He puffed out in irritation. "When I first became an Auror, the service was still reeling after the scandal and not that many were applying. Scrimgeour had been so very close to losing his position as Head Auror –because of Snape, mind you!– that he'd reformed the entire selection and
training process. He was determined to make an elite division of us."

"A scandal?" Harry frowned. "I have a hard time imagining Snape suing Scrimgeour or Moody." He sounded doubtful.

"Oh, he didn't." Shacklebolt laughed without real mirth. "It was Dumbledore who pestered the Wizengamot until they established an inquiry, because Scrimgeour had refused to use Veritaserum when Snape said he worked for Dumbledore. Albus was furious, and it almost wrecked his friendship with Moody."

"Scrimgeour was Moody's boss, no? I suppose there wasn't much he could say."

"But Dumbledore was trying at the same time to get an audience with Scrimgeour to tell him to leave his spy alone. Moody knew but stalled. He always claimed afterwards that he wanted to be sure that Snape wasn't leading Albus down the garden path. He waited several days... several sessions before relaying Dumbledore's evidence to Scrimgeour. By then, Dumbledore had already gone to Barty Crouch and asked for an extraordinary session of the War High Court to exonerate Snape."

He paused, before adding sombrely, "I confess I sometimes wondered if Dumbledore resented Moody's delay because he'd let his men take it out on Snape... or because he'd been more loyal to Scrimgeour than to himself."

As Harry couldn't find anything to say, trying to digest the revelations, Kingsley scoffed. "Lucius Malfoy added to the havoc, of course. He claimed that he had been Imperiused and that the Aurors had never considered the medical evidence but just made him sign his own confession under torture. This allowed Alexia Yaxley to negotiate his release."

"Hmmph."

"As you say, but St Mungo's were really able to find traces of the Imperius and the Cruciatius on Malfoy, and this got him exonerated. He'd been tortured badly, I must say. Someone clearly enjoyed humiliating a Malfoy."

There was something in the Minister's voice that alerted Harry. Kingsley knew who had done it.

"After that, several heads rolled at the Ministry. Scrimgeour only saved his own because he managed to prove that he'd always been denied the necessary funds for Veritaserum while being pressured by Barty Crouch for results."

"That's a little too easy, isn't it?" Harry remembered that he'd never liked Scrimgeour, who made him think that he steamrollered his way through everything.

"As you say. Moody escaped the sack because of Dumbledore's influence, but his career effectively ended and he always landed the most dangerous assignments after that. I guess he knew a little too much," said Kingsley sarcastically.

Harry nearly choked, remembering the old Auror's many disabilities.

"It's the unvarnished truth, Harry," Kingsley said, more gently. He knew the power of his revelations, and that Harry was going to take it hard for a long time. "Barty Crouch wasn't as lucky as Scrimgeour, because public opinion had turned against him when he sentenced his own son to Azkaban – not because of it, but because of the fanaticism he'd shown. The torture issue was the last straw. Even if most of the facts were being kept secret, tongues wagged. It was used to paint him as an intolerant, holier-than-thou, ambitious man who would stop at nothing to get rid of people who
didn't share his opinions. People were overtly telling that Minister Bugnold was too old to hold the helm and that corrupt Ministry officials would stop at nothing to send people they didn't like to Azkaban."

"I don't think people were wrong," interrupted Harry grimly.

"Unfortunately, they were not." The Minister's eyes stared into space. "It was the main reason why I joined the Ministry... To change things. I didn't want my country to become a dictatorship. Everyone thought I was mad, giving up my career to become an Auror."

He shook himself out of his memories. "Well, to sum it up, Barty Crouch was transferred to a much less powerful position and denied any further opportunity to run for Minister. They offered it to Dumbledore, who refused as you well know, but after his calls for change, they pestered him until he agreed to become Chief Warlock."

"What about Snape?"

The Minister guffawed, "He got compensation."

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

Shacklebolt chuckled appreciatively, "They gave him the contract to brew the Ministry's Veritaserum along with other highly classified brews." Harry laughed. "A very handsome contract, I should say. And of course, as he used Hogwarts' labs, he also paid the school a percentage."

Harry whistled softly. "I often wondered how an ordinary teacher could brew so many potent and restricted potions." A sudden thought occurred to him. "No wonder Umbridge trusted Snape's Veritaserum! And he couldn't deny her!"

"Now, you know. Snape still held the contract at the time of Dumbledore's death."

Shacklebolt stretched in his seat. "But back to the matter at hand. You and Draco Malfoy will be the only people to speak about what happened that night on the Astronomy Tower. There is no way I'll authorize any Death Eater out of Azkaban, and certainly not to testify at the security nightmare Snape's trial will be. So, you must learn to get along with the Malfoys."

As Harry pursed his lips in annoyance, Kingsley hammered it in, "We need them. We always will."

§§§

It was the middle of the night when Harry woke up, covered in sweat and tangled in his sheets. He did not remember his dream... Or rather his nightmare. But it had all to do with Moody, his father and Sirius.

It was only to be expected—he had spent hours pondering on Kingsley's revelations.

Heart still pounding wildly, he wondered once again if James Potter and Sirius Black had tortured people, too, when they were Aurors.

He remembered his last meeting with Moody before the Battle of the Seven Potters. The old Auror had made it clear that he was ready to go to any length to get Harry's hair for the Polyjuice. His harshness spoke less of despair than of the habit to get his way at any cost.

And that wizard had been his father's and Sirius's instructor.
What were the odds that two young men with a serious career as remorseless school bullies behind them would indulge in torture, when it was actively encouraged by their superiors?

Dawn was not far when another thought struck Harry.

Sirius's absence of trial.

*Did they send him straight to Azkaban because they knew what he was capable of?*

He got up and wandered around his godfather's former home.

*Is this the reason why Dumbledore never lifted a finger in his aid?*

And why did the Headmaster borrow James Potter's Invisibility Cloak precisely at the time he might have needed it most? *Maybe he didn't really trust my father either and didn't want him to slip away to go and help Sirius.*

At long last, he watched tiredly as a pale sun rose over London. At this hour, the rare passers-by were all taking their dogs out. It made him smile as he remembered Padfoot.

*Love you, Sirius. Always,* he thought as he fondly remembered the comfort and the unconditional support he had always found in his godfather.

Whatever he had done... Whatever his faults and his immaturity, Sirius Black had spent as much time in Azkaban as true, hardened criminals like his cousin Bellatrix. Was this not atonement enough for everything he might have done?

Speak of a wasted life!

And everything he had ever done after Azkaban had been for him, Harry. He felt keenly his loss.

Yet, for the first time, he was almost relieved that his godfather was dead, because he could not imagine facing him with the questions that ate at him.

He never realised that he had drawn his own blood and smeared his face by biting repeatedly on his lower lip until his bathroom mirror cried out. He healed it without thinking but considered his Auror robes for a while before putting them on.

"*I joined the Ministry to change things.**" Kingsley had told him.

That would do for him too. As for the rest... He preferred not to think about it for as long as possible. It may be the coward's way but, some days, there was a limit to the amount of truth you could live with.

§§§

Alfred Constanz was rather unorthodox for a healer. He maintained that, except emergencies, nine times out of ten his patients needed attention rather than medication.

Once Snape's speech had returned to almost normal and he would not tire his vocal cords too much, the healer made himself an unwelcome presence at Snape's side – not unlike Albus Dumbledore in his worst days.

The healer had proposed to use Leglimency to try to find the source of his nightmares and Snape had reluctantly agreed.
Unfortunately, despite his resolve and effort, he Occluded the instant Constanz's mind brushed his. He had worked for years to make his mental shields an automatic survival reflex. He succeeded all too well.

Constanz had merely shaken his head and said that they would have to do it the muggle way, until his unconscious decided to let go of some of its layers.

"What for? My mind is not a book for you to read at your leisure."

"No, but you absolutely need to put words on what's blocking you. The best way is to find significant memories and go through them again."

Snape snorted. "I experienced that kind of healing once. In Azkaban with the Dementors. You can keep it, Constanz."

"I've been called a headshrink often enough, but a soul-sucker may be a little harsh."

Snape could not help chuckling.

Constanz was rather solemn despite his smile. "You have to understand that you won't leave St Mungo's unless we give you an all clear mentally as well as physically. In fact, considering your power and skill, the Ministry is much more concerned about your mental health than about your physical well-being. Making sure not to unleash potential psychopaths seems to be the motto these days."

"So, I have no choice but to play your little games?"

"I don't think there is any game implied as far as your life is concerned. Not with me, at any rate."

Snape was more than reluctant, as expected.

He had heard and read about muggles spending hours lying on a couch while telling some nosy dunderhead about their life. He'd even read about those trying to regress to being a new-born and live through the trauma of birth again. He had always thought this sounded more than stupid, and nothing a good potion couldn't do. Though what good -but for the lack of physical pain- ever came from spilling your secrets to the Aurors after being dosed with Veritaserum or to the Dark Lord's spies under drugs at a Revel, he couldn't say.

But if this was the price to pay, Severus Snape was a man who always paid cash.

§§§

The room was absolutely empty save two chairs facing each other. Constanz removed one and wheeled Snape right in front of the other.

At least, it is not a couch, thought Snape.

He expected Constanz to sit in the other one, but the healer surprised him by walking behind him. As he tried to turn to look at him, Constanz put surprisingly strong hands on his shoulders and steered him straight ahead with his arms.

"This chair is the visual and symbolic presence of others. You've not doubt heard that hell is other people. So, here is your chance to actually tell them what you think of them, of what they did or didn't do. Tell it what you ever wanted to say but couldn't. You can speak to anyone: your father or your mother, a lover, Voldemort, me, a colleague, the Minister... whoever you want. You just have to
say it aloud."

"I’d prefer to be alone." The tone proved Snape was going to be quite stubborn, just as expected.

"I don’t doubt it but I’ll stand behind you and you’ll be able to forget me. I hardly need to tell you that nothing you say will leave this room."

Snape resorted to silence, scowling. There was no telling what he thought.

After half an hour, Constanz called a halt to the silent sitting and thanked him.

The next day was very much the same, with Snape never volunteering anything and the next after that.

That third time, Constanz asked him who he had pictured in the chair and Snape sneered, "You, of course."

"A pity I didn't hear what you had to tell me then." He saluted Snape, "See you tomorrow."

For several days, Snape was mostly silent during his sessions with Constanz, though he occasionally mumbled, growled, glared, clenched his fists or tapped on his armrests.

One day, finally, he gave in and began to abuse Constanz, complaining about his stupid pop psychology; his total lack of bedside manner; his supposed exultation at the prospect of breaking his mind; his total lack of respect; his sneaky ways which barely hid plain manipulation, "But what else can one expect from a friend of Dumbledore's?"

Then, he called him a meddlesome, insensitive bastard, Dumbledore's arse-licker, a self-appointed, self-righteous voyeur, an executioner and a spy ready to send him to Azkaban—"And why waste the time and money to heal me in the first place?" - a selfish, glory-seeking muckraker...

When he was finished, mainly because of running out of voice and sheer exhaustion from his ranting, Constanz asked him calmly to come and sit in the empty chair, the "hot seat" as he called it. When he did, still scowling, the healer asked him to repeat all he had said, except he had to replace "you" with "I".

Snape registered it in silence, remembering all he had just said. He paled even more if it was possible and stubbornly crossed his arms, repeating not for the first time that he refused to "play games."

Constanz ended the session with his usual calm and apparent indifference, thanking him as politely as usual. Snape left quickly but he was quite distraught for the rest of the day.

Not that the night was much better.

The following day, Snape told the healer that he was fed up with meddling, that he had had enough of that with Dumbledore. Constanz interrupted him and, gesturing to the hot seat, told him to say it directly to Albus Dumbledore.

Snape scowled and stayed silent for a time. He swallowed hard and opened his mouth several times in vain, unable to voice anything.

It was almost the same the next day… when the chair suddenly exploded.

"This is quite impressive but you already killed Dumbledore once."

Snape stared at the remains of the chair and then at Constanz, who said, "I think it would be more
efficient to make your point to him verbally."

And he just cast Reparo on the chair.

Chapter End Notes

All my thanks to my beta, Tra8erse, who made this chapter so much better.

In my mind's eye, Snape doesn't look like Alan Rickman, he looks and sounds like Sacha Pitoeff, a deceased French actor and director, who worked mostly for theatre. Of course, my being French has nothing to do with it... You can watch him in this little trailer. He's the tall, thin and sarcastic man on the left who lets the dreaming Russian lean against his shoulder. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjxASdgcD_w
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I hope you like Neville Longbottom, because he one day invited himself in the story and nothing could make him stop disrupting my plot bunny. It's so typical of him that I offered him a place to stay.

All my thanks to my beta Tra$erse who once again made this chapter easier to read.

When people run in circles

It's a very, very mad world

(Gary Jules, Mad world)

Neville – March-June 1999

Neville's help proved invaluable to Harry.

Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice but Neville was the Wizard-Who-Defied-You-Know-Who in his own right, and he had just decided he was not made to be an Auror.

He was not the insecure grandson, easily-bullied-into-submission, that Augusta Longbottom remembered, but obviously she did not care. There was a true Heir to the House of Longbottom now, and despite her own overbearing ways, Augusta had despaired for so long that Neville would ever fit those shoes that she let him follow his own wishes without saying… much – even when she did not approve.

She did not approve of Luna Lovegood, for one thing. Xenophilus Lovegood was a little too eccentric for her tastes, and his daughter was obviously cut from the same cloth. Neville was so clearly besotted, however, that it could only damage her own relationship with her grandson if she said one word about it. Besides, she wasn't doddering yet, was she? She could tell that the Lovegood girl was not as committed to the relationship as Neville was.

She did not leading him on—Augusta would have already put her foot down if she was—but there was something missing... It was difficult to pinpoint, but she trusted her hunch. She suspected that it was Luna's doing if Neville had not yet popped the question. Augusta severely doubted that the answer would be "yes" right now.

Whirlwind romances born in the midst of war sounded very romantic, but Augusta was old, and cynical, and she preferred a good, slow courtship to get to really know each other. It was better than waking up one day to realise that you were tied for the remainder of your life to someone who is not really your match. She could only approve of Luna's caution, although she would have preferred that it was Neville who had the good sense to slow things down – well, what little there still was to slow down.

Neville was totally oblivious to his Gran's reservations. If you were to ask him about his private life,
he would say that it was all right, thank you very much. He had Luna. He would move the world for her.

When they were together, she would regularly wake up in the night and panic in the darkness, thinking herself back in the dungeons at Malfoy Manor.

He did not mind casting charms in the middle of the night to make the room as bright as in sunlight, holding her and helping her feel safe.

As he told her philosophically, when she was not there it was him who had nightmares. Not as often as Luna, but then, he had not been thrown into a dark dungeon and kept there for weeks on end with the sole company of an old man who'd been almost tortured to death by Voldemort, and a few unfortunates that stayed for a few hours but never came back.

Strangely, every time she had a nightmare, Garrick Ollivander visited afterwards. Just like Luna announced some days, "I have to go to Garrick's, because he is feeling poorly."

It was as if they were attuned to each other since that time when she kept him alive while he kept her sane.

It was fortunate that Neville did not have in him to be jealous. He understood perfectly. Luna was his own anchor. She had welcomed him in her life without the least hesitation as soon as he had found the courage to tell her what he felt for her. The least he could do was to give her his support.

After all, if they already had the worst before being married, was it not a good omen that they should have the better from now on?

§§§

May 2, 1998

Neville had found her at last. They stood face to face, filthy and torn-clothed. She looked like a ghost. She was covered with the dust from the exploding walls to which she had stood so dangerously close during the battle – but the only thing that Neville noticed was that it made the blue of her eyes even deeper.

His own hair was singed, his nose, cheeks and forehead bore an ugly tinge from the healing spells Poppy Pomfrey had hastily cast on his burns, warning him that it would itch for a few hours. He was filthy. He reeked of sweat. He was sore all over. If it had been any other day, he would have staggered to the makeshift shower in the Room of Requirement and then to his pallet. Luna gazed up into his eyes dreamily and smiled… and he forgot everything else.

He gripped her arm, wiping her face with his other hand, searching it feverishly for cuts and abrasions, healing them without a conscious thought. He asked in a hoarse voice, "You're all right? You're really all right?" He hugged her fiercely in sheer relief, as she assured a little brokenly that, "Yes, Neville, yes, I am… Now."

"I was so frightened… You can't imagine. Even after you sent your Patronus to say that Harry had rescued you from the Malfoy Manor."

"I feared for you too. I prayed that the wrackspurts would not make you careless." He almost did not hear her as she added, in a voice choked with emotion, "When Voldemort put the hat on your head, I… I…" She buried her face in his chest.

He rocked her as one would rock a child. "I missed you so much… I missed you," he repeated,
overcome with feelings and relief so strong that it washed over him like an equinox tide, leaving him giddy.

She brought a hand to his cheek. He leaned into it, biting his lower lip in a doomed attempt not to cry too.

He had tried so hard. Never allowing himself to let go, to voice his own fears and doubts.

They all counted on him – because he was Harry's last friend still at Hogwarts, he thought.

He did not ask to lead Dumbledore's Army and the student rebellion. It just so happened that he had actually been with Ginny and Luna at the Battle of the Ministry, while their only experience in fighting had been when the Death Eaters invaded the school and killed Dumbledore. The others seemed to think that this made him a seasoned warrior and a natural leader.

He tried to tell them that he had just gone to help and that he had only managed to destroy the Prophecy they were supposed to protect. That he would help, of course, but that Ginny had more experience leading the Quidditch team and...

"As far as I'm concerned," Seamus told him, "you won."

"I am telling you that I was so clumsy…"

Seamus didn't let him finish,"The Death Eaters will never be able to use that prophecy and you're still alive. That's what I call winning. That's what I expect from a leader."

The others approved, and that was that.

How often had he considered leaving… But there was always another student to rescue… another evilness of the Carrows to undo… and Snape! Snape who always happened to be right there when he was at his lowest. Who seemed to read his very thoughts, taunting, daring him to defy his authority over the school. He had stayed just to show him up.

Wait! Harry had said that Snape was on their side.

Luna smiled again, and he could not think any more. He did not want to think. It was over, at last, and Luna was there.

She was there!

"I'm glad they didn't rape me," she said, very matter-of-factly. "I very much prefer my first time to be with you."

Neville's heart almost stopped but he had no time to consider as Luna pulled his head downwards and kissed him.

It was his very first kiss from his first love and it was just the same for her. It was perfect. Everything after that was just as perfect.

He had no time to think that things were going too far, too fast, as he would have been bound to do if they had not just won and survived the final battle of the war.

Many others found the same kind of solace in physical closeness that night at Hogwarts – adults and older students alike, more or less frantic, even if many pairings happened more because of the relief of surviving together rather than anything else, and did not endure.
The staff and healers all turned a blind eye during these special hours before everyone had to leave Hogwarts, offering contraceptives as naturally as food, hot drinks and healing potions – only asking for discretion in front of the youngest, “And do not forget your Silencing charm, please!”

§§§

Luna had stayed with him. He loved her and she loved him. Even better, she never judged him.

True, she commented on odd things, sometimes the tiniest detail, in her inimitable way that sent you to another reality altogether. What others called oddity -when they were kind- had been his lifeline that last year at Hogwarts.

She helped him to adjust to the fact that so few things really mattered, and she unfailingly pointed at what really mattered. Like the fact that it was useless to try to emulate his parents without feeling a real call to be an Auror. Or that his grandmother was inordinately proud of him, though he still had trouble really believing it at times.

Luna's soothing influence was enough to help him to come to terms with the fact that he was now a man in his own right and not the last, and rather disappointing offspring of the Longbottoms.

Since the Battle of Hogwarts, people treated him like a man and not a boy any more. He talked as equal with the senior members of the Order of the Phoenix and with the Ministry officials. He had been awarded an Order of Merlin, second class, no less. If this was not enough, what was?

*Enough*. A word he had never had in his vocabulary before, when he was just "that poor Neville" who always "could do so much better" according to all his teachers—save Professor Sprout, bless her kind soul!...And Snape, of course, who wrote once that he did not need to bother presenting himself at the OWL exam, "to save the both of us time and grief."

He had lived all his life in the shadow of his parents' accomplishments and martyrdom, but their example would not be the main influence in his life now. Quite the contrary, in fact. He did not want to run the very real risk of leaving orphans behind—and certainly not for the sake of the job he did not even like.

He had an idealised view of the Auror as a child. He now realised that he had only wished to become an Auror to win his Grandmother's approval and to follow in his parents' steps.

With the deep insight of his nineteen years, he supposed it was inevitable to be disappointed by the reality of the job.

He disliked politics, yet it was what influenced most of the verdicts of the Wizengamot when they arrested war criminals.

To make things worse, the most senior amongst the Aurors watched him and treated him with strangely mixed feelings that could only come from their memories of his parents. He did not know if this meant that he was living up to their reputation or failing, but he soon made his decision to quit. The Ministry was not for him.

As far as Gran was concerned, it was much easier to deal with her these days and he was ready to face her disappointment when he told her he wanted to quit.

The last months of the war had largely subdued the old termagant. Broken was not the word for the woman who had sent his current boss and a couple of colleagues to St Mungo's but she somehow mellowed. Old too, though he did not want to consider it – Gran was eternal. She had to be, even if growing up in times of war had taught him that nobody lives forever.
She even seemed in awe of Luna, which was quite comical to witness, after the young woman had proved to be totally impervious to any kind of yelling, critique, praise or patronizing.

So, Neville set his heart on finding an apprenticeship in Herbology before giving his notice to the Ministry. It was much easier than he had expected because of his natural ability for the subject as well as his status as a war hero.

It would not pay much in the beginning, so he would not be able to ask Luna to marry him as soon as he would have wished, but they did not need that to be a couple, whatever Augusta Longbottom and Xenophilius Lovegood might say.

The war had shattered a great deal of the old codes of morality and conduct in the wizarding world, all the more since several pureblood families had been wiped out in the conflict.

Their parents' generation had paid the highest price in both wars, and many children like Neville or Harry had been raised by relatives or by their grandparents. The little Teddy Lupin was just one example of that history repeating itself.

Right now, just like it happened in the muggle world after the cataclysms like the two World Wars, the youngest amongst the survivors just wanted to live – like Neville and Luna, or Harry and Ginny, and never mind if they shocked their elders.

However, unlike the muggles, the elders had always been by far the most numerous in wizarding society due to their longevity. Nobody knew yet if the younger generations would finally choose to identify with the values of their grandparents, who still held the reins of power and money, or if they would create their own.

Neville did not think that far. For the time being, he agreed to delay his departure from the Aurory when Harry asked him, and only because it was Harry.

Luna had insisted, since their failed attempt at stealing the Sword of Gryffindor, that Headmaster Snape was not what he pretended to be. Neville had been too blinded by prejudice to listen to her. Sure, Snape was not as bad as the Carrows, but there was a great difference between admitting this and believing he could be an ally. He felt so foolish now... Just like Harry, who had shared his own guilt and regrets with Neville when he talked him out of immediate resignation.

Neville agreed to help, but only when he was offered a secret field assignment that would keep him away from the Ministry, which he considered to be a nest of vipers. He preferred to leave politics to Gran, who had finally accepted a seat on the Wizengamot to help the rebuilding and reformation of the country.

Neville was tasked with searching for the muggle families who had lodged the complaints against Snape. As if by coincidence, all had apparently moved without leaving a forwarding address.

When he found out why Neville was asking him so many questions about the muggle world, Seamus Finnegan took him to Dean Thomas, who lived in muggle London.

Dean lodged him for a while and helped him to find his footing in the muggle world. It ended more than once with a good laugh when Neville blundered without realising it, and at least twice a week in a guys' night out at the muggle pub with Seamus. The three of them had shared a dorm for six years and knew each other inside out. Dean and Seamus could always guess when he was going to do something unacceptable or too strange for muggles. It was a great time for the three of them, and an eye-opener for Neville.
In people's minds, Neville Longbottom had already resigned. His file had conveniently disappeared from the Staff Offices and ended up on the desk of an Order member, with no termination date on his contract. Consequently, nobody asked for his Auror kit back, because even Head Auror Dawlish assumed that the old tartar in charge of the MLE staff had already seen to it.

At the moment, Neville was sipping Butterbear with Ron at Grimmauld Place while reviewing the charges against Snape.

They had set aside the Flint and Pucey complaints – numbered 1 and 4 – about slander and discrimination at Hogwarts since Professor McGonagall's public apologies to the House of Slytherin had been reported in the Prophet. Hermione had relayed Draco's opinion that Alexia Yaxley would not have any problem in dealing with them.

The remaining fifteen complaints emanated from the families of muggleborn students who had suffered various types of abuse at the hands of Hogwarts's Death Eater staff before being transferred to the Muggle Registration Commission.

Everyone had heard the worst about the infamous Commission and the violence perpetrated on the poor people dragged to Azkaban for the alleged theft of true wizards' magic. Many had died there: entire families, children – all packed there with violent, demented criminals or handed over to the Dementors.

Dolores Umbridge and Alfred Runcorn, who headed the commission, were now both serving life sentences in the very prison they had transformed into an antechamber of Hell, along with most of the original guards and the surviving Snatchers.

They had all tried to plead duress, or merely following orders, but the plea of their victims had horrified the wizarding world. Indeed, the horrors perpetrated on the orders of the Muggle Registration Commission still regularly made headlines around the wizarding world, and they justly commanded the indignation and loathing of the public.

Implicating Snape in their crimes was a smart move. People could accept that a spy had to play along with the Death Eaters to better betray them, but the deliberate degradation, mistreatment and torture of the Muggleborn had pushed the limits of evil. Anyone associated with Umbridge and Runcorn would elicit the same disgust and rejection.

"That stuff is much more serious than Dumbledore's murder," Harry had insisted. "We need to know who wants Snape's head, and why."

To add to the confusion, all formal charges were labelled Investigated Case, bore the seal of the Aurory and the signature of John Dawlish, Head Auror. There was next to nothing in the files otherwise, except medical certificates, claims for damages against Snape's estate and notes explaining how none of the muggle families wanted to cooperate with the trial, because it would be too hard and painful, but that they all hoped that Justice would be served, with various comments of said parents full of loathing towards the barbarians who had tortured and abused their children.

Ron helped Neville compile the information available on the victims so that he could plan the logistics of his journeys, when something caught his eye.

"Neville, look here." He handed him the new list on which he was about to write down the addresses. "I think there's something queer."

Neville read:
n°2 Silas Cox, 14, Hufflepuff,

n°3 Mathias Crawford, 17, Hufflepuff,

n°5 Nigel Barber, 15, Ravenclaw

n°6 Angus Foester, 13, Hufflepuff

n°7 Sarine Brady, 17, Ravenclaw

n°8 Malika Azouz, 16, Ravenclaw

n°9 Anjum Gururani, 11, Ravenclaw,

n°10 Sarah Bartholomew, 13, Ravenclaw,

n°11 Johanna Bettelman, 17, Hufflepuff,

n°12 Allison Hatter, 14, Gryffindor, (deceased)

n°13 Rodolfo Marconi, 15, Hufflepuff,

n°14 Kim Donnelly, 14, Hufflepuff,

n°15 Melinda Martin, 11, Hufflepuff, (deceased)

Neville whistled, "Seems that Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw suffered the most."

"Yes, and only one Gryffindor."

They looked at each other. It did not feel right. There had been just as many muggleborn in Gryffindor as in the other two houses.

"Why didn't the Gryffindors lodge complaints as well?" wondered Ron aloud. "You won't tell me they suffered less than the Badgers and the Ravens."

"Our muggleborn were smart enough not to return to Hogwarts.″ Neville frowned even as he was saying it. He sat bolt upright and grabbed the list once again, scanning it carefully. "Hey! I don't remember them being at Hogwarts!"

Ron frowned, trying to remember the blurred faces. "I confess I never paid much attention to the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students either but I recognise the names. I knew Johanna, Sarine, Mathias... But I must admit I didn't care about the youngest."

Neville stubbornly shook his head. "It's not what I mean. I remember more than their names, even if I didn't know all of them personally... but I do not remember actually seeing them at Hogwarts in September 1997.″ Ron gave him a startled look. "It is more than fishy, it sounds like an outright fake."

"Yes, but who would go that far? We agree there must have been someone who exaggerated in their depositions but to fake it all? It's too gross.″ Ron's tone carried his own doubts.

"What isn't gross in those complaints? Snape was a right bastard, but none of us would have believed him being able to actually raise a hand to his students.″

Ron snorted. "He once cuffed me with a book, the git!"
"And I nearly wet myself and worse when he threatened to feed my shrinking potion to Trevor – but Luna made me realise that he had the antidote at hand all along. For a toad!"

"All right! All right! I see your point and I agree. It's no fun any more with Harry, Hermione and even you all being members of Snape's fanclub." He looked at Neville shrewdly and added, "Come to think of it, it isn't written anywhere who amongst the Aurors investigated the cases. That's highly irregular, too."

"But not unexpected, considering how they were short of people and had to swear us in as Junior Aurors so swiftly."

"There is that. Still, the mess after Riddle's death could be a nice cover-up."

"So..." they began at the same time and chuckled. Ron concluded for the both of them, "...the War High Court would have no reason to doubt complaints labelled Investigated, when they may have been mere allegations and totally false."

"Quite the clever move, that," approved Neville. He made a face. "I like this job less and less, particularly if it proves true that people are rotting the MLE from the inside. How did they get Dawlish to sign that?"

Ron shrugged, "How do you get him to sign anything?"

They both knew how understaffed they still were, the amount of red tape they had to deal with and how Dawlish's assistant brought him piles of papers labelled "urgent" to sign, that would fold and fly away as soon as he had put his magical signature on them, whether or not he had the time to read them.

"Seriously," said Neville, "I don't remember that many students being taken from the school."

"And I think it would be hard to miss," said Ron with a little sarcasm.

Neville held his hand up to stop the joking and give himself the time to think. "I remember Allison Hatter, of course, and Sarah Bartholomew, because they were singled out as soon as the Welcoming Feast ended, but..." He shook his head, quite dismayed, "I really don't remember any of the others."

They shared a look, just before Ron thought of something and rummaged through his notes.

"Look! It's written here... Educational Decree n° 547..." He read aloud, "Muggleborn students will be identified as soon as possible after their arrival at Hogwarts, separated from the other students and from each other, and brought to the Ministry at once under the responsibility of the Headmaster or any of his Deputies." He puffed his cheeks and blew, clearly annoyed, "They may not have made it to the Great Hall."

"No, Ron," interrupted Neville, sure of himself. "It's impossible. As soon as the train arrived, they piled all the luggage randomly into a few carts and herded us together by House with the First Years following, as if they didn't want us to escape... And it was exactly that." He pulled a wry face at the memory. "We had to walk all the way from the railway station to the school. I suppose it was easier to watch us than if we'd used the Thesstral-pulled coaches or the boats as usual. I can still hear Parvati complaining that her shoes pinched her, but we were forbidden to use our wands out of school grounds. They sent us straight to the Great Hall. The Welcoming Feast was like a wake, with Snape announcing nothing else but discipline, rules and punishments." He paused before adding, "And then, Amycus Carrow made a great show of summoning poor Allison and Sarah."

He closed his eyes as he remembered the absolute silence that fell on the Hall, as the two girls stood..."
up with barely held terror and walked up to the Deputy Headmaster who watched them approach with a sadistic smile.

Ron watched him clench his fists and would have asked questions if Neville had not opened his eyes again, before saying in a less steady voice, "I can tell you, we would have noticed if so many places had suddenly gone empty in the Great Hall... We sure did, after each holiday break when fewer and fewer students returned. They didn't call anyone else, not that day, nor any other." He snorted, "Except that idiot Justin, of course."

Ron shrugged. "He had the bollocks to do it, you must admit."

Neville rolled his eyes. Justin Finch-Fletchley had returned to Hogwarts claiming he was a half-blood and had the papers to prove it. He had been feeling safe for a few weeks, until he was suddenly summoned by Amycus Carrow. He had returned quite shaky from the encounter – but he had stayed. Apparently, his faked papers passed muster, although he shook his head when they asked him for details. He just said, "You wouldn't believe me."

Ron sighed. "Yet another trail, and another person to visit. I'll do it, if you like."

"Yes, please. And you must ask him what he knows about the missing Hufflepuffs. I'll ask Luna about the Ravenclaws."

Ron sniggered. "You don't want to trade?"

Neville smiled mischievously, "Thanks, but no thanks."

"What about impartiality and objectivity?" asked Ron pointedly, in a fair imitation of one of their stricter instructors in Law.

Neville, usually the epitome of good wizarding manners, smiled suavely and gave him a friendly two-fingered salute. They both laughed but sobered quickly enough.

"I can't believe we almost missed this House business," Neville said.

"I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't made the list with just the names and the houses," Ron said pensively. "I generally focus on the complaints themselves, not on the house affiliation..." His eyes widened, "...or the date of the facts. The dates!" He shouted, before making yet another list. This was the one thing he had learned from Hermione, and it proved more than useful.

"As we all do, I suppose. It's the enormity of the accusations..." Neville shook his head while watching his friend work, curious of what he was looking for.

Ron did not stop writing, even as he answered, "I think it's deliberate, so that we can't see the wood for the trees."

"Makes sense, I suppose." He picked the new list Ron was handing him, scanning it for details, hints, anything that might trigger a memory.

And then it struck him. The reported abuse stretched over the first four weeks of the term, which seemed rather long, considering the instructions from the Ministry for immediate action and the fact that it was easy to assess the students' blood status from their files.

"You know what? It's impossible. Dumbledore's Army weren't really active before Halloween, but we watched and I haven't a single memory of any of it. Rumours of the shackles, yes, but nothing else, and not these students."
Ron suggested, "Maybe whoever is behind this assumed that you weren't doing anything yet… And that it was safe to stretch things a little to make the story more plausible. If it were true, if they all were at Hogwarts and Snape had followed the regulations, all of this should have happened within a few hours, two to three days at most, I think."

Neville snorted in disgust, "Snape would have needed a lot of stamina to be able to do all he’s supposed to have done in so short a time… and so would the Carrows."

With a pained smile, the same they bore when heading for Potions at Hogwarts, Ron said, "I hoped to avoid this but I'll really have to track down our missing students in the records of the Muggle Registration Commission."

§§§

Getting detailed testimonies from the families of the muggleborn students proved a long, painstaking work. Many had moved, as expected from people threatened by a gang of almost all-powerful madmen, and were difficult to track.

Meanwhile, Ron immersed himself, as he had said he would, in the files of the Muggleborn Registration Commission. He discovered that apart from Alison Hatter and Sarah Bartholomew who had actually been sent to Azkaban under the blood status legislation, none of the students on the list had been sent down from Hogwarts in 1997-98. He could find a trace of only a very few of them.

The two eldest, Mathias Crawford and his girlfriend Johanna Bettelman, had both been arrested while leaving Gringotts after the departure of the Hogwarts Express. They had been warned not to board the train and had tried to close their accounts to collect the money and flee together.

Poor little Melinda Martin had been snatched with her parents in Diagon Alley while shopping for her first year. The parents had been Obliviated and lost all knowledge of Melinda's Hogwarts letter and of being visited by Professor McGonagall.

There may have been others, but there were too many files, and it was too daunting a read to do it for long.

Ron decided that his next move would be to return to Hogwarts. The thunderstruck Headmistress looked into the school files with him and had to admit that it was true – the students on the list did not attend the school in 1997-98.

She berated herself for not spotting the obvious the first time she had been given the list of complaints, nor when the Order had discussed them, too busy as she was focusing on the horror of the accusations just like everybody else.

Ron tried to comfort her. She had dealt with so many students throughout her career at Hogwarts that it was not that strange that she got the dates mixed up… and after all, their mysterious opponent was counting on it.

The Headmistress clearly remembered how she had been to see the Martins twice. The first time was to explain and prove that their daughter was indeed a witch. The next, she had to explain that Melinda would not be able to attend Hogwarts before the next year. The girl had been so disappointed that McGonagall had arranged with Tom of the Leaky Cauldron to let her through with her parents to shop for a few basics that she could keep until next year.

"It's my fault," she said, in an unsteady voice. "She shouldn't have been in Diagon Alley in the first place, and I wasn't even there to help."
Ron left Hogwarts rather disheartened. It was disturbing, to say the least, to leave a distraught Minerva behind when she was always seen as the tower of strength and wisdom. She was beating herself up because it was her own sentimentality that made her authorise and assist in that fatal shopping expedition.

They both felt deeply for the poor Martins who had been lucky only to be Obliviated before being thrown out of Diagon Alley. A few weeks later, and they would have been carted off to Azkaban with their daughter. They had filed charges with the muggle police. They feared that their daughter had been kidnapped by a muggle paedophile and probably killed – while still grasping at straws and hoping she would be found some day. The child had quickly died in Azkaban, an innocent and helpless victim who had never understood what was happening.

Still, she had never been sorted since she never set foot at Hogwarts. How could she have been registered as a Hufflepuff, then? And who decided to convert the muggle complaint into a wizarding one, since the parents had not the faintest memory of the magical world?

The affair was getting murkier and murkier.

§§§

Neville's painstakingly long assignment brought several surprises and the beginning of a few answers.

Most of the students had not even tried to go to King's Cross. Minerva McGonagall had been able to warn all the new muggleborn students before the beginning of the term.

Moreover, in the days following Snape's formal appointment as Headmaster, they all received via the muggle post ("Smart move, impossible to trace by the Ministry," said Ron approvingly) a letter signed Severus Snape, Headmaster.

It stated that "Pursuant to Educational Decree no. 543, attendance at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is compulsory for all British magical children". However, after the preamble, the letter also explained that "Muggleborn students must wait to be summoned by the Muggleborn Registration Commission, which will examine their right to further their magical education. Therefore, no Muggleborn student will be admitted for the school year 1997-1998 without prior authorisation from the Muggle Registration Commission. No Muggleborn student unable to produce written proof of said authorisation will be admitted to attend Hogwarts. Those caught trespassing on Platform 9 ¾ will be fined five hundred galleons and incur a sentence of no less than three weeks in Azkaban State Prison."

Indeed, the lengthy missive, with its legalese and administrative jargon, was warning of the new blood status laws in such a way that most muggle parents had appropriately equated them to the Nazi anti-Jew laws.

"For the academic year 1997-1998 and pending further regulation:

- Muggleborn students are not allowed to bring pets or owls to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

- Muggleborn students are not allowed to take part in school clubs or school competitions, all previous memberships are revoked.

- Muggleborn students are not allowed to attend Flying lessons.

- Muggleborn students are not allowed to sign for the Apparition lessons and an Apparition Licence."
- Fifth-year muggleborn students are not allowed to sit the O.W.L. exams.

- Seventh-year muggleborn students are not allowed to sit the N.E.W.T. exams.

- Muggleborn students are not allowed to have any position of authority over their peers, all previous Prefect appointments are revoked.

- Muggleborn students are not allowed the benefit of free attendance at the Halloween, Christmas and Leaving Feasts, or any other Feasts yet to be scheduled, apart from the Sorting Feast where attendance is mandatory.

- Muggleborn students are not allowed to carry wands outside classes. Wands are to be handed to their Head of House who will only release them into the hands of another teacher. At the end of each class, the teacher will hand back the wands either to a Prefect or to the Caretaker who will carry them to the next classroom and release them into the hands of the teacher. At the end of the day, the wands are to be returned to the Head of House by the teacher of the last class. It is the sole responsibility of the teacher to decide if the Muggleborn students are to be allowed their wands and then only for the purpose of schoolwork.

- Muggleborn students are not allowed to visit Hogsmeade.

- Muggleborn students are not entitled to the free medical care of the Infirmary.

- Curfew for Muggleborn students will be enforced between the hours of 05:30 PM and 08:30 AM."

Dean Thomas confirmed that he had left the family home as soon as he had the information in his letter confirmed.

Dennis Creevey told Neville that his father had received the letter and ordered them to pack and move to relatives of theirs. Colin wanted to defy the warning, until frantic exchanges of owls with their schoolmates confirmed they had better stay as far as possible from the wizarding parts of Britain until further notice.

Several victims were particularly unlucky, because they had not received the letter in time. This explained how Sarah Bartholomew and Allison Hatter boarded the Hogwarts Express without the least inkling of what awaited them.

Though Neville painstakingly managed to hunt down most of the missing students, Silas Cox and Nigel Barber had totally disappeared, along with their families.

At the Barbers', the family car was still in the garage. The house was deserted, the garden was growing wild, the post box overflowing with bills and threats of repossession. Telephone, water, electricity... Everything had been cut off for non-payment once the current account was empty. The Inland Revenue was engaged in a procedure to seize the savings accounts. A police investigation had been launched at last but it was going nowhere.

The Coxes' car had been found near a picnic area two years ago, as if its occupants had just stopped for rest and were about to return. After so long, Neville could not find a single fact or trail to trace them, and their home was simply abandoned. The muggle police had investigated after finding their car but they had no leads. None of their relatives, neighbours, workmates or relations had the smallest inkling of where they could have gone. Most were rather bitter at not having been warned. They assumed that an entire family could not just disappear without planning ahead and that they had organised it; others felt uneasy and worried – one person was even convinced they had been abducted by aliens from another galaxy. The chances were they had been targeted by Death Eaters,
just like the Barbers, and used for some horrible practices, since Snatchers would have sent them to Umbridge or Runcorn.

Every single student was difficult to find, and without Neville's stubbornness and the resources discreetly allocated by Shacklebolt (including calling in favours from the muggle Prime Minister and other Ministers for Magic), it would have been close to impossible to discover their whereabouts.

They could safely assume that if Snape's trial were to be conducted in the usual swift manner of the War High Court, the defence would have no way to prove that the complaints were fabricated – not with the seal of investigation by the Aurory.

Snape's denials would be ignored or, if given the benefit of the doubt under Veritaserum, his reputation would at least be definitely ruined, particularly if he were exonerated only because of a lack of proof.

§§§

Hermione bit into her apple and savoured its juicy freshness for a few seconds. Almost casually, she said, "Ron tells me that they can't find a logical explanation for the fake complainants being exclusively from Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw."

Draco, who sat near her on the bank of the lake, stopped eating to sneer, "Can't they, now."

"I told him I would discuss it with you."

"Oh?" He smiled now, mildly amused, "Are we to discuss it, then?"

"What for? It's not as if it's so important to the outcome of the inquiry."

She took another mouthful and Draco ate one of his figs. After a time, she said, "I want him to work it out by himself, or it won't be of any use to them."

"You must really be in love if you believe he can. You've been doing his thinking for him, and for Potter, for as long as I've known you."

"You twit! We're supposed to be friends now."

"The two of us are friends, " he said with finality. "With Weasley and Potter, the operative word is 'supposed'. Without you, I'm not sure we wouldn't still be at each others' throats, even for the sake of Uncle Severus."

"I don't believe you. You're too clever for that."

"Flattery laid on with a trowel is no flattery at all."

"You should know, you're the expert in the matters of trowels."

"Give up, Granger. Praise is not your thing."

They finished eating in companionable silence.

At last, Hermione said, "You know, whenever there's something we don't understand, Ron's always the one to find out."

Draco sniffed. "Since he exerts his brain only when there is a real challenge and this is so obvious to anyone but a Gryffindor, he won't find out by himself."
"Want to bet?" He shook his head. She added, with fake indignation, "And what am I, if not a Gryffindor?"

"An honorary Slytherin."
Harry refused to believe that Head Auror Dawlish, for all his blind obedience to the previous Ministers, could have deliberately faked reports. The man's loyalty was to the public service, not to one political cause or another. This was the reason he had been promoted after the war when Shacklebolt desperately struggled to find untainted civil servants senior enough to take over what was left of the Ministry.

Still, either Dawlish was in league with Snape's foes or someone had tampered with his seal and his files. In either case, it had to be an inside job.

Harry set Seamus watching Dawlish discreetly, with instructions to note every contact he had for an extended period of time. So far, he had nothing suspect to report.

"There has to be a common factor between all the alleged victims," insisted Harry. In the interests of discretion, they had agreed to meet at Harry's home, as old school mates would after hours.

Neville shrugged. "As far as I know, the only real link is their being Muggleborn, but we already know that."

"Ron, any recurring pattern in their background?"

"Well, they're listed as Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, except Alison Hatter, of course. Even those who never set foot at Hogwarts."

Harry racked his brain, totally frustrated, "Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Why only the two houses? The missing link has to be at Hogwarts."

"Not for those who were never sorted," interjected Neville.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Nope, but I'll ask Luna. There's a Hogsmeade weekend in a fortnight."

Harry sighed, unwilling to offend Neville. He did not think Luna's comments would be very useful. He turned to Ron, "What does Hermione think?"

Ron rolled his eyes and answered dourly, "She only said she wants to discuss this with Draco." After a pause, he added, "I asked Dad's opinion and even Percy's but they're like me, they can't find a single connection."
"Let me know as soon as you hear from her then."

As soon as Neville left, Ron whined, "Why does it always have to be Malfoy? The way she's seeking the ferret's opinion about everything, you'd think the sun shines out of his backside."

"Believe me, I know exactly how you feel," said Harry, sullen. "Kingsley's practically ordered me to be friendly with the Malfoys. He says that with Snape out of the picture, they're our best hope for the inside knowledge." It was his turn to whine, "What did I do to deserve that?"

Ron chuckled. "You killed Voldemort."

"Shut up!" retorted Harry, "You helped me."

Ron sighed melodramatically, "And this is probably why I'm being saddled with Draco Malfoy as the new best friend of my girlfriend. It's all your fault!"

"Fate hates us."

"Sure."

§§§

When Harry gave his next report to Shacklebolt, the Minister shook his head at him as if it were obvious why the reported victims were all listed as Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw. Harry was quite vexed when the only comment he got was, "Unless I'm mistaken, it's not that important for the inquiry."

The Minister recommended that they should track down the students who had not returned to Hogwarts in September 1997, either because they were threatened as Muggleborn or because they elected to go to Beauxbatons to finish their studies.

He was right. Soon, Neville brought interesting news. The same firm of solicitors approached the parents of Muggleborn students and offered to act on their behalf, through a so-called 'Association of Muggle Victims of The Death Eaters' to help them claim war damages. They did not approach any student sorted into Gryffindor or any member of Dumbledore's Army, which explained why they had never heard about it. This also proved that the whole thing had been carefully planned by someone who had access to the Hogwarts or Ministry files.

"All they needed to do was file a formal complaint against Hogwarts and Snape as Headmaster for mistreatment or discrimination. The Association said they would take care of everything for a fee."

"Are you telling me that the victims actually paid to pursue Snape in the hope of getting what would be awarded to them in any case?" asked Harry, scandalised.

"That's the gist."

"Someone's clearly found a way to fish in troubled waters," Harry commented, clearly disgusted.

"At least, we know their official cover now. It's a clever way to finance their actions," said Ron.

"Not as clever as you'd think," said Neville.

"Oh?"

"None of the families I met actually signed the contract."

"Ah!" Harry brightened, "They still had the sense to file for damages themselves."
"No, they didn't," said Neville gloomily. "They simply do not want anything to do with wizarding Britain anymore."

They exchanged stricken looks. The Ministry wasn't exaggerating the loss of population: as heavy as the casualties had been, the number of voluntary exiles was at least double that and it didn't look like many planned to return any time soon... If ever.

As silly as they sounded, the regular debates in the Wizengamot about the need for a marriage and breeding act to ensure enough magical births in the next generation made sense now.

Neville usually lent only a bored ear to his grandmother's recounting of the sessions but he realised how lucky they were to have a democrat like Shacklebolt for Minister.

"I can't imagine being forced to get married straight out of Hogwarts," said Harry. "I know I want to marry Ginny, but not for a few years yet!"

"I wouldn't mind marrying now," said Neville, "but I can't say I'm ready to be a father any time soon."

"Same here," said Ron, groaning at the horrific prospect. Their youth had been spoiled by the war, and the Wizengamot's greybeards would force them to give up their chance to enjoy life before settling down? No way.

Ron sighed, "Percy has been commissioned to draw a huge fiscal reform. He asked Dad to help him investigate Muggle family benefits and fiscal incentives in various countries. At least, they agree that incentives are better than coercion."

Harry grumbled, "I'm not sure how I'd react in your father's place to be ordered by my own son. Arthur's really a nice man... and a nice father."

Ron made a wry smile, "I can't believe I am even saying this, but Percy's not so much of a prat these days. And he's proving himself a great Senior Undersecretary." He winked."At least, that's Mum's opinion."

Neville added, "I heard from Gran that they're going to encourage immigration and offer tax exemptions for foreign investors. Entrepreneurs willing to settle and returning expats can also count on low-cost resettlement loans with very generous repayment terms."

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance. Harry shrugged. It was not as if it was a secret. "That's true," said Ron. "It will be announced very soon. Bill told us just yesterday that Kingsley's managed to have the Great Mugwump negotiate fifty years subsidized loans for Britain with Gringotts International. They argued it would cost much less to the international community than to send aid and volunteers for the next fifteen years as they had first offered. Percy and Dad say the cabinet are unanimous. They don't want to be beholden for so long to the international community."

"I find it hard to believe that the Goblins agreed to this without demanding compensation," interjected Neville.

"They didn't," sniggered Harry. "They're keeping all the assets confiscated from the Death Eaters as security. They will administer them until full repayment."

"I'd have thought the Ministry would hold on to those assets and sell or lease them. It's not like they have much tax revenue right now."

"Percy says they haven't the means to administer them as efficiently as the Goblins will. The little
money suckers will make sure their guarantee holds value and it's not as if the Ministry has much choice in the matter."

"Makes sense."

Since the alternative would be the revival of archaic laws like the actual fining of bachelors and childless couples, they could only agree that it was a step in the right direction.

§§§

Under Draco Malfoy's tutelage, Hermione was discovering the sociology of wizarding Britain. Always an enthusiastic student, she summarised for Harry and Ron the various political currents and opinions, and which families or financial interests supported them.

Unsurprisingly, many people still tried to cash in on all sides and supported radical purebloods as well as Shacklebolt's allies.

It didn't help that they were all related in one way or another, the blood pool of wizarding Britain being somewhat limited. This added family issues to the political and sociological mess.

Meanwhile, Neville racked his brains over the school lists and Owled his questions to Luna. They met regularly and with Ginny's help they tried to remember every occasion, every student who had been tortured, punished or spared through "pure luck".

Ginny and Luna made an appeal for witnesses amongst the students, while Neville and Seamus did the same amongst the members of Dumbledore's Army who had refused to return to Hogwarts after the end of the war. In the end, even Seamus (who still ranted about Snape's guts and five years' worth of nightmares in the Potions class) was surprised by the results.

The sheer number of narrow escapes was staggering: students got away with lines or essays, threats of retribution that never came to pass, ridiculously simple assignments to carry out with Filch or Hagrid, and more often than not, were sent to their Head of House with a pompous note expressing the Headmaster's "utter disappointment and disapproval" and his "hope that I can rely on your diligence to impress on this offender's mind how their behaviour tarnishes the good reputation of your House. You will see that an appropriate punishment is given." The Heads of House were supposed to send their students to either of the Carrows for punishment but they evidently did not. They all knew that neither of the Deputies ever issued a punishment that did not involve violence, humiliation... or both.

It was incredible that nobody had noticed at the time—but then, the students had been just too happy to escape and survive another day unscathed to wonder. The teachers had been too busy evading the Carrows themselves to do more than brighten their day with the knowledge of having managed to spare yet another student. It probably had to do with Snape's unrelenting verbal harshness and promises of "cruel punishment", when all they had to do was spend time in the Forbidden Forest under Hagrid's supervision... Hagrid who was loyal to Harry Potter to his fingertips!

How could they have all been so blind?

So many things about the war seemed incredible now, and had depended solely on Snape's acting skills and constant bluffing.

If he had really been a Death Eater, Snape could have easily got rid of the staff faithful to Dumbledore. It was silly to think he had no time or no way to replace them.

With the Headmistress's full cooperation, Hermione scanned through the staff files. She unearthed
missives from the Ministry full of suggestions for the hiring of new teachers and dismissal of almost every one on staff. She also found a lot of application letters from quite talented sympathisers of the Pureblood creed. Many of them would probably have done quite well as replacement teachers, even discounting the propaganda. All of them received the same answer. "No position worthy of your talents is available right now, but we shall not fail to contact you in the future."

His own letters proved that Snape had shamelessly capitalized on Dumbledore's murder to drag things out with the most active zealots at the Ministry. He wrote that "the students already have to adapt to the change of Headmaster that I initiated and to the modified curriculum. Teenagers need strong, stable points of reference. It would be counterproductive at this time to introduce any more changes, particularly amongst the Heads of Houses."

He used his experience as a Potions master and Head of Slytherin to take up the position of Voldemort's unchallenged expert on education within the Inner Circle of the Death Eaters—to the unrelenting disappointment of Amycus Carrow, who could only boast of giving lectures in front of bored allies and family members as teaching experience.

In the end, it sickened even the members of Dumbledore's Army who had been through it all to imagine what could—what would have happened had a true Death Eater been made Headmaster and given free rein over the school.

Amycus and Alecto Carrow's pamphlets might be ridiculous, scientifically speaking, yet they were popular amongst the Death Eaters, and consistent enough with Voldemort's public stance to get them an appointment at Hogwarts. In the perpetual struggle for influence within the Inner Circle, there was little doubt that Amycus would have become Headmaster, as Dumbledore had surmised, if Snape had not been able to secure Voldemort's trust and gratitude by killing him.

None of them thought to ever feel relieved that Snape found the strength to carry out the murder— but they were now.

§§§

The Finch-Fletchley house stood in a rather posh neighbourhood. Ron quickly identified the doorbell and rang. The sound was melodious and he thought that he ought to ask Justin where to procure the exact same bell. It would make a nice birthday present for his dad.

A nice lady opened the door. She laughed when he mistook her for Justin's mother. She was the day housekeeper. None of the family was home but she happened to know that Justin had gone to play squash and directed Ron to his sports club.

Justin did not believe his eyes when he came out of the changing room but he was soon beaming and inviting Ron for a drink. "I can see your Auror robes through the glamour. I guess you're here in your official capacity but I'm parched. You won't give me some nonsense like not drinking on duty or anything like that?" Ron smiled back and denied any intention to be nonsensical. "Come. It's been some time since I last saw anyone from Hogwarts. I'll try to help you, whatever you want, but you'll first have to tell me the latest."

They were soon seated and Ron discreetly cast Muffliato and a mild Muggle repelling charm. They exchanged pleasantries and promises to meet again next Autumn after Justin had started his new job at Gringott's. His family had long been in finance and both his mother (a banker) and his father (a business lawyer) were as much interested as the Goblins in finding mutually profitable and discreet ways to do business. Justin had a foot in both worlds and joked that he was going to have a finger in two different kinds of pies as well.
Ron finished his drink and took out his notebook. "Now, let's get down to business. It's about Professor Snape."

Justin's smile faded and he blushed.

§§§

Snape's recovery was erratic. He would make swift progress, and then relapse, having drained himself. This happened repeatedly, until the Healers really understood how high was his tolerance to pain. They learned they had to check for the signs, because he would always mulishly refuse to admit that he had reached his limits.

At first, Snape had felt too tired for any angry reaction to be worth the effort, but he felt very frustrated. He would feel his power build up for several days and then… nothing. He could not stop trying, even if he ended up drained, because being defenceless was his worst fear.

Healer Constanz asked him why he felt he had to conquer his life rather than live it? Not having a ready answer certainly did not mellow his temper. He lashed out so violently at one of the physiotherapists that he almost blacked out.

When he opened his eyes again, he watched the wizard - yet another past student - bite his lip to contain his anger and bend to help him with the same gentleness he had always shown. Something tore in his chest and left him ashamed.

Why did you insult him like that? Are you truly a bastard at heart? he thought. You don't want to be remembered only as a villain and a murderer.

Just wait till they cart you off to Azkaban or to be Kissed, countered his Snape persona, which was the cold, paranoid part of his mind. Or to whatever kind of Circus Games the Ministry has set up for the Death Eaters. It won't matter how they remember you then.

Maybe, answered Severus, the spontaneous part of his personality – the more vulnerable too. But maybe not. I'm fed up with being an outsider. Why not blend in, for once?

Delusions, chided Snape.

Hope! cried Severus.

You'll regret it.

Probably, but at least, I'll have tried, decided Severus.

So, he managed to grumble "I'm sorry," feeling like a tongue-tied fool.

The startled look he was met with was the proof that he still was the same ill-mannered bastard.

He put his hand in the younger man's and was finally pulled up. He released the hand and exhaled deeply as much from the physical exertion as from feeling totally out of his depth. He was painfully straightening his back and his conscience.

It felt really awkward to deliver an apology while wondering if the healer would not just think that the Greasy Git was mocking him—but he managed it. He forced himself to repeat calmly (breath!) and almost clearly (darn useless throat! Articulate!), "I'm sorry, Healer Babock. That was uncalled for. Do not doubt that I appreciate your professionalism."
Babock's answer had the air of an automatic politeness. "You're welcome," he said, and continued acting a little bewildered the following days—probably wondering if it would last, but he was soon much warmer in his dealings with Snape.

Severus Snape blessed the much-too-soft-for-their-own-good nature of the Hufflepuffs who infested the ward.

He would have to try harder. Constanz told him often enough to "forget the future for a while, focus on the Now."

It was time to leave the miserable Professor Snape behind, since that persona was dead as far as he was concerned—even if he admitted to himself that it would need more than a little play-acting before it came easily… And before his voice ceased to dictate most of his acts.

But then, most of his life had been play-acting. He had learned to act like a pureblood aristocrat; like a Death Eater; like a teacher; like a spy; like a true bastard (well, that had come naturally)—and he had become each part rather easily. Would it be so difficult to act normal and polite, just like everybody else?

Severus desperately wanted this. He knew, without the pessimistic input of Snape, that peace and quiet never lasted in his life, but he was determined to make the most of this enforced stay in St Mungo's. Let it be a peaceful parenthesis at least.

And there was also the tiny hope that, just maybe, there might be a second chance for him somewhere.

A tiny hope that refused to be silenced.

§§§

Severus Snape's coming trial was just one of Hermione's, Ginny's and Luna's preoccupations.

Their seventh year was full of revision, but also of careers advice, meetings with potential employers or presentations by various Guilds and postgraduate programs.

Luna ignored all offers. She knew that she wanted to work for the Quibbler. As Harry had predicted, she seized the opportunity of the investigation into Professor Snape's actions in the war to interview as many students as possible. She used the interviews to write articles for her father's magazine. It soon became a chronicle of the war at Hogwarts, full of trivia and all the ordinary life details. It was an instant hit. Parents subscribed just to read about their children and everybody else was interested in what happened in their old school.

Xenophilus Lovegood was rubbing his hands in satisfaction. He was proud of his daughter and also more pragmatic that people generally gave him credit for. You cannot run your own business for long if you always have your head in the clouds.

He had turned more politically radical toward the end of the war, more critical of the system and it showed in the Quibbler. He had a network of like-minded friends all over the world. They were unconventional but politically aware people, very sympathetic to environmentalism. They published each other's papers, featuring rare and endangered magical species or celebrating the diversity of magical creatures. Xenophilus was determined to make his compatriots aware of the complexity of the magical world and of the waste of resources that decades of war had caused.

One of his regular contributors was the son of an old friend, a certain Rolf Scamander who was currently cataloguing the plants and creatures of Amazonia for the Magical University of Sao Paulo.
He wrote Luna an amazingly friendly and encouraging letter, to tell her how much he liked her
chronicle, which reminded him of his own student days and of home, while he was in the back of
beyond. He was also full of questions, because he had been there for four years, working mostly
alone or with locals, and totally missed most of the events at home. This made him homesick in
retrospect. He unfortunately had another three-year contract and would not be able to come back
before it ended.

It was the beginning of a steady exchange of letters via Rolf’s exotic but resilient pelican that caused
a sensation every time it flew into the Great Hall of Hogwarts.

Ginny remembered that Rolf Scamander had been in the same year as Charlie and a kindred spirit.
Rolf was a Ravenclaw but her brother had often regaled his siblings with the tales of their pranks in
the Care of Magical Creatures class which they both attended at NEWT Level. She remembered him
visiting the Burrow a few times – a friendly, energetic boy whom they all liked.

It was a pity he was homesick. She made a point of writing to Charlie about Scamander's
whereabouts and was glad to hear they were now regularly in contact. Not via letters though, since
Charlie had no patience for writing, but via a Patronus. It was exhausting at long distance, but they
were young, happy to become friends again and it was much more fun to share jokes with each
other.

Professor Flitwick was overjoyed to hear about Rolf when Luna passed on his greetings to his
former Head of House. More often than not, the sturdy pelican returned to Amazonia with two
letters, sometimes three, since Pomona Sprout could hardly restrain her curiosity once Flitwick
shared some of Scamander's information with her.

Another consequence of her papers in the Quibbler was that Flitwick suggested to Luna to revive the
late Hogwarts Gazette, which had died from the lack of dedicated talents sometime during the 1950s.
She eagerly accepted, since she kept hearing from her father how much he had learned about
journalism when still a student, thanks to that "good old gossip rag".

It was an instant hit. The students just loved the monthly four-sheet, which featured House gossip,
outlandish prophecies from Divination classes, lost and found column, maintenance advice from
Argus Filch or interviews of unlikely figures like Peeves (who has grown inordinately fond of Luna,
for the reason nobody could fathom) or some long forgotten and rather boring portrait.

Most people read Hogwarts Gazette thinking that Luna was deliberately writing parody. She earned
herself the reputation of a tongue-in-cheek wit, which was rather close to the truth, but the joke was
on them. It was not parody but the way she saw Hogwarts, and what could interest her readers.

Hermione, who was the paragon of logic and organisation, had despised the blond Ravenclaw
almost on principle in earlier years. Psychotherapy made her radically re-evaluate her life and her
perception of others, Luna amongst others. Now that she had to work more closely with the other
girl, she discovered that what used to irritate her in Luna was that she was her opposite when it came
to thought process.

The only child of a total eccentric and of a daring inventor who had lost her life experimenting with
new charms, Luna was the closest thing to an intuitive genius you could find in the wizarding world.
Her teachers generally did not understand how she reached her conclusions, but they were always
correct. Her mind did not just work under the surface, it delved in waters so deep that she had no
time, use or care for the trivialities of ordinary politeness and conventions.

Hermione said that her reasoning and Luna's intuition were like oil and vinegar, but once Luna
suggested that it was the recipe for a good dressing, she laughed. If she could make friends with
Draco Malfoy, who had tried to humiliate her at every turn in the past, how difficult could it be to appreciate someone who had painted her portrait in her own bedroom, alongside Harry, Ron, Neville and Ginny, because she liked her?

§§§

If Luna had known since fifth year that she wanted to follow in her father's steps, Ginny was just as sure that she would never follow in her mother's.

"Don't get me wrong," she said, "I love my family and I want my own one day, but I want a career and I'll certainly never have so many children."

Ginny wanted a career and did not like office work, but that was the extent of her ideas for the time being. She was good at many things but did not think it was so vital to choose the right path at seventeen.

Headmistress McGonagall (who was also her godmother) encouraged her to widen her horizons – maybe travel or study abroad for a while. Her childhood had ended violently, when she was possessed by Tom Riddle at eleven and after that... there was the war.

Now at last came the time to enjoy her youth.

Even her mother, whom most people could not imagine doing anything else than staying at home, encouraged her, telling her that she was herself considering her options now that all her children were adults and the war was over.

A golden opportunity presented itself. Ginny was the Quidditch captain this final year. She had declined being Head Girl to focus on Quidditch, because she loved the thrill of it, and because she did not think she would have much opportunity to play in the future… except with her family, but it just was not the same. She was adamant in her desire to make the most of her last year at school and devoted a good deal of her energy to ensuring that Gryffindor would win the cup this year.

Professional teams always sent an observer to the final games at Hogwarts. They had tried to lure Bill several years ago, and Charlie, but they had both refused because they had other goals. Ginny was much more amenable when Madam Hooch told her she had caught the sight of several selectors.

She could hardly believe her luck in fact, but it was perfect for her at this point in her life. She even had a choice, since two teams finally made her offers. She barely hesitated before choosing the Holyhead Harpies who wanted her as a reserve Chaser. She was tired of being the only female in the family, so she signed with the all-female team.

§§§

Hermione was biding her time to decide her next step. For the first time in her life, she was not getting stressed with the fear of failing exams. What she feared most now was failing at life.

Her career choices and prospects were wide, bright and open. She could do anything she wanted, as every teacher told her.

Potential employers fought to secure the Brain of the Trio for their firm. She knew that any position, any apprenticeship was hers for the asking. She was Hermione Granger, war heroine, Harry Potter's friend, Minister Shacklebolt's and Arthur Weasley's protégée and a brilliant witch to boot.

Unfortunately, private sector employers only asked her what her price was for letting them benefit from her reputation. They hardly spoke of the actual work, challenges or research but all insisted on
representative functions and public relations. They were willing to let her do whatever she wanted to keep her happy, even if it was just colour-coding charts. She went to interviews but each time returned feeling as little more than some kind of showdog on the market.

She had been offered several golden opportunities at the Ministry, too. They were willing to sign a contract before her NEWTs results. Once again, she knew she was sought more for what she stood for than for her competence.

The first time she went to an interview at the Ministry, she felt that something was wrong. She assumed it was the stress of returning to the place, after all that had happened there, not to speak of all the war trials she had attended. It was just the same every subsequent time.

It was only as she walked the trail back to Hogwarts, sometime in late May, that she could finally put the finger on what troubled her. No trace of the war was visible at the Ministry.

At Hogwarts, building teams were still at work on several parts of the castle. There were scaffoldings here and there, and she could even recognise Draco on one, his platinum blond mane gleaming in the sun.

It was obvious that the heir of the House of Malfoy found his place in a team for the first time in his life, and that he actually enjoyed it.

It made sense. Shared physical exertion was good for the heart and the mind. It was no coincidence that the Headmistress and Professor Sprout often asked the students to help in the restoration of the school's gardens and lawns.

Draco caught sight of her and waved.

She waved back with a smile, thinking once more how strange and marvellous it was to see the haughty aristocrat working so hard to help rebuild the castle.

Draco had barely been there three months when the Ministry architect, who had to stretch his time between too many sites, made him his assistant and all but handed him the plans.

Draco was the symbol of the renaissance of Hogwarts. He had first helped those who sought to destroy and conquer it, but he had learned his lesson and was now giving his all not only to rebuild it, but make it better.

He had proposed, in places, to let the battle damage remain visible for symbolic purposes: to repair what was needed to ensure the safe functioning of the place, but to let people see and remember that other people fought, suffered and died there.

He did it first in the corridor where Fred Weasley had died. There was the traditional memorial plaque, of course, but they all knew that, given enough time, nobody would ever read the plaque again. He had suggested the use of a different pattern in assembling the stone wall, just where it was blasted, so that the eye was drawn to it, like to an old scar, well-healed but there nonetheless.

He had proposed several other memorials too, the last being the place where Voldemort had died. No gaudy plaque, an urn or an ugly sculpture there. Just a tingling ward to warn off trespassers and a sober outline of his corpse where it had lain, stretched, while their minds had been trying to register the reality of it – that he was dead, dead at last, and that he would never wage war on them again.

For the first time in decades, the Headmistress decided to ask the students to discuss and vote on Draco’s proposal in their common rooms. They had suffered, and they had to decide if they wanted the daily reminder of this suffering.
The students approved. The vote was practically unanimous, even in Slytherin.

§§§

When the Weasleys and all their relations visited for the unveiling of Fred's plaque, Molly stood transfixed for several minutes in front of the wall before dissolving into tears.

Hermione watched Draco, who was there at the back, flush beet-red, his eyes widening in dismay before he suddenly fled. He stayed in the park until dark, hiding when he heard people call his name. He returned only to go straight to the workers' dorm, packed his trunk and prepared to leave.

It was there that Hermione found him. For a Slytherin, he was quite transparent.

"I'm sorry," he blurted. "I never meant..."

"Molly's not angry with you. Neither are the other Weasleys."

"She cried."

"Yes, she cried. It's not the first time and it won't be the last. She lost her son, and she will never totally heal from that loss."

He shook his head. "I shouldn't have done it."

"You're right," she said sternly, "you certainly shouldn't have left like you did. You're not usually a coward these days."

Startled, he said, "I mean... I shouldn't have proposed the memorials in the first place."

"Oh cut the drama, please! It was a fabulous idea and everybody approved. You were proud enough, if I remember correctly. May I remind you that Gryffindor's vote was unanimous?"

"I know but..."

She insisted, "In case you didn't realise, this means that Ginny voted for it, too."

"Oh!" He hadn't thought of that, too busy wallowing in self-pity and guilt.

"Do you imagine she didn't think hard about it? Or that she didn't tell her family? The Weasleys have known all along. Did they object?"

"No."

"So, are you done feeling sorry for yourself?"

"I can't help feeling it's wrong, to make a mother cry. " She almost did not hear him mutter, "If it had been mine..." before he bit his lip.

To change the mood, she handed him a letter, smiling brightly, "It's from Molly Weasley."

He took it gingerly, turned it several times but there was only his name on it, and it did not look like a Howler.

"I'll leave you to read it in peace."

She left, smiling to herself. She knew that he was going to shed a few tears. He would never want
her to see, of course. Molly's letter was more like a note, but it began with "Dear Boy", it finished with "God bless you" and she had cried again while scribbling it and blotched the paper.

She could almost hear him say, "Gryffindors!" while shaking his head in disbelief.

§§§

There had been a battle at Hogwarts, and they all refused to forget it. They all aimed to make it a better place because of it.

By contrast, Hermione realised that she had been feeling out of place at the Ministry as soon as she looked at the Fountain of Magical Brethren.

It was perfectly repaired, of course, and nothing would remind you that it had once been damaged in their fight against the Death Eaters and then replaced by the horrific symbol of Voldemort's domination and racism.

The Ministry had done their utmost to erase all traces of the war. It was as if nothing ever happened there, as if they never learned any lesson. Most people did not want to speak of the war any more, so they erased all traces of it. Do not mention the war! she thought, feeling rather bitter.

The Hermione Granger who had been honed for six years by the Hogwarts system would have done fine there. She had been sure she just needed to enter the Ministry and then she would change the archaic wizarding world, by the force of law if need be – because it was the right thing to do. She would have fitted perfectly there, hardly questioning her own opinions, the rightness of her mission and her policies. She would have become a political force to be reckoned with... And a scary, overbearing witch.

But the Hermione Granger who had been wandering for months in search of the Horcruxes—numb, cold, starving, holding on desperately to the need to keep Harry going… the Hermione Granger who had her life torn apart by the Snatchers and Bellatrix Lestrange... that Hermione Granger could not fit into the Ministry any more. Not if this meant only dealing with grand principles and ideas while leaving the real, flesh and blood people alone with their pain, because it was the politically correct thing to pretend that nothing had happened... except once or twice a year in a commemorative political show.

There was only one place where she felt she could really make a difference to people's lives. Healer Constanz sent a delighted response to her application but warned her that the final decision depended on her NEWTs results.

They were exceptional, as expected. No one could equal her, even Luna with her own collection of Outstandings – but the blonde was so discreet about her own results, as usual, that nobody but the teachers congratulated her.

Ginny's results were not so stellar but she did very well in all her subjects and when she felt ready, she would be able to choose practically any career she fancied. It was totally liberating. She was free to enjoy playing Quidditch without having to worry about what she would do when the time came to retire from competitive sport.

When they left Hogwarts, Hermione was fully aware, as she boarded the Express for the last time, that the page was turned for good at last. She could now enter adulthood without any regrets or misgivings.

Minerva McGonagall watched them with misty eyes as they went through the great doors for the last
Never had she been more proud of a particular group of students. She knew, without any doubt, that each one of them would leave their mark in the world.
I hate to say it

but it's probably me

(Sting, It's probably me)

"So, was Draco of any help with the mystery of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students?" Harry asked a little too sarcastically for Hermione's taste.

"I forgot to ask him. We had other things to discuss," she said.

Ginny looked up, suspicious. She had spent more time around Hermione in the previous months than Harry and her brother, and learned her different moods. She sounded a little too innocent to be honest.

"You forgot?" Ron sounded strangely disappointed, considering how he hated the times Hermione spent with Draco.

Something was definitely up. Ginny was sure Hermione knew more than she let on just by the way her eyes travelled between Harry and Ron before she asked, "You still haven't found the answer?"

Harry grumbled that either people stared at him with pity before telling him that it had nothing to do with the result of the investigation or they did not have a clue. And of course, Neville had not been able to get any useful answers from Luna, although he pretended he did.

"I'm sure she told him something," she insisted.

"You may think that 'it's sweet that you noticed, but then, that's why I love you' is a useful answer but I don't, even if it makes Neville grin like a fool."

Hermione laughed, "Yes, this sounds like Luna."

She turned to Ron, with the same look she sported when she demanded he show her his homework after he pretended he had done it, while they both knew he had just been reading Quidditch magazines, "I thought that you planned to ask Justin Finch-Fletchley. Surely, he had an opinion."

Ron gave her a slightly resentful look, "Believe it or not, everything was going well with Justin until then. He just said, "Typical". Ah yes, and he rolled his eyes. After that, he couldn't leave fast enough."

"That's hard," Ginny commiserated. "He didn't use to be so rude." She pointedly told Hermione, "I'm sure you know what's up."

They stared at each other in some kind of battle of wills until Hermione shrugged. She said sadly, "If you can't figure it out by yourselves, it's useless."

§§§
There was, of course, a party at the Burrow for Harry's birthday, but also to honour Ginny and Hermione. Ginny had just officially signed her contract with the Holyhead Harpies and Hermione would begin her apprenticeship under Healer Constanz in St Mungo's Monday next.

She was now taking up residence with Harry and Ron in Grimmauld Place. Ginny was supposed to stay at the Burrow – more for Molly's comfort than anything else: her baby girl was to leave home for good much too soon, and she did not like the idea that she was living with Harry without being married, even if Ron was supposed to chaperone them. Ginny actually spent most nights with Harry, but she generally Flooed home after dinner.

The Trio found that they could easily get into the habits of their student days again, colour-coded planning included. This time, what Hermione planned were their appointments and assignments to research Professor Snape's case, but also their turns at various household chores or to use the good bathroom. There was no way Kreacher was going to do everything, not while Hermione was living there.

When Ginny managed to dine with them, the kitchen was all hers. She was not Molly's daughter for nothing, but she also knew that preparing their meals together made Harry happy.

He peeled and sliced the vegetables or washed the dishes the Muggle way, which amused her, and generally made himself useful. She felt sad whenever she remembered he had learned the hard way to help in a household and to stay out of the way.

She made a point of proving to him that he was never in the way.

With her, he laughed. He was carefree. He was young. He wanted to taste everything – her above everything else.

Hermione's apprenticeship went very well, as a matter of course. Every day confirmed her in the conviction that she had chosen the right path.

Healer Constanz had detailed a precise plan for her training. She would spend three months in each department (Artefact Accidents, Creature-Induced Injuries, Maternity, Magical Bugs, Potion and Plant Poisoning, Chronic Diseases and Emergency) before joining him in the Spell Damage Ward where she would specialize. She was also taking long-distance courses in psychology with the Muggle university of Paris Sorbonne. She could expect to become a full Healer in five years' time but she would be in charge of patients with minor, routine ailments after six months, as Healer-in-Training. At that time, she would be entitled to wear the green robe of her chosen trade, with the wide red braid indicating that she was In Training and which would grow thinner and thinner until she finally graduated.

And then, there was Ron, and her wish to get back into the swing of things. Summertime and the example of Harry and Ginny were slightly intoxicating. Remaking the world in the sitting room or the back garden helped to renew their friendship and went well with tentative then tender kissing.

If she sometimes paled at the most casual touch or at a sudden move, her friends had long learned not to voice concern but to simply offer silent support.

§§§

"I've figured it out," Ron told him in passing.

"What?" asked Harry.

"Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw."
"Yes?" Harry gave him his full attention but Ron was already at the door. He sighed, before going out, "Hermione is right, it's useless if you don't figure it out by yourself." The last words were a little muffled since he spoke them while he was already out of the office.

"WHAT?"

Harry chased Ron into the corridor of the Aurory. "You git! You can't come out with something like that and just leave."

"You know I've got to go to the Archives again."

"No! No! No! You have to tell me."

"Make a list."

"A list?"

"Yes. One column for the people who immediately knew what it is about and one for those who don't understand on their own, and then look for what they have in common." He considered his friend for a few seconds and added, "Don't count Hermione, it will only confuse you."

Bemused, Harry took a quill and penned his list.

Those who know: Kingsley, Luna (?), Justin, the Malfoys, Constanz.

The others: Me, Ron (not anymore), Ginny, Arthur, Percy, Seamus, Neville (not anymore).

And finally it struck him.

§§§

Harry was to be on night duty, something that seemed to bother him to no end and earned him a sympathetic grimace from Ron. They both strictly respected their obligation of professional secrecy so Hermione never found out what it was about. She did not try to harass them either, since she had the same obligation at St Mungo's.

Ginny was to stay at the Burrow tonight, to keep up the appearance that she still lived there.

So, Ron and Hermione decided to do it. The big it they had carefully avoided voicing even when they both hoped that Bill and Fleur's wedding would be the perfect occasion to move their relationship farther, until the events of the war put paid to this possibility.

They had a nice outing in London. Hermione introduced Ron to several kinds of Muggle junk food which he found glorious, as she had expected. They ate in a park, surrounded by pigeons, groups of young people and uninhibited couples.

They walked back to Grimmauld Place, tired and comfortable, holding hands and occasionally stopping to share kisses.

They opted for Hermione's bedroom. She felt more at ease "on her own territory". She went through her evening routine, got herself into bed and waited for Ron, who had gone to freshen up a bit and get into his pyjamas in his room. The wait was a little unnerving, but she felt all right anyway. This was Ron. She wanted this. She wanted him.

Soon, he opened her door, peeking through the doorway and winking with a conspiratorial air. They both laughed. He came up to her, looking more confident than he really was.
Sure, he had that one clumsy first time and two slightly more confident occasions with Lavender back in their sixth year, but Lavender was very possessive and downright embarrassing in public. Then he was hit with the Amortentia and the poison, only to wake up in the Infirmary totally confused. He had no memory of having broken up with Lav, even if he was rather relieved to learn that he had apparently done so. It was Hermione who was there, holding his hand, emotional and downright mental, as usual.

He only regretted that Lavender always gave him the cold shoulder after that, and even more so now that she was dead. She was a little shallow, but she certainly did not deserve to die at the hands of Fenrir Greyback.

Last night, he reviewed the Playwizard Special the twins had given him before Bill's wedding.

He hoped he would do all right, because he had heard that raped women sometimes remained frigid or would suddenly have a flashback in the middle of the act.

He was terrified at the prospect and wondered how he would react if Hermione suddenly was to cry or fight him.

"Just be tender and understanding," his father had told him a long time ago when they had discussed Hermione, "and always be patient. Always let her set her own pace." He spoke confidently, as if he knew all about the problem, and Ron had been grateful at the time for the advice. Now that the moment came, he just thought that it was easier said than done, and that Dad did not know what it felt like.

He settled in the bed, and stroked her cheek. She smiled, and moved to kiss him. Soon, they were properly snogging.

He cupped her breasts. They were firm and fit his palms, and he enjoyed fondling them. But... Nervous thoughts could not be silenced. Does she like this or not? Does she feel anything or not? Why won't she say what she feels? What if I am hurting her? Lavender made sweet little moans when he touched her, and it felt good, reassuring and exciting. She also knew how to encourage him. Remembering those feelings, he began to harden. Hopefully, he asked, "Do you like this?"

"Yes, Ron, it's nice." He did not really find it encouraging because her voice lacked real enthusiasm or conviction.

Hermione found that the sensations were fleeting, coming and leaving. The simple fact of speaking cooled the building up heat. Ron's question broke the mood it seemed. Not that it's his fault, she thought guiltily. But what am I supposed to say? I don't know what I am feeling. I don't know what I am supposed to feel. She forced herself to recall what she had read but she could not bring herself to touch Ron in his most intimate place.

Ron felt her hands stroke his shoulders and arms and caress his chest. In a gust of tenderness, he thought that she would learn soon enough and that everything would be all right. She was trying, and it was good.

They went on stroking each other for a time. Ron slowly slipped his hand further down.

Hermione froze. She liked it all right, but she felt ashamed to like it. It was too... intimate. Too intimate to let Ron do something so dirty. She remembered that day... the frightening jolt of pleasure that Scabior had surprised out of her when he had touched her there without warning.

She stopped him with her hand.
"Mione? You don't like it?"

"I'm sorry, Ron... I don't like it." It was not what she meant but this was all that she was able to say.

Not unexpectedly, Ron took her words as a rebuke. The disappointment on his face was unmistakable and Hermione turned her face away, sorry and even more ashamed of herself than before. "Not now at any rate," she whispered, fighting tears.

Ron immediately turned protective. He held her close and whispered softly, "Later then. We're not in a hurry."

He soothed her like a child with light kisses and gentle words, until she smiled and cuddled against him without holding back. Soon enough, their kisses became more insistent and they were once again snogging and stroking. It was good, but they did not seem to be able to go anywhere from there because she went rigid every time he tried to go anywhere below her navel.

Ron was at a loss at what to do next, fearful to have Hermione freeze again. She was rather passive and this was not remotely arousing any longer. There was a huge ball in his throat and another one forming in his gut. He felt dirty, touching her like that, when he had dreamed of passion, of irresistible excitement and fulfilment, of tenderness... of giving her pleasure as he became her man.

She most certainly was not transported in bliss.

He wondered why this was happening to him. Why he could remember his first time with Lavender Brown as a heated, wonderful session, although he did not care as much for the poor, sweet Lav at the time as he now cared for Hermione. There was no passion there. He felt cheated... and guilty to feel like that.

Maybe he was wrong trying to go too slow, to be too gentle? His strokes increased in intensity, covering more and more of her upper body, her breasts, her sides, her shoulders. He massaged her neck and she finally let out a little moan of pleasure, which instantly rekindled his own desire.

Hermione sighed and rolled over slightly to give him better access. He began to undulate against her, bringing their lower bodies together as he explored her more deliberately and rubbed himself against her. She obliged and parted her thighs to give him better access.

Through a haze, he saw that she had closed her eyes. There was a rather determined look on her face.

"You can touch me, you know," he said.

Her hands went automatically to his sides. She was hesitant, even a little clumsy, but he did not mind. At least, she was not just waiting for him to...

There was something like a warning bell in his mind. He suddenly noticed that she looked exactly like she always did at the beginning of their end of year exams. Is she only waiting to get this over with?

He stopped. She did not withdraw, but she did not reach out to him.

After some time, when nothing more happened, she opened her eyes.

"Ron?"

With a sinking heart, he gave her a rather constrained smile. "Maybe... We should not try so hard,"
he said, lifting his head and leaning his chin on his hand.

They looked at each other. Ron felt disappointed when Hermione sighed with an unmistakable relief – but he soon realised that he felt oddly relieved too.

"I don't think this will work," he sighed.

"I don't feel it either," she said sadly.

He braced himself for the answer, but he had to ask. "Would you have gone through it all without telling me if I hadn't spoken first?"

His heart almost missed a beat as she blushed, swallowed hard and turned hastily away, trying to hide her suddenly tearful eyes. This was answer enough.

He just hugged her "You know you have the right to say no. Especially to me. OK?"

She nodded. Ron let go of her and sat back. She did the same, still not looking him in the eyes.

Silence began to stretch into awkwardness so thick one could cut it with a knife.

Ron broke it again. "Look, you know I love you, don't you?"

"Oh, Ron! Of course I do. I love you too. I thought..."

"Shhh," he soothed. "It's not your fault. I don't think it's just your... your experience. There's something else missing between us. It's not the lack of feeling but... I don't think I can make you feel good, and you're just not doing it for me. At least, not as I dreamed it would be."

"And it's not a lack of feelings on my part either but you're right. Something just feels wrong."

Timidly, she added, "Maybe it's not that kind of love?"

It should have been, thought Ron guiltily. What did I do wrong? He was too busy feeling sorry for himself to look at Hermione and realise that she was thinking just the same.

Silence settled in again.

"I don't suppose you'd like to try again?" he asked dutifully, once more feeling that it fell to him to break it.

"No."

At least, she doesn't look disgusted.

She could not ask him to wait for another day, another occasion. It's too late, she thought, dispirited. And so unfair, for the both of us.

"Better to find out now, than to carry it to the end, I suppose." Say no, Mione. Say you want another chance. Say you will give us another chance.

"Yes." Oh! Ron.

They both sighed, realising it was over now. They would never have the courage to try again – together.

Ron grabbed his pyjamas and put them on, while Hermione did the same with her nightclothes.
Now, it was really, really awkward.

"I still love you."

"Same here."

He kissed her – just a quick, friendly peck.

They both realised at the same time the absurdity of the situation. They stared at each other. They were heavy-hearted but they had gone through so many things together that they could not help smiling, even if wryly. He shrugged and offered his hand. She took it with relief. They had always comforted each other like that since the end of the war. It would have been awful to lose even this.

After a time, they even began to giggle, rather hysterically at first. It certainly helped to defuse the tension.

"I don't know what I'm going to tell Mum," Ron said with mock alarm. "She cornered me last week and asked me if she needed to lend me the money to buy you a ring."

Hermione sniggered, "Don't tell me. She's been asking me forever if I don't envy Bill and Fleur, and hinting that she'd be so pleased to have another marriage to plan."

Ron faked gagging. She huffed slightly but could not help chuckling at his antics, if a little sadly.

"Imagine we got married and discovered on our wedding night that we're not compatible," he said, playing the clown as usual, for fear of showing how vulnerable he felt. "How miserable I'd have been with you."

She tried to cuff him, but without conviction, as usual, and he dodged easily. "You're an absolute prat and nothing would induce me to marry a prat."

They laughed, still too close to tears for real merriment, and then hugged again, for a long time – for comfort. At least, they were still comfortable together. The most important thing was that they still had their affection and their friendship – their own brand of love, even if it was not the one they had hoped for.

They could regret what would never be, but they were determined to hang on to what they had.

"Well, time to go to bed, I suppose," he said.

"You can stay. We don't work tomorrow. We can at least talk a little longer."

"I need a snack."

She rolled her eyes. Of course, he needed a snack. "Let's make some cocoa then, and there are still some of your mother's waffles but you must leave at least two for Harry, do you hear me?"

And that was the end of it.

§§§

It was mid-morning already when Harry, totally knackered, found two empty, used cups in the kitchen, and only one waffle left when he was searching for something to eat.

He ate it absently. He just wished to be spared another of those night vigils in St Mungo's, when there was really nothing to do in the oppressive silence, regularly broken by moans and nightmares,
and rushing nurses.

The place was a madhouse by day, in every meaning of the word. At night, it sounded like an antechamber of hell when the inner demons of the more damaged patients had no visitors or routine to keep them at bay, and suddenly got loose in the silence.

This did not incite Harry to chat, even when he was with one of the colleagues he was on good terms with, because as soon as they got comfortable, a nurse would show up, disapproval clearly imprinted on his or her face and demand they hush to let the patients sleep, as if the chaos in the ward was their fault.

He did not know why, but the night nurses all reminded him of Professor McGonagall. They always reduced him to a strained, guilty silence.

As a team leader on special assignment, he had managed to get himself out of the day roster at St Mungo's but the service was too short-staffed for him to avoid guard duties altogether. It would not be fair to his colleagues. So, he chose night duties because he did not want to face Snape without warning.

It was bad enough as it was.

It had taken weeks before he stopped fidgeting every time he heard something coming from Snape's room. Constanz told him at the time that the wailing and ravings were due to withdrawal-induced hallucinations. Harry had not dared say much, but he was sure he recognised things that came from Snape's actual memories and not from random ravings.

Thankfully, the worst was over. Snape had even asked to be told news of the war, Constanz told him.

That made sense. Snape had no way of knowing how the battle ended and what happened after they had left him for dead in the Shrieking Shack. It seemed he had guessed that Voldemort had been killed, simply by the fact that he had been allowed to live—which was rather sickening in itself.

He thought that Harry was dead and was apparently seeing his ghost tormenting him.

So, he did not dare open the door now and risk finding Snape awake. He could not bear the thought that the other man would immediately think that he was coming to hurt or kill him, or that he still hated him to death.

He knew, through Constanz again, that Snape had begun psychotherapy. The idea of Snape undergoing counselling seemed strange at first, but it made so much sense.

And now, Constanz had just told him before he left that Snape would soon be stable enough to be allowed visits.

This meant that he would not be able to postpone the inevitable face to face with his former Professor for long.

He took a few drops of the Calming Draught and climbed into his bed.

§§§

When she woke up and went to the bathroom, Hermione took the time to look at herself in the mirror.
Nothing was wrong with her. She had nothing to be guilty about. She had spent half of the night talking to Ron. She had not been able to feel because Ron was not the right man anymore, and he had not been able to get aroused by her because she was not the right woman for him anymore.

It was the simple, sad truth. They would regret this for a very long time but "that's life", as Ron said.

She was more thankful than she would ever be able to say that he had stopped. She did not want to think how she would feel right now, if she had let him take her, just because she had been fed up with her own lack of sensation and wanted to prove that she could do it.

On a whim, she decided to bake him her mother's famous chocolate and raspberry cake – the one she made only on special occasions.

Ron Weasley may not be the right man, but he certainly was a true friend.

Three weeks after deciding to make an effort to be more courteous, Severus Snape was wondering if Fate was not laughing at him again. He had tried to forget that dunderheads form by far the greatest part of the human race, but they persisted in reminding him of this all the time.

Severus Snape was a complicated man, just as complex as one of his potions.

He would always be introverted. He had a pungent vocabulary and a crude frankness that came out a little too easily but Lucius and Abraxas had taught him patiently, and years of association with the most exacting purebloods had finally made good manners natural... when he chose to use them.

It was no more difficult to be polite to silly dunderheads ordinary people than to the average rich bitch who would lacerate you in public for your half-bloodedness at the slightest lapse of courtesy.

Ordinary people at least did not Crucio you like the reptilian psychopath who had thought he owned him. They did not constantly pull the strings of your guilt or your gratitude to manipulate you like Albus Dumbledore. They just taxed your patience with their silly, useless prattle and prying concern, but he had long learned the necessity of patience at the feet of his two masters.

In the end, the good will his politeness earned him lessened the need to give tiring lessons in efficiency, so it was fair, he supposed.

There was the added bonus in overhearing now and then ex-students wondering if he was the same Professor Snape who had taught them. They always concluded that the nasty teacher act must have been part of his spying, and that he was not that bad really.

He was not ready to admit that he often found himself with an uncomfortable lump in his throat when he heard this, rather than with his usual urge to snigger at their silliness.

In those moments, he let the Snape in him compensate for Severus's weakness, and calculate coldly that if the staff were less suspicious, it would at least make things easier if he had to escape before the Aurors finally decided it was time to drag him to Azkaban.

"What about Sirius Black?"

"No, Constanz. I will not speak of that bastard."
The only thing that almost provoked the resurgence of Professor Snape was a conversation, whispered, but not discreetly enough, between one of his physiotherapists (Ravenclaw, 1982) and a gossipy little nurse (Hufflepuff, 1986 or 1987?) who seemed to waste their days chattering.

He despised the lack of professionalism this implied, but now that he spent most of his time doing exercises, he was not going to complain. He hated staying idle and feeling so feeble. He hated even more to have someone breathing down his neck, so if they were occupied, it was just fine with him. He did very well on his own, thank you, without the insipid so-called 'encouraging' input of the physiotherapist.

"The poor, poor wizard, when you think about it," commiserated the witch in what she obviously assumed was a discreet undertone. It might have worked with someone who did not use to be a spy and a teacher for half of their lifetime. Obviously, she was still your average dunderhead, convinced that if they do not see your eyes, you cannot be watching or listening to them.

Condescending bitch, he thought, neither batting an eyelid nor missing the rhythm of his physical exercise. She had been a senior student when he began to teach, one who still remembered him as Snivellus.

He was steadily increasing the force of his moves even if he was hardly satisfied with his endurance so far. He purposely ignored the reflexive tingling at the base of his neck, refusing to acknowledge that they were staring at him.

He finished his series, and began another, chasing his second wind. Come on, he thought, you can do it. You need your muscles back.

Drenched in sweat, muscles burning, he clenched his jaws and poured all his will into the next move. Fifty-five... fifty-six... fifty-seven... fifty-eight... fifty-nine...

Exasperated by the persistent chatter on his left, he concentrated on the happy memories of how he had entire classrooms in hysteric's his first year teaching, hers included. The only benefit he ever got from his being arrested on the school grounds had been the way they literally wet themselves when he entered his classroom thereafter.

Thankfully, the students' limited understanding of politics soon relegated the real reason of their collective fear into obscurity. In later years, the younger students only learned from their elders that he was an unmitigated bastard you had better not cross. They were so stupid. Once, he cut his finger during class and instinctively sucked on the cut. It was enough to start a rumour that he was a vampire. Minerva had been in whoops about this and it started many a bedroom game.

He was still mentally chuckling, while trying to concentrate on improving speed, when suddenly Rebecca Babbling, the ex-Ravenclaw, said, "Who would have thought him capable of such love for his Lily?"

He narrowed his eyes. What kind of prank were the silly witches playing on him? He turned discreetly to watch them from the corner of his eye, careful not to lose his rhythm and coordination but ready to stare them down if need be.

They were looking at him with the same kind of ridiculous, longing looks girls reserved for handsome bastards like Sirius Black or fakes like Gilderoy Lockard.

What?!
The physiotherapist sighed soulfully. "If it had been me, I would have never let a wizard like him slip through my fingers." The nurse actually giggled, then she sighed, too, and nodded in the exaggerated way only teenage girls usually consider indispensable to express the sincerity of their feelings.

Snape definitely lost his coordination and nearly crashed against the pull-up bar. He swore under his breath ("There is absolutely no excuse for profanity in front of a woman," Abraxas had hammered into him). He punched the bar with a frustrated groan.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Professor," said Healer Babbling. "You were doing all right up to now."

He looked daggers at her, wondering how that kind of comment was supposed to be helpful. She ought to be urging him to do more, better, longer...

He said so, quite cuttingly.

She did not recoil as she was supposed to and kept smiling, although a little less cheerily than before. "We generally have to push our patients, but you're the kind of perfectionist we rather have to slow down, Professor."

He snorted, "This is the kind of self-indulgence that gets too many people killed."

"We're not at war any more, Professor. You're entitled to do this at your own pace."

The war is not finished for me, Idiot. "This is my own pace."

"Yes," she smiled wider again.

"Do not patronize me, Babbling," he warned.

"Professor! I'd never..."

In ten seconds, she's going to: 1. begin to cry, 2. flee to tell her colleagues how mean I am, or 3. look at me with pity and tell me that she understands the extent of my trauma and feels sooo sorry for me. Totally frustrated by the useless exchange, he interrupted her before she gave him the opportunity to find which option she was going to choose.

"Will you please assign me the next set of exercises, then?"

"It seems my new cross is to have a goody-two-shoes like Babbling speculating about Lily and me. I expected a more professional attitude from your staff."

"Last month, your choice 3. was 'recoil from me in disgust and anger'. When did that new choice appear in your life?" asks Constanz, seemingly busy reading his notes.

Snape shakes his head in disgust. "Since you and your clique began to hound me at all times." He grits his teeth. "Now, will you or will you not send Healer Babbling to harass someone else? I'm quite fed up with her."

Healer Babbling apologized for her unprofessional attitude and assured him that it would not happen again... while still managing to convey that she would not mind getting to know him better after he left St Mungo's.
He had not expected this and she had been clever enough not to say things too openly.

This left him totally unbalanced, and more than a little resentful— all the more because he had no apparent reason to refuse her excuses and had already accepted them.

The good old routine worked perfectly. He just stared, until she blushed and finally took her leave.

After she had left, he sighed in relief. He had never been comfortable when women -and quite a few men - propositioned him.

Babbling certainly did not interest him, but that very same night, for the first time in five years, he felt something stirring hopefully down there.

§§§

"But what about love? Wasn't it love that won the war, in the end?"

"Love?" Severus's snort is as derisive as he can make it. "I don't know the meaning of the word." It isn't worth it for the likes of me.

"The likes of you?"

"Have you just used Legilimency on me?" he asks, instantly suspicious, even if he intellectually knows that Constanz would never do something as unethical as using Legilimency on a patient without warning.

"No. In case you didn't realise, you've said it aloud."

Silence.

"What are the likes of you, Severus?"

Ugly? Unwanted? Unworthy? Undesirable? He can't help laughing at himself for his list of U words and chooses the most pertinent.

"Unlovable."

"Unlovable... or unloved?"

"Both."

"Why not?"

Constanz almost tuts, he is sure of it. He even dares to look at him with that infuriating benevolence of his (infuriating because it still reminds him of Dumbledore).

What is it with people and the so-called power of love? Love! Love is for people like Potter, Lily, Minerva... even for that bastard Black who had Lupin's and Harry Potter's devotion for simply existing... It is for the people who were born under a favourable star: handsome, rich or popular... Not for working class half-bloods from the wrong side of Cokeworth and the wrong House of Hogwarts... the wrong side of Fate...

"Love is a mirage. It's a thirst... A hunger... which never, never gives enough to quench the need, the longing..."

Silence.
"The heartbreak."

For the most part, Snape trusted Constanz but he could not help thinking that his magic was a little too slow in returning. He had all the time in the world, so he spent hours trying to figure out possible interactions, accidental or not, between all his potions.

The poorly made vitamin supplement he received for breakfast went down the washbasin as well as the 'relaxing drought' in the evening.

He could walk unaided, though he still had to use a cane to come back from the gym, which infuriated him – but he was at least past the stage of having to be wheeled around or to use the walker and wheeze every few steps while surrounded by a pair of more or less impatient Aurors.

He mastered moderate sequences of movements. Fine motor skills were progressing nicely according to his physiotherapists, though he had a hard time believing it. And he could almost speak properly even if he was not even remotely close to mastering all the vocal nuances he had been so proud of before.

His voice had also dropped a few tones. Even to his own ears, it sounded deeper. His throat had an unfortunate tendency to become scratchy rapidly and even to turn to coughing fits whenever he became petulant (which was even more exasperating when you wanted to make your point) or felt like laughing—which was tedious, too, but saved him the humiliation of having his ex-students stare incredulously every time he chuckled.

The speech therapist (a Gryffindor who had been in Narcissa's year) batted her ridiculously curly eyelids at him, trying to persuade him that he had to take singing lessons to get his perfect diction back, on the very slim excuse that it would be a shame not to exercise a voice like his. She even invited him to join her choral group after he had left St Mungo's.

He did not dignify this with an answer but looked daggers at her and left her satisfyingly quaking. New Severus or not, there was just so much cheek and silliness he could take.

Instead, he returned to reading carefully aloud, a lonely routine he had established for himself so many years ago, when Abraxas Malfoy gave him a biography of Demosthenes and a handful of exquisite marble for pebbles. (This happened after one too many rows about the undignified way he tended to sputter and revert to Cokeworth's plebeian accent when under stress...)

When Dumbledore first hired him, he added sequences in front of a mirror, coached by Abraxas' portrait, to get rid of revealing emotional attitudes and gestures.

Now, he practised at night, just like his attempts at wandless magic, because this was the only time when he did not have to cope with people entering without notice.

Of course, nobody, least of all the Aurors, ever noticed that he cast undetectable silencing charms and alarm spells on his doorknob – that was the purpose of undetectable. There was such a host of charms all over the place that if anyone had noticed, they were harmless enough you could suppose they were cast by the staff.

*The Professor was a feeble, wandless invalid these days, wasn't he?*

"Tell me about Sirius Black."
"No."

§§§

It is always during his sessions with Constanz that Severus wonders if he could have lied successfully to Voldemort with short hair and the impossibility to hide behind it. He feels like Samson – robbed of power and vulnerable.

"I hate that I can't guard my tongue and my feelings these days. I hate what I have become."

"That's a big word. Do you really hate what you are or just losing the abnormal degree of control you've imposed on yourself over the years? Occluding isn't supposed to be maintained for months on end."

"Why are you asking questions if you know the answers?"

"You did the same thing when you taught. It's an effective, thought-provoking tool."

"I'm not a child, Constanz." He feels like one much too often during those sessions and today he has had enough.

He is already at the door when the healer asks again, "But what are you, Severus Snape? Who are you?"

"No guinea pig of yours at any rate."

§§§

By September, Snape's vision came back to almost normal, considering he had a pronounced myopia to begin with that he only treated with short-term potions. He had always refused to wear glasses because no charm was efficient more than a few minutes against the steam of a cauldron and because he could not afford the risk of them breaking and hurting his eyes with the kind of double life he led.

Of course, he never told anyone that he had Reductoed his first and only pair of glasses, obtained thanks to Madam Pompfrey back when he was still a student. He absolutely refused to be compared unfavourably to James Potter once again... Not after all the mocking he had endured about his resemblance to an owl—and it had been from his own Slytherin mates. The Reducto was cast even before he stepped out of the common room.

The optometrist discussed the matter with Healer Pye and they both suggested that Snape might wish to try Muggle laser surgery in the future. Once again, he stared at them, but they were serious.

He shrugged contemptuously, but registered somewhere in the back of his mind that it might be worth researching if...

If.

He forbade himself to consider the possibility of a future—a future beyond his trial.

§§§

"Sirius Black?"

"NO!"

Constanz adds another vertical line to the tally of exploded chairs. Twenty-three.
This chapter was edited by the excellent Tra8erse.

I'm sorry I won't be able to keep up the weekly update. Next chapter won't be up before mi-september.

Have you figured out why the fake complainers are all listed in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw? I'd love to hear your opinion.
Oh, I need the darkness, the sweetness, the sadness, the weakness...

(Nathalie Merchant, My skin)

"Every single person has a breaking point. It can be pain... shame... facing death... whatever makes you unable to cope or to act. For most people, it is facing death, whether one's own or the death of others and surviving to tell the tale."

Whenever Constanz explains something, it is somewhat frightening, because it always has the accuracy of a matador's banderillas on a toro and it leaves Severus open to even more questions about himself – with no way to ignore them, even when he refuses to answer the healer.

"I must have many breaking points then. I spent my life feeling unable to cope, and yet I did. I faced death more times that I care to remember and I'm still there. There's a flaw in your reasoning."

"Is there? Look at your hands."

Severus breathes heavily. "I didn't realise I was clenching them."

"Then, unclench your right fist. Good. Now the left one."

"Why?"

"Humour me. We need to see if you can."

"Of course I can."

"Then... do it."

Severus inhales painfully as he forces himself to loosen and open his fingers. His hand is shaking a little. "I... I didn't expect it to be so difficult."

"I can see. Try again."

Severus only stares at his left fist that he has just closed again unconsciously, as if it is a strange object and not a part of himself.

"Maybe I can help you, if you will just follow my lead? Now, clench... unclench. No, no. The left one. Clench... unclench. Unclench, I say."

"I... It's difficult."

"Feel it out. Why can't you simply open your hand?"

Silence. Severus glares at his fist as if daring it to disobey him again and slowly opens and relaxes his fingers.

"There. I did it."
"Let's try again."

"No.″ He slightly panics, all the more since he does not understand why.

*Here be dragons.*

"Please? I think it's important for you. Don't you feel it?"

He denies it. "I think it's silly."

"Then it's just a silly, easy exercise you can repeat to humour me."

"Humph." He focuses on his hand and obeys the healer. Once, twice…several times. "Satisfied?"

"Yes, but you look like you are Occluding. Remember the rules?"

Severus snaps out of Occlumency and rolls his eyes. "No Occluding," he recites. "No Legilimency. Say what comes to mind, whether emotion, fleeting thought, memory or impulse. Give a name to my feelings here and now."

"So, now you relax and you let yourself clench and unclench this fist freely, at your own rhythm."

Snape’s resentful look as he complies shows clearly that he knows how futile it is to resist any request of Constanz.

"You're frowning."

"You said 'freely'. I don't feel that free," he hisses as he still mechanically opens and closes his hand.

"No?"

Severus slaps his thigh in frustration. "You're just like them. You give me the semblance of freedom. I still have to do your bidding."

"Them? Who are you thinking about?"

"Dumbledore." He shrugs. "The Dark Lord and my fellow Death Eaters, but that's as a matter of course."

He stops, struck by a sudden realisation.

"Who else?"

"Lily."

§§§

Trying to deal peacefully with people was painful in more ways than one. It gave Snape the nostalgia of countless past discussions on the subject with Lucius, who instinctively knew how to treat people with the right note of familiarity or authority.

After several failed attempts at using a quill without spilling ink all over the parchment, he managed to swallow his pride long enough to secure the help of a commiserating nurse (Hufflepuff, 1983). He dictated her a brief, coded message to Narcissa Malfoy, asking for news.

A few nights later, he woke up to find Lucius at his bedside. He did not ask silly questions like
where his friend came from or how he had entered. They hugged and even shed tears like two sentimental witches.

Severus could count on the fingers of one hand the times when they had been so emotional together. Abraxas's death. Draco's birth. Lucius's release from Azkaban, in 1982 and 1997.

That mutual display of care and weakness was brief. They had too much to share and too little time.

§§§

"Who are you, Severus Snape?"

Severus's eyes narrow in instant suspicion. He waits – a strategy that saved his life and secrets more than once.

"Are you your mistakes? Your regrets? Do you define yourself by the Mark you hide on your arm?"

Constanz never misses the instinctive clenching of his left fist every time he enters the room. Since the last crisis, Severus has grown rather self-conscious about it, even if he pretends that nothing happens. It is not at his hand that the healer is pointing right now, but at the fresh scare tissue over the remnants of the Dark Mark. Severus nailed himself raw several nights in a row.

"From where I sit," he says, "this is nothing more than a fading tattoo."

"You do not know what you're saying, Constanz." He cannot help tracing the outline of the Mark. It is hardly visible when you do not know, particularly as it is covered in red welts, but he could do it with his eyes closed.

"Why did you harm yourself?"

"I didn't mean to. It itched."

"Itched?"

Severus huffs, not very politely. "I already told your colleagues. Don't pretend they didn't tell you."

He stares at his forearm for a while then says with disgust, "It felt like... like it was crawling with bugs or insects. It was torture... and I know the meaning of the word. I couldn't help scratching and then I... I just couldn't stop."

"Ah."

Severus looks up and sniggers, "Don't waste your breath telling me that I harmed myself because I'm a pathetic, delusional maniac. Everybody's already managed to convey that's the reason I'm in the Janus Thickey Ward with the other nutters."

"I find it hard to believe that my staff would act like that."

"Oh! They don't say this aloud, of course."

"Your Mark will only have the importance you give it... even to the point of attracting Morgellon pests to it and getting compulsive itching in return."

"Morgellon pests?" He eyes Constanz suspiciously. "Are you channelling Xenophilius Lovegood, now?"
"Xenophilius proved six months ago that Morgellon Syndrom is caused by small parasites attracted by the magic leaking from mentally vulnerable people and that they can be defeated with soothing salves containing pine, mint and cedar."

"Ha! I thought everything reeks in my room because they're using a new cleanser."

Constanz smiles. "It's Morgellon disinfectant, and it works."

"Now, I know I'm really mad."

"You're not the first to have this reaction where Xenophilius Lovegood is concerned but we are speaking of your Dark Mark."

Silence.

Sulking silence.

"If you want to let that tattoo eat up your life, and let people reduce you to something on your arm, or to the role of traitor or spy... you will get what you ask for. You will victimize yourself."

"Save your platitudes!" booms Severus. "I'm not a victim, and this is not a victim's mark!"

Constanz's eyebrows shoot up.

Snape growls, "Stop this, please. I'm a bad mouse for your cat and mouse games. I hate hypocrisy, even if it's your duty."

"It's not hypocrisy and I don't think there's much risk of anybody confusing you with a mouse."

Snape gestures at his nose. He sniggers, "Even a shrew-mouse?"

Constanz does not hide his smile. "I understand cats find them quite unpalatable. Much too bitter is my guess, though I am no cat."

"It doesn't stop cats from playing with them. Not unlike some humans, they like their puppets alive and kicking – until they have no more use for them."

"Which humans?"

"Oh! Great people... Your friend Albus Dumbledore, for one." Severus cannot help being sarcastic every time he remembers Constanz was Dumbledore's friend and personal healer.

"Not Tom Riddle?"

"The Dark Lord is so obvious, he isn't even worth mentioning. At least, he was predictable."

"Predictable? I'm not sure that's how History will remember him."

"History is a whore who will tell only what the victors decide."

"Aren't you one of them?"

"You've got quite the sense of humour," says Severus sarcastically. "Both sides accuse me of treason -not unreasonably- and want me dead. When they've outlived their usefulness, spies and executioners are more an embarrassment than anything, and I was both. That's the definition of neither a victor nor of a hero."
"What makes a hero?"

Silence.

"Mmm?" insists Constanz.

Severus stares at the ceiling and enumerates, "Fortitude. Courage. The ability to live up to one's standards and one's goals, to sacrifice what needs to be sacrificed for..."

He stops and swallows – something obviously unpalatable.

"For what?" insists the healer.

"For an ideal. For... a Greater Good, I suppose." He sniffs with contempt.

"You suppose?"

"I'm hardly an idealist." Severus scoffs at the very idea. "I was just desperate to stop the Dark Lord. Heroes can only be Gryffindors."

"Yet, it seems to me you're a man of great idealism."

"Idealism? What idealism? Honour? Justice? I think I believed in that when I was eighteen. It lasted a whole six months into my initiation as a Death Eater."

"What about duty?"

Severus considers the question with surprise, but when he answers, it is rather clinically. "Duty is a line of conduct, not an end in itself."

"One still needs to have very strong ethics to follow unfailingly in the line of duty."

"One only needs to face oneself everyday in one's mirror."

"Oh? And what did you see in your mirror during all your years of spying?"

Silence.

"Mmm?"

"Dumbledore's spy." This is said with a lot of resignation.

"You always seem to go back to Dumbledore."

A shrug. "Yes."

"Not to Lily?"

"Lily..." A pause. "You can't understand."

"Make me."

Silence.

"I loved her, you know." Severus smiles wanly.

"But?"
"I loved her. I would not have forgotten her... but after a few years... it didn't hurt that much anymore."

"Like in life goes on and things like that?"

"Yes. Until..." Severus sighs resignedly once again.

"Until?"

"Dumbledore... Who else?" he challenges. "He refused to let me forget Lily. It was almost boring the way he kept speaking about Lily once her son arrived at Hogwarts."

"Oh?"

"Oh, indeed. He needed me to wallow in permanent guilt." Severus raises his arms and lets them fall back in defeat. "When someone keeps repeating the same thing to you, you can't help believing it... at least a little."

"And Minerva?"

Severus stiffens instantaneously. "What about Minerva?"

"Did she help?"

He relaxes minutely. "She's the only reason I didn't lose it long before Dumbledore's death."

"And after Dumbledore's death?"

Silence.

"There was only Lily left." It is barely a whisper.

"How so?"

"You know what a Pensieve is, don't you?" says Severus, quite aggressively. "You can figure it out yourself."

"What I can or can't figure out myself isn't the issue."

"Fine," spits Severus resentfully, and not a little ashamed as his sudden flush proves. "I used my Headmaster's Pensieve to relive the times when I made love to Lily."

Silence.

"I hope you're happy," he hisses. "I said it. I know it's shameful... A woman dead for years and married to a man I hated and despised. It's almost paedophilia when you think we were fourteen the first time and sixteen the last one."

"It's you who says it's shameful."

"Yes, this is what I'm saying. Don't think I didn't despise myself every time I plunged my head into the Pensieve."

Silence.
"Pathetic as it was, it was the only way I could feel some kind of physical release…"

"You know, I feel glad that you had at least that."

Snape shrugs. He looks sad, staring into space.

"What are you thinking, Severus?"

"That I miss remembering how once I was loved." His voice is crumbling at the edges.

Silence.

"You never used memories of Minerva?"

"And face her, full of hate, the next day? That would have been helpful, yes!" He scoffs at the thought.

"I see."

"You don't see anything but suit yourself."

"It feels like you didn't forgive Minerva for not seeing through your act."

Silence.

Silence.

"Quite pathetic, isn't it? Doing all I did, going through all the motions and still hoping..." Severus purses his lips. "That's why I'm not a hero."

"I fail to understand why this would make you not a hero."

"Because I didn't believe enough in what I had to do. I hated it. I hated that someone had to kill Dumbledore in order to take over the school... and that it had to be me."

"I find that reaction merely... human."

"When people say something's only human, it just means you're weak."

"Tell me, Severus: do you know anybody else who would have been able to do what you did for Dumbledore?"

Severus does not hide his contempt as he answers, "Not in the Order, no."

"So?"

"So what?" he exclaims bitterly. "Does this make the murder of the greatest and most popular wizard of our time any less of a murder? Does it make turning Hogwarts into a concentration camp any less despicable?"

"What about the intent?"

Severus stares at the healer."Are you telling me that you still imagine one can cast the Avada without intent?"

"What about the great, personal cost to yourself then... To your soul?"
"What about your soul, Severus?"

"What about it?" he hisses, scrunching his eyes and sending the chair flying and hitting the wall without even looking at it. "You can't imagine I still have one."

"I can't imagine why you would believe you've lost yours."

"It's scattered I don't know where. The pieces are probably already waiting for me in Hell."

Silence.

Anguished silence.

"Twenty years, Constanz. Twenty years of Evil," he hammers out.

Silence.

And again, silence.

"I heard that you refused to sit for your Headmaster's portrait."

Immediately on the defensive, Severus snaps, "Who told you that?"

"Minerva."

Snape's lips tighten in anger, leaving a thin, white line in place of his mouth. "You discuss me with Minerva?"

"Of course not. She told me the night they brought you to St Mungo's, after the Battle. She came to see you." Severus is as startled as the healer expected him to be.

Severus pales. "I don't believe you," he whispers. "She hates me."

"She obviously didn't hate you at the time. She was quite desperate and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer when I told her you were in surgery and she couldn't see you."

"Do not mock me, Constanz," he pleads.

"You know I don't. She was expecting you to die and was very distressed that she wouldn't see you again because you had no portrait... That you'd denied yourself that little piece of immortality."

Snape shakes his head, clearly unbelieving.

Silence.

"Why did you refuse to have your portrait painted?"

"To save them the bother of burning it."

"One doesn't burn a watchful portrait—not a Headmaster's portrait."

"I was hardly a Headmaster," he insists stubbornly. "More like a gaoler. They would have made an exception."

"I fail to understand why you're so inflexible about your own actions. The Castle itself recognised
you as the Headmaster."

Silence.

Seemingly out of the blue, Severus suddenly asks, "Have you seen the youngest of today's Aurors?"

"Of course. I saluted him. A fine young man. Irish, I believe. It's not his first assignment here."

"His name is Seamus Finnegan," he informs the healer, very matter-of-factly. "He was tortured by the Carrows under my authority. He bears Cruciatius scars, like many of my students. He may never be able to father children because of this."

"And?"

"And it was done in my name."

"I thought it was done in Voldemort's name."

"Under my authority," Severus insists.

"But not your will?"

"WHAT DOES IT CHANGE?!"

Constanz has good reflexes. None of the splinters hurt him.

Silence.

Silence.

"You can't know how it feels when you're unable to turn anywhere without seeing one of your victims," growls Severus.

"I rather wonder how it should feel to look around and be able to say to yourself that all these people are still alive and free because of you."

"I'm not Harry Potter," answers Severus tiredly. "I wouldn't know."

"I find it sad that you don't believe that you helped win the war."

"I believe I helped win the war. I just don't believe I'm a hero, because I'm not. There's a long trail of victims behind me."

"Are you so sure that Mr Finnegan and his friends are your victims rather than the Carrows?"

The laugh sounds bitter. "You could ask him."

"I want your opinion."

"My students suffered, thinking all the while that I was responsible! And I am! I didn't stop my deputies. I even berated them every chance I had."

"Could you really have done anything else?"

"Of course," says Severus, honestly surprised by the question. "I always had a choice. People always have a choice, whatever they pretend."
"What was yours?"

"To follow Dumbledore's orders, or to follow my conscience and defend the students. I could have refused to kill Dumbledore to begin with. I'd be long gone and I'd have avoided another deeper plunge into the evil."

"Why didn't you follow your conscience then?"

"Because-"

Silence.

"Because?"

Silence.

"Say it, Severus."

Through gritted teeth, he answers, "Because I couldn't think of a better plan."

"So, Voldemort would have won. Not much of a choice, I think."

"Still my choice to make and to damn myself with," says Severus stubbornly.

"We were talking about History. Don't you think people will remember this war by the choices people made? People like Dumbledore, Harry Potter... And you."

"And what will they remember," he says with almost palpable hurt, "except that I was stupid enough to become a Death Eater in the first place, and then that I killed Dumbledore and tortured children?"

He stands up and marches to the door. It opens silently. He finds himself glaring into Seamus Finnegan's startled face.

§§§

Seamus Finnegan and Snape stared at each other for a few seconds before the young Auror and his colleague Proudfoot positioned themselves to escort him back to his room.

Snape did not move but turned back to look at Constanz. Then, he asked Finnegan, "Why are you here, Auror Finnegan?"

"Sir?" Seamus was taken aback by the question.

Snape insisted, 'Why are you here?"

Seamus glanced at Proudfoot and then at Constanz, desperately looking for a clue. At last he said, "To protect you, Professor."

"What for?"

"It's not for me to tell. It's our standing orders."

"Do you think that I deserve to be protected?"

"I... I don't understand."
"You understand me very well. After all you've gone through at Hogwarts, do you really believe that I deserve to be protected?"

Seamus's eyes narrowed in anger, but to Snape's surprise he stepped aside to confront Healer Constanz heatedly. "What have you done to him?"

"Me? Nothing." The healer was smiling, quite serenely.

Proudfoot grunted in warning. With a last, none too gentle look at the Healer, Finnegan shrugged defiantly and took his place again at Snape's side, grumbling.

They had hardly made two steps when Constanz called, "Nice lesson in History, don't you think, Severus?"

Snape stopped. He did not turn but enunciated clearly, revelling in the uncharacteristic vulgarity, "Fuck History."

§§§

"Please, Hermione." Harry was making puppy eyes at her. Ginny might find it cute. Hermione did not… but it was almost a ritual between them and Hermione was generally willing to give in even before he finished.

Not this time. "It's completely out of the question. I'm not authorised to perform diagnostics and healing spells without at least six months of training."

"Constanz says you're already doing it."

"In Maternity, Harry! Do you expect Professor Snape to need that kind of help?"

"You'll be officially Healer-in-training by the time of his trial."

"But I still won't have enough experience in psychological trauma, snake poisoning or addiction recovery! Even if Constanz gets me transferred to his ward right now, I won't know how to deal with a difficult case like Severus Snape."

"It need only be on paper. Constanz will still remain his personal Healer." He took a deep breath before asking, almost casually, "Do you remember when you made me promise Professor Snape wouldn't go to Azkaban?"

She sat upright, alarmed."Don't tell me that-"

He interrupted her, holding his hand in a pacifying gesture. "I told you I would do anything to keep him out of prison. That's what I'm trying to do but I need your help for that."

"OK. You have it."

"Madam Yaxley's petition for a War High Court trial has finally been accepted."

Hermione beamed. "Finally!"

"The Ministry now has three months to call the Court, select the panel and appoint the chairperson and prosecutor. This should lead us to a trial mid-January or something like that." He scowled and Hermione's smile receded as he added, "Dawlish and some of the MLE top brass asked for Snape to be remanded in Azkaban as soon as he leaves St Mungo's."
"Bastards."

"Yes," he agreed with feeling. "They pretend they can't make an exception, even for a member of the Order of the Phoenix."

"It's just political."

"I agree. Fortunately, Madam Yaxley manoeuvred Dawlish into recognising that Snape is under Auror protection at St Mungo's and not under Auror custody. She then presented another petition for him to remain under protection until the trial. She also had a healer's certificate at hand to prove that Snape's health will require constant medical supervision for at least another six months, even after he leaves St Mungo's."

"From Alfred, I suppose?"

"No. That's the beauty of it. Constanz confirmed the other healer's opinion and the medical consensus turned the balance. Snape is to be put into 'protective custody' under medical supervision until the trial. That's where you play your part. Constanz can't leave St Mungo's for that long, but you can."

Hermione shrewdly added, "And if I'm officially Professor Snape's healer, there is less risk of Alfred's statements being challenged on the grounds of conflict of interests or something like that."

"Got it in one," confirmed Harry.

Hermione frowned. "Wouldn't it be easier to just ask the healer who made the certificate? If they're willing to help Snape..."

Harry chortled. "There's a little problem."

"What could..." Struck by a sudden suspicion, she asked sharply, "It's a real healer, yes?"

"Yes, yes. Don't worry... but Alexia Yaxley... she's quite something! I don't know how she managed..."

"Harry," interrupted Hermione in a dangerously mild voice. "Who is the healer?"

"Someone called Rebecca Babbling. It seems she's very competent-" Hermione nodded confirmation but could not help chuckle, as he added, "but for some reason Snape is adamant he doesn't want her as his personal healer."

The chuckle turned into outright laughter. "You bet! According to St Mungo's grapevine, she has a crush on Professor Snape..."

"Oh! No! Not another one!" exclaimed Harry in mock distress, but he could not keep the act up for very long and was soon laughing, too. When he managed to calm down a little, he said, "Never mind Healer Babbling. Even if we could have her, I wouldn't want anyone but you."

She crossed her arms and tilted her head in a no-nonsense fashion. "What is it you're not telling me, Harry?"

§§§

"Why does it always feel wrong to do the right thing?!" rages Severus.

"What feels wrong?"
"Keeping my cover... Lying to Lucius... Terrorizing children... Betraying my Slytherin friends... Killing Dumbledore... Sending Harry Potter to his death... Shall I go on? Everything felt wrong."

"It's what it felt, but was it really wrong? War is wrong, but the things you have to do because of war aren't always wrong."

"Killing, lying and sending people to their death do not pose a problem to you then, provided it's for the Greater Good?" Severus sniggers. "I forgot for one minute that Dumbledore was your friend."

"Wasn't he yours, too?"

This has Severus shooting out of his seat at once. He shouts, "NEVER!"

He is shaking in anger. In a vain attempt to calm down, he begins to pace around in the room.

"That's quite vehement. What are you feeling?"

Severus breathes heavily. "I don't want to feel! And I don't want to think about him."

"Am I wrong or have you been thinking about him since you arrived?"

"You know I do," spits out Severus. "I hate thinking about Dumbledore."

"What's the reason you're hating it?"

Silence.

"He just pretended to be my friend." He nervously runs his fingers through his hair. "I still can't believe I was moronic enough to trust him."

"He was your boss and your leader. Why would you think it was wrong to trust him?"

Severus snorts. "He always manipulated me and I knew it. He would open his box of revolting sweets, bend his head just like that and smile." He crudely mimics his former mentor. "And then, he would sigh or shake his head and say something particularly outrageous until I couldn't help smiling too, or snorting or... Well, you know. He made it seem like he..." Another snort. "Like he'd finally come to respect me. To trust me. But he didn't, of course. He never did."

Silence.

Severus resumes walking, unable to stay still. Suddenly, he stops and points an accusing finger at the healer.

"I know what you think, Constanz."

"Oh?"

"You think that it serves me right that Dumbledore used me, since I betrayed everyone," he snarls.

"Why would you attribute such thoughts to me?"

"Isn't it natural?"

"Natural?"

"Normal. In the natural order of things. Usual. Do you really need synonyms? I hate it when you
pull your Dumbledore act."

"My Dumbledore act? What do you mean?"

"That way you throw your little questions at me," accuses Severus. "You smile sooo benevolently... and then wait for me to explode or plead... Like a fool!"

"Is it what it felt like with Albus Dumbledore?"

Snape stops in his tracks.

He leans heavily against the back of the chair. He breathes heavily.

"Much too often."

"And the rest of the time?"

"I thought he might just lo...-" Silence. "I thought maybe he liked me. A little. In his own way."

"You sound angry."

Silence.

"Yes."

"Is it how he made you feel? Angry?"

Silence.

"Helpless."

"Helpless? Stay with it."

Snape does not breathe, he gulps air before speaking.

"I never knew what to expect with him. He could make me feel valued as well as despised. Loved and hated. Trusted and betrayed."

Silence.

"Of course, the valued and trusted stuff was in the privacy of his office. In public... Ha!"

Silence.

"Just the opposite of your father, then?"

"Do not bring up my father!" growls Severus. "I had no respect left for him since I was ten and I didn't expect anything from him!"

"But you had expectations where Dumbledore was concerned?"

"Ha! Ha! Ha! The simple fact that it makes me laugh when you say it aloud proves how ridiculous it was." But he is not laughing.

Silence.

"I was just like a dog to him. A dog, you can pet one day and beat the next, and it's still your dog."
"A mad, snarling dog that bites people and they fear it, but still, the dog obeys its master."

Silence.

Deafening silence.

"He even made me shake hands with Sirius Black, you know. And I did it."

Severus pinches the bridge of his nose, closes his eyes and shakes his head, as if he still cannot believe it.

"I did it!" he repeats.

Finally, he laughs – a bitter, forced laughter as corrosive as Nagini's venom. He grips the back of the chair again to steady himself, as if he was grabbing someone by their lapels and shaking them in anger.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You disgust me, Severus, but if you do everything I ask of you, I'll consent to save Lily, so that she can live happily ever after with her swine of a husband... Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The chair makes awful squeaks against the floor but he does not seem to notice what he is doing with it. "Oh, sorry, she's dead... but Potter's brat is still alive and I need you to protect him... Of course, Albus, of course... Anything for you... you just have to ask!"

As he shouts the last words, Severus lets go of the chair and flings his hands at the sides of his face, as if in pain. The chair bounces on the floor before it stills.

"Brewing Wolfsbane for the werewolf who'd nearly offed me? Why, yes! Feeding lies to the Dark Lord? Yes, of course... but have you thought what he'll do when he finds out your information is as crap as it sounds? Oh, yes, a little torture can't hurt that much, can it?"

The chair bangs even more violently and almost in a steady rhythm now.


Snape stares into space. The chair stops moving. He's still hysterically laughing but he's almost out of breath now.

"Of course, I will be the most hated traitor of all times but you don't give a damn, do you? Neither do I, Albus. Ha!... Ha! Neither do I. You're right, why bother as long as you don't suffer?"

Snape grabs the chair again.

"It's not as if I had a soul left..."

This time, it's not magic that hurls the chair against the wall where it breaks once again with a loud crack.

"My soul... What a joke! Ha... Ha..."

Snape is still trying to laugh but it rather sounds like he's choking.

"I've sold my soul for Lily's son and you've set him up to die."

Silence.
"All you ever asked, I did."

Silence.

Angry silence.

"And you know what? I'll be damned if I know, right now, why I did it."

Silence.

Sobbing silence.

"Stupid fool!"

Silence.

"Won't you sit down, Severus? You're ready to fall."

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

"Can I go now, Constanz?"

"You're always free to go."

Before he reaches the door, Constanz casts a mild glamour on him to hide his puffy face and says softly, "Crying is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of healing."

Snape stops dead in his track and snarls, "It just makes the ugly uglier and the drunk, the beggar and the criminal – more pathetic."

"And which are you?"

"I've never been much of a drunkard, and I stopped begging when Lily died."

"You have a strange attitude towards crying."

"Strange?" Severus shakes his head. "Many people refuse to cry or to wear their hearts on their sleeves."

"Everyone is allowed to cry."

"Fools, to hand others the rope to be hanged with," he hisses.

"Many people respect the need to cry but it seems you don't agree."

"Slytherins do not cry."

"Are you so sure of that?"

Severus's voice shrivels to a whisper, which sounds like the confession it is. "We keep it private."

Silence.
"You know I was at Durmstrang. I've never been able to understand that house system of yours. At least, what Dumbledore told me never really made sense."

Severus drawls, "Oh! It's fairly easy to understand. If you're a brash, unsubtle Gryffindor, you can get away with anything by the Grace of Dumbledore." He waves his hand dismissively but his tone hardens as he adds, "If you're a Slytherin, you're predestined to hell."

"Very Calvinist."

"And a little Catholic, if you want to go down that road, because there are four houses," he says sarcastically. "Consider Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff as a kind of purgatory that leaves you with the benefit of the doubt... until you take sides. You can also sum it up the Muslim way and say that Hogwarts is great, Dumbledore is her Prophet and if he pronounces you good or evil, you are."

"I thought Dumbledore was dead."

"Please. Half a century of molding the minds of our society... It's more than a legacy, it's a societal change. Everyone in Britain knows who are the righteous and who are the villains."

He sighs, frustrated.

Silence.

"We should get rid of this rotten house system. The world is unfair enough without willfully feeding division."

"Weren't you Headmaster yourself? You could still have some influence-"

"Spare me your jokes, Constanz."

The Healer does not wince, because he is expecting the slamming of the door.

§§§

"Of course, he was a good man. Decent. Honest. Courageous. He was a Gryffindor, when all's said and done. A good teacher, too. Much better with the students than I ever was."

Snape pauses and snorts. "It makes me sick to say such mush, because he was also unable to accept his responsibilities when he had to think for himself."

Silence.

"I never managed to hate him as much as I wished but..."

Silence.

"Just looking at him... him. It kept coming back. Even Occlumency didn't work very well... And not at all in front of Black."

Silence.

"And yet... As strange as it sounds, I knew I could trust him... Or I wouldn't have..."

He sighs.

"I thought... I hoped that it would get better with time. For some reason, guilt or whatever, he
seemed to think I was worth knowing. Of course, it was only after he'd lost his last friend but he… he made me wonder if he was worth knowing, after all."

Silence.

"I'll never know now what could have developed between us."

Silence.

"Don't look at me like that, Constanz. I know it's not my fault he died."

Silence.

"I suggest you use the chair."

"Not today, Constanz."

"Do you think it will get easier?"

Another sigh.

"No."

Silence.

Snape braces himself and sits down in front of the hot seat.

"Oh! For God's sake! You know I feel ridiculous speaking to that chair with you hovering behind my back."

Silence.

"Wolf… No, Remus. You're dead, I can call you Remus, even if I could never do it to your face. You called me Severus after the first war... After they told you I was a spy. I hated it, because I never managed to call you by your name… and this gave you yet another advantage over me."

Snape purses his lips rather contemptuously.

"You just hoped that things would clear up by themselves... Ha! You were quite the little coward, weren't you? As if things could get better with you pretending to be the innocent, decent folk in front of this Slytherin bastard of a Death Eater... Always hiding your head in the sand, eh?... Pretending the past could be forgotten and we would all end up being jolly good friends." He gives a wry chuckle. "Really!"

Silence.

"Of course, you always managed to make it appear as if it was all my fault that we were not friends." He snorts. "It probably was."

Silence.

"I think you hoped I could be your new pack... Don't imagine I didn't see you sniff me when you thought nobody looked... As if I could miss something that obvious... but I...

Silence.
"I've never liked being second choice."

Silence.

"I remember how pathetically grateful you were the day I called you Remus. You were drunk, you were crying, you apologized, once more. You hugged me, and I did let you, I don't know what got into me... and you laughed awkwardly that I was a good, kind sort of bastard." Chuckle. "Your words, not my usual way to berate myself as Constanz likes to pretend. Your words, Remus Lupin. I should have..."

Silence.

"Never mind."

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

"I don't know how I managed that day, because I felt just as pathetic as you looked... You always pretended that everything was all right after that... But I didn't really..."

Silence.

"I didn't hate you anymore. I knew you were as much a victim as I was but... I wanted to. I willed myself to. But I couldn't. I clenched my fists, and I told myself that I pitied you. Despised you. And that it was worse than hate and good enough for me and for you. It was not true."

Silence.

"I'm sorry."

Silence.

"I'll never be able to tell you that I'm sorry."

Silence.

"Damn you! Lupin... Remus... For all that you were a coward often enough, you ended up being the more courageous of the two of us... You were the one who said sorry. The one who trusted first."

"I feel that you trusted him more than you are willing to admit," says Constanz from behind.

"I don't know."

"It's something to trust someone with your life; like you trusted Remus Lupin."

"Not as much as you think. I trusted my life several times to people like Yaxley or Goyle." He shakes his head. "It's a much greater risk to trust someone with your feelings, and I could never do it completely with Lupin."

Sigh.

"I'm sorry, Remus. I couldn't do it. What I hated, I think, is that you were much more courageous about your condition than I could ever have been."

Silence.
"Had you bitten me, I would have just been a wild beast. They would have had to put me down as soon as possible. It would have been even more obvious to everyone that I was..."

Breath. Breath.

"Maybe it would have been better. I would have killed myself if they didn't. And none of that would have happened."

Silence.

Silence.

"Severus?"

Grunt.

"Don't you think that Voldemort would have now been ruling the world if you hadn't been there to tell him about the prophecy? That he would have been ruling it for twenty years?"

"You don't know that, Constanz. Fate or God or whatever Cosmic Joke rules us would have found another way, another prophecy..." He sneers. "Another hero. Or simply someone else would have reported the prophecy."

"Yes. Anyone could have reported the prophecy to Voldemort."

Silence.

Silence.

Glowing, resentful silence.

"You're proud of yourself, Constanz, aren't you? You've managed to make me say it."

Silence.

"Well! I've overdosed on self-pity and saccharine today. I can't imagine why you think it's healthy."

Severus marches to the door and opens it. He leaves without another word or look at the healer.

Chapter End Notes

All my thanks to Tra8erse, as usual, for editing this chapter.
Chapter 17

You don't believe in Love and War

(Globus, One truth)

Severus crosses his arms. "I would prefer that we do not speak of Lily again."

"Since you dream of her, it's difficult not to."

Silence.

Brooding silence.

Apparently, he sees something on the carefully neutral face of the healer. "No need to look at me like that, Constanz. I'm not pining for her."

"You've already told me so, but I feel that there's something you are refusing to let go where Lily is concerned."

Severus makes a wry face. "They all end up rejecting me, at one time or another. Lily at least forgave me."

"Mmm. Do you believe that Lucius Malfoy rejects you or that he will one day?"

"Not Lucius, no. Though some days, I wonder why he bears with me."

"Your innate charm?"

Snort.

"I still betrayed him."

"And yet, he doesn't hold it against you. Just like you brought the prophecy to Voldemort and from what you tell me, Lily forgave you. There's also Minerva-"

Squirming as always at the mention of his former lover, Severus interrupts, "Minerva probably feels guilty. After all, her father stuffed her head with things like 'forgive thy enemies' or 'turn the other cheek'."

"I'm sure she wouldn't appreciate the way you are dismissing her feelings for you. And I am not speaking of Dumbledore."

"Oh! No. Do not speak of him," he says, his tone a dire warning. "He can take his forgiveness and stick it some place I won't mention."

Silence.
Gently, the healer insists, "Maybe, he's the one who needs forgiveness?"

Silence.

"Mmm?"

Silence.

"I still hate him," Severus says in a tone that sounds less mature and more petulant than he intended. "No matter what you say, I hate him. I don't think I will ever be able to forgive him."

"Since you haven't forgiven yourself, I don't expect you to be able to forgive him."

Silence.

"I haven't it in me to forgive."

"Every human being has the capacity to forgive, when the time is right."

"I'm not sure many people count me as a human being," Severus shrugs. "Not that I blame them. A Death Eater is an exact opposite to a human being."

"You are still calling yourself a Death Eater."

Severus extends his left arm palm up, almost under the Healer's nose. It's easy since he is wearing short sleeves for the physiotherapy at 11:00. These days, he manages not to be too self-conscious about it around others – just like he manages to just shrug when people's eyes are drawn to his facial scars the first time they meet.

[The healers assure him that the Mark will fade with time, just like his scars, and he nods when they say it. The way his scars seem to stand out when he looks at himself in a mirror, he is not entirely convinced, but this is the face he has to show to the world and it will have to do.]

"Are you joking?" asks Severus nastily as they both look at the faded but still unmistakable outline of the skull and snake – Constanz quite dispassionately and Severus with the usual disgust. "You know what I did with the other Death Eaters. What does it matter to the victim if they are being tortured by a 'true' Death Eater or by the spy pretending to be a Death Eater?"

"The intensity of the spell? The fact that most of the spy's victims survived? That he somehow managed to have them brought to St Mungo's and always asked about them afterwards? The potions you brewed for them?"

Severus shakes his head stubbornly. "Crucio is Crucio. And as my esteemed mentor Avery used to say, dead is dead."

"Did you enjoy it? Torturing people, I mean, or killing them."

"No. But... I can't always hide behind Dumbledore's orders."

Silence.

Anguished silence.

"Even before... You know..."
Severus stands and paces nervously before planting himself in front of the healer.

"Before the Prophecy... I didn't like it, but I tortured people... willingly," he points out. "I killed too. Not with the Avada, but I was so very efficient," he adds, his tone full of self-loathing.

Silence.

"Mulciber called me 'the frigid killer' if you want to know. The Death Eater who feels nothing, cares for nothing and has no pleasure in anything."

Silence.

"You were supposed to enjoy it?"

"Yes."

"And yet you did not," states Constanz, putting emphasis on the last word. "You were not very good at being a Death Eater."

"No, but there is no turning back from things like that," he grunts.

"But you did. You did turn back. That makes you different from the others."

"I turned my back on the Dark Lord's goals, yes... but you can't turn your back on being a Death Eater," he says with fatalism.

"But you regret what you had to do."

Severus sits down again and puts his head in his hands. He breathes deeply, before he can look up again, his voice a little muffled as he says, "You have no idea... because you can't even imagine what I did."

Silence.

"After the Dark Lord's return, I had to prove myself again. And again."

Silence.

"Dumbledore told me..." His voice catches in his throat and he swallows painfully. There is a wild, trapped look on his face as he manages, "He told me that he trusted me not to be cruel."

Silence.

Severus shrinks visibly under Constanz's eyes.

Silence.

Painful silence.

"He never really trusted me... and he was right." He shakes his head. "The things I've done..."

§§§

Not for the first time, physiotherapy had to be postponed until late afternoon.

When Constanz's assistant relayed the information to Healer Babbock, the wizard instantly knew that he would have to monitor Professor Snape carefully today. His patient would need to take it out on...
something and exhaust himself until he was ready to collapse. This was not the day for working on fine motor skills.

He quickly noted the change in the set of exercises he had prepared. He hesitated a little and finally went to the cupboard where he stocked the equipment his colleague from the Aurory had sent him when they refitted their gym. He pulled out the punching ball.

§§§

"Imagine we're back in 1995 and Albus Dumbledore is here, asking you to return to spying on Voldemort," Constanz ignores the way Severus's eyes widen in panic for a brief instant before his face instantly goes blank. "No Occluding! I know it's difficult for you, but remember...-

"...the rules, yes," hisses Severus.

"Tell him what he is really asking you to do. Tell him about your feelings."

"No!" he cries in anguish. "He will use this to hurt me even more."

"Who? Voldemort or Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore!"

"You must tell him. He doesn't know."

"Yes, he does. He always...-"

"Tell him."

"I can't, Albus! I can't do it!"

Silence.

"I can't do it because I'm a coward." He's shaking now, and the chair is shaking too. "I know he will torture me to death. I'm a dead man, Albus... but you don't care. Oh, you're looking at me with those tragic, solemn eyes, but I know you don't really care. You're worrying that if he kills me, as he probably will, you will lose your spy. But I don't want to die. I..."

Suddenly, he stops and straightens, refusing to go on. "This is silly," he says stubbornly, "because we're now and not then."

"But the feelings are still here, aren't they?"

"Yes!"

Silence.

"I didn't want to die without at least saying goodbye to Minerva," Severus says, his voice rather pleading now, "but I had to leave in front of people who hated me, without speaking to her." He shrugs. "I know there was no choice. Even if I had not gone, the Dark Lord would have hounded me through my Mark and I would have died in the end. But I wanted to see Minerva."

He shakes his head helplessly. "Dumbledore sent her away before asking me if I was ready to go to the Dark Lord." He sighs, "I suppose it was the right thing to do. I may not have found the strength..."
"There was only Potter and his little friends to watch me leave. Molly was there too, but we were not close enough..." He makes a dismissive gesture as if she did not count. "Harry Potter... He watched me leave." He closes his eyes and cannot help his face twisting a little. "I was expecting torture and death... and I knew he would rejoice. They would all have rejoiced... And then he would have died too... The idiot!"

He is panting now, hunched against the chair.


"I'm all right," Severus snaps, refusing to obey. He wraps his arms around himself and closes his eyes.

"Well, I am not all right," says Constanz. Severus searches his face for any sign that he is lying, but he is not. "I don't think anyone can be all right when it comes to sending you or anyone to be tortured and possibly killed... When it comes to the horror of what you had to live through."

"Pah! It's the easy kind of guilt," says Snape in a dismissive tone. "The kind of guilt you can blame on the exigencies and harshness of the war. Dumbledore did that very well."

"I don't think it's that easy, but if he did, it was wrong of him."

"Then what?" says Severus with a shrug. "I returned to Voldemort. I was lucky he'd stopped the punishment before he actually killed me and Albus had his perfect spy to play his games."

He stares into space. "I can add two and two," he says rancorously. "It was easy to see that he didn't hesitate half as much when it came to choose between Black and me. Or between my soul and Draco's."

Silence.

"Tell me. If Albus Dumbledore hadn't asked you to kill him, would you have stood and watched Draco kill Dumbledore?"

Silence.

Uncomfortable silence.

"I... I don't know."

"Really?"

Silence.

"He's my godson," Severus says mournfully. "He always looked up to me. He expected me to show and tell him what is right... but I always had to choose Harry Potter over him."

"So? You would have sacrificed his soul?"

"No!" he exclaims in anguish.

Silence.

"So, you would still have killed Dumbledore in the end."
“I…” Severus stares at his hands. “Probably. I couldn't let Draco destroy himself. He didn't deserve it.” He sighs again, with a helpless gesture of the hand. “We had already betrayed him so much… Lucius and me… We let him... no! We used him. We abused his trust and his naivety in repeating our professed opinions to prove we were loyal followers of the Dark Lord.”

Silence.

He looks up and smiles painfully at Constanz. “I owed it to Draco to kill Dumbledore. And to Narcissa. For me and for Lucius.”

“So, there was no way you could have avoided to kill Dumbledore.”

“Dumbledore was adamant there was no other solution,” he says resentfully. “I wouldn't have taken that stupid Vow if I had found a way out.”

“You sound angry.”

“I sound angry, because I am.”

“Stay with it. You're telling me there was no alternative to killing Dumbledore. Is this what rankles the most?”

“Yes!”

Silence.

“Albus kept repeating there was no other way. He dismissed every alternative, every suggestion. I didn't realise at the time that this was the easier way out for him.”

Constanz looks at Severus several seconds before asking, “He sacrificed your soul for his own comfort? Is that what you are telling me? That he just wanted to avoid pain and humiliation?”

“How...” Snape blinks in surprise. He is incredulous at first, then suspicious and almost instantaneously, gives in to his rage and leaps out of his chair.

“You have seen my memories, haven't you?” As Constanz does not reply immediately, he shouts, “HAVEN'T YOU?!”

The healer remains seated, as cool as ever. Severus feels very foolish for his outburst even before Constanz answers, very matter-of-factly, “Of course. I was Dumbledore's personal Healer. I was called in as an expert witness at Draco Malfoy's trial. Harry Potter presented the memories to the Court. It was the only thing that convinced them that Draco must not be convicted as an accessory.”

Severus sits back in his seat, as if all breath has been knocked out of him. “So…” He opens and closes his mouth twice before finally being able to ask, “Everyone there saw my memories... right?”

“Apart from Draco, because he was chained, it's a safe guess that all the members of the Wizengamot must have seen them.”

“Who else?” asks Severus, through gritted teeth.

“The press. The Order. All kinds of people. There were many who were curious.”

Silence.

Severus stands up again and paces, once more unable to stay still in his agitation.
Silence.

"And of course, you will be the expert again during my trial?"

"I'd be surprised if I weren't."

"And this doesn't trouble you?" insists Severus, not so much aggressive as frustrated. "Or are you here trying to make up your mind about what you're going to tell them about me?"

"This doesn't trouble me. And it shouldn't trouble you."

"It shouldn't trouble me?" Severus cries out. "Are you having a laugh? I hate that my thoughts aren't mine any more, but have to be shared with you. I hate that my memories are displayed in public."

Through gritted teeth, he growls, "What is left of me?"

"You're entitled to be angry."

Instantly, Severus's face turns blank.

"No Occluding!"

"I'm not," denies Severus but he forces himself to stop.

Silence.

"You're entitled to be angered," he repeats, mimicking Constanz accent. "Entitled! I'm entitled to nothing!" he says in a strained voice.

"I still feel that you're entitled to be angry. This whole loss of privacy wasn't your choice. In fact, I'm feeling rather angry myself when I remember that these sessions aren't your free choice either, but were forced on you by the Ministry. This doesn't mean that good things can't come out of this counselling or even of your trial."

"I will be able to walk to my fate happy and healthy?" Snape opens both arms dramatically.

"Azkaban, here I am! Is this what you mean?"

"I mean that, whatever the future holds for you, I am convinced that you'll face it better if you learn to accept and value yourself."

Snape shakes his head. "I am and I always will be the Death Eater who killed Dumbledore."

"He made clear to everyone he spoke with that he did not consider you to be a Death Eater. It's still what his portraits say."

"It's a lie!" Snape shouts. "He PROVED that I am a Death Eater!"

Silence.

"He proved that I'm really a killer and a Death Eater at heart, whatever side I was on... Whatever I thought I was."

"You know it's not true."

"I killed him! It was not Draco. Not Greyback. It was me! I KILLED HIM! I!"

Silence.
"I..."

Panting silence.

"I killed Albus."

He cries.

"And this is on his head," Constanz says softly.

"Oh? And he's the one who will be sent to Azkaban?" Severus shrugs, defeated. He wipes his eyes with his knuckles. He does not sit down as much as lets himself fall into his seat and sighs. "Why did they save me, if I was to end up in this mess?!"

Silence.

He looks up again and asks, rather coolly, "Do you know what kind of example the Ministry want to make of me? The Kiss? Azkaban?"

"The Dementor's Kiss has been abolished."

"Ah."

He cannot interpret the intensity of the healer's stare, until the man says at last, "You think your friends will let you go to Azkaban for what was forced on you to save the world? That they will say nothing? Do nothing?"

"Even Lucius's money and Alexia's talent can't do everything."

"I didn't speak of Lucius Malfoy."

"I have no other friend," states Severus, his lips curled disdainfully.

"That's what you think."

"That's what I lived!" It is not a cry of distress. It it the cool tone of someone who will brook no objection. It is Professor Snape.

Silence.

When the healer speaks, his tone is placating. "Now that the whole Order know the truth...-"

"Spare me the hypocrisy, Constanz!" snaps Severus. "When I was a spy... Their only and irreplaceable spy, mind you!... I still wasn't worthy to share the air with them. It wasn't simply a matter of trusting me or not."

Silence.

"Do you know how many times I was hurting or bleeding when I Apparated to Grimmauld Place to report, and not a single one of them as much as looked at me?" he asks coldly.

Silence.

"I was a leper!" he booms. "Molly Weasley was the only one who would help me, and only because she can't help fussing over everyone and everything, and because she's Minerva's friend."
"Did you ever stop to consider that they didn’t dislike you but that they were in awe of what you did... And wary of your sharp tongue?"

Severus laughs – not a happy laugh. "You can't believe that Alastor Moody was impressed. He never trusted me and showed it at every opportunity."

"Have you never realised how resentful Alastor was?"

"Bah! And Sirius Black?"

"Everything points to the fact that he was jealous."


"Your intelligence and your courage? Dumbledore's trust? Minerva's and Molly's friendship? Lily's?"

Snape is shaking with silent fury as he stands up and simply walks to the door. "I won't stay and listen to you mock me," he says, his hand already on the doorknob.

"I am not mocking you," calls Constanz, uncharacteristically urgent. "I am just asking you to consider the possibility that a fragile, unbalanced mind like Sirius Black resented you for being more brilliant than he could ever hope to be, and for going up while he went down."

Silence. Severus stays poised to open the door, but he is listening.

"I am also asking you to hear that you have friends in the Order, friends who will help you... who are helping you."

Silence.

"And there are Dumbledore's portraits at the Ministry and at Hogwarts. You know his word will be as good as if he were still alive."

Snape instantly stiffens. He turns at last and scowls at Constanz. "I'm not that sure," he harrumphs.

"That his word is as good as when he was alive? Or...-"

"Or!" he interrupts angrily. "If it suits him, he will make sure to ruin me once and for all."

"Why are you assuming the worst?"

He walks the few steps back to Constanz and leans with a sneer, until he is almost nose to nose with the healer. "Because he betrayed everything he made me believe in? Because I was supposed to die... and to die a reviled villain to suit his plans? Because I managed to survive when he never stopped to consider the possibility?"

He exhales painfully and forces himself to straighten and relax. He is perfectly collected when he says, "Do you know that he didn't leave a shred of evidence to exonerate me? I know, because I asked. He always trotted out the same excuse, that no one must ever suspect..." He snorts. "The truth is that he could not care less."

"If you don't trust Dumbledore," insists Constanz, "at least trust the Order."

"Is all this coming from my Healer or from a member of the Order of the Phoenix?" Severus asks,
instantly suspicious again. "Because my Healer is not being very professional today."

"Both. The fellow member..." Severus snorts as loudly as he knows how. "The fellow member, because you are one of us, whether you want to believe it or not," stresses Constanz, "passes a message, because the healer is worried that you might be... unwilling... to wait for your friends’ help."

"I won’t kill myself before being able to leave St Mungo's if that's what worries you," Severus answers disdainfully. "I want to shake the dust of this place off my feet."

"And after that? Do you think I have something to worry about? You're the one who talks about killing yourself."

Severus sniggers, "And there was I, believing that people who talk about killing themselves never do it. That should appease your worry, Healer."

"You say nothing of what you will do after you leave St Mungo's."

"Because it won’t be for me to choose. I will go to my trial, never fear."

"It seems to me that you won't let yourself hope."

Severus opens the door, this time for real. Before leaving, he quotes ironically, "He who has never hoped can never despair." *

§§§

Constanz was away for a few days after that. He had scheduled months earlier to take part in a symposium in Paris, but he did not leave without issuing quite a few warnings to Snape.

Indeed, Snape was told during a routine round by a much-too-cheerful duty Healer and his team that he was now authorized to receive visitors and that the Minister himself was expected.

It could not have been a coincidence – not when Constanz had as good as admitted that he had been shielding him from the outside world but that this was coming to an end.

Snape had tried very hard to act as if he did not know that he was a wanted criminal— except in his dealings with Lucius and Constanz, to focus on his recovery. This ended now.

The game is on. Snape smirked inwardly. But I won’t go down without giving them a run for their money.

§§§

Snape's very first visitor was Kingsley Shackelbolt.

The Minister towered above Snape's lounge chair, assessing him. Then he startled him by saying with a reproachful look to the staff that Professor Snape was still much too thin for his own good and wasn't it high time for him to put some flesh on?

He then shooed everybody out of the room. He slammed the door after reminding the objecting Aurors that in ten years time they might know as much as himself about security.

He then proceeded to put state of the art confidentiality spells all around. Severus gave him an appreciative look and settled down comfortably to report.
Snape had never been particularly friendly with Shacklebolt at the beginning of their acquaintance but he had nothing to dislike about the man either. He rather respected him for his competence and had never received open hostility from him, despite his professional association with Moody.

So, he had no qualms about giving him the information he wanted and to ask him about the news in return. Shacklebolt answered candidly, telling him without equivocation who had been lost; who had been removed, or promoted; who they had found impossible to get rid of until now, and asking for tips. He made no secret of the awful first months of his tenure when he had had to deal with reduced staff at the Ministry and summary justice by the overzealous citizens eager to settle past scores themselves... Or about the fact that he was facing a backlash in public affections now that order had been restored but the economic restrictions still held.

Shacklebolt would come back regularly, always eager for Snape's input on the Death Eaters and their incredibly widespread net of familial, social and business relations. Sometimes, when there was a sensitive investigation going, he would bring Dawlish along – the new Head Auror.

Snape wondered aloud if Kingsley did not have a somewhat sadistic disposition as he himself made no secret of not trusting the Aurory any more than he did when Dumbledore was alive, and certainly not a "Confunded lackey" like Dawlish.

Shacklebolt only chuckled and humorously gave Snape soothing pats on the back. Dawlish scowled, because he knew that Shacklebolt himself would be Head Auror if he had not stepped in as Minister; that he had himself been promoted only because of the chaos following Riddle's death and by the elimination of much more compromised colleagues rather than by choice. The obvious favourites were either dead (Nymphadora Lupin) or still incapacitated after Azkaban (Gawain Robards).

Dawlish never managed to stare Snape down when the wizard alluded to the shameful days of the Aurory under Barty Crouch and Scrimgeour... or to his own unfortunate susceptibility to Confundus.

He refused to return after Snape asked him what colour his office was these days, despite Shacklebolt taking his side for once and telling angrily to Snape to "shut up, you are insulting all of us."

Constanz was relieved to see that these visits did not cause any relapse, even when Snape rowed with the Minister. The recovering wizard could do with a few adrenaline highs to remind himself that he was alive and that he still had warm, powerful blood in his veins.

One day though, the Minister brought a thick, heavily warded file and let Snape leaf through it at will. It explained candidly how his case stood.

After that visit, Snape had nightmares again.

§§§

"Lily again?"

"I can't control my dreams."

Silence.

"It's not as if I want to dream of her."

Silence.

"Still, I prefer to dream of Lily than of Potter, Black or the werewolf..."
Silence.

"Or of Hogwarts."

"You often dream of Hogwarts."

"Nightmares are not exactly refreshing and uplifting."

Silence.

"There's this one with Dumbledore falling from the Astronomy tower and calling me a coward. Or that one where the Carrows torture the students while I'm unable to move."

"So, dreaming of Lily is refreshing and uplifting?"

"Not this dream."

"Ah. The one when she's dead."

Silence.

"Do you dream of Minerva?"

"Leave Minerva out of it!"

§§§

Inevitably, the next visitor was Minerva McGonagall.

On her first visit, she was allowed to enter only in the presence of Healer Constanz. He then announced that he was giving her five minutes alone with Severus. He had warned her that Snape had been significantly upset when he relayed her intention to visit.

The reunion was understandably awkward. Severus was fighting the tightening in his chest and throat, and Minerva was clearly at a loss, unsure of her welcome.

She managed to say hello, clearly hesitating to make a more intimate gesture but in the end she did not touch him.

Neither spoke for what seemed like an eternity, even after Constanz's departure, though it could not have been more than two minutes. Then, she embarked on a convoluted, stilted speech, totally unlike herself, to convey that she was sorry for everything she had said or done to him since Dumbledore's death. She told him that she missed him and that he could expect to see her more often, now that he was allowed visitors... If he wanted to see her, that is.

He nodded, unable to think of anything that could not be misunderstood. Her eyes were strangely glittering and he refused to wonder whether his were, too, despite the suspect blur through which he was seeing her. As it was, he hardly dared to breathe and she seemed almost poised to flee.

The silence stretched again between them as they stared at each other, neither wanting to be the first to look away. It was not a battle of wills, rather the fear that the other might yet interpret it as rejection or indifference. They both sighed in relief when Constanz returned.

Her second visit was significantly longer. She brought 'Get Well' cards from the staff of Hogwarts, every single one carrying some kind of praise and apologies, even expressions of regard. Filch still called him "Headmaster" in his. According to Minerva, they all regretted their treatment of him now
that they knew all about the sacrifices he had made for the Light and his fealty to Albus, and hoped
for the best for him. Septima and Rolanda had even wept writing theirs—a pointed look daring him
to snort.

He did not. He had a hard time keeping himself from crying too, while he read what his old
colleagues and former friends had written.

Minerva managed to say that she was happy he was recognised as the hero he was—he finally
managed a weak snort—for the sake of the Slytherins.

At this, he straightened at once, all ears now.

It certainly helped to restore their status and to boost their morale to have him as their figurehead, not
to speak of the Orders of Merlin given to the handful who had returned to join their schoolmates for
the fight, led by Millicent Bulstrode, of all people. After the battle, Blaise Zabini had spoken for them
all, shrugging haughtily and pointing at Voldemort's corpse. "What? Do you imagine we wanted to
spend our lives scraping and bowing before him?"

Repairs were well under way and they were now rid of most of the scaffolding inside the castle.
Draco Malfoy had, of course, proved invaluable. He had developed a keen interest for restoration
and construction and his cultural and historical knowledge was so extensive, with a gift to find easy,
practical solutions that the architect had apprenticed him as soon as his probation ended and often left
him in charge of the site.

Severus listened patiently to her babbling—at least she felt she was babbling. He just listened,
keeping his eyes closed and vaguely moved his fingers from time to time to urge her to go on. There
was a pulse beating on his temple, a sure sign of a headache. She did not know what to do until he
abruptly said he was tired and needed to sleep.

In all the years she had known him, he only said that when he was deeply disturbed or hurting
helplessly and he did not want to disgrace himself with a show of emotion and weakness. She was
glad to see he still cared for... for Hogwarts, she told firmly to herself as she left, feeling quite
frustrated and unhappy, but refusing to consider the obvious reason.

The third visit happened quite early in the morning and totally outside the regular visiting hours. He
acknowledged her presence with a surprised stare and a thin, thankfully spontaneous, smile but he
said nothing, still pondering how he should address her. So far they had carefully avoided addressing
each other personally. He would be damned if he called her anything to be rebuked.

When she saluted him as Severus, he gave her the merest nod, but said Minerva in return much more
warmly than he had intended. He had been more than half convinced she would call him Snape or,
even worse, Professor, thus demonstrating she only visited him out of duty, pity or guilt.

She seemed to be back to her old self too: composed, forbidding and all. She said that she could not
stay very long. She was in St Mungo's on business, as she was chaperoning yet another student who
was currently doing counselling with Constanza. "You can't imagine how many children we have had
to bring here since the end of the war."

The hell he could not.

She faltered slightly as she watched him pale but bravely went on, "Oh! And Hermione Granger has
also managed to convince Pomona and Argus that they need counselling too, for their panic
attacks."
So, not only were Weasley or Finnegan occasionally standing guard at his door as new Aurors, but now he had to prepare for the time when the Granger girl would turn up too, as a Healer-in-training. He already had a headache just imagining her incessant questions and shrill girlish voice. As if it was not bad enough to feel the Aurors stare at his back when he dragged himself back from the gym or, even worse, from his sessions with Constanza.

While he pondered that, Minerva asked him questions about his progress. He answered absently.

She regained his full attention when she went so far as to hint that the DADA position was still available with only a temporary teacher in place. Gawain Robards still had long months of healing to do before returning to active Auror duty but he had made it very clear that he did not have the patience with teenagers. So, DADA could be his for the asking. Or Potions, as Slughorn was not very keen to stay beyond one or two more years. And whatever added responsibility he would wish, Deputy, Head of House... He only had to ask.

"Minerva..." He shook his head in disbelief. He smiled sadly and the gentleness of his answer told her how serious he was. "When I leave St Mungo's, Hogwarts is the last place I'll wish to go."

Except Azkaban.

But that, he kept to himself.

Despite the heated and, from his point of view, totally useless argument that followed, Minerva became a rather frequent visitor, though there was no pattern or regularity to her visits.

She would come on the very slim pretext of asking him about something she said she had forgotten about one file or another from his Headmaster days… To bring him a slice of today's rhubarb crumble since he had always been very fond of it… Or simply because he had been so pale and tired on her last visit and she wanted to make sure he was feeling better today.

She would generally kiss him briefly or hold his hand. He would pull her to sit beside him with his arm around her waist while reading whatever missives she brought him, to talk more easily... Because you cannot simply erase years of intimacy like that. Minerva speculated that it was probably what people who divorced but remained friends felt, and Severus admitted she may be right.

It had never been the most torrid of affairs but rather a loving friendship, the loving part born of circumstances and mutual loneliness rather than any irresistible attraction.

At least this was what they had always told themselves. Minerva had always been very self-conscious about her age and ashamed that Severus was so much younger – even younger than her own children. She always refused to really commit herself to Severus or allow herself to think in the long term.

Severus, for his part, had never been one for public displays and needed the secrecy because of his Death Eaters associates... and because he absolutely refused to discuss his private life with Albus Dumbledore. He did not need the Headmaster to have yet another lever over him.

He was well aware now of the ambiguity of their relationship.

Minerva had been his teacher, and even tried to mother him during his awful sixth year. After Lily's death and the end of the first war, Dumbledore had all but ordered Minerva to sponsor him and help the ex-Death Eater and (the not-so-ex) spy to adjust to life after the war. At every turn, she proved to him that she had more motherly instinct in her little finger than Eileen Snape ever had in all her being. He had always known that he needed her protective and irritating interference in his life as
much as her presence in his bed... Just like he needed Abraxas and then Albus to play the role of mentors.

He also found that he could not forget how she had so easily believed the worst of him.

Just a few months ago, it would have qualified for another silent mix of longing and hatred in his life, carefully nurtured with guilt, regrets and bitter-sweet remembrance.

But there was Constanz now to reckon with... And his own mind... And all the time in the world, it seemed, to ponder past stories and put guilt and regrets into perspective.

§§§

"No, Constanz," he repeats once again, "I never told Minerva about the depth of my... my affection, but she didn't want to listen anyway. She forbade me to use L words as she called them."

"Surely, if you wanted to tell her-"

"Tell her what? That I didn't know how to love, but that I was willing to bestow whatever meagre feelings I would be able to summon on her if she had a mind to allow it?" He snorts derisively. "And why not at Madam Puddifoot's while we're at it? Please!"

Silence.

"Besides... It wouldn't have been fair. She was... She wasn't half as strong as they all thought her at the time... She still avoided staying alone with a man... Any man. Dumbledore was a fiend to ask her to begin with..." He rants, once more indignant for her sake, "I was a Death Eater, for God's sake! One of them!"

"Ah! So she told you about the Death Eaters?"

"I would have guessed even if she hadn't told me... or if I hadn't heard Goyle bragging about it."

"Do you realise that she told you more than she ever told anyone but Molly Weasley, or me?...And she only told me because I was their healer."

§§§

It is hardly easier to say aloud how hurt he was that she could so easily believe the worst of him.

"I didn't think my life could get worse until she called me Headmaster, in that tone of voice. I had hoped..."

"What?"

"It was stupid of me!" He makes one of his dismissive gestures and turns silent.

"It can't be stupid if you hoped for it. Feel it out."

"I wanted her to still believe in me. I wanted just a tiny little bit of hope – even if I knew it would have been suicide for the both of us."

Silence.

§§§
Several sessions later, and he is able to admit that he would be dead if Minerva had really set her heart on killing him because he was absolutely unable to retaliate—not against her.

"Yes, Constanz. I wished she would kill me."

He had not tried very hard either to really court her or to make her forget the age difference that crystallised her worst insecurities.

He selfishly bedded her and took what he could. He was not sure any more what she had got out of the relationship, although she was still unaccountably fond of him.

"Unaccountably?"

"I can't see what she is getting out of it."

"Do people always have to get something? What about simple, gratuitous feelings like friendship or affection as you call it?"

For me? He snorts, but he has to admit that she was the only person—except Lucius—who knew the truth about Lily, and several other deep secrets of his life as well. He never doubted her absolute discretion, even at the worst of times.

"Never?"

"Never. We're speaking of Minerva, Constanz. Not of a... a lesser woman. She would have killed me herself but she wouldn't have betrayed me to others."

§§§

They were still comfortable enough together that they did not need to voice that they were trying to go past their mutual guilt and salvage all that was possible of their friendship and of their... affection.

Whatever fun Constanz pretended to have with the word, it suited the both of them and they could live with it. It was not, had never been romantic love, he insisted – a little too loudly.

The only really awkward time between them was the day she told him that Horace had got it into his head that it would be "a jolly good thing" to commission a portrait of Professor Snape for the Slytherin Common Room. Something to boost the students' morale with a positive, heroic figure to identify with.

"It would be an ordinary portrait from one of your photographs. Don't worry, you won't have to sit, just contribute a little blood."

She knew he would not like it but she thought that Horace's sycophantic idea would be a good start in the difficult process of convincing Severus to sit for his official Headmaster's portrait at last. She did not even try denying to herself that she would be quite happy to have a perfectly good excuse to have his likeness in her office.

He got as close to incoherent panic as she had ever seen him.

"Don't! Minerva! Don't let him carry out such a stupid, ill-conceived... It would be worse than... Oh! You don't know the half of it!"

"I won't if you don't want it. Calm down, Severus. It isn't worth upsetting yourself over."

He seized her wrist, anchoring himself to her, and tried to pull himself together into Professor Snape
under her eyes.

Oh my! I've never seen his control slip like that, except… Except when he returned from his first meeting with the reincarnated Voldemort.

She was not surprised by the strength of his grip since she had not forgotten what was hidden under his deceptively thin frame, but she did not expect the urgency of his words.

"You mustn't allow this. When they arrest me, the scandal... It will be worse than all the rest for my poor Slytherins..." It warmed her to hear that, in spite of everything, he still thought about the Slytherin students as his, "and for the school. You have to know, they will accuse me of..." His voice broke. "Minerva, I swear to you, I never did any of it, but..."

She returned his grip and whispered soothingly, "I know."

"WHAT?!"

"I know. Kingsley told us about the complaints." She watched his face fall and hastened to add, "He told the Order, I mean, and he asked for our help. We won't let you down. Do you hear me?" she asked, as he closed his eyes in dismay. "I won't let you down."

He opened his eyes again and considered her with a guarded look on his face.

"We know that you didn't do it. Of course, you didn't do it!" she insisted, quite vehemently.

He opened his mouth but she did not let him speak. "You won't be alone this time."

Chapter End Notes

Tra8erse betaed this chapter, but as usual, I can't help changing things until the last moment, so the remaining mistakes are entirely my own.

* quote from George Bernard Shaw.
Minerva left St Mungo's much grimmer than she had been in a very long time. Whatever front Severus presented to the rest of the world, the accusations of abuse and paedophilia committed against his students had hit him much harder than even she expected.

She pressed her lips into a thin, taut line in an unconscious mimicry of her former lover.

*He misses Hogwarts, even if he refuses to acknowledge it.*

She could not help remembering how he had clung to her before raising his Occlumency shield. Only when he had come back from Voldemort that very first time after Cedric Diggory’s death, or during lovemaking, had he ever let his mask slip so completely in all the years she had known him. His motto since Lily had chosen James Potter was always "no feeling, no showing, no telling." And there he was, with no more control over his emotions than when he had been an angst-ridden sixteen year old!

This was, for her, the ultimate proof that Alfred Constanz had not been exaggerating when he told the Order two months ago that Severus Snape was deeply traumatized and that he was neither physically nor mentally fit to face the Wizengamot in the near future.

§§§

It was George Weasley, who had taken so long to emerge from depression himself, who summed it up for them all.

"*He's as mad as a hatter, that's what you're telling us, Constanz.*"

"*What I'm telling you,*" countered the old healer with only a mild chiding, "*is that, in the mental state he's in now, he's likely to accuse himself of every single crime committed by Voldemort and the Death Eaters, simply because he couldn't prevent them.*"

Unsurprisingly, it was an aggrieved Molly who said, "*I suppose it doesn't help that we all made him feel like a criminal and an accomplice during his years as a spy.*"

Some protesting voices were heard but they were cut short as Minerva added, in her sternest classroom voice, "*Don't pretend you have forgotten. Don't pretend he was welcome here, and that it*
was his own choice not to stay for a drink or a meal like everyone else."

Constanz nodded grimly, "He was indeed made to feel like a pariah by the Order. Or like a leper."

Several people grumbled that Constanz was exaggerating, but he insisted, "These are his own words. Indeed, I wonder more often than I'd like how he didn't return to Voldemort in earnest."

"But then, we wouldn't be here if he had."

This came from Harry. Kingsley Shacklebolt echoed his words slowly, looking at every embarrassed face in turn to reinforce his meaning. "No, we wouldn't. We would've been dead."

Constanz went on, "Allowing him to stand trial now would be as close to assisted suicide as his killing of Albus was... for him... for Albus's reputation... and for the Order!"

"What do you mean, for the Order?" asked Aberforth Dumbledore. He did not care a fig about his brother's reputation, but the Order was another thing entirely. Their cause was the closest thing to his heart – the only one worthy enough for him to set aside his resentment against Albus and to join forces with him.

"Right now, Severus would plead guilty to anything the Prosecutor could think about, just because he can't accept that he lived when so many people died while he could do nothing to stop it, except sometimes end their suffering."

"Excuse me, Doctor, I don't understand why he would do that," said Arabella Figg. A few people sniggered at the old lady's use of the Muggle title.

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with bitter resentment, "since he ordered him to be the perfect Death Eater and to kill him without any regard for the consequences."

"How dare you call Albus a criminal!" exclaimed Elphias Doge. "He only did his duty and you can't compare him to someone as shady as Severus Snape."

"You, old berk!" answered Aberforth with contempt, "you've always worn rose-tinted glasses where Albus was concerned, ever since you first had a crush on him at Hogwarts! You've always thought the sun shone out of my brother's every orifice. And you could never find any redeeming qualities in Severus Snape, either... once you put it into your head that my brother might like him better than you."

"What?!" wheezed the old wizard indignantly. "Are you suggesting that I am jealous of Snape?"

"Suggesting? No! I am saying it to your face. You've always been a fool, you always will be, and you know what they say about old fools."

After more squabbling and drawing of wands, Minerva threatened to make the results of their hexes permanent if they did not calm down. Aberforth shook his goat head at Doge, who shifted his donkey ears and brayed defiantly, but as soon as the Headmistress began to palm her own wand, they deflated and shut up at last.

Percy Weasley, who was the most junior co-opted member of the Order, stood, cleared his throat and announced rather stiffly, "I must agree with Healer Constanz."

Someone sighed, rather loudly. Ron, Percy thought bitterly. His younger brother made no secret that he thought him a pompous ass. At least, he is not pretending to like me, like the rest of my family.

"You must know," he said, careful not to let himself get carried away and speak too forcefully, "that every single argument against Professor Snape will be an opportunity for the opposition and some of the press to demean the actions of the Order. Any sign of dissension or disagreement between known members of the Order of the Phoenix will be used against the Professor but also against the Order in general, and the Minister in particular. It is imperative that we present a united front."

"You must know a lot about this. Weren't you the one who wrote Thicknesse's press releases for him?" asked Regis Podmore with mixed feelings. He was still only half-convinced of the necessity to welcome Percy Weasley to the Order and had voted reluctantly for his admission.

The redhead flushed bright crimson but stood his ground. "Yes, I did and that's why I know all the ropes they will try to use. It is not that difficult to make a political mountain out of a molehill..."

Shacklebolt interrupted him, using his great presence and impressive looks to catch everyone's attention, and stop any possibility of bickering. "It's not difficult either to have a man condemned because of a tangled web of intrigues, assumptions and old antagonisms," he said with a pointed look at Podmore, but also at Aberforth Dumbledore and Elphias Doge, who had still not recovered their usual appearance. "I won't let this happen to Severus Snape. He deserves our full support."

The Minister did not show any other sign of irritation, but only because he had become good at hiding his real feelings.

Order meetings were as tedious as some Wizengamot sessions these days, with the old guard feeling neglected or nursing old rancours, and the Weasleys so much outnumbering the others that someone once proposed sarcastically to rename the Order of the Phoenix as the Order of the Carrot Tops.
"Percy knows what he's talking about," the Minister said with a calm authority. "For my part, I won't tell you what we must do, but what we must not."

He waited until he had everybody's full attention before going on.

"We must not forget we are not a political party. We are not here to bypass the Ministry or any of our institutions, but we are here to see that the sacrifices of all those who fought in the war are not forgotten or ignored. Those people who forged accusations against Snape have an agenda. I don't know exactly what it is, but one thing is certain: we do not share the same values with them and we must not let anyone believe that we might."

Ron whispered to Hermione, "I understand why he's Minister. He speaks really well." As she smiled, amused, he added, "And Harry begins to sound just like him."

She shushed him with a friendly kick, in order to listen to Arthur Weasley, who was signalling that he wanted to speak.

Mr Weasley asked without equivocation, "I know nobody wants to look bad speaking about it, but… are we absolutely, totally sure that Snape is innocent? Not that he would intentionally harm students, but maybe he had to show the Carrows that he was on their side or something like that…"

He had expected Molly and Minerva to look daggers at him, for voicing it aloud, because Snape had always been one of their favourites; Harry and Hermione, too, because they were Snape's greatest fans these days, but he was surprised by the reproachful look he got from Ron and even from Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnegan.

"I am sure of it," answered Constanz. "This information is still classified, but he went so far as to neuter himself when Voldemort returned," Several people still winced at the Name, "so that he would never have to be party to the rape and abuse policy of the Death Eaters."

Many people gasped at the revelation.

Minerva said, "I can confirm it. I was there with Albus when Severus decided to drink it. He didn't tell us what the potion was before it was done."

Harry added, pointing at Ron and all his fellow members from Dumbledore's Army with a sweeping gesture, "And we are in the process of actually proving that every single complaint of abuse is fake."

Minerva could not help saying, "The worst is that, if anyone can complain of having been mistreated while a student at Hogwarts, it's Severus." She refused to acknowledge the curious or startled looks this declaration elicited. "Somehow, this is a way of adding insult to injury!"

"Which makes me believe," Shacklebolt added, "that the person or persons behind this must know Snape quite well. This is a personal as well as political revenge."

"Unfortunately, we haven't found any possible connection so far," interrupted Harry, with a helpless gesture. "Snape has no friends left, apart from Malfoy."

"Correction, Harry," said Shacklebolt. "Apart from Lucius Malfoy, who has nothing to gain but much to lose if Snape is sentenced, he has no friends left... outside the Order," he added with a placating gesture before Minerva or Molly Weasley could protest. "who are not dead or in prison."

"That we know of," pointed out Arthur.

"That we know of," concluded the Minister somberly.
Late in the night, the Headmistress of Hogwarts could not sleep.

A slender tabby cat wandered the corridors of Hogwarts, pausing here and there on what used to be the path of a certain Potions master when he came back from his meetings with the Death Eaters.

More than once, she had waited for his return in her Animagus form and followed him silently to reassure herself that he was safe—or at least that he could make it to his rooms.

He always did, no matter what. After the first few times, he had never even called Moppy, his personal elf, for help.

*Was he always that afraid? All those years?*

She swore to herself that he would never again have any reason to doubt her, even if he was likely to question her motives to his dying day.

*No! Do not think about him dying.*

She refused to remember how she had pleaded with Constanz, and threatened him, until he let her see him one last time... How she had bitten her hand while they were trying to make his heart start again and she heard a nurse saying "He's fading." And when the signals proved that the exhausted, abused muscle was pumping again, how she had uttered a relieved sob, that made the operating Healer turn around and shout to Constanz, "What's she doing here? Take her away!"

*NO!*

She found herself back in her human form and leaning against the cold stones of an empty corridor, dizzy and breathing heavily.

She straightened up. This was not the time for self-pity.

As usual, she comforted herself with snippets of memories of her father reading her bedtime stories from the Bible.

*To every thing there is a season... A time to kill, and a time to heal... a time to mourn, and a time to dance... a time to love, and a time to hate.*

She shook her head.

*To think how I willed myself to hate him while he was Headmaster!*

But this was the past.

Love has many facets. She had always denied Severus the truly romantic part of love and they had irremediably lost the sexual part years ago, but they still had so many others to explore. They had lived together for months without a physical relationship, and this did not stop them caring for each other.

He was still her closest friend and they were becoming each other's confidants again.

She could no more give up on Severus than on her own children. She would just have to hammer it into him until he understood and stopped asking what she got out of it.
Some days, he was not convinced... but she could be just as stubborn as he was.

"Tell me about Sirius Black."

"Not again!"

Silence.

"You won't be able to escape Sirius Black forever."

Silence.

Severus whistles under his breath, ostensibly looking away.

"Severus!"

Silence.

"You'll never give me a bit of peace, will you?"

Silence.

"Fine! I…"

Silence. Deep breath.

"What can I tell? Sirius Black was... Sirius Black. The Scion and Heir of the Most Noble House of Black who pride themselves of being always pure... which basically means that the rest of us are just dust under their soles."

"Speak to the chair."

"No."

Silence.

"Or rather... Yes. I will. I will because I'm not afraid of you, Black. I've been afraid of many things in my life, but you... I hated you so much I seldom had time to be afraid of you. The first time I had to kill someone, I imagined it was you to be able to do the deed... and the man was dead before I even realised it."

Silence.

"Potter... I mean Harry, not his father of course... He was quite fond of repeating in front of me... For my benefit, no doubt... One of your so rare little pearls of wisdom. If you want to know what a man's like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.' I wonder how a blockhead like you could come up with something so true... But you didn't realize what it said about you, did you? Oh! No! Not the mighty, infallible Sirius Black..."

Snort.

"Because you only recognised one equal in all your life... And it was James Potter."
"It's taken me years to realise why you were so obsessed about my relationship with Lucius... Why you loathed so much the idea of homosexuality..." He chuckles. ".And why you taunted me so much about losing Lily. This meant that you lost James. It seems they were more than a little repressed in this so-called Noble House of yours. It's quite funny that I had to pretend to be gay when you tried so hard to make everyone believe that you loved women. A seducer, yes. A lover of women, that's another story."

Silence.

"I'm sure you'd have tried to seduce Lily if you'd thought there was the slightest chance that James would drop her... but he would have more likely dropped you first."

Severus rolls his eyes and sniggers. ".You never stood the least chance with Lily. She had the measure of you from the beginning and she knew just how to play you as well as to play Potter."

The chair begins to dance a merry gig, but stops abruptly as Severus sobers.

"I found a letter..."

Silence.

"I cried my heart out over it, because she offered you "lots of love". She wrote to me like that once, you know? And it was really love then," he says quite vehemently. "You didn't deserve it!"

Silence.

"Of course, I was not exactly what you would call sane at the time, but when I finally stopped crying, I read the letter again and I realised that she must have been desperately bored when she was in hiding. I wonder if you ever realised that she didn't like you? She obviously had to put up with you, but she did not like you."

Snort.

"She was bright, Lily. She knew from the beginning that you were a womaniser because you despised girls. And that you were never a champion of Muggles or Muggleborn because they deserve equality, but because you wanted to reduce everyone to the same level."

Silence.

"We were just shit to you."

Silence.

Constanz asks, curious, "It's not often that I hear you speak like that."

"Because I said shit?" He feels some kind of satisfaction at having surprised the healer with mere profanity, for once. "It's the way we speak in Cokesworth, you know. At least in the seedy parts, but I wouldn't know about the others, of course."

Silence.

"It's the way I spoke when I first went to Hogwarts. Lucius and Narcissa did their best to cure me of it, but I always reverted to that kind of speech when I confronted the Marauders. They..."
Flashes of memories dance in his mind but he shuts them away.

_Breathe._ In. Out.

"I just... regressed, I suppose... Black and Potter... They never let me forget that I was working class. That being poor was being less. It was as if they smelled it on me. Not that you can forget that you're from Spinner's End... It sticks to your skin and to your soul."

Silence.

"The stylish robes... The posh speech... Walking as if you own the world... It's just another role. Lucius is the genuine article. Black or Potter were, too, and Evan Rosier, Rabastan Lestrange... I just copied. Lily was another fake, just like me. The most beautiful and radiant fake you can imagine, but still a fake."

Silence.

"The Dark Lord was one, too. He liked me for that."

Silence.

"I knew he was no more Pureblooded than me, even before Dumbledore told me. He knew that I knew, and somehow he didn't care. He never punished me or threatened me because of it."

Silence.

Silence.

"We were speaking of Sirius Black."

Severus gives the healer a long-suffering look. _"Constanz...!"_

But, of course, he has no choice but to comply.

"What can I say about Black that you don't already know? He was everything I wasn't... And everything I once wanted to be. The only thing we ever had in common apart from Dumbledore's Order was that we both made a right hash of our lives."

Silence.

"He would have denied it all the way to hell but he was the quintessence of Pureblood pride and prejudice. His heart was just as rotten as Bellatrix's."

Snort. "He was almost as mad, too, but people were so used to letting him have his way that they didn't realise it."

Snigger. "To think that Moody approved of everything he did because he was not a Death Eater... What a joke!"

Silence.

"People always feared what would happen to them if they fell into the Dark Lord's hands... But during the first war, I never feared this as much as I feared what would happen to me if I ever were caught by Aurors Black and Potter. I'd have done anything not to be caught alive by those two."

Silence.
"Not that I relished the time I spent with their colleagues, but then I could hope to be rescued. And Albus did rescue me, I give him that."

He stands up in a sudden flash of anger. "Not like Lucius! When I think of what Scrimgeour did to him..." His fists curl, and Constanz watches the knuckles whiten. "The same band of bastards!"

"Stay with it!"

"I'm angry, and it's no secret why. The Aurors were hardly better than the Death Eaters with their prisoners. But they were the good guys! Ha!"

He kicks the chair for good measure, before going on, in a low, dangerous voice. "They could look at themselves in a mirror with a clear conscience! And they did! The bastards!"

"And you could not? You were one of the good guys, no? You were the spy."

Severus turns around and looks the healer in the eyes. "I did not have that excuse before I changed sides. And even after that, I've never been delusional. There is no moral ground in using Crucio or any kind of hex or curse, whatever side you're on. Nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies it. Things have to be done to win a war, but war is totally immoral to begin with, whatever side you belong to."

Silence.

"People like Black and Potter lived as if there really was a Good side in the world and as if they rightfully belonged there and this excused everything they did. They just didn't realise that the Lestranges and many Death Eaters were just as sincerely convinced that they were on the side of the Good, too, and acted like them."

"Do you believe that Good and Evil are only words? That they do not exist?"

Silence.

"No, they do exist. I just don't think anyone can claim them for themselves."

Silence.

Severus sighs as he sits down again. "I really don't like that kind of cheap philosophy."

"But what about Sirius Black? I don't think that is all you have to say about him. Your relationship with him defined a part of your life."

"I wouldn't call that a relationship," Severus tries to joke, but he cannot – not really. "The one thing Black did right in his life was to save Harry Potter's life at the Ministry. No, there's another good thing he did, too. He died."

Silence. Severus stands up, walks to the other chair and settles comfortably there with a smug smile.

"Why are you sitting in the hot seat?"

"Can't you guess? You're a professional, I was led to believe."

"It's not exactly identification, is it?"

"Don't be obscene!"
Silence.

Very satisfied silence.

"I sit in Black's chair because..." He trails on, almost purring. "Because I can."

Silence.

"You can't begin to understand the satisfaction it gives me to know that I can sit here because he's dead. After all he's done to me... All the time he wished for me to die... rejoiced in everything that happened to me... I did not die, and he did. And the way he died is the greatest joke of it all. The dolt simply had to show off and... and try to... pardon the image... to get into a pissing contest with his cousin Bella... And he was found wanting. Of course, I could have told him that Bella was by far the scariest of us all."

Silence.

"It's almost as cosmically ironic as the fact that he ended up in Azkaban for the crimes he did not commit."

Silence.

"I even pitied him sometimes."

Silence.

Angry silence.

"But never for long."

§§§

Snape's third visitor in St Mungo's was a real surprise. Not that he had even meant to visit Snape in the first place.

Neville Longbottom stopped by to chat with Healer Constanz on one of his weekly visits to his parents. It was more spur of the moment than anything else when he enquired after Professor Snape because he happened to sight the Auror guard at the other end of the corridor – the former colleagues he was still uncomfortable talking to, because they did not understand his reasons for leaving.

He had spent months investigating Snape's case but it was still a shock every time he realised how little his childhood and teenage memories of the Professor had in common with the fighter whose role had been revealed after the fall of the Death Eaters.

Potions class had been his nightmare for five years but he had been so bad at it that all these years were just one massive, nightmarish blur in his memory.

So, it had been a total surprise when he found himself appreciating Snape's DADA classes in the sixth year. No doubt because he really understood by then the true meaning of his warnings and teaching – nearly losing one's friends and life during the Battle of the Ministry will do that to a person.

Oh, there had still been many nasty remarks about his clumsiness or Gryffindor, of course – but in hindsight, Snape had marked Neville fairly, even generously in DADA. When he re-read some of his essays and tests, he could not help but notice that the red-inked marking dispensed really useful,
practical advice under the guise of sarcasm.

The seventh year had been yet another kind of nightmare but he had long recognised by now that they would probably not have made it if Snape had not turned a blind eye to most of the Dumbledore's Army's activities.

The Headmaster shielded them as best he could with silly detentions of his own. He also showered the Carrows with stupid administrative chores that kept them too busy to harass the students as often as they would have wished to.

Even more humbling had been the discussion with Hermione about his control of the Room of Requirement during the war. He had been too relieved at the time to look a gift horse in the mouth and just used the Room to the best of his ability.

Hermione had almost – almost – spoil the joy of that Saturday evening with Luna with her questions. Luna herself had always been so sure that "of course," Professor Snape was helping them all along. She had not been at Hogwarts when her boyfriend had taken refuge in the Room of Requirement but when he told them everything, she was just as keen as Hermione to point out the weak points in his story.

Dobby had supplied Aberforth Dumbledore with supplies from Hogwarts to feed Neville and his band of renegades… but there was no way the Chief Elf of Hogwarts could have concealed from the Headmaster the drain on their supplies. She was on a budget. A generous one to be sure, but she had to produce her accounts and hand in the bills. And if there was one duty Headmaster Snape never, ever shared with the Carrows, to their obvious resentment, it was the financial management of the school.

There had been bickering enough at the Staff table for everyone to know and laugh about it. Amycus Carrow was not one to let go of as sore a point as Snape's refusal to let him have his fingers in the till and he complained loudly enough.

Any delusion Neville may still have harboured that Snape did not know what they were doing in the Room of Requirement was dispelled after their late night visit to the Room itself.

It provided them with an impromptu barbecue on a tropical beach before Ron had to leave for his night shift. Neville was quietly enjoying a snogging session with Luna while Ginny, Harry and Hermione had a dip in the moon-lit lagoon. They all jumped up with fright when the Headmistress's Patronus appeared and gently chided the young couple.

"I have no objection to your getting together to remember and celebrate, but Miss Lovegood is still a student for a few weeks, as well as Misses Granger and Weasley. You're all bound to behave properly within the school's ground. No exception. I will overlook the curfew for once, but do not make a habit of it. And please, do try not to run into Mr Filch when leaving."

Ron laughed his head off when he was told but Seamus whistled before swearing with grudging respect, "The bastard!"

"Who?" asked Neville.

"Snape, of course. Now I understand why there was always something popping up in the way when I tried to be friendly with one of the girls."

Neville guffawed, "Ha! The pillow! It was him then?"

"And I suspect the leaking pumpkin juice, the soap, the damp towel, Michael's torn sheet-"
"Padma's boot!" boomed Neville. This had been a good one. Nothing to kill the mood like a girl losing her balance and sending her boot flying right into your… Ouch!

Seamus hit him in the shoulder to silence him, on principle, but he was laughing just as much, even he could not help wincing a little at the memory.

It was Ron's turn to whistle in awe. Harry blushed and bit his lips but he couldn't help guffawing.

"The bastard," repeated Seamus with feeling. "He got us."

"He got you," laughed Dean.

"And Lavender, Padma, Michael... Stop laughing, Nev. If Luna had been there, it would have been you."

Longbottom gave a frustrated sigh. "It was me, last night."

"Serves you right."

So, it was with no small awe at Snape's performance on a razor edge that Neville asked Constanz how the man fared.

The healer had no clear idea at this point in Snape's therapy of the history between this former student and this professor and saw nothing amiss in the question, since they had all fought on the same side. In his opinion, Neville was a dedicated, kind-hearted young man and it seemed in character that he would enquire about one of his teachers. Not so long ago, he had even been one of the Aurors who stood guard at Snape's door and he had never displayed any of the initial bitterness of somebody like Seamus Finnegan.

It seemed just the thing to take Neville in as they were walking by Snape's room to say hello. In his opinion, Snape needed more visits to realise people did not judge him as unmercifully as he judged himself – a necessary step in his forgiving himself.

To be fair, had Constanz known, he would have thought it even more urgent for the two of them to work through their shared history… And he would have still brought Neville to Snape.

Neville knew Constanz almost since birth and followed him without thinking.

Snape did not realise that it was Neville Longbottom who was saluting him before it was too late to be awkward.

Neville had been brought up to be unfailingly polite. Besides, resentment simply was not in his nature.

So, he saluted his former teacher, vaguely aware that he would not have recognised him if he had not been told it was really Severus Snape in front of him – what with the muggle jogging gear and short hair, the absence of a scowl… And the strangely mesmerizing pearly scars on one side of his face which reminded him of a tiger's stripes.

Then, the "hospital effect" kicked in – this way your mind lowers your sense of intimacy and the social awkwardness that goes with it when you are out of your usual sphere and confronted with half-naked or vulnerable patients. He automatically said, because it was the polite thing to say, and because he felt a little closer to Snape after all the time he spent investigating the man, that he hoped that Professor Snape was getting better at last.
Severus nodded, feeling at a loss. He remembered – though he generally tried to forget it – that Neville's parents were there, too, and asked if he had been visiting them.

"Yes. I come every week, since I was a child. Except when I was at Hogwarts, of course."

"Of course." Snape was considering the courage and affection it must take, to visit vegetable-like parents with such devotion, when most patients in the incurable ward were more or less abandoned there by their relatives.

Before he had time to consider, Neville politely added that he might pop in again on occasion, if it was agreeable to the Professor.

Surprisingly, it was.

At least, Snape supposed it was, after he had actually uttered the words and could not take them back.

It was only in the process of telling his day's news to Luna that Neville thought about his past Boggart and shrugged. All that had been so long ago...

It also helped that Luna was Luna and that she said that it had to be hard for poor Professor Snape, who was so much like the dominant male in a herd of Crumple-Horned Snorcacks: he was bound to decline if he had no one to protect. It was so kind of Neville to indulge him, but then, she expected nothing less of him.

She was so adorable that he just had to kiss her.

And this is how Neville Longbottom started visiting Severus Snape.

At first, he only stopped to say hello on his way out. They shared the usual pleasantries about the weather and the news, but Neville's remarks were received more warmly than they deserved or he would have ever imagined.

He supposed they were precious glimpses of the real, ordinary life outside and felt sorry for Snape who probably did not see many people, if at all.

In fact, Snape welcomed Neville's presence, because he took it as a precious sign of forgiveness. He knew very well how awful he had been to Neville, whatever his reasons at the time, and he marvelled after every visit at the fact that the young man did not seem to bear any grudge. His conscience demanded that he try to at least be cordial to make what amends he could.

§§§

"Azkaban? You want me to speak of Azkaban?" asks Severus, more to buy time than anything else. Trust Constanz to always bring up what he least wants to speak and think about.

Silence.

Silence.

"I've often heard people compare that experience to hell," says the healer.

"Trust me, Azkaban must be very close to the real thing."

Silence.
"Of course, I only stayed a fortnight."

Silence.

Silence.

"I'm not sure I would have made it if Albus hadn't arm-wrestled my exoneration from Barty Crouch."

Silence.

"For a very long time, I would wake up from a nightmare and imagine that everything, but the nightmare, had been a dream and that I was back in Azkaban."

Silence.

"Part of me hated Black because he kept his sanity – what little he had to begin with – for seven years while I wanted to die after a mere few days there."

Silence.

"The swine! To think that he survived Azkaban and that he could die with his soul intact!"

Definitely not silence, as the chair makes awful screeching noises on the tiles.

"He was an Animagus," says Constanz, rather matter-of-factly.

Fortunately, and not unexpectedly, the screeching stops.

"What?"

"A dog Animagus."

"I know, but what does it..." Constanz watches as understanding sinks in and lets him draw his own conclusion.

"So... He wasn't so much better than me? He had to transform..."

§§§

The time he spent with Snape rapidly enlivened Neville's visits to his parents. He never stopped to consider the irony of the situation.

There was nothing funny in visiting the Janus Thickey Ward. It might be part of his weekly routine. It was a duty. Sometimes a heartache. An occasion to dream of what might have been... but it was never a pleasure.

Not since he was six years old when he had spent a long time drawing a picture for his parents, and his father drooled all over it. The nurses all gushed about how sweet he was, while Gran tried very hard not to cry and he... He was dying of shame because he was realising for the first time that his Daddy was not a real Daddy but some kind of freak, and his Mummy, too.

The adult Neville soon felt that he missed something if he could not share at least a few words with Snape, just to be able to talk to someone in that ward who would recover—who was recovering... Who was normal.
So it did not discompose Neville when Snape told him to "stop this out of place formality, Longbottom. Don't call me Professor, please. I'm no one's professor any more... And certainly not yours by a very long stretch."

Neville answered softly, "Oh, but you were... Much more than you think."

An awkward kind of silence settled while both men digested the other's words.

Snape coughed a little. "Well, I'd prefer for you to call me Snape, or even Severus if you feel like it."

Neville felt a little pride at that.

Was it a coincidence, then, that he began to talk about his work with Snape, explaining how he had dropped out of the Aurory to go back to Herbology and to regularly ask the wizard's advice about the uses of particular plants in potions?

And was it only boredom that led Snape not only to answer but to ask very pertinent questions, and even to make a few suggestions?

§§§

"Everybody makes mistakes."

Severus snorts. "And some people keep making them."

"Names, please."

"You know very well I am speaking of myself, Constanz. I have more than twenty years worth of mistakes to deal with."

"I never presume. And for all I know, this applies to many people who fought in the war."

Severus answers pensively. "Do you know, I agree with you?"

"O blessed day."

"Putting on Voldemort's cursed ring when you know exactly what it is, certainly tops reporting a silly prophecy."

§§§

"Who are you, Severus Snape?"

It is an established tradition in their sessions that Constanz will always ask him this question at one time or another.

This time, Severus almost smiles as he answers, without any hesitation, "A survivor."

§§§

"You can do it, Hermione. You know we'll just go to the library and to Severus's chambers." Draco's voice was as kind and encouraging as he could manage but he was beginning to think that bringing her to Malfoy Manor was a bad idea. She did not shake but she was much too pale.

She tried to rally and joked, without much conviction, "The things I do for Harry and for Professor Snape."
Draco squeezed her hand, but she could see that he was nervous, too. "You're doing it for all of us. For you, but also for me and my parents. Really, if I hadn't thought you'll be better when the visit is behind us, I wouldn't have agreed to it... but you just have to say the word and I'll Apparate us back."

She swallowed, her heart sinking at the view of the exquisite Italianate portico already visible just up the alley. "I know." Once again, she mentally consigned Harry to hell.

"We're tracing the last Muggleborns on the Continent," he insisted, after she had agreed to his madcap scheme. "Neville is in Africa, so I have to go myself and Ron is busy covering for me at the Ministry. Besides, you can't ask him to be gracious to Lucius Malfoy, not after what he did to Ginny."

"He could go in your place and you stay here to deal with Malfoy?"

"Hermione! Can you really picture Ron all by himself in Muggle Europe?"

She had reluctantly agreed that it would have been a disaster and then he had gone for the kill. "I just don't have the time to deal with Lucius Malfoy right now to see how to prepare the house and... everything. It's not like you don't get along with Draco! He'll be just too eager to smooth things over with his father for you, and you know you're much better at planning things than me."

Lucius Malfoy was very much _persona non grata_ everywhere they could have met. The Ministry still insisted that he avoid being seen in public. It was Percy who took on the task of telling him this time. "Or it will be at your own risk, Mr Malfoy. Remember what happened to Pius Thicknesse when he tried to go to Flourish & Blotts? We can't provide protection."

"You can't or you won't?"

"Both. The public wouldn't understand."

Harry did not want Lucius Malfoy at Grimmauld Place, even if he was not there and there was no way she would ask the Weasleys to let him come to the Burrow. Harry had suggested Hogwarts before leaving, but Headmistress McGonagall had been adamant that the consequences would be disastrous once the knowledge of his presence leaked out through any of the students, as was bound to happen. They simply could not afford another controversy so close to Severus's trial.

This was the reason why she was about to enter Malfoy Manor to arrange Professor Snape's stay at Spinner's End with the one wizard who could cross his wards... and she was already feeling close to hyperventilating.

_Breathe, Hermione. Short. Slow. Breathe._

_You can do it._

"You can do it, Hermione," echoed Draco, without realising it. "If it's any consolation, this morning, Mother was no better than you are now."

Hermione blinked as the words registered more slowly than usual. "Really?"

"Really. She's the only one of us who never took the Dark Mark. She was just dragged along because she was in the wrong family... I should say families... at the wrong time. It doesn't stop her from caring and feeling guilty."

As if on cue, the first person she saw when Draco opened the door was Narcissa Malfoy.
The two women eyed each other cautiously before Mrs Malfoy smiled ruefully. "Welcome to our home, Miss Granger. This time, welcome."
Draco offered an arm to Hermione, Narcissa walking ahead. They went through several grand corridors that Hermione had thankfully never seen. She was aware that her hosts were taking her through a lot of twists and turns, most probably to avoid the main drawing room.

Portraits looked at her with open curiosity, perhaps bemused that she returned. She was thankful that none began to shriek or insult her like Mrs Black's painting did at Grimmauld Place.

They arrived at a set of massive, lavishly ornate doors that Draco, stepping ahead, opened theatrically. He invited her to enter with a sweep of his arm, while Narcissa smiled at her, obviously waiting for her reaction.

"Oh…!" she gasped, taking in her surroundings with an obvious if inarticulate delight.

Draco grinned at his mother who smiled with indulgence, and no small relief, at their guest's enthusiasm as she walked around, taking in the fact that the Malfoy Library was almost as huge as that of Hogwarts, but organised in stacks of open bookcases and working alcoves rather than floor-to-ceiling shelves.

The lower ceiling also had a more intimate and studious feel, although, unlike Hogwarts again, there were much more windows. They provided a clearer light, softened by the strong wall colours and oak floors for the comfort of the eyes. The bookcases themselves were impressive works of art rather than merely utilitarian furniture, and did not hold just books but, here and there, magical curios or rare artefacts.

Mesmerised, Hermione could not help scanning the shelves as she walked, discovering at every turn major reference books and treasures that made her sigh or exclaim every time she spotted one.

It was very obviously the work and pride of many generations, and her very own vision of paradise. She smiled, already convinced that she could easily forget the rest of the castle and even the lord of the manor himself if she could only come and visit his library regularly.

To her great surprise, some shelves were reserved for Muggle works, literature and art as well as technical or scientific books.

Draco's teasing stopped her from asking how the library of a high ranking Death Eater came to have a Muggle section.
"This is something you won't see often, Mother. Hermione Granger, speechless."

Hermione turned at once to Narcissa, blushing a little. "I'm sorry, Mrs Malfoy. It was very impolite."

"No, no! It's a pleasure to see you enjoying what is my husband's greatest pride. Do not mind Draco," she said with an indulgent glance at her son, "he's just like all the men of this family, it's very hard to drag them out of here."

"As if you don't spend hours here yourself?" answered Draco in kind.

"Well, if I want to spend time with your father or Severus when they are home, I have little choice in the matter."

Draco gave her a sceptical look but concentrated on looking through the alcoves, searching for something. At last he asked, "Where is Father, by the way? We were supposed to meet him here."

His mother's mouth curved unhappily. "He's currently speaking with Head Auror Dawlish. Some urgent business that apparently could not wait," she said, her tone betraying that she did not believe for one second in the urgency of the call.

"What a coincidence!" scoffed Draco with bitter contempt. "I suppose Shacklebolt or Potter are nowhere to be found at the Ministry."

Hermione raised inquiring eyebrows at that. She knew that Harry was somewhere in France or Italy. She did not know where Shacklebolt was but, if Draco's and his mother's body language was any proof, this situation was not uncommon.

Draco explained, "Whenever they leave the Ministry, and particularly when they don't tell the big wigs of the MLE where they're going, Dawlish or his cronies take a fancy to check on my father's whereabouts. I'm not sure if it's a case of getting their fun when the champions of democracy can't see them or if it's some paranoia that makes them suspect some kind of collusion or conspiracy."

Hermione did not like what she heard and began at once to ponder the implications.

She nearly missed Narcissa Malfoy's bitter comment, "...At least, he confines himself to Floo calls now that Harry Potter openly visits us. It's been some time since he sent a search squad."

"Are you telling me the Head Auror is misusing his authority?" asked Hermione, clearly concerned.

Narcissa shrugged fatalistically, which made it even worse, in Hermione's opinion.

It was Draco who answered for them both, "When was the last time a Head Auror didn't? We just don't enjoy the favours of the Ministry anymore."

Hermione did not like what Draco implied... which was something that Neville scoffed at openly... and Harry and Ron admitted only with reluctance, because of the loyalty they had sworn to the Ministry.

The Ministry of Magic was not just a somewhat inefficient and corrupt institution. It was also a very interfering body which collected a mass of seemingly useless information on the whereabouts of their citizens. Pieced together, all this from the very beginning had enabled the Death Eaters to run a very efficient police state, which would not have been possible if the seeds had not already been there.

She only had glimpses of this as a student, but it was obvious even then that various political factions tried to use it to their advantage and that Ministers Fudge and Scrimgeour had very few misgivings
about using their power to indulge those who supported them, or to frustrate their opponents' efforts.

She pursed her lips and mentally kicked herself for her own idealism, which made her assume for so long that Wizarding Britain was as much of a democracy as Muggle Britain.

Her parents used to rant about the system, but they had never hesitated to act to support their own opinions, and the democracy of Muggle Britain let them. Hermione had not fallen far from the tree, as she proved when she launched her S.P.E.W. campaign in support of the house elves.

But except for the enslavement of the elves, every failing of the wizarding world she had then attributed to the war.

Now, as an adult and with a clearer view of the greater picture, she realised that there might not have been a war if the wizarding world had been less harsh a place and if the political situation had been more democratic.

Tensions were inevitable with people from so different backgrounds as the Muggleborn and the Purebloods, but the Ministry and Hogwarts were entrenched in their isolationism.

They had been unable to understand, let alone recognise, the rapid changes in the Muggle world and never even tried to help the Muggleborn part of the population to fit in. They had all but abandoned the Muggleborn, leaving them to blunder in a foreign world and to inevitably antagonise the Pureblood as they tried to fend for themselves.

Draco coughed and she realised she was daydreaming. She looked up to Draco, who smiled gently but gestured discreetly, directing her gaze to Mrs Malfoy. She was standing painfully uneasy, no doubt wondering if Hermione was remembering the time when Bellatrix had tortured her in this very house. It was obvious she had been unable to forget. Draco stepped up to his mother, put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed encouragingly. She leaned against him and smiled feebly.

It was the first time Hermione saw them together, without an audience. She knew Draco adored his mother, and Narcissa Malfoy's actions during the war had proved how much she loved her son, but Hermione had not expected them to show their feelings so openly, or Mrs Malfoy to be so visibly fragile, emotionally speaking, when her rare glimpses of the woman had left her with the impression of a cold, disdainful lady. Yet another one who wore a mask in public.

Forgetting the last of her own anxiety at once, she smiled encouragingly to the older woman, who answered with a grateful smile of her own. Mrs Malfoy finally asked, "Draco is telling me you're to be Severus's healer once he leaves St Mungo's?" It was obvious that she had very mixed feelings about this.

"No." Draco's mother could not hide her relief and Hermione chuckled, "Believe me, I'm as relieved as you are. Healer Constanz is and will remain his personal healer, just not officially any more. I'll barely be entitled to the title of Healer-In-Training by the time of the trial."

Draco teased, "Confess! What you really dread is wearing those awful green robes."

Narcissa's eyes lit up with sudden mirth. It completely wiped off the last remnant of the guarded look that could be so easily mistaken for pride. "Oh, I can believe this! No woman in her right mind would choose to wear that colour."

"You're right, Mother. They call it lime green, but it's more like vomit green."

Hermione grinned, "Rumour has it, the colour was chosen precisely to hide certain kinds of stains."
"Eugh!" said Draco, mimicking fanning his face with his hand to clear the odour. He turned to his mother. "Clearly, we'll have to make another donation to St Mungo's, but on the express condition that they change the colour of the healers' robes."

"Spoilt rich brat!" scoffed Hermione.

"How ungrateful of you!" countered Draco. "I just meant to save you from a horrible fate."

Narcissa was smiling openly now, as she listened eagerly to the friendly banter. It was so good to see Draco relaxed for once, and with someone his own age. She turned to her son's friend. "Tell me, Hermione… I can call you Hermione?" she asked.

"Of course, Mrs Malfoy."

"Please, call me Narcissa. I'm not that old or that stuffy, you know."

"I… This is unexpected, but I will try… Narcissa."

"How sweet!" cooed Draco ironically, though he was rather pleased with this turn of events. "We should go to Madam Pudifoot's to keep up the saccharine mood."

"You can take me there next time we have tea," Hermione answered in kind. "I've never been but I suppose you're a regular."

"Pansy dragged me there once when we were fifteen," he shuddered theatrically. "Their colour scheme is even more tasteless than St Mungo's, and the fare is just as insipid as in your cafeteria."

"Draco?"

"Mother?"

"Shut up, please. I was trying to talk to Hermione."

Hermione chortled as Draco mumbled, "Sorry", pretending to be vexed.

"So, Hermione, what exactly will you be doing with Severus?"

"Not much, except providing the so-called medical supervision necessary for his release from St Mungo's, signing the medical reports for the Ministry…" She sighed. "...And acting as a buffer, if at all possible."

"A buffer?"

"Can you imagine Harry Potter and Professor Snape confined together for weeks at Spinner's End?"

Draco was laughing into his sleeve but Narcissa shook her head in dismay before asking with humorous resignation, "I suppose it was Auror Potter's idea?"

"Who else?" sniggered Draco sotto voce, which earned him a hard look from both women. He held his hands in appeasement, then mimed zipping his mouth. Both his mother and his friend rolled their eyes at him and, when they realised they had the same reaction, grinned at each other.

Mrs Malfoy shook her head again before adding,"Severus is not as bad as you were expected to believe when you were his students, but..." She smiled wryly. "Let's say he has his quirks…" Draco snorted and Hermione bit her lip because she felt much like doing the same. "And Harry Potter…"
Narcissa pouted. "Well, I wish you good luck. You will definitely need it!"

She beamed, and Hermione did not realise immediately it was not at her but at something behind her.

She turned and met Lucius Malfoy's cool gaze.

She could not help tensing up, as she watched the tall, haughty blond lean with both hands on one of his ridiculously ostentatious canes, waiting for them to join him.

Hermione was surprised to note how tired he looked when he inclined his head to greet her, much more coldly than his wife – but then she never expected Lucius Malfoy to be cordial.

Narcissa Malfoy tsk-ed in disapproval. "Lucius, don't you dare play The Lord Malfoy with Hermione. We're past that." Her husband's eyebrows nearly reached his hairline at her calling Hermione by her first name and knitted in irritation when she added, "And do sit down before you overtire yourself."

"It wasn't that bad," he said coldly, before turning to Hermione and Draco again. "I wonder how Dawlish knew that Miss Granger was visiting today."

There was an implied accusation in his declaration.

Hermione felt the need to defend herself, "I did not tell anyone, except Harry and Ron, and they certainly did not tell anyone else, but when I met Draco at the Apparition point in Diagon Alley I did not hide either."

"That's true," added Draco, a little defiantly, too. "We did not hide, because there is nothing to hide."

Lucius Malfoy sighed, "Nothing to hide, but still enough for the MLE to warn me against trying to ingratiate myself with the Golden Trio, who have nothing to do with the 'questionable characters' like me."

"What business is it of theirs?" asked Hermione, quite livid now. "I will talk to Shacklebolt..."

"You will do no such thing, Miss Granger," snapped Lucius Malfoy. He immediately added placatingly, "At least, I would not advise it."

Stubbornly, she asked, "Why ever not?"

"Because I infinitely prefer that Dawlish and his friends," he spat out the last word, "come to me openly."

"But he has no right to harass you like that. Draco said it's not the first time."

"And it probably won't be the last."

Narcissa Malfoy put a hand on her husband's forearm as much in appeasement as to claim his attention. "What did he want this time?"

Lucius shrugged dismissively. "The usual."

Hermione watched, dying to ask. Narcissa offered her a thin smile and explained, "Threats, mostly, as if Lucius really has nothing else to do than to plot or Imperio half the Ministry... or war heroes like you. Priori Incantatem..."

"As if I would cast Unforgivables or Dark spells with a Trace on my wand and on half this place."
Narcissa almost smirked and went on, for Hermione's benefit, "Insults, too."

"Mere taunting," amended her husband philosophically. "That's fair enough."

"You seem to be taking it rather well," Hermione said, a little surprised.

"I've known worse."

Narcissa huffed unhappily, "Luce..."

Her husband frowned slightly, silently conveying that he did not want to discuss this further, but Narcissa was not so easily subdued. There was a silent battle of wills, an exchange of challenging stares. Finally, Malfoy rolled his eyes and turned to Hermione.

"I don't like it of course, but I understand Dawlish... to a point. He had been Confunded several times by Yaxley and several of the undercover Death Eaters who worked at the Ministry. He's convinced I was one of them."

"Were you?" Hermione asked, curious.

"No... But he was just a small fish in the pond," he said with obvious disdain. "I would have if the need had arisen and he obviously fears that I still would."

"Then it's rather foolish of him to contact you so often." She frowned, "He's just offering you the opportunity to curse him."

"I suspect this is his intention."

"You think he's baiting you?" Malfoy nodded. "But what for?"

"There are many people who would feel relieved if I were returned to Azkaban. I don't think Dawlish really believes I am that stupid but rather that he hopes I would try."

"What did he say, this time?" asked Narcissa sternly.

"Cissy..." he trailed meaningfully, glancing at Hermione.

"No, Lucius. It is too late for that kind of pride. It doesn't help!"

He pursed his lips disdainfully, "Really, he is running out of ideas. He could think of nothing wittier than to mock my cane. Too ostentatious by half, for some scum out of Azkaban. It's supposed to have people wonder if I need to compensate for something."

Hermione thought that the Head Auror's comments were rather spot on, since she had just thought the very same thing herself. She bit her lip to try to hide her smile, until Malfoy added, in much lower tone, "He suggested that it would be funny to have it investigated in public and let everyone see how..." He pursed his lips and trailed off.

She noticed that Narcissa reached for her husband's hand – obviously for her own comfort as much as his. He smiled tenderly as he squeezed her fingers but she insisted, "This is not nothing."

Draco was trying to catch Hermione's eye, behind his father's back. He was shaking his head and his hand urgently, to prevent her from asking the questions she was keen to ask.

Lucius turned to his son, as if he had actually seen this. "Never mind, Draco. Some things have to be known between..." he sniffed, "allies."
He stared straight into Hermione's eyes, frowning. She had the feeling that he wanted her to look away. She refused to be intimidated and stared back, stubbornly.

"I see you prefer long sleeves these days," he said coldly. She gasped in outrage and only Draco's pleading face stopped her from responding with a scathing retort.

"So, I suppose you can understand why I myself prefer to have people focus on my cane," Malfoy's words were the last thing she would have expected. He chuckled without real mirth, "My knee never healed properly after Azkaban... My first time in Azkaban, I should specify. Courtesy of Head Auror Scrimgeour."

Her eyes were instinctively drawn to his legs. She could not see anything through the thick robes of course, but he lifted the hem a few inches for her to see, and, for the first time, she noticed that one of his shoes had a much thicker sole than the other. She looked up in dismay and met his icy blue eyes.

"I tire easily without support. I've even been known to limp, imagine that," he sneered, daring her to comment. "Some people in the Aurory found it an endless source of merriment when I was arrested. No doubt it would amuse many people to know... and to watch."

Hermione knew she was crimson by now, ashamed by her own assumptions and angry about the implied mistreatment. "I refuse to believe that decent people would find anything remotely funny in the situation," she said resolutely.

"You would be surprised," he answered dryly. "Thinking that I have an overgrown ego stops people from looking closer." Through gritted teeth, he added, "I hate to be pitied."

"So do I."

They shared looks, free of hostility or suspicion now. They truly saw each other for the first time, Hermione thought. She smiled, still a little shyly. "But the way you're dealing with this is very Slytherin, I think."

Lucius Malfoy straightened up, and somehow some of his tiredness seemed to leave him. "Yes." The pride he put in his short answer was almost tangible.

Narcissa beamed, her eyes shining with the same kind of pride.

Behind his father, Draco winked, but straightened up a little himself.

§§§

"There's nothing worse than humiliation, Constanz. Nothing."

Silence.

"At least for a Slytherin."

§§§

There was a brief knock and the door opened, the person on the other side not waiting for an answer.

A man entered. He started when he saw that Snape had company.

Minerva barely managed not to gasp, as she recognised Pius Thicknesse, the ex-Minister. She could not help clutching Severus's hand that she had been holding a little harder, before realising how this could be interpreted and letting go – not as subtly as she thought.
"I'm sorry," Thicknesse said. "If I'd been aware you had a visitor, I wouldn't have presumed..."

"No, no, Pius," interrupted Snape, standing up from the bed where they were sitting together, reading. "Come in. Please."

Minerva stared at them both in surprise. She had never known that Severus was on friendly terms with the ex-Head of the MLE. "You've met Minerva McGonagall, I suppose?"

"Of course," he said, with painstaking and somewhat stiff courtesy. "We entered the Ministry the same year, I recall. Elphinstone Urquart regretted your leaving for years. He often said that the day you chose Hogwarts was a great loss for the Ministry."

Minerva inclined her head, quite unable to say anything beyond "thank you".

She was surprised to hear the unexpected kindness in Severus' voice as he asked, "I suppose you come to say good-bye then?"

Thicknesse sighed. "Yes," he said bitterly, "I am free to go." Shoulders slumped, he snorted, "Free!"

"Lucius..."

"Malfoy has been more than helpful, just like you. It's just..." He shook his head, and looked Snape in the eyes. "You must think I'm ungrateful when nothing could be farther from the truth."

"I know. Don't worry."

"Well, as you said, this is good-bye. You know where to find me." Very conscious of Minerva's presence, Thicknesse stood a little awkwardly, as if he didn't know what to do next.

Severus extended his hand and Thicknesse shook it but didn't let go as expected. Instead, he drew Severus into a hug that the younger wizard returned without hesitation.

At last, Thicknesse took a step back. "Take care," he breathed.

Snape shrugged, "I'll try."

The ex-Minister turned only briefly to Minerva. "Professor." And he was gone.

Minerva stared at the door for quite a while. "I didn't know you're friends with Pius Thicknesse." It was almost an accusation.

"Minerva... Not you," he said reproachfully.

"What?"

"Do you know why Pius Thicknesse was here?"

"He said good-bye, I suppose he's leaving the country." Too many people had left Magical Britain, and she did not think very highly of them.

"He will in a few days, but right now he's only leaving St Mungo's. He's been staying in the Janus Thickey Ward for three months."

"Ooh!" said Minerva, always as quick to sympathise as to fly off the handle.

"It was the third time he tried to kill himself, and it wasn't a cry for help. They saved him only
because Constanz had him on suicide watch."

"The poor man," she cried. "He must be full of remorse, even if it wasn't his fault, Imperioed as he was."

Snape sneered, "He is, but apparently still not as much as some people would want him to. I suppose you remember Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley in 1982, when you acted as my bodyguard?"

Minerva did remember. There had been a lot of painful scenes – and just as many dangerous ones. "And I've been so cold to him!" she said, all of a sudden filled with guilt.

"He's been acquitted of everything he'd done under Imperius, but people still treat him like a Death Eater. I have been the one to advise him to leave Britain... at least for a few years." He pursed his lips bitterly, "I often wish I could do the same."

Minerva went to the window. She stood there silently for a while. "Would you? Really? Leave everything you know..." Her voice trailed, as she could not voice her real meaning. "Would you leave me?"

She heard him approach. He put his arms around her shoulders and they both looked down, watching the hunched figure of Pius Thicknesse walk briskly and disappear behind a corner.

"I don't think I can do it again," he said softly, with an obvious regret.

"It won't be the same, this time," she objected. "People know that you're a hero."

She felt him stiffen. His grip loosened as he took a step back from her, and this was all the answer she needed.

With grim determination, she stood still and said, "I will write to Pius Thicknesse. I don't know what I can do to help, but at least I don't want him to believe that I despise him."

§§§

As she left Snape's room, Minerva stopped briefly to exchange a few words with Ron, who was on guard duty with Auror Savage and feeling rather bored, since the senior Auror was not one for chit-chat.

Having gone off duty, Ron decided a pint of beer was what he needed before going back home, and walked to the nearest pub. As he exited St Mungo's, he got a glimpse of shining dark blond curls, and swaying hips under crisp nurse robes.

He stopped and gasped, "Lav?"

The witch was energetically walking away, and he called out louder, "Lavender?" and then, as she did not react, he ran after her and tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned, and he found himself looking into a pleasant if surprised face - the wrong shape, the wrong age and with the wrong eye colour.

The woman took in his Auror robes and gave him a frightened look. "Sir?" she asked uncertainly.

"I'm sorry," he blurted. "From behind, I mistook you for someone else."

"I have done nothing wrong."
"No, no! Miss – For a while, I just thought I saw my… My girlfriend," he blurted. "It was stupid."

"Oh! I suppose I must be flattered." She smiled.

Ron smiled back, a little wistfully. "Yes. She… She was very pretty."

"Was?"

Ron's face darkened. "The war."

"I'm sorry. I should have guessed. So many of us lost loved ones."

"Yes. He sighed. "Well, I must be going. Sorry for disturbing you."

He drank several pints before heading back to Grimmauld Place, wondering why he kept thinking about a dead girl since he broke up with Hermione.

Next time Seamus suggests an evening out, he thought, he would agree and it would be surprising if he could not find himself a date.

But next time Seamus offered, he did not feel like it and he went home.

As usual.

§§§

It was on Halloween that Snape revolutionised Neville's life once again.

The Professor looked uncharacteristically... sad was the first word that came to mind.

Neville politely enquired what the matter was and Snape began by snapping at him, then abruptly cut himself off and apologised. "I'm sorry, I fear I can only be a poor companion today."

"Two years ago, I would have gone into shock if I'd heard an apology from him. "Don't worry. I can see you're out of sorts. I hope it's nothing too dire."

Snape snorted, "You can say that."

"I won't bother you. I hope you are better next Thursday."

Before he reached the door, Snape's voice stopped him,"Neville..."

He turned back to Snape, stunned to hear his first name.

Snape himself seemed just as surprised to have used it. He swallowed before saying, "You do realise that you were the child of the Prophecy as much as Harry Potter?"

Understanding dawned on Neville's mind. He was to spend the night at Grimmauld Place because Ginny, Ron and Hermione were all working and did not want Harry to be alone on the night of his parents' death.

Today was also an anniversary for Snape. A sad, morbid anniversary.

"Not after Halloween 1981, I wasn't. Voldemort definitely chose Harry." And you surely wished often enough he had chosen me. He had no time to think where the thought came from… or the bitterness, but he certainly felt bitter.
"He did. And yet, like most people, the Dark Lord thought that there was only one possible way to accomplish a prophecy, and therefore only one possible antagonist for him." To Neville's astonishment, Snape laughed, if rather mirthlessly. "He couldn't have been more wrong. I didn't believe in prophecies at the time, you know, but I've learned the hard way. There is always more than one way of fulfilling them. It was not for him to choose... the Chosen One."

"But he marked Harry as his equal."

"He linked his fate to Harry Potter's, which is quite different."

Before Neville had time to ponder his meaning, Snape added, "You see, since your last visit, Constanz brought me a Pensieve so that I could see Minerva... Professor McGonagall's memories of the Battle. Oh, she told me, but it's certainly not the same as actually watching them, I'm sure you'll agree."

Neville gazed, fascinated, as Snape ran a hand across his face and left it in front of his mouth, as if to hide. He seemed so lost, suddenly.

Neville had an epiphany, "You've seen the dead."

It was in a blank voice that Snape answered, "The dead and the wounded."

For a time they sat silently, sharing their sadness.

At last, Neville shook himself out of his meditation and noticed that Snape was staring at him, waiting for his attention to return.

"I also watched the courage and the bravery. I saw you."

Neville shrugged. "I couldn't let Harry down. I couldn't let the Light down. You did much more."

"You did what no one else could do."

"It was nothing to what Harry had to do."

"That's where you're as wrong as the Dark Lord. As wrong as the rest of them," Snape hissed angrily. "If Harry Potter had been killed, Voldemort would have been vanquished all the same and I've no doubt it would have been by you."

Neville gasped and raised both hands in denial, but Snape stood up and marched to him. For a brief moment, Neville expected to be hauled up by a lapel but he just leaned to make his point. "Do you remember what you did at the Ministry, the day you stupidly followed Potter to rescue his godfather?"

Neville gulped, "I was the clumsier of the lot, as usual. I didn't want to be left out, so I went but I wasn't much help and I broke the globe holding the Prophecy."

"Yes. And by doing that, you destroyed the prophecy that was marked as concerning Harry Potter, and reclaimed your place."

Frightened by Snape's closeness and intensity, Neville began to protest. "No! No! I did no such thing..."

"Of course you did!" Snape took a step back, restoring both their personal spaces, and exhaled loudly.
Neville released the breath he was unconsciously holding but had no time to feel relieved because Snape snorted, "Do you really think Harry Potter knew what he was doing when he faced Voldemort? Do you think I had the intention to betray Lily when I reported the Prophecy? Do you think I even realised it applied to real people, people I knew? I was about your age. I didn't think that far."

"You reported the Prophecy to Voldemort?"

Snape blinked in surprise, "You didn't know?"

"I... No."

"I would have thought Potter told you. There seems to be so little he didn't tell about me." Bitterness was dripping off Snape, suddenly turning him back into the Potions master of Neville's memories.

With all the hindsight knowledge he had gained about the man, Neville realised that Snape was preparing himself for his rejection or his anger. He expects me to hold the prophecy against him.

"So, we have at least one thing in common," he said, trying to lighten the mood. "We didn't think before acting, and it didn't turn out very well in the beginning."

Snape very nearly gaped at him, "I never thought of it like that."

Neville shrugged, "Well, we both acted stupidly, when all's said and done."

"But some more stupidly than others." With a wry smile, Snape added, "I was talking of myself, in case you wondered. There's no question of who caused the more damage."

"But it all turned out well in the end."

Snape shook his head and considered him as if he was seeing him for the first time.

There was a little stretch of silence.

At last, Snape said, "I have watched you for seven years. I must admit I wasn't surprised to see in the Pensieve what you did during the battle."

"Sir?!

"Don't call me sir!" Snape gritted his teeth and almost snarled, "It's certainly not the time to use the courtesies I don't deserve. Just before you came, I decided to... apologise and to let you know why I was so horrid to you. Do not make it even more difficult than it is."

Damn Constanz for reminding me that you're entitled to the truth.

Neville shook his head in wonder. "Why would you do that?"

"For closure, if you like? I'll soon leave St Mungo's and I may never have another opportunity." He swallowed before adding, "Or the courage to do it."

"There's no one more courageous than you," exclaimed Neville.

"Says the man who defied Voldemort all alone in front of all his Death Eaters? The man who proved to be the most Gryffindor of them all and claimed Godric's sword? Even Harry Potter couldn't, you know. I tell you again, I have no doubt that had he failed to kill Voldemort, you would have done it."
Neville did not know what world he was in. It did not make sense for Snape to praise him so.

He tried to remember how they came to have this discussion. "Why were you so horrid to me, then?"

"Why was I so horrid to Harry Potter?"

Trust Snape not to make things easy.

"Because..." He was back in class with Professor Snape. He gulped. "Because he was the son of... of Lily and James Potter."

Of course, Snape sniggered. "Apart from any... personal issues you can't even begin to understand, I had to be seen to loathe the Boy Who Lived. Why would I have been kinder to the son of Frank and Alice Longbottom? Don't you know they were the icons of the resistance against the Death Eaters?"

Neville obviously looked too doubtful for Snape's liking. Impatiently, he insisted, "Have you ever wondered why your parents were targeted by the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Junior?"

"They were Aurors. They must have supposed they were better informed than most."

"Don't you think that Barty Crouch Senior, who was their boss, would have been a much better target, and easily reached through his son?"

Neville gaped at him. Snape smiled – not a pleasant smile – and asked, "And why do you think Voldemort chose Harry Potter over you?"

"Because he was a half-blood like himself?" He felt like a fool to repeat the official conjecture. He just knew that Snape was going to sneer at him, because Snape never went with the tide.

And so he did. "Please! I am a half-blood like Voldemort because we both had Muggle fathers. James and Lily Potter were both magical, even if Lily was Muggleborn. Many people consider Harry Potter to be of much purer blood than me. This was only part of the appeal for the Dark Lord."

He began to pace in front of Neville, speaking to him as if he was lecturing. "The Prophecy stated that 'the One with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord' would be born to those 'who have thrice defied him.' I don't exactly know about James and Lily at the time, but he decided that your parents didn't qualify because they had defied him much more than three times."

He stopped to watch the effects of his words on Neville. "I'm not convinced it's a serious argument as far as prophecies as concerned, three being a symbolic number more than anything else. Indeed, most Death Eaters in the Inner Circle were not convinced either. There was a lot of debate about it. You would have been the most obvious choice."

Snape silenced Neville with a glare before he even opened his mouth to protest.

"Most convicted Death Eaters were sent to Azkaban because of your parents, you know. Your mother..." He stopped, searching for the right words. "She had her ways to get them to confess and your father to gather the evidence. They were the most powerful team of Aurors in their time. They completed each other perfectly."

Neville was fascinated and did not really notice the sarcasm lacing Snape's last words. "I didn't know that. Gran only told me that they were heroes and very famous... But no one was as famous as the Potters..."
Snape interrupted him, "Only after their death, and only because their son survived the killing curse while the Dark Lord disappeared. Your parents were the true heroes of the Light at the time."

Neville bit his lip, lost in thought. "Gran has a box full of newspaper cuttings about my parents but I never realised..."

Once again, Snape interrupted him, "Bellatrix Lestrange was totally, absolutely mad."

They exchanged a meaningful glance. Neville remembered facing her at the Ministry. He shuddered.

"But she was brilliant, and more insightful than most. She was the only one who suspected that I was a traitor, do you know that? Thankfully, she had so many personal reasons to dislike me, Voldemort never took her seriously."

Neville shook his head, waiting with bated breath for Snape's next words.

"She decided to target your parents because she believed them probable candidates for the Prophecy rather than because she wondered if they might have something to do with the disappearance of the Dark Lord."

There was another heavy silence.

"You think too highly of me," Neville sighed. "And I'm glad that I wasn't the Chosen One. Harry is much more powerful than me."

Clearly frustrated, Snape snorted. "I don't know why you should think Harry Potter is more than you. You've been just as instrumental in Voldemort's fall as he was."

"So were you!"

Snape ignored the words. "That last year at Hogwarts, you made it very difficult for me to maintain the fiction that you were not powerful and dangerous enough for the Dark Lord to bother with you."

The words sunk into Neville's mind, opening up the totally unexpected perspectives. "You..."

He stopped, unable to finish. Snape let him collect his thoughts, with a wicked little smile.

"So that's why you always treated me..."

"Like a moron, yes." Snape confirmed. "Like little more than a squib, barely able to perform basic magic... All for the benefit of the Death Eaters' children so that they could relay it to their parents."

"I was almost a squib," he said, as Snape's face turned furious.

His former teacher exploded, of course. "Merlin! When will you stop berating yourself?"

Neville's eyes almost bulged out of his head.

"You were the worst walking disaster it has ever been my misfortune to teach," Snape drawled, "but you could have done much better with a more... sympathetic Potions master... seeing that you're quite the prodigy in Herbology."

Quite thunderstruck by the tribute, Neville breathed out, "Thank you."

"I'm not sure what for," sighed Snape as he finally let himself fall in his armchair, clearly exhausted.
Confronted once more with the older man's vulnerability and mercurial moods, Neville felt another unexpected rush of... He did not know how to call the warm, protective feeling that he felt. He smiled softly. "May I ask..."

Snape straightened at once. Good, Neville thought as he was once again glared at.

"I'm tired. You're entitled to the truth, but I'll answer only one more question. Choose well."

Neville looked at him almost affectionately—or so it seemed to a puzzled Snape, and asked, "After Gran trounced the Aurors and escaped..."

Snape chuckled.

"...When you told the Carrows that Hogwarts could dispense with me... You knew I was listening, yes?"

He shrugged. "What do you think?"

Was the young man actually laughing?

"That I just asked a stupid question."

He was.

Snape could not help smiling back.

"Ten points to Gryffindor."

§§§

"Who are you, Severus Snape?"

Severus chuckles. "Are you not tired of the game, Constanz?"

"Never."

"I confess I find the question intriguing. I don't even try to anticipate it and find ready-made answers anymore, or to justify myself, but I'm somehow looking forward to the question."

"Ah?"

"It feels as if I'm waiting to discover myself what my next answer will be. What I'm going to learn about myself."

"Then I'm sorry to disappoint you, because this is the last time I'm asking you."

Severus gapes at the healer. After a time, he asks, although he suspects he knows the answer, "Why?"

"Because your therapy's finished. Your compulsory, Ministry-ordained therapy, I mean." The old wizard smiles affectionately, "You're of course welcome to make an appointment."

Silence.

"I... I will think about it. I should be relieved but I feel like you've just pulled the carpet from under my feet. I do not feel ready."
"This is why I say you don't need to be coerced into coming to me anymore. You must now choose to do it."

Silence.

"So, for the last time, tell me. Who are you, Severus Snape?"

"A man. Just a man."
Chapter Notes

As usual, this chapter benefited from the helpful editing and advice of Tra8erse. Remaining mistakes are entirely my own. I suppose by now you are used to my rather cynical vision of the ruthlessness of the wizarding world, but I must warn you that there are mentions of suicide as a legal alternative to death penalty.

Old, but I'm not that old
Young, but I'm not that bold
(OneRepublic, Counting Stars)

Harry Potter had sent Snape a thick file via Seamus Finnegan, in anticipation of their first meeting. Snape received it gingerly and opened it with the caution usually reserved for toxic substances or explosives.

There were heaps of newspaper cuttings—all the circus, in fact, that he missed since he had fallen into a coma.

Potter had done a truly impressive job of ensuring that the world knew exactly what he, Severus Snape, had done for the Light... And he wanted nothing so badly as to hex the silly, meddling little fool. It was far worse than what Constanz, Kingsley or Minerva had told him.

Of course, the ruddy Gryffindor had to rub Voldemort's face in the fact that Snape had betrayed him. He wished he could have done it himself... But Potter had no right to claim that Severus had done it for the love of Lily. No right to shout Severus's most private secret for all of Hogwarts to hear! For the likes of Rita Skeeter to write about it—and for the whole world to read and have their fun!

Severus forced himself to calm down. He wished he could stride along the corridors of St Mungo's as he used to do at Hogwarts when he needed to think, because the three steps he could take across this room before having to turn round were a very poor substitute. (When he escaped after the trial, he would find himself a place where he could walk, walk, walk...)

So, everybody knew just how absolutely and completely he had made a fool of himself where James Potter's wife was concerned. How he committed himself to slavery for Dumbledore to protect her and then her son, even when Albus had not held his side of the bargain.

He punched the back of the chair in frustration. For all his faults, even Dumbledore had kept Severus's secret for fifteen years. And in just one minute, Potter proclaimed it to all ends of the world.

Now he understood the gossip and the commiserating looks from the medical staff. It was much, much worse than anything he had feared.

Healer Babbling had known him as a student and then as a junior teacher. He had wondered about
her lack of discretion but thought that she remembered his devotion for Lily as a schoolmate, when she was in fact discussing the public display on which his private life had been for months. The proof was in his hand.

Witch Weekly had even made fun out of his misery with one of their odious, silly polls. *Severus Snape: Virgin or Sex God?*

As his hands curled around the offending rag, he wondered if Potter was mocking him by sending him this exhaustive press file, full of drivel. Was it payback for all the times he had taunted him for being an attention-seeker?

He nearly gagged all over the magazines. His life reduced to sordid speculations, vile gossip and treacly sentimentality!

He was ready to set the lot on fire, and the whole of St Mungo's with it through sheer will, when Constanz, sly old fox that he was, showed up for an impromptu session.

Now he felt even worse reading how the Wizengamot dared to make use of his memories – his painful, *intimate* memories – in the war trials. His fists clenched at the thought.

He could not regret that Alexia Yaxley used them to help Draco and Lucius. He would have willingly offered them to see them free... But to know that politicians had used his misery and his plight to damn all surviving Death Eaters!

They had shattered any kind of defence his former mates tried to mount by implying they could have turned coat "*just like Snape*". This made him feel like he betrayed them for a second time.

Not that he would have hesitated for one minute to send the members of the Inner Circle to Azkaban. They deserved it ten times over, but it was so wrong to pretend you could just quit after you had taken the Dark Mark. It was wrong to say that anyone who stayed with the Death Eaters was totally, irrevocably bad for falling for the lies and manipulations of a madman. Did Avery, Gregory Goyle, Vincent Crabbe and so many others ever have a single chance to escape serving the Dark Lord with fathers like theirs? And what about the way Azkaban turned into psychopaths weak, misguided fools like Rabastan Lestrange?

Revanchist politicians never learn anything. They have to humiliate when they are just supposed to dispense justice.

You only had to add *'Slytherin'* to the public branding of the Death Eaters – which many did – and you had all the seeds to feed the old prejudices all over again, to give rise to another round of dissension and civil war in the next generation.

There was one thing they could be grateful to Peter Pettigrew for: that he had been a Gryffindor – even if this was not enough to shut up the Slytherin haters.

Judging by the declarations made in the heat of debate, a sizeable part of these politicians were quite eager to send Snape himself to Azkaban, to spare themselves the embarrassment of his continuing existence as they had tried to do with Lucius.

If the worst came to the worst, he would be prepared. He would not put vain hopes in the judicial system. Oh, he would stand up to the Wizengamot and the whole wizarding world, never fear, but after that... Spending the rest of his life in Azkaban was not an option.

Snape shook his head. The most pressing matter right now was Harry Potter himself.
In the heat of the battle and its aftermath, it was easy for an impulsive young man like Potter to get emotional. He did not set any store by Potter's glowing reports to the media of his so-called heroism, after years of an equally vociferous hatred. If one knew how to read between the lines, it was obvious that Potter had become cynical about the press pretty soon, and was an expert at deflecting intrusive questions by redirecting the attention to someone else.

He probably had a good laugh every time he used Snape's name with seeming admiration to get rid of the unpleasantness.

It was impossible to believe anything else. Not when Auror Potter had months to ponder over his file and over the fact that Severus Snape may be a paedophile on top of being a Death Eater, the murderer of his beloved Dumbledore and the cause of his parents' death.

On the other hand, Lucius was positive that Potter genuinely wanted to help – but why would he do this?

Why?

He racked his brain with wild hypotheses. He could not help comparing Harry Potter to Neville Longbottom.

Longbottom did not send ambiguous messages through others. He came to see Severus and speak to him.

Here was the proof of Potter's true feelings. He was ready to help, but his heart was not really in it. So, he had to do this through some kind of obligation.

Maybe Dumbledore had left some information after all... and he could not choose anyone else but his dear Harry, of course – so that dear Harry could try to save someone once more, even if it was only Snape... and so that Snape would once more have to be grateful to a Gryffindor and to a Potter.

Yes, it would be just like Albus to kill two birds with one stone so effectively. Severus gritted his teeth, as he envisioned the old man smirking to himself while sucking on one of his disgusting lemon drops with relish and wiping his sticky fingers on his beard.

It was to spite the old bastard, even if he would never know it, that Snape had decided to tell the truth to Neville Longbottom.

This helped him to clear his own thoughts and gave him hope, because he had been able to explain himself to at least one of the boys of the Prophecy.

He did not know if this would ever be possible with Potter, but he could at least take some comfort from the fact that Neville understood. Neville, who turned out to be a kind and very decent sort – one he, no doubt, would be proud to remember, and even to miss.

Needless to say, Snape did not sleep much during the days around Halloween, between reading Potter's files, rehearsing what he was going to say to Neville – without spilling out the whole truth about his parents.

What little sleep he got was haunted, unsurprisingly, by the familiar figures of Dead Lily and Dead Harry.

Constanz sighed, but setbacks were to be expected.

Neville's visit had gone much better than Severus expected but it did not comfort him as to his
meeting with Harry Potter. Neville was by far the better man. Potter was… He did not know what Harry Potter was these days, but he was not his friend.

He could not be.

It was absolutely, totally impossible.

§§§

"Impossible? Really?"

Hurt more than usual, Severus sighs. "I know Harry Potter is a noble," he spits out the word with some venom, "heroic Gryffindor with a saviour complex the size of Ben Nevis, and that I should be grateful for his condescension. And you don't have to smile like I am an imbecile."

"Severus!" gently chides the healer. "You know very well that I would never judge you or tell you that you should feel any kind of obligation to anyone, be it Harry Potter or anybody else."

"You're certainly the only one, then."

Constanz answers his sullen glare with an indulgent gaze. "And if I am smiling, it is only because I remember you telling me... What? Two months ago...? That you could never be friends with any of your former students, and certainly not with someone like Neville Longbottom."

"This is not the same," counters Severus rather lamely, even to his own ears.

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When Harry Potter finally opened the door of Snape's room on the 4th of November, both men eyed each other warily. (Snape had noted with mixed feelings when he read the date of the appointment that it was the eve of Guy Fawkes Day. He could not help wondering if people would celebrate his own sentence by burning his effigy or with fireworks.)

They were punctiliously polite to each other and began almost immediately poring over the legal documents that Harry brought with him, avoiding any discussion that did not strictly concerned the matter at hand. Not that Harry did not try, but Snape was totally unresponsive.

St Mungo's had given 10th December as the estimated time of Snape's release. As a consequence, his trial was scheduled for 17th January and was expected to last the whole week. Until then, he would be kept under protection at a Ministry safe house.

This was the MLE-approved plan – the way it was publicised. As a matter of fact, Snape would leave St Mungo's as discreetly as possible on the 27th of November, which was a Saturday. He would be placed under close protection in his own house in Spinner's End, with daily medical attendance in addition to a weekly visit from Healer Constanz.

The hospital would be on short staff for the week-end, which should ensure less attention and, even better, Shacklebolt's spokesman would not relay the change of circumstances to the press before Monday – "for security reasons".

Leaks would then make it public knowledge that Head Auror Dawlish travelled almost daily between the Ministry and a stronghold in the Hebrides, kept under high-level protection for cover.

Snape had never really hoped to be allowed to go to Malfoy Manor, and Lucius had strenuously argued against his associating with them before the trial. So, he expected to be sent to one of the
remand cells at the Ministry and tried to plan accordingly.

It was obvious that Potter had his own agenda for sending him to Spinner's End, but it was the best opportunity for Snape, even if this meant being stuck with Aurors in close quarters. After all, it was his house, his wards – and his secrets.

So, it was no hardship to thank Potter with genuine sincerity for his efforts on his behalf.

All that was needed now was for the Ministry to give the go-ahead, as soon as the Aurors finished inspecting the old terraced house under Lucius's scrutiny and not exactly benign protection. (Snape smirked inwardly, both at the opportunity it offered Lucius of a little payback to the Aurory and as he envisioned how Dawlish's goons would make fools of themselves while officially refusing to admit it.)

If he had known what kind of conditions Harry Potter had already secured for him, Snape might not have watched him leave with such equanimity. He might not have sighed in relief, feeling that this first meeting had not been too bad after all.

He would never admit this to anyone, but he was scared when he had read the brief but courteous message announcing Potter's visit.

Until he began his therapy with Constanz, he had believed for what seemed like an eternity that the boy was dead – because nobody had thought to tell him what really happened. For days, he had been drowning in the guilt of sending him to his death for the sake of Albus Dumbledore's Greater Good.

He still could not help feeling that he had failed Lily. It did not matter that the boy had somehow managed to survive yet again, he had been meant to die.

§§§

"Just like you?"

"Like me?" scoffs Severus. "There's a great difference between a child who's meant to be sacrificed from the first and a Death Eater turncoat who has to atone for his own stupid choices." The bitterness which laces the last words confirms that they are not Severus's own words but the sort of nasty remarks he had heard often enough in the Order.

Silence.

Severus makes a wry face even as he is chuckling, "And of course, Dumbledore couldn't find any other way to inform the boy that he must let Voldemort kill him! It had to be me."

"What did you feel then?"

Silence.

"Anger... Betrayal... Then, I had to rack my brains to work out how Harry Potter would ever listen to me – let alone believe me. Really, that was the weakest point of Dumbledore's plan..."

He clenches his fists and his voice hardens, too.

"Until I realised that it could not work unless I was dead or actually dying. Potter would listen to a dying man's last words or thoughts, never to those of Dumbledore's murderer."

Silence.
Severus does not stand up and pace, as Constanz expected. He leans back in his seat and looks at the ceiling, as if looking for help there. The healer knows then that it is what he must have done at the time, when he tried to understand what was expected of him and how to do it.

He has a hard time hearing Severus's next words, so low and subdued they are.

"You may believe yourself strong... or resigned... or cynical... but when you actually face the cold fact that your own death is just one of several carefully calculated factors in a war strategy, you feel very, very small."

For once, there is just plain vulnerability on Severus's face. No bitterness, no anger, no defensiveness.

"You must have felt very lonely," Constanz says.

"Not so much lonely as abandoned."

He grabs at his hair, obviously hard, and closes his eyes in the memory of anguish.

"Why me?" he asks more forcefully. "Why always me?"

He opens his eyes, and they are moist, like the eyes of a child who was betrayed so often that he does not know how to cry anymore, except that he still does. "It's not easy to accept that you've only ever been but a means to an end."

Silence.

Silence.

Severus adds sarcastically, "And I'm not telling you about the guilt I felt when I imagined meeting Lily in the afterlife and having to explain that I sent her son to his death."

Harry was left almost speechless when he found himself in front of a polite Snape, despite the rumours he had heard from St Mungo's staff and his colleagues—that the former spy was much mellower and, well, simply human.

Harry was feeling out of his depth since he had sent Snape some files with a note to inform him of his visit. He had not slept very well either. He was not sure of his welcome (he was rather sure of the contrary) and wondered if he would have the maturity to act as he was supposed to do when faced with Snape's hostility or resentment.

Last night, he was tossing and turning in his bed, plagued with the memories of Snape dying in the Shrieking Shack, finally falling asleep much too late to get any real rest.

He went there with high hopes, but what if the man refused to forgive him for having left him to die? What if he ruined his chances to get to know the real Severus Snape because of his own blasted, impulsive temper?

In the end, he felt like walking on eggshells during the whole meeting.

Snape looked washed up, which raised Harry's concerns at once. It was also rather difficult not to stare at the pearly scars that criss-crossed the left side of his face down to the base of his neck and to stop himself from thinking how he got them.
What was worse, he did not seem to really care what Harry was telling him about the preparations for the trial, except to offer punctilious thanks for being allowed to go to Spinner's End.

When he spoke, he was sarcastic to boot, even if it was not aimed at Harry. He had a jaded view of the world, of human beings in general and of politicians in particular, which seeped from every single one of his comments about the documents, the procedure and the news Harry was giving him.

He dismissed every mention of his importance in the war. It was very disturbing for Harry who remembered Snape always standing up to everybody and everything.

It began when Snape was left blinking and speechless for a horrifying full minute when Harry assured him that neither he nor his friends had ever believed any of the accusations of abuse.

At long last, Snape found words to thank Harry for his "good opinion" but he sounded so dubious that it was the most depressing thing he could have said.

It was just as clear that he listened politely but did not believe a single word of Harry's carefully rehearsed thanks and assurances, so the praise died on his lips.

Snape did not believe him.

He would not believe him. Everything he said proved that he was still trapped in the war, when everything had to be black or white and he assumed the role of the perpetual villain.

He found himself explaining in great detail that, no, there was no death penalty anymore in the country. No Dementors left. Really. Even at the Ministry. (That question left Harry speechless, for its nightmarish implications. Maybe the attack on Barty Crouch Junior had not been an accident… Maybe that was not the first time Dementors conveniently kissed a prisoner before any embarrassing revelations could come to light.)

Yes, Harry ranked highly enough in the Aurory to know beyond any doubt. Besides, Minister Shacklebolt had made it a matter of principle to rid the country of all Dementors. (As he said this, an icy feeling spread along Harry's spine as the idea struck him that Kingsley, who fought all his life against mistreatment and torture, had expended a surprising amount of time and energy to achieve this goal in the very first days of his nomination as Interim Minister, when there were much more pressing matters to settle.)

Snape was so clearly incredulous that he found himself repeating Percy's declarations to the Press, as he made very clear the Ministry's stance on the subject of death penalty. "Our country does not apply death penalty anymore. No court will pronounce a death sentence ever again. However, we also believe that it is the exclusive choice of a convict to refuse a life sentence. In other words, if they are willing to rid us of themselves, we will grant them their wish. Upon written petition, they may be authorised to drink poison willingly, provided it is without assistance and in the presence of at least two impartial witnesses to ensure they do it by their own, free choice."

So, yes, the way out was poison. People called it The Final Solution – a name made popular by the Prophet.

The next set of questions made Harry feel like a student again, as he tried to describe exactly what kind of poison it was; the time of action and documented effects… and then he found himself listing all the high-ranking Death Eaters who had chosen the poison, and the very few who had not, Amycus Carrow being the most notable.

He did not realise that Snape was coldly cataloguing those amongst his former friends who were
dead, who were still in Azkaban... And who Harry had not named – those who managed to avoid capture. Lucius had been unable to tell him, as it was a closely guarded secret, but they both preferred to know against whom they would have to remain on their guard.

What was clear in Harry's mind was that Snape was weighing up the pros and cons of choosing the poison for himself.

Why had Constanz led them to believe that Snape was better, since he obviously was not?

Harry wanted to shake his former teacher, to make him understand that no, he was not a murderer... that he was nothing like the other Death Eaters and that they were not going to let the Wizengamot convict him.

He was struck by a sudden memory of Snape, seconds before Voldemort attempted to kill him. He had instinctively drawn his wand but almost immediately desisted from using it. He had not protested any more and accepted Death because it was futile to resist.

This was a blinding realisation for Harry. Snape was not uninterested or detached. He just expected the worst of his trial, whatever Harry said, and forced himself not to care about his own fate, because there would still be poison in the end.

This would have been insulting had it not been proof of despair rather than of defiance.

Harry was mature enough now to understand that it was a deeply ingrained defence mechanism but he still dreaded to see it explode and to find himself once more on the receiving end of Snape's frustration.

He would not be surprised – but he knew how it would hurt, now that he did not hate the man any more.

*Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,* thought Harry as he closed the door. He had not been able to speak about the measures they were taking for Snape's protection and privacy when he would leave St Mungo's. He would explain next time.

Probably.

§§§

"Miss Granger. What are you doing here?"

There was no real surprise in the question, only a faintly raised eyebrow in a familiar and yet very different face. She took in the changes in a blink, already trained not to gape curiously at patients, even when there would have been every reason to do so.

She tried to make her Healer-in-Training robes billow in response, which drew an appreciative chuckle from Snape.

*Humour? Really?* She shook her head to herself. Close association with a certain Slytherin and even with his parents taught her that they were totally different from what she had learned to expect from them. Professor Snape was one of the family, after all. It was only logical.

Besides, her swift promotion to Healer-in-Training had been a surprise even for her, since it happened in half the time it usually took. Healer Constanz – she was to call him Alfred now – insisted that she earned it fair and square because of her dedication, and not through any kind of favouritism or opportunism, and that she must wear her robes proudly. She did, because she knew
she deserved it, but the timing made her doubt that the promotion only reflected recognition of her hard work.

"It's Healer Granger now, Professor Snape. Healer Constanz has managed to move me from the maternity ward to assist him... So that I can help you when you leave St Mungo's."

He frowned, instantly suspicious. "What do you mean, 'help me when I leave'?"

"Harry didn't tell you?"

The glare she received was answer enough. Harry had not told him. The coward.

"He just said that I will be under 'protection'," he spat the world like an insult, "until the trial."

"Uh..." was all she was able to utter.

Trust Harry to shy away from telling Snape the whole truth—that the Trio would be in charge of him, in his own home, and for the full duration of the trial. Trust him to leave her to bear the brunt of the former spy's ire!

Severus found funny the way Granger's eyes and her whole face darkened in anger and her hair actually twitched. She had always been that transparent and impulsive, and one did not need Legilimency to know she was going to give Potter a hard time at the first opportunity. He could not afford to be too rude to Auror Potter, but it was good to know someone would do it for him.

A dangerously sweet voice dissipated Hermione's last hope that Snape had really gone soft with the end of the war. "Tell me, Healer Granger," only he could make the title sound almost-but-not-quite derisive, "what is it Potter was supposed to tell me?"

"You're of course to stay under medical supervision for the next three months." He nodded cautiously. "And, err... Well... I am the medical supervision."

"I absolutely refuse to have therapy sessions with anyone except Alfred Constanz," boomed Snape at once.

"No, no..." She felt her cheeks heating dangerously, to her considerable annoyance. "I didn't mean it like that, Professor." He pursed his lips into a thin, almost white line she remembered only too well and gave her his most suspicious glare. "Healer Constanz is still the healer in charge of your case, but he can't leave St Mungo's to stay with you at Spinner's End."

"I do not need him... or you, for this matter, to 'stay with me', as you phrase it."

"This is a legal matter, totally out of our hands," she said apologetically. "You must be attended by a Healer for at least two hours a day."

Snape sniffed with disdain but did not comment further.

"I am still a trainee, so it's easier to pull me off the duty roster. And I have helped to investigate the charges. It will be better than having a complete stranger."

She tried to remain serene and composed under his assessing look.

Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin. She felt just like King Belshazzar of the Bible: weighted, weighed, judged... And found lacking.

She put up her chin. Snape spoke at last, not as hostile as she had feared. "Tell me the truth, Healer
Granger... Who am I to be saddled with in my house, apart from you?"

"Err... Harry and Ron?"

He closed his eyes, pinched the sides of his nose and groaned, "I should have known."

She could not help adding impulsively,"It's because we're on your side, Professor!"

She expected a snort, some shouting and vicious remarks.

It was quite unnerving that he just watched her in meditative silence.

He did not dismiss them on principle, she could tell. That in itself proved that he had changed for real, but there was something else in his eyes, more disturbing.

Something close to... Fear?

§§§

She smiled wryly as she entered Grimmauld Place. Harry was waiting for her with Ron, eager to know how Snape had taken the news about Spinner's End – well, Ron was obviously much less eager.

He was not looking forward to the stay in Spinner's End, unlike Harry. Fortunately for him, he would only be needed for a few hours a day, since Harry had pompously promoted him to 'Liaison Officer', which meant he would be running errands for Harry most of the day. He did not mind in the least.

So?" asked Harry, unable to wait longer than the time it took her to hang her coat on the entrance rack under the loathing look of a disapproving but mute Mrs Black. (Lucius Malfoy had condescended to teach Harry – on Draco's request, "and only to oblige Miss Granger,"– the Portrait Silencing Spell every Head of House was supposed to know to maintain order in their own home.)

She slowly turned towards Harry and put her hands on her hips. "You've got some nerve to force me to explain to Professor Snape that you will be actually living with him for nearly two months with only Ron and me to chaperone you a few hours a day. Have you no consideration for my safety?"

Harry paled. "As bad as that?"

She tried to glare at him but ended up chortling. "Actually, no. Not at all."

"Did he shout?" Ron asked, a little nervously. He knew he was an Auror and Snape technically in their charge, but he just had a hard time envisioning himself having the upper hand with the wizard. Snape still managed to make him feel inadequate when his gaze travelled from his head to his foot and back, before he let fall a cold "Auror Weasley" in greeting.

"No." Hermione's answer interrupted his musings. "If anything, he was rather resigned but... Not in a bad way, if you understand what I mean... Open-minded, I think, even if you'd have to look hard to find any enthusiasm."

Harry whistled. "Wow! That's almost a miracle." He grinned. "Thanks! I'm sure he wouldn't have reacted half as well if I had told him myself."

She swatted him because he deserved it, but they were still laughing when they sat down to dinner.

It was only as she settled herself to sleep that she realised.
Spinner's End.

Lily Evans.

Harry had neatly rationalised and explained why he did not want to have any other people but the three of them around Professor Snape, because of the high stakes they were all playing for.

He never said a word, though, about his own potential interest in Spinner's End and their former teacher's memories, but they all knew the truth: Harry was obsessed with Snape's life because he identified with him. She did not like to think what he hoped to gain by imposing himself on Snape.

Snape had every reason to feel trapped, even if he was determined to make the best of it. Not only was he forced to revisit his past with Constanz in therapy, but he would now have to do it with Harry in the worst of contexts, while preparing for his own trial for war crimes. He had every reason to fear their interference in his life.

First thing in the morning, she would ask Alfred — bully him if need be — to speak to Harry. Because say what you want, but Harry would not take her warnings seriously if the Healer did not hammer them into his mind first.

§§§

When she arrived at St Mungo's, there was already a note for her, requesting her presence later in the day at an appointment with Aurors Potter and Weasley in Constanz' office.

So it was in the presence of a very grim Hermione that Constanz warned Harry and Ron on how to treat Snape.

The Professor had years of experience in deceiving the most cunning of people and in allaying suspicions about his real feelings.

He knew how to appear steady and sure of himself whatever the circumstances.

Years of a "perfectly justified paranoia" blended with survivor's guilt made his possible reactions under the stress of his pending trial totally unpredictable.

Harry interrupted the flow. "Could you speak in plain English, please? I understand we must be cautious, but about what? Do you expect him to become violent? To attack me? To try to escape?"

Constanz shook his head, which triggered a worse kind of fear in Harry. "Do you mean he could try to harm himself?" he breathed, the memory of a speechless Snape unable to believe Harry Potter did not loathe him, coming to his mind.

Hermione immediately tried to soothe him. "Healer Constanz is positive that Professor Snape intends to stand trial and be helpful about it. Aren't you, Alfred?" she asked, just a little too sharply for someone supposed to be confident about what she had just said.

Thankfully, her mentor did not disappoint. "Indeed, he needs the closure." But Hermione's smile froze as he added, "However, I don't like the way he pretends he can't make projects beyond the trial because of the uncertainty of the verdict. He's a cunning one who will hide everything he doesn't want you to know..."

"As he did with Riddle," objected Harry. "This is how he survived that long."

"Obviously. Still, what worries me is that I don't see any signs that he's planning to live beyond the
trial."

Predictably, this comment drew a gasp from the Auror.

Ron, shifting on his feet, did not say anything but he kept glancing between Harry's and Hermione's worried faces.

"Mind you, I am not saying that he's suicidal, or he wouldn't be leaving St Mungo's. I just think that he may very well decide in perfectly cold blood, I'd even say scientifically, that he'd be better off dead than alive after the sentence."

Harry blurted, "He asked me a lot of queer questions about death penalty and the Final Solution."

Ron's raised eyebrows proved he did not understand Snape's thought process, but Harry physically deflated in front of them.

He had gone through a drastic re-evaluation of his life after Voldemort's death, when he felt he was literally useless now that the deed was done. Without Ginny, his two friends and the Weasleys to anchor him and help him distance himself from the revelations of Snape's memories, he might not have been alive today.

And he was the adulated Saviour, not the Man Who Killed Dumbledore on his orders and whom half of Britain had wanted dead before Harry's revelations... Not to speak of the accusations of paedophilia which were not even public yet.

Suddenly, he wondered if he could do it and if what he had to offer Snape was worth it.

Constanz was practically feeding Harry's doubts as he explained, "You must understand that he never planned or expected to survive the war after Dumbledore's death. I know it's a great pressure to put on you both, particularly you, Harry, since you'll spend most of your time with him... But it's imperative that you change your view of Severus Snape and treat him like a..." He hesitated before choosing a neutral word, "...like the ally he's always been. It's the only way to help him admit that he can expect more from life than permanent antagonism or dislike. And don't err on the other side either. He won't stand fawning, flattery or false regard."

"Or else?" asked Ron, quite curious.

"He may give up on his own defence." With some exasperation, Constanz added, "There's no saying what kind of lies he'll just let pass and I don't need to tell you how they will be used by the prosecution."

"I don't see what we can do if he just doesn't care," insisted the redhead stubbornly.

"It's not that he doesn't care. You can't begin to imagine how the accusation of abuse affected him..." Oh yes, I can, Harry thought, "...but he was so ready to go down in history absolutely vilified that he's still convinced nobody realises how crucial his role was in the war. That's why he can't bring himself to believe how much his losing his trial would affect the new political order and all our lives too. I know Minister Shacklebolt tried to convince him, but it is almost impossible for him to accept that, suddenly, anyone other than the Malfoys or Minerva McGonagall would care."

"But it's not true!" cried Harry.

Constanz explained kindly,"For a very long time, there was never anyone to back him in public except Minerva McGonagall, and she just as publicly tried to kill him in the end. Do you think it is easy to live and to just turn the page because the war is over?" Harry gaped at Constanz, while
Hermione whispered, "The war isn't over for him. Not with this trial to come."

Constanz nodded before adding, "He does not care about his reputation because he's given up on it years ago. One more lie, one more slander or one more betrayal is hardly anything for him – or at least, that's what he's trained himself to expect."

Harry sighed. "What would you have me do, then?"

"At least show him genuine respect and refrain from harping on past grievances."

"I tried. I swear you I tried. I even thanked him. He just didn't care. He didn't believe me."

"Is it surprising? Did you expect him to fly into your arms on your first visit?"

"No, but… Oh! Well, I know it's going to be awkward."

"Yeah," confirmed Ron. "Like trying to pet a hedgehog."

"But we won't give up! Really!" promised Harry.

Ron shrugged with a reassuring smile at Hermione and she answered in kind. She did not really worry about Ron, who had matured more than she had ever hoped. She counted on him to leave behind his childish dislikes and to act at least neutrally during a professional assignment, as long as he was not forced to spend too long a time with Snape.

Harry was another matter entirely. He had planned to stay almost constantly at Snape's. She knew how devastated he would be if anything happened to their former teacher. He had staked so much on Snape's case – one could even say all his credibility and career prospects – but this was another level of pressure to put on him, considering his past dealings with the Professor and the probably unrealistic expectations he had built in his mind about a better relationship with the man.

Whatever his good intentions, one could expect a clash of personalities. At the height of his Occlumency powers, Snape's famous self-control had always run very thin where Harry was concerned and Harry was still very much the same impulsive, uncompromising person, always prone to instinctive, visceral reactions.

How did I ever consent to yet another mad scheme, she asked herself for the umpteenth time. To trap the two of them in Professor Snape's house for nearly two months was pure insanity, even with Ron and herself to act as a buffer for a few hours each day.

She forced herself to focus on Constanz's more practical instructions. "If you notice any kind of compulsive or prolonged scratching, particularly in the area of his Dark Mark, warn Hermione or me at once. Discreetly, of course. It's also very important that you don't restrict his activities when at home, as he will need every possible outlet to release tension: household chores, brewing, gardening, moving furniture, sports… He used to be an almost obsessive walker and jogger, and trained at least twice a week in combat. It would be nice if he could somehow restore his muscles more naturally than in the gym."

Ron shook his head at Harry, plain disbelief on his face. As Harry did not react, much too self-conscious and – Ron supposed – guilty about Snape again, the redhead blurted, "That's all very well, Constanz, but he's going into protective custody. We'll certainly not let him outside the house before the trial."

The old healer beamed at them, "Of course not. I wouldn't dream of your endangering him in any way but… I've heard he's got a garden so he can go outside as much as possible and if you could
indulge him in little bouts of martial arts..."

"Martial arts?" Harry and Ron looked at each other in dismay.

Constanz smiled. "Unless I'm much mistaken, it's still part of Auror training, isn't it?"

Harry's voice lacked conviction as he answered,"Yes."

"I'm not sure it would be wise..." began Ron.

"Only if he's willing of course. But, if you could manage a few warm-ups between the two of you, he's missed it so much, it's sure to catch his interest..." Constanz voice trailed off suggestively.

"You'd have to go gently of course, but we can safely expect a steadier recovery now that he will be able to brew his own strengthening potions and won't pour them down the sink anymore for fear of being poisoned." Startled, Harry raised his eyebrows at Hermione who confirmed the truth of it with a brief nod.

"Downright paranoid," muttered Ron.

"Exactly, Mr Weasley, although we can reasonably hope getting his strength and magic back will go a long way in changing his view of the world. It feeds on his feelings of physical helplessness."

Ron flushed slightly. He had not meant to be heard or to be taken so seriously.

"Severus should get better much faster outside the hospital," the healer went on. "I hope being in his own environment will help him restore his fighting spirit. If you provide him with a challenge, he could even be almost totally recovered by the time of the trial. So, you see, you won't need to restrain yourselves too much."

Harry and Ron traded looks again and made faces at the same time.

Ron snorted. "I'm not sure I'll measure up. In fact, I'm very sure I won't. Snape may be a convalescent, but the only time any of us managed to best him, it was only because he was out of his mind about Sirius Black and never expected the three of us to Stun him at the same time. I'm not about to volunteer for turning myself into a mat for him to wipe his feet on," he said bluntly.

Harry chuckled, "Same here."

Hermione joined them in merriment, but it was Constanz's laugh that was the heartiest, "Oh, but imagine how good this will be for his morale."
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

New chapter, just in the nick of time here in France so that I'm still able to say I posted it in 2016...

Wishing you happiness and a great year!

All hail Tra$erse for her always useful corrections and comments!

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Are we going down or will we fly?

*(Tyron Wells, Sink or swim)*

So, he was to be saddled with the Dream Team.

Severus had expected Potter to jump at the opportunity to interrogate him. It went without saying that Weasley would not be far behind him.

He could even admit that Kingsley was doing him a favour by assigning them to his case and making them his close protection. Whatever their personal feelings, the two young men were Order members and would follow the line decided by Minerva and Kingsley.

He had not anticipated Granger though, and soundly berated himself for it.

When Potter insisted on installing a Floo at Spinner's End, he just assumed that Constanz would call often enough and probably have one of the physiotherapists assign him new routines, too. He never expected they would enlist Hermione Granger, too, and he should have.

She was going to be a hindrance. She used to be much too observant and discerning. Now that she was a healer, she would probably recognise suspect smells or spot unusual stiffness in his limbs that the Aurors would not.

He would have to be extra careful and wait until the last minute to act.

Annoyed, he tapped his fingers on his knee. The trio were obviously still as close as ever, and it would be even harder to fool them.

Harry Potter had impressed him with his professional confidence and his ability to sweet-talk even his hated Potions master. Unless Severus was much mistaken, Potter was Minister material now and Shacklebolt was already grooming him for the role. He did not think it would be long before he was at least Head Auror, the usual first step to power.

Granger surprised him, too, in a good way. After Neville Longbottom, after Harry Potter, and even Seamus Finnegan, here was another of his former students – *child soldiers*, he should call them in truth– who turned out mature, not visibly traumatized and, even more impressively, not hostile.

He had no doubt by now that Hermione Granger was the overachieving intern whose arrival he had
overheard Constanz announce to the staff.

He was surprised at first, when Minerva told him that, unlike Potter, Weasley and Longbottom, she had refused all the very tempting offers from the Ministry. She had been right, of course. They would have turned the know-it-all into an overbearing harridan who would have made staunch enemies as she tried to impose her point of view and turned every promotion and career move into a constant battle.

St Mungo's would be good for her and she would be good for St Mungo's. Her Robin Hood ways would find the proper channel in helping people who truly needed and wanted help—unlike her well-meaning but misguided campaign for the house elves.

And she was turning out very well as a woman too, he could not help noticing.

She now wore neat, short curls which suited her admirably, instead of the unmanageable bush that had used to be her sorry excuse for a hairstyle. Of course, cutting her hair usually has a great significance for a woman. He was curious to know what could have prompted the change. A sentimental rupture? A declaration of independence? A gauntlet thrown at the still very prejudiced wizarding world?

Somehow, he was sure that Narcissa approved of Granger's looks, as she obviously approved of her friendship with Draco if he was to believe her written account of the visits of the Muggleborn to Malfoy Manor.

He had to admit that the young witch was one of the few people who managed to look impressive in the acid-green Healer robes. She had the countenance of someone who had looked death in the face and the confidence of the truly passionate professionals, that could not be affected by the ridiculous robes. Coupled with the no-nonsense haircut, it gave her great poise—something he would not have expected from the insecure, exasperating goody-two-shoes who was forever trying to gain his approval at school – as if a Death Eater could afford to praise a Muggleborn!

He wondered if she was still infatuated with the Weasley boy. This one he still had really to interact with, and he would then have a clearer idea of what the coming weeks in Spinner's End would be like.

The youngest Weasley boy had grown up swallowing every single bait laid for him by the twins and particularly when it came to the most outrageous rumours about their Potions master. It made him even more insolent than his friends, but it had helped Severus immensely with playing the villain with Potter's class, as his outrageous stories and opinions prepared them to always believe the worst about him. Ronald Weasley was one of the most impulsive boys Severus had ever taught: lazy, whiny, stubborn and opinionated… But he also had a keen analytical mind when he could be bothered to use it, a lot of courage and loyalty he must have inherited from his parents.

Severus could not help being curious about what the war had made of Ronald Weasley. You did not get an Order of Merlin just for being Harry Potter's friend, and there was always much more to any child of Molly Weasley's than simply their good looks.

He had heard nothing but praise from Shacklebolt about the young man's Auror training. He indeed looked and acted very professional the few times he had been standing guard for him, even if they never shared more than nods and minimal greetings. A point in his favour was that he did not flinch or react anymore when Severus tried to unsettle him with one of his famous glares.

Snape thought fatalistically that it was only for eight weeks anyway, and then, good-bye Britain. He had much better things to plan than speculating on the lives and personalities of former students.
He snorted. Who was he fooling? Harry Potter's presence at Spinner's End could well prove even more nerve-racking than accommodating the Rat who had betrayed Lily.

§§§

"You will need to be particularly careful."

Snape was lecturing the trio inside the collective Pensieve he had asked Harry Potter to bring from the Ministry, taking them on an extensive visit of his house.

Snape was sans billowing teaching robes these days, but they found that his performance was not affected in the least.

"There are blood wards on the house. Four generations of Snapes and two generations of Princes tied in by my mother, just to say how powerful they are. In fact, it's the only reason I kept that rat hole."

That, and the fact that it's much more difficult to spy on and monitor a wizard in a muggle area.

He warned sternly, "There are also a few innovations of mine in terms of property protection. So, you can enter here with the password of the day..." He was guiding them through the main entrance, "...and here."

Who would choose to enter their own home through a kitchen window, wondered Ron – but then, who was paranoid enough to change their home password every day, apart from Snape, of course?

"...but not here, and definitely not there." Here being a rotten back garden door and there the basement windows. "You'll also want to avoid this area..." - the garden shed- "...this area, that area, and there too, unless you're with me or with Moppy."

So, basically the garden, the whole basement with Snape's lab, the master bedroom and the attic were off-limits.

Harry did not seem to see anything amiss, even if he was to spend practically all his time in the house.

Hermione instantly pursed her lips at the mention of the house elf.

Ron only rolled his eyes, as much at Harry's stern refusal to admit how difficult living with Snape was going to be, as at the prospect of being constantly on edge for his own safety… rather than that of the wizard he was supposed to protect.

With as much irony as he was capable of, he said, "I suppose we're lucky you didn't trap the loo."

"Not since Pettigrew stayed with me."

They laughed at the deadpan answer but stopped abruptly and watched in awe as a glimpse of a memory with a terrified, whimpering Wormtail passed by, showing that Snape was perfectly serious.

Snape then detailed which pieces of furniture were safe and which were not when he was not present in the room. There was no explanation as to the why, certainly not about the how, and no overture either to discuss whether Snape would cancel any of the traps to accommodate them.

They would have to stay on their guard all the time – take it or leave it.

Of course, smiled Hermione inwardly. The house in Spinner's End might be a sad place but not only
was Severus Snape a deeply private man, it was the only place that was truly and solely his. He would not take any type of intrusion well, even one meant for his own good.

The Malfoys, Snape… She could see the recurring theme. It was not that they enjoyed being maligned, but they used their reputations as an armour and consoled themselves with the idea that the joke was on the rest of the world.

Hermione sensed intuitively that the house was another very Slytherin sort of statement. Snape was one the most powerful wizards she had met and he owned a house elf — shame on him! It had to be a choice to leave dusty spider webs to hang down from the ceiling, mouldy wallpaper to peel in the corners or drawer handles to dangle without bothering to fix them. By leaving his family home so shabby and poor, he proclaimed that he owed nothing to the wizarding world. That he refused any kind of compromise, because he did not care what people thought of him.

She could not account otherwise for the sharp contrast between the state-of-the-art, impeccable private lab they were only allowed to catch a glimpse of, and the dreary, almost dilapidated living quarters. It would have been so easy for a wizard to improve them, even without much money. Malfoy had offered to send his elves to refurbish but, apparently not for the first time, Snape only agreed to the cleaning—and then only by his personal house elf.

With some kind of sadistic relish, which confirmed to Hermione the accuracy of her analysis, Snape warned, "It's nothing if not a hovel. You'll have to Apparate in the neighbourhood, here or here, and walk there. The house isn't linked to the Floo."

"Yet," said Harry, for the first time since Snape began the lecture about Spinner's End.

Snape did not answer him and abruptly turned towards Hermione, "Until then, you will need to ask Potter or Weasley to walk with you. The area isn't safe."

Her first reflex was to feel affronted that he thought she might not be able to take care of herself but she quickly reconsidered. After all, she still had more than her fair share of cold sweats when she walked alone in the streets and she dreaded to think what a wizard like Severus Snape would find unsafe.

So, she asked, "What do you mean, not safe?"

"The city council pretend they have a regeneration plan for the area somewhere but there is just nothing left for decent people to wish to live here. You'll find that most houses are run down. There are plenty of squatters, illegals, junkies, drug dealers..." He waved his hand as he stopped enumerating all the dodgy people living in Spinner's End. "It's simply dangerous to walk there. Think Knockturn Alley, and you won't be far off the mark."

Swift visions of the scenes like she had only ever seen on sensationalist TV flashed by as Snape threw strands of memory around them in the Pensieve. Some disturbingly reminded her of the Snatchers.

"You get the idea," he said, with an air of indifference. "It's the sort of area where the police has to escort the emergency services." With a sardonic smile, he concluded, "Welcome to Spinner's End."

The sarcasm was a challenge, too — the same kind Harry used when someone commiserated about his childhood, and he would lift his chin up and say that, yes, he used to sleep in the cupboard under the stairs and it was rather comfy, thank you.

She refused to be like the condescending people who would taunt Harry or Severus Snape for their
background and said softly, "I promise to be careful."

He turned sharply to another memory – in the same way he had ignored her in class when he could not find an excuse to deduct points. "Once you're through the gate, you've nothing to fear. There are charms to repel Muggles, but they are old enough not to draw attention if someone's watching us." He wrinkled his brow and looked at Harry with suspicion. "Unless the Aurors thought it amusing to remove them when they last searched the house?"

Harry shook his head, "The Ministry deemed it more prudent to leave the house as it is."

"Which means they prefer to steer clear of it," concluded Snape with great satisfaction.

Slightly vexed at the implied criticism of his colleagues' competence, Harry retorted, "They could have just torn the place apart, you know."

Snape sneered at Harry's poor attempt at irony, "They're welcome to try." He chuckled, "In fact, they did try when I was on the run. I understand there were casualties."

"Yes," admitted Harry. "They came up with a solution in the end, but it would involve blowing up a part of Cokeworth."

Snape's little smile turned definitely smug.

"I don't suppose you would agree to give any of us full access for the duration of the trial?" asked Harry, for form's sake.

"No."

In the pregnant silence that followed, Snape clarified, "Frankly, even if I were inclined to do so, I currently haven't the strength. Apart from Moppy, Lucius is the only one who has ever had full access, and even he doesn't know how to dismantle the protections."

Ron almost laughed out loud as he watched Hermione's eyes narrow once again at the mention of Snape's house elf. It was just like waving the red rag at a bull.

They had not met the infamous Moppy yet, except through a few glimpses in Snape's memories of his lab or of the garden, but Draco Malfoy had told Hermione about the house elf when the two met for tea which has by now become something of a ritual.

For once, she had come home really annoyed with Draco 'Pureblood' Malfoy – which was good, of course, from Ron's point of view, but not exactly fair. It was not the ferret's fault that his godfather had a house elf, after all, and it was not as if Ron himself did not find it awfully convenient to have even a miserable pain in the neck like Kreacher take care of the worst chores at Grimmauld Place...

But of course, Ron was not such a glutton for punishment that he would say it aloud, unlike that idiot Draco.

§§§

 Feeling strangely bereft at the thought that her hero was a slave-owner, Hermione protested rather blandly, in spite of the fact that Draco had just confirmed it. "Professor Snape really owns a house elf?" Surely, it was a joke.

Draco could not help a guffaw, "Sort of."

Quite affronted that he would speak without giving the matter proper consideration, she asked
"What do you mean, sort of? Does he own a magical creature or not?"

The blond chuckled, "In this case, I'm not sure who owns whom. Moppy is not your typical house elf."

Ignoring Hermione's mulish look, Draco explained, "She was once a Prince elf."

He knew it would catch her interest. "They chucked her out after Severus's mother eloped with her Muggle — supposedly because she knew about it, though I don't know what she could have done if she was ordered not to speak about it... But then, I've always heard that the Princes were nutcases — at least, according to my grandfather. Moppy ended up at Hogwarts like so many others..." His voice trailed off and he flushed unhappily as he remembered Dobby. He went on rather lamely, "In short, she had a sentimental preference for Slytherin and always wanted to be assigned there. When Severus became a teacher, she recognised his mother in a photo while cleaning his rooms."

"Of course, he couldn't do it himself?" she said, forgetting that she had relied on the house elves, too, and nearly provoked a riot in Gryffindor when the elves went on strike and refused to clean the place for fear of picking up one of her knitted attempts at freeing them.

Draco merely shrugged. "Every teacher has at least one or two house elves attached to their service. Of course, they do not do the house chores themselves. When would they have the time with all their duties? And they need help with a lot of things. Tidying up and preparing their classrooms, their teaching materials..." Seeing that she did not relent, he asked, "I understand your parents had their own practice?"

"Yes," she answered curtly, already sure where he was going.

"I don't think they had the time to clean their labs and their home on top of everything else?"

"They employed," she said with some force, "assistants and a cleaning lady."

"Well, in the wizarding world, people employ house elves."

"No!" she said through gritted teeth. "Wizards employ other people. They own house elves. It is not the same. The Elves Law is a very literal copy of serfdom laws. Serfdom was abolished because it was degrading to human beings but nobody ever spoke against the Elves Law."

"It is much more complicated than that," answered Draco sharply, because she was beginning to get on his nerves with her stubbornness. "And you know it, if you're honest. Serfdom was abolished because society was changing and it was not mutually beneficial any more. It is still beneficial for the house elves."

"I don't see..."

Draco interrupted her, "Do you want to know about Moppy or not?"

She glared, pursed her lips but nodded, rather aggressively.

Draco continued, "Once Moppy realised that Severus was the son of Eileen Prince, he could not get rid of her. He had no choice in the matter. She literally threw herself at him, like elves are wont to, and petitioned, or whatever it is Hogwarts elves do, to Dumbledore."

"She was free. He should have..."

"For Pete's sake, Hermione! Grow up! The elves know what they want and what we need. You can't
deny they know what to offer! They're darned useful, as anyone will tell you, and they need us to take care of them. Hermione! What are you... Eh! Wait!"

She had already stormed off, leaving him to deal with the canaries.

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Of course, Hermione being Hermione, she just could not let the elves business go when she found the opportunity.

Harry asked her to plan and organise the details of his stay at Snape's. She pestered the Professor with – in his opinion – absolutely useless, trivial household matters. He dismissed her concerns summarily, "I don't care either way. If it's so important to you and for Potter, you can sort it out with Moppy."

She instantly flared up. "How convenient – though, I must say I didn't take you for that kind of wizard."

He straightened instantly, a dangerous gleam in his eyes, but Hermione, now in high dudgeon, did not care. "How can you have a poor elf tied to your will when you know what it is to serve two awfully demanding masters?"

He froze. Almost literally, as proved by the arctic, condescending tone of his answer. "You do not know the first thing about house elves, Granger. I would have thought you'd done your homework on the subject by now."

"I know slavery when I see it," she said, crossing her arms defiantly. "And it's Healer Granger."

Severus watched, quite fascinated as her hair ruffled up. She obviously still did not have a clue it was doing this and that it revealed her mood. It was subtler that Tonks's changing colours, which had been an endless if hidden source of merriment for him when he taught the metamorphmagus. He had occasionally noticed Granger's hair trying to twist up at Hogwarts in a sure indication of her foul mood, but he supposed that the sheer mass of it weighed it down then and made it much less obvious.

It was all the more comical because she had a rather round bosom, and crossing her arms as she did, unconsciously displayed her assets, too. In fact, she looked very much like one of the manor's peacocks when it was about to fan its tail.

With an infuriating little smirk that she did not understand, he asked a little too suavely, "So, you think that I treat Moppy like barbarians treated their slaves?"

To her credit, she did not get flustered. "I did not say that! But, however well treated, elves are slaves!"

"However badly treated," he said dismissively, "elves are not slaves."

She was outraged. "Yes, they are."

Snape tapped his lips with a finger, while considering Hermione with amusement, which did nothing to calm her ire.

"I can't understand why you won't recognise how fundamentally wrong it is to enslave another sentient being, Professor. You of all people..."
"Miss Granger," he interrupted.

"Healer Granger!" she almost shouted, determined to wrangle proper respect at least for herself, since he did not respect the house elves.

"Healer Granger," he said, with a nod and a smile. She did not realise immediately that Severus Snape knew how to smile, but this mellowed her a little. "It seems you labour under a misconception that is common for people who have never actually dealt with house elves." She opened her mouth, but he was already asking, with a surprising courtesy, "May I ask where and when you obtained your knowledge about the house elves?"

"At Hogwarts, of course. I discovered the plight of the house elves in my Second Year with Dobby. I expect you knew him?" she asked in an arch way.

He merely nodded.

"But it was not until I actually saw how Barty Crouch treated and threw out Winky that I realised something was wrong. I searched the Library and it was very obvious..."

"Yes, I know," he interrupted rudely. "But did you look for information outside of Hogwarts? At the Ministry or any of the other libraries?"

She was startled. "No. I've never had the opportunity."

Snape stared into space, his lips tightly pursed, obviously considering something unpalatable.

"It seems you have never had the means to understand the very basis of elves's needs," he said pensively. Looking her straight in the eyes, he said, "In brief, they are symbiotic creatures."

Startled, she gaped at him. She barely managed, "I beg your pardon?"

"You failed to learn this one basic truth during your little SPEW campaign..."

"It was S.P.E.W." she protested feebly.

His lips twitched but he did not deign to acknowledge the interruption, "...And this is the main reason it was bound to fail from the first."

Her eyes blazed, but she clamped her mouth shut and did not answer.

Remarkable... for a Gryffindor. His voice was a little gentler as he said, "As surprising as it may sound, coming from me, I'm not trying to... disparage your efforts."

They stared at each other until she nodded stiffly.

"You must know," he said with a sadistic relish, "that Dumbledore found your badges so funny that he discouraged your Head of House from explaining the true situation of the elves. He told her that something interesting might come out of your misinformed efforts because your heart was generous. Or something to that effect... The usual sentimental Gryffindorian drivel... I thought he actually liked seeing someone whose knitting skills were even poorer than his."

She huffed a little, but only half-annoyed if her amused pout was any proof, "I think you're just trying to change the subject."

"Not at all. He inflicted too many badly knitted scarves and socks on me over the years for me to forgive easily. Not to mention the colours."
She could not help the little giggle that escaped her. It even seemed to please him but his tone was serious as he went on, "I did not realise for a very long time that Dumbledore really went out of his way to ensure that you and your friends never learnt about the house elves... but also that neither Draco nor myself had a chance to hear Dobby's true story."

She sighed unhappily, "Why am I not surprised?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"I am disappointed... once again," she said, "but I can't say I'm surprised. After what he's done to you, and to Harry, I've come to expect the worst from him."

He very nearly gaped at her, flummoxed to discover one Gryffindor – apart from Minerva – who did not idolize the Headmaster. To cover his confusion, he went into the lecture mode, "The only sources you can find in the Hogwarts Library are the legal texts about the Elves Law, as they're supposed to be discussed in History of Magic."

"Professor Binns never said a word about it!" she interrupted, quite indignant.

"He's never been interested in the subject," he said, deadpan. "Had they allied themselves with the Goblins, I suppose you would have heard about it."

She could not stop a small chuckle and he smiled more openly. This time, she noticed but had no time to make herself ridiculous by staring wide-eyed as he went on, "Binns' deficiency was not an issue, since you were supposed to study house elves properly in Care of Magical Creatures, some time in your fourth year."

This made her forget Snape's smile and everything else. "We did not!" she cried.

"I know. I had... other preoccupations at the time," he said, dismissing summarily all the events of the mad months of the Tri-Wizard Tournament and the return of Voldemort, "and I did not notice that Dumbledore had asked Hagrid to skip that part of the program."

"And of course," she completed bitterly, "as Hagrid trusted the Headmaster absolutely, he did as he was told."

"Yes. And as he doesn't... didn't..." He faltered briefly, remembering that it would be a very long time before Hagrid returned to Hogwarts... if he were ever to return. He always had a very complicated relationship with Hagrid, but of all the horrors Minerva had shown him about the battle of Hogwarts, the vision of the half-giant falling on his knees before collapsing headlong in the middle of a corridor was one of the worst. He had hardly gasped but Severus would never forget Pomona's shrieks of despair.

Hermione gave Snape a pained look, as she remembered, too, how Walden Macnair, who had been left for dead after being hurled against a wall, had managed to sneak behind and send his ax in Hagrid's back in retaliation before being dragged straight to Azkaban by the Aurors, still shouting insults and imprecations.

Severus frowned, forcing himself to speak with an air of indifference. "Well, I'd say Hagrid always had a very "hands on" approach to teaching, which explains the lack of textbooks and references."

It was the understatement of the year. Hagrid was no scholar and he would have had a hard time using a textbook, Hermione admitted. When he gave them a written test, it was always a multiple choice question paper, except for the final exams and everybody knew that it was Professor Sprout who actually did the marking for him.
"As you well know," he went on, "the Elves Law goes back to Helga Hufflepuff. However brilliant a witch she was, Hufflepuff was terribly down to earth and of her time. She just found it easier to use the standard laws of serfdom that everyone around her knew and accepted, and she used them to establish the magical bond between the Hogwarts house elves and herself. It soon became standard to use servitude law for everyone to deal with their elves – not that the elves objected, mind you."

"That was a thousand years ago."

"Hogwarts was founded a thousand years ago and it still exists. Most of our laws are at least centuries old because they still apply to the situation. Why would it be different for the house elves?"

"The way they led to decades of civil war, I'm not sure most laws still 'apply to the situation'," she said. Snape merely raised his eyebrows. "And it's morally indefensible to keep sentient beings in servitude."

"From the Muggle point of view, it is slavery." He gave her a piercing look as he added, "But from the magical and even physical points of view, a lone elf is a weak creature, very much like a small child who can't control their magic. They're doomed on their own because they need a witch's or a wizard's magic to direct theirs, just like young wizards and witches need a wand to learn to focus theirs."

"But Dobby..."

"Dobby was mad and even he had to go to Aberforth Dumbledore in the end."

"He was mad from abuse."

"From abuse, yes, but abuse that came long after he'd grown into his full power — and it was not by Lucius before you begin to slander him."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I don't understand."

"It's obvious," he said sarcastically. However, before she finished gritting her teeth, he was amending, "...But you have every excuse. None of your friends had the least inkling about what happened either, and Dumbledore, as usual, chose not to tell anyone," he added with a long-suffering sigh.

"It was only after Dobby helped you escape from Malfoy Manor that I began to piece things together." His face shut down in anger, and it was with pursed lips that he gritted, "Lucius confessed the whole diary mess, that he'd hidden from me out of a misplaced pride."

Hermione was surprised but Snape stood up and walked to the window. She did not see his face, but his hands were tightly clenched as he spoke.

"It was only then that I could confront Dumbledore's portrait with my suspicions and force him to tell me the truth about the Horcruxes."

She gasped, "You didn't know?"

At last, he turned to face her. "I never knew. Once I realised what role the diary played in Dobby's madness and that Ginny Weasley had brought the thing to Hogwarts, it was not that difficult to make
the connection with the Chamber of Secrets. I deduced that it had to be a Horcrux… in the same way Dumbledore did. There was no mistaking his hurt and anger. "Until then, I walked even blinder than you were. I was supposed to find Potter and persuade him to sacrifice himself at the 'right time', and I did not understand why."

They both sighed in frustration.

"The months and lives that could have been spared if you had known how to help us!" she fumed.

"Yes."

They shared looks, both consigning Albus Dumbledore to the fires of hell – and not for the first time, either.

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"For the last time, Hermione, what's up with you? You haven't even scolded me once since you've come home," sulked Ron.

Hermione was certainly not in the mood to put up with Ron's demands for attention. She snapped, "Am I such a shrew? Or do you miss your mummy?"

Ron's hurt look did not endear him to her at the moment, even if she knew that tiredness made her overreact.

"He's right," interjected Harry. "You haven't said a word beyond 'pass the butterbeer'. Something wrong at work?"

She hesitated.

"Snape," said Ron, a little resentful. "I'm sure it's about Snape. Everything revolves around him these days."

"Oh please! You won't become jealous of Professor Snape now. We've been there already with Draco," she said with some contempt. "You're being ridiculous."

"Jealous? Me? I just wish that work stay at work, Malfoy in his manor and Snape in St Mungo's."

"Snape in…" Incensed, she shouted, "That's awful, even for you."

He shouted back, livid, "Tell me I'm wrong. I'm sure it's about Snape!"

She pursed her lips. "It's not what you think."

They stared at each other, neither willing to give in. Ron said through clenched teeth, "I certainly don't think anything except that it's about Snape. You're just as obsessed with him as Harry is these days, and that's saying something."

"Hey, mate! I'm right here," protested Harry.

"Right here, yes, and still worrying about what you're going to say or do or make with or for the man. Yes. That's being obsessed."

Now it was Harry's turn to sulk. "You don't understand."

"And I don't wish to. I've had a hard day, looking for evidence to save Snape's hide and I'll do it
again tomorrow and the day after, but now I wish to enjoy a little of my well-deserved time off and not think or speak about him. He's not my best mate but I just feel that my best mates have forgotten me because of him... and as for me, I need a break at the end of the day." Before either Harry or Hermione could answer, he was already storming out with a sarcastic "Good night".

Harry and Hermione watched him stomp out of the room. They looked at each other and shrugged helplessly, knowing that Ron had to cool down on his own before they could say anything.

Clearing his throat, Harry asked, "What happened with Snape?"

"Nothing happened," she sighed. "I'm an idiot, and I've been for a long time."

Instantly incensed, he cried, "I swear I'll make him apologize."

"No!" She held a beseeching hand to him, while fighting for words. "It's not something Professor Snape did. It's something I discovered... That he explained."

With more force and frustration, she repeated, "I was an idiot. Everybody's been laughing at me... And they were right!"

She said it with such feeling that Harry could not consider it funny. So they sat side by side on the sofa, looking ahead rather than at each other, as they often did when they discussed serious matters. It was something she initiated after Ron had left them during the search for the Horcruxes. She said it would help them discuss things more constructively while they looked in the same direction, and they found it was true.

"I was wrong all along about the house elves," she said, without preamble.

Harry certainly did not expect that. "I guessed so, but I don't know much about elves either. I did not see the point of discussing this as you would not listen, anyway."

"No, you don't know, either, and it was intentional."

Intentional? With a sinking feeling, Harry realised this could only mean...

"Dumbledore?"

"Who else?" she gritted.

Facing her now, he caught her wrist. "Tell me all you can."

"Yes, but you must know Professor Snape's promised he'd explain everything to you and Ron."

"Good," said Harry with relief. If Snape was willing to cooperate, it was a step in the right direction. "But I still want you to tell me now."

She took a deep breath. "The relationship between an elf and their master is symbiotic."

"Symbiotic?" parroted Harry, not seeing what she was getting at.

"They both live better together than on their own."

"I know what symbiotic means," Harry chuckled, "even if it's a three syllables word. You don't need to explain that."

She snorted, "Idiot!" and swatted him lightly on the arm. "In fact, the house elf needs their witch or wizard much more than we need the elf's help. Young elves will get consumed by their own power if they can't anchor themselves to our kind of magic. Think of electricity and the need to earth it for
security or you can get a short-circuit. That's how Professor Snape explained it to me. Our magic is the earth for the elves. They have a lot of raw magical power, much more than we have but it can only be harnessed via a human witch or wizard. Without a proper anchor, an elf will have all sorts of mental disorders and they will die. Remember Winky, Barty Crouch's elf?"

Harry nodded. The poor elf was deeply depressed and had turned into a pathetic alcoholic.

"You may have noticed that other elves are rather aggressive with abandoned or freed elves. They fear them because they're very much like a time bomb. Elves' spontaneous discharges of magic can be very destructive."

Harry frowned. "Dobby didn't need anyone. He was so proud to be free," he said, filled with sorrow and guilt once again, as he always did when he thought about Dobby.

"He was relieved to be freed from danger but he was rather obsessed with you, wasn't he?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Unfortunately."

"He hoped that one day you'd agree to be his next Master and waited for that time. I think we all knew it."

Harry sighed, "I couldn't have accepted him." He paused, "Though come to think of it… If he'd lived after we escaped Malfoy Manor I might have… But he wasn't dangerous!"

Right after saying it, Harry remembered the twisted, dangerous, even unscrupulous ways the elf had used to stop him from going back to Hogwarts. He gaped at Hermione, unable to speak.

"Just so," sighed Hermione. "From what I understand, Dobby was fully matured when he was lured into Riddle's diary."

"Oh no!"

"Yes. Snape will explain better but, in a nutshell, Riddle manipulated Dobby in an attempt to be taken to Hogwarts."

"But it was Ginny who did it, not Dobby." Harry frowned. "Are you trying to tell me that it wasn't Lucius Malfoy who put the diary in her shopping basket but Dobby?"

"No. It was really Malfoy but… Oh, I have to explain, after all. Lucius Malfoy knew the diary was dangerous for wizards so he made Dobby write in it in his place. After a time, the poor Dobby didn't know any more what was real and what was the diary's enchantments. Riddle tried to turn him against his master in an attempt to possess him but Dobby's bond to Malfoy made him hate Riddle just as much when he forced him to spy on his master. Dobby ended up fearing and mistrusting both of them, and punishing himself all the time because of it."

"Poor Dobby. No wonder I was his only hope."

"Yes, it's easy to understand how he'd come to think the Saviour of the Wizarding World would be his personal saviour."

"Please, you make me sound like a messiah."

She sniggered softly, "Aren't you?"

He gave her a mock scowl and a two-fingered salute which considerably reduced the tension and
they both laughed.

"To resume," she said more happily, "Dobby heard Snape complain to Lucius about you, and your always running into danger at school. It was apparently enough for Dobby's deranged mind to decide that you mustn't go to Hogwarts since Riddle wanted to go there. I think he'd already decided you would be his next master since you had already destroyed a wizard as powerful as Voldemort."

The simple truth of it was so blinding that Harry could not find anything to say. He probably missed some of Hermione's explanation until he heard her conclude, "After Dumbledore's death, you didn't call for him and he was forced to seek the help of Dumbledore's brother to anchor himself. He couldn't stay at Hogwarts with Headmaster Snape since he feared him too much because of his association with Malfoy."

"Yes," interrupted Harry, "but where does Dumbeldore fit in?"

"With the lost elves who arrive at Hogwarts. They have to go to the Headmaster. He can't handle all of them, of course. He uses the magic of the Castle. Hogwarts is practically sentient and serves as a kind of shunt for the elves' magic. Professor Snape thinks the situation with Dobby and Ginny helped Dumbledore realise that the diary was a Horcrux but he didn't want anyone else to suspect."

Harry digested this in silence but Hermione was incensed. "Dumbledore let me make a fool of myself with S.P.E.W. because I provided the diversion and the... comic relief," she spat with loathing, "to distract Snape and Draco of the situation with Dobby. Dumbledore prevented Professor McGonagall from explaining the truth to me because he needed Snape and Draco to think about elves in general and not about Dobby in particular. He even had Hagrid skip the lessons about the house elves."

"I've often wondered... Snape didn't know about the Horcruxes?"

"No. Dumbledore never told him. He discovered the truth by himself just before the battle of Hogwarts."

"What a mess!"

"Oh yes. When I think how Snape could have helped us, instead of all our running around like headless chicken! It's only through sheer luck that we won!"

"But why didn't he tell Snape?" moaned Harry. "Dumbledore knew very well I'm crap at Occlumency. He told me about the Horcruxes while Voldemort could have seen all this in my mind and he didn't tell Snape, with all his talent?! It's simply incredible."

"I don't understand, either, but the fact remains that Dumbledore never told him about the diary. He believed all that time that Voldemort had possessed Ginny like he'd possessed Quirrell."

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"Yes, it's yours."

Snape stared at his wand in Harry's hand, wondering what kind of trap this might be.

"I just ask for an oath from you that you won't do anything to escape before the trial."

The young Auror remained true to form, slightly nervous but with the hopeful smile he wore most of the time since he had first stepped into Severus's hospital room.
He put Snape's wand on the side table with care and casually took his out of his holster, presenting the tip to his former teacher.

Severus had never expected to see his wand again and could not help glancing sideways, still unable to believe it would be this simple. He wanted nothing more than to feel it in his hand once again... Feel the power of his magic concentrating and being channelled perfectly through it.

He desperately longed to touch it but restrained himself. What about the wording of the oath? His spy and Slytherin instincts stopped him from acting on his first impulse.

Was Potter suggesting that if he could not escape before the trial, he was expected to do it during or at the end of it?

Was it an implicit permission or something more sinister?

Harry Potter appeared to be as eager as he used to be, and well disposed towards him – but he'd always been so easy to manipulate. Others at the Ministry may have another agenda.

Kingsley Shacklebolt he trusted almost implicitly but no Minister ever was an absolute master. Was there some plot in the Aurory to get rid of him for certain by way of a planned 'regrettable incident'? Head Auror (what a joke!) Dawlish had always been one of Moody's and Scrimgeour's men and they always loathed each other.

He clenched his fist reflexively. No matter what, the yew wood with the unicorn tail hair core was beckoning him, even more powerfully than when Ollivander first put it in his hand.

In a flash, he made his decision. It would not be the first time that he staked his life on intuition. Even if it turned out to be a rather crude trap, it suited his own ends, and he would do nearly anything to hold and feel once again this true extension of his magical self.

He touched the tip of Harry's wand. "My word as a wizard."

Harry handed Snape his wand, with a delighted grin that the older man was unable to return because his heart was beating too madly and he was trying hard to prevent his hand from shaking.

All of a sudden, Snape's Patronus doe was jumping around, a true figure of joy and exuberance – but Harry's gaze could not help returning to Snape's face rather than watching the doe, as he tried to glimpse once more the delight, triumph and pain that washed over his face the moment he was reunited with his wand.

He had never been meant to see Snape like that and he would never, ever mention it – not if he wanted to stay alive.

He just swore to himself that he would do anything for Snape to keep his wand.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every move you make, every step you take

I'll be watching you

(The Police, Every breath you take)

The departure from St Mungo’s was kept as secret and discreet as possible.

Since Snape was not yet healed enough to use a Portkey unless tied to a wheelchair—which he of course adamantly refused—they had to take him through the staff-only stairways. He stumbled several times after the first three floors, because he stubbornly tried to maintain the pace of the healthy, athletic Aurors with his cane. Harry made the group slow down but did not dare to offer help to the proud wizard, unlike Seamus who was instantly rebuked for it – but he stayed close at hand in case it happened again.

Four floors. Still two to go, then two corridors to the Emergency Apparition point in the basement.

When Snape faltered, and then again, Harry felt on the verge of panic. Drat the man for being so stubborn! It was obvious he would end up more worn-out than with the dizziness of a Portkey... and Hermione was going to have Harry's head for it, even if he had managed to get Snape consent to Apparate Side-Along with him.

They slackened the pace even more but it hardly helped matters until Snape, angry with his own physical weakness, handed his cane to Seamus and clutched at the rail with both hands to propel himself on to the next stair with as much pig-headedness as real physical strength.

Snape's face was not red as expected from the over-exertion but turned an alarming tinge of grey even though he was sweating heavily. His breath was laboured but all offers for a pause were angrily dismissed.

Harry forced himself to breathe deeply. Seamus whispered to him that he should not worry, that Snape was often like this after intense sessions in the gym because he refused to listen to the healers, too, when they told him to slow down, and that he needed only a few hours' rest to be all right again.

Besides, Hermione was waiting for them at Spinner's End, with Ron who was making sure the area was safe and nobody spied on their arrival.

He will be all right, Harry repeated to himself like a mantra.

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The photo was plastered all over the Prophet's front page.

The narrowness of St Mungo's corridors made for a slightly sinister background. You could only see Snape's back, but his was an unmistakable figure, surrounded by Aurors. Snape walked haltingly despite his cane, attended by an anxious Harry Potter whose hand hovered over his back in a clearly protective gesture even if you could not tell from the photo if he was actually touching him… Just
before everyone turned around in alarm and the other Aurors closed ranks around Snape, wands at the ready. Harry pounced and held his hand to block the camera and the photo turned dramatically black.

Harry braced himself, waiting for Snape to lacerate his ego and his incompetence when he read what they had dared to write. He sent Ron out of the kitchen with a nod and met no protest, only a commiserating whisper in passing, "Your funeral, mate."

When Harry entered, the uncharacteristic clang that Snape's cup made as he put it down was the only sign that he was affected, but he looked up and said in a rather clipped tone, "I hope you know what you've signed up for, because it's only the beginning."

Harry squared his shoulders. "I volunteered, and it's not the first time they're telling lies about me... Or my friends," he put some emphasis on the word, hoping Snape would understand that he was included in the group. "I know it doesn't help but I'm sorry. We haven't found the source of the leak yet but we will."

Snape made a derisive snort and buried his forehead in his hand, a gesture of weakness Harry had never witnessed from the wizard before.

Silence stretched out between them. At long last, Snape stood up.

"We'll have to speak of your mother," he said in a tired voice. "But give me some time." He paused and added, "Please," as an afterthought, before stomping out.

It was only when Ron entered that Harry realised he was still gaping like a fish, unable to process all that had happened in a matter of seconds.

On the table, Photo-Harry endlessly, futilely fussed over Snape's back then tried to stop the photographer.

Rita Skeeter's paper read, 'Protective? Affectionate? Is Harry Potter in danger of falling for the man who should have been his father? Ministry confirms Harry Potter still in charge of Severus Snape's case. Fears of unfair biases (page 4). He has his mother's eyes: How an obsessive Death Eater deals with the son of the woman he loved. Girlfriend Ginny Weasley devastated by Harry Potter's abandonment (page 5).'

The entire double page 4 and 5 was plastered over with a photo unearthed from Fred's funerals with a sobbing Ginny hiding her face in Charlie's shoulder, her brother looking straight ahead with a grim, vengeful face.

There was the inevitable portrait of a radiant Lily Potter and the comments of former school mates about her charm and beauty, and how she and Snape were always together until the handsome James Potter courted her and won her favour – but the only true revelation was an amateur photo, clearly made more than twenty years ago.

Several well-known Death Eaters including both Mulcibers and the Lestrange brothers were smiling and laughing, obviously sharing a toast. A young Lucius Malfoy and an even younger Severus Snape stood slightly apart from the group, drinking in each other's glasses in an incredibly intimate gesture. The comment reminded the readers that the Potions master Albus Dumbledore chose and imposed on the Board of Governors to teach generations of young witches and wizards, always had a reputation for bisexuality – and possibly much worse, considering the infamous rapists and torturers he associated with.
It was obvious they were paving the way before revealing the abuse complaints, which were still classified until a fortnight before the trial.

Seamus had been assigned to look for the leaks at the Ministry, but just like with his covert surveillance of Dawlish, he found nothing: not a single unusual or after hours meeting at the MLE, no file going astray or documents copied or retained for longer than usual by anyone. No rumour, no gossip… Nothing.

Plainly frustrated, he told Harry, "I'm quite positive there has been no leak at the Ministry. If people at the Prophet know about the complaints, it has to be from those who made them."

"Then, the information about Snape's release date was really leaked from St Mungo's." Harry frowned. "There was always a risk, but I thought only Constanz and Hermione knew about it."

Seamus shrugged. "Unless a little bird told Skeeter, there's a leak in their staff."

Harry and Ron shared a look. "Not a bird, a beetle," breathed Ron.

Seamus stared suspiciously, "What do you mean?"

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"My mother fell from the stairs in the middle of the night. As she was gorging on anti-depressants, the police supposed she didn't realise she was missing the steps. My father was drunk in their bed and didn't hear her. She died from internal injuries. He found her in the morning and called the neighbours for help but it was too late." Snape sneered. "At least, this is the official version."

"And what really happened?" asked Harry, trying to sound composed.

"My father shoved her out of their bedroom and down the stairs. They were having a row... about me, of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

Snape watched the dicta-quill with disgust. Mornings were for official hearings but speaking to Harry Potter felt a little too much like speaking to Alfred Constanz. The only difference being that Potter wanted facts and evidence while Constanz wanted feelings and reactions. The dicta-quill reminded him that his life was still dependent on the good will of others.

Resigned, Snape went on, "I'd just reached my majority as a wizard and he was afraid that I would use my magic to fight back and make him pay... you know. He waved his hand dismissively. "As if I'd ever wish to come back! My mother didn't agree, of course. He told her she could leave and return to the wizarding world."

Harry gave Snape a commiserating look, which only made his scowl deeper. "It was a usual argument between them, and it was not the first time either that he pushed her... except she fell the wrong way. And just as usual, he was much too drunk to realise what he'd done."

Harry marvelled at Snape's apparent calm. "How did you learn the truth?"

"He got blind drunk again after the funeral and kept crying and asking my mother to come back because he didn't mean to do it," he answered with obvious disgust. "It was rather enlightening."

Harry could not help wondering about the teenager Snape had been. About what he said: the blunt way he had been informed of his mother's death the morning after his birthday; how he had gone
alone to the funeral, claiming he was a legal adult now and did not need Slughorn's or Dumbledore's reluctant support... And what he did not say: how he had felt when he realised that his own father had killed his mother.

Snape's words carried the feel of cold resignation, but after spending so much time viewing the man's memories, Harry knew how easily it masked simmering frustration and repressed anger.

He could empathise as he remembered how he felt whenever Uncle Vernon spoke about his father, telling him he was a drunkard, an unreliable man who got himself and his wife killed – only, Snape's father was the real thing.

"What did you do, then? About your father?"

"What was there to do?" Snape sneered. "I took the few belongings left in my room... a few things from my mother that I wished to keep, and I left."

"Just like that?"

Snape shrugged. "I'm sure you would have left your aunt's home 'just like that' if you had been given the opportunity."

Harry flushed but did not answer, which was answer enough.

"I only returned when the Dark Lord asked me to conduct some research for him. My father was long dead, of course, and I didn't want to risk blowing up Malfoy Manor."

"You know, you should really avoid calling him the Dark Lord," Harry said softly, in the hope that Snape would not take it badly. "It will not be well received when you're in front of the War High Court."

Snape scowled but only said, "Habit, Potter. Pure habit. Tell me, what is the current fashion for naming..." He sighed dramatically, "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" Harry had a hard time trying to remain serious.

"In court, it has become customary to call him Riddle," he said, rather tongue-in-cheek.

The former Death Eater asked, a little too casually, "And if I call him Voldemort, what will happen?"

Harry smiled, appreciating the wickedness of Snape's humour now that it was not turned against him. "No real objection, but a lot of people will probably wince."

Snape groused, "Just as I thought. Still the same bunch of cowardly, hypocritical idiots."

Harry chuckled openly this time. "I suppose we can expect to hear the name of Voldemort resonating in the courtroom?"

Snape gave him a glare. "I certainly won't cater to politicians' whims."

"That's fine with me," assured Harry, "but to get back to the subject, you were saying that Voldemort assigned you some kind of research that sounds fairly dangerous."

Snape made a face. "It is common knowledge that Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel blew up at least eight houses before they managed to brew the Elixir of Life, and many of their would-be followers did the same to their labs and sometimes to themselves."

Harry sat bolt upright. "The Elixir of Life? That's what he wanted?"
"Are you really that surprised?"

"When you really think about it, no... But is it possible?" he asked with considerable awe. "Can you recreate it?"

"Very theoretically, since many tried but no one ever managed to do it again. I didn't have much choice in the matter and I had to at least appear to be doing research."

"I guess," commiserated Harry. "When was that?"

"Shortly after the Battle of the Ministry. He inflicted Pettigrew on me," said Snape, his face scrunching in disgust. "Officially as an assistant, in reality to watch and report on the seriousness of my endeavours."

"So, he didn't really trust you, after all?"

"He trusted no one, and certainly not me... not after the Order turned up so conveniently to rescue you. Bellatrix was positive I had to be the traitor who warned them. It was quite unpleasant," he said roughly.

Harry cleared his throat, afraid to ask. Snape smiled thinly. "In fact, it's thanks to you that it didn't degenerate into a full-scale interrogation."

Baffled, Harry stammered, "I don't... How?"

"He apparently picked up in your feelings that you were convinced that I was responsible for Sirius Black's death."

It could not have been difficult, Harry thought guiltily, as he remembered that all he had been repeating to everyone willing to listen was that it was all Snape's fault for not warning Dumbledore.

Snape went on, seemingly oblivious to Harry's turmoil. "The Elixir was a way of keeping me busy while he was trying to decide if he still needed me."

This brought Harry back on track, although a little doubtful. "He had no other spy so close to Dumbledore. He would have had a hard time to manage without your information."

"Ah, but he was planning to get rid of Dumbledore at last, and it's not as if I could give him what he really wanted," Snape answered, gazing at Harry through half-closed lids. Harry coughed uneasily but Snape ignored him. He stated coldly, "In fact, there is always a time when it becomes obvious, even to the greatest fool, that what appears to be valuable information always lacks the essentials... and the Dark Lord was no fool. He had less and less... patience... with my inefficiency." His face hardened, as his eyes seemed to contemplate something very far and very, very unpalatable.

He must have sensed that Harry, shifting uneasily in his seat, was bracing himself to ask for details, so he immediately took the wind out of his sails. "Dumbledore was very much aware of this. He was very pleased with himself when he found the perfect way for me to prove that I still could be... useful to the Cause."

Their eyes met, the Auror's widening slightly as he realised that Snape was speaking of Dumbledore's murder while Snape's lips curled bitterly, as he added, "Yes, I've been very useful to everyone." He paused. "But we were speaking of my research about the Elixir of Life. Pettigrew's role was to ensure that I would not keep the elixir for myself if I ever managed to brew it. It was, of course, to be reserved for Voldemort's sole consumption."
Harry shook his head in disbelief. "He was really, really mad."

Snape mocked, "Did it take you this long to realise?"

Harry joked back, "You can talk. I'm not the one who took the Dark Mark."

He regretted his stupid words at once, but Snape did not react as he feared. Instead, he pointed at the quill and mouthed, "Off the record."

He waited until Harry stopped the recording quill. "If he had not been so obsessed with killing you, his best option would have been to induce you to join him..." He let his words trail and when he was sure Harry looked him in the eyes, he added grimly, "And if he'd truly decided on this, I wouldn't have bet on your chances to resist. You may even have been the one to beg for it."

"Never!" exclaimed Harry, snorting at the absurdity of the idea.

Snape lifted his index finger to make a point. "Bellatrix," he said.

"What about her?" asked Harry, totally mystified.

"She was considered the most brilliant witch of her generation. Not unlike your friend, Miss Granger, and with all the social advantages of being a pureblood."

Harry stared wide-eyed, totally incredulous.

Snape smiled. "Slughorn told me once that, when she was recruited by Minister Jenkins as her personal assistant, he was convinced that she was on her way to become Minister herself. From what I've heard, she was no more prejudiced than other people of her background before she met the Dark Lord, and nobody had ever complained about her being particularly unkind or sadistic."

Harry always believed that Bellatrix Lestrange had been a devoted Death Eater practically from birth. This was quite surprising. "What happened then?"

Snape shrugged. "I won't go as far as saying that Voldemort fell in love, because he certainly never cared for her feelings, nor for anyone else's. He just decided he wanted her brilliance for himself, but without binding himself in any way, of course. He engineered everything, including Rodolphus Lestrange's proposal."

"No," said Harry, eyelashes fluttering. "No way."

"I see you are still labouring under the common misconception that Dark wizards can't have feelings, even if only of lust or possession," sniggered Snape. "The facts remain that Bellatrix renounced both her career and her hopes to ever have children because he loathed them and he wanted to keep her at hand and always available. She never regretted anything, as far as I can tell. In fact, she boasted about her amazing luck at every opportunity."

Harry shook his head. "She was brainwashed and mad."

"And happy to be so... which is precisely my point."

Harry could not help asking, with more than a little challenge, "And you, were you happy?"

"When I first joined? Certainly. It allowed me to stay in Britain for a most coveted Apprenticeship-"

"Stay in Britain?" interrupted Harry, astonished. "You were going to exile yourself?"
Something flashed in Snape’s eyes that Harry could not place. He could only say that it was strong but it was swiftly suppressed.

"Abraxas Malfoy had secured an Apprenticeship for me with Slug and Jiggers."

Harry smiled. Only the very best for the Malfoys, of course. The smile soon died on his lips when Snape added sourly, "But they revoked the contract when he died. All my subsequent applications, even with much less prestigious Masters, were turned down." He sniggered, "Yes, there was a brutal eclipse of the Malfoys' influence when there was suddenly no one left but a twenty-three year old Lucius, with only the moral support of an eighteen-year-old half-blood."

Snape spoke coldly, but Harry knew that it was just a front. He had a pretty good idea by now of how close Snape had been to Lucius and Abraxas Malfoy when he was a teenager. From what he had been told by every single member of the Malfoy household, including Abraxas's portrait himself, the two rather lonely Malfoy men, always surrounded by sycophants, had welcomed and adopted him in all but name… Just like Molly and Arthur Weasley had done with Harry to the extent Dumbledore had let them.

"I must assume it was not just about money?"

"Of course not. Abraxas had already provided for me, even if the adoption had not been formalised, and Lucius would have helped me, no matter what."

"Then I don't understand."

Snape frowned. "Don't you know how Lucius became a Death Eater?"

Harry blushed slightly. "I could not attend that part of the trial. I was on another case at the time."

Snape gave him a hard look, very much aware that the other man did not care, apart from waiting to hear Lucius’s sentence. "Voldemort had Abraxas killed, though we could never prove it, by having food contaminated with Dragon Pox sent to him."

Harry was surprised, which drew a bitter smile from Snape. "No, Abraxas Malfoy was not a supporter of the Death Eaters. In fact, he was the only reason we resisted joining, like all our friends did, despite the peer pressure. Not because he did not believe in the Pureblood cause, mind you," he added when he saw Potter's disbelief, "but because he neither liked nor trusted self-styled Lords popping out of nowhere... and whose opponents died a little too swiftly and too conveniently. So, he died, too." He snapped his fingers. "And all of a sudden, just like that, Lucius's inheritance seemed to fall apart." He let Harry contemplate the facts he had just evoked before adding with sarcasm, "Fortunately, the Lestranges were there to help, 'because they were practically family already'." He simpered, in a clear imitation of Bellatrix. His eyes burned dangerously. "Things righted themselves as if by magic after this... but for a price."

He held up his left hand. "That price." He chuckled mirthlessly. "I did not mind at the time. It brought me recognition and power, and maybe more importantly, I could stay in tune with my friends."

"And who were your friends?" asked Potter, genuinely curious.

"Evan Rosier had become a very close friend during my last year, and Felix Parkinson, too. And..." He hesitated briefly, "Rabastan Lestrange."

"Lestrange?" Harry felt vaguely disappointed. "Snape and one of the Lestrange torturers?"
"He was an amusing dilettante at the time. Weak of course, with never enough backbone to resist
either Rodolphus or Bellatrix when they asked him something… anything," he said with meaning,
"But he was a good friend, I can't deny it. He married Henrietta Rosier, Evan's sister, who was also
Bellatrix' particular friend, which tied all of us even more. The photo in the Prophet...
" He did not
specify which photo and Harry did not ask, there was no need. "It was one of Henrietta's."

"How did Skeeter-" began Harry, rather surprised.

Snape chuckled grimly. "Very easily, I can tell you." He shook his head, to get rid of unwelcome
memories. "I never met anyone who wasn't happy and proud to join, even Evan who did it more to
follow in his father's steps than out of real conviction."

Watching Harry Potter's dubious look, he amended, "Except the very, very few who were really
Imperioed like Pius Thicknesse or blackmailed like Draco, but during the first war, things were very
different. We were young… idealists, I suppose, but we really thought that we would solve all the
problems of the world with Voldemort." He chuckled, "Of course, that first enthusiasm did not last."

Harry felt uneasy with the images Snape had conjured. After a lengthy pause, he asked, "Why did
you ask for this to be off the record?"

Snape gave him the disgusted look he used for reserve to his classroom when he wanted to convey
that they were all morons. "You don't want to feed the fears of the paranoid busybodies of the
Ministry."

"Which fears?"

"That you are a potential Dark Lord, of course, or likely to be seduced by the Dark," Snape's voice
is dripping with irony.

"Come on!" said Harry, incredulous.

"Tell me you never had the Unspeakables on your back, trying to gauge the impact of Voldemort's
scar on you."

Harry sat bolt upright. "How do you know?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "I was in this war before you were born. I can guess. Even without Fudge,
Umbridge or Scrimgeour, the Ministry can't have changed that much."

"So that's why that bastard Croaker didn't want to leave me alone!" He swore long and rather
creatively, to judge by Snape's raised but appreciative eyebrows.

At last, he turned his attention to Snape again and said defiantly, "But I would have never become a
Death Eater."

Severus smiled sadly. "Very few people chose to become Death Eaters. What they chose was what
seemed to them their best option."

"And you claim that Voldemort was the best option? You, who've sacrificed so much to see him
destroyed?"

"He was a master manipulator who knew the right price to offer to everyone. Money… Power…
Recognition… Acceptance… " He sent Harry a piercing look and leaned closer. "Have you ever
wondered what would have happened if it had not been Hagrid who was your first contact with the
wizarding world?" he asked in a soft, insinuating voice. "What if it had been… Quirrell? What if he'd
told you that you would be great in Slytherin? That there was someone who could protect you... Help you... Teach you... Appreciate you." He paused, then whispered in an almost sultry voice, "Love you?"

Harry stared at Snape's face with horrified eyes. He shook his head in denial, but he could not hide from himself the anguish and, yes, the longing that Snape's words evoked... because since the end of the war, he had wondered several times about exactly the same.

"The Sorting Hat..." He hesitated. "It said that I could be great in Slytherin." He looked at Snape almost pleadingly, seeking reassurance – he did not know himself what he wanted to hear.

Snape shrugged. "Really, people make too much of that Hat. Not that I'm surprised at what it offered you. People call Slytherin the House of Ambition or the House of Cunning." He sighed unhappily. "More often than not, it's the House of Survival. It's a well-kept secret, but most abused or neglected children end up there... because their greatest ambition is to survive."

Harry seized the opportunity to shift the focus back on to Snape. He whistled softly. "The House of Survival, eh? No wonder you were their Head of House for so long."

"But it also takes courage, loyalty or intelligence to survive. So, any House can do," Snape said in a disillusioned voice. After considering Harry for a time, he added more caustically, "We must be thankful you did not let the Sorting Hat put you in Slytherin, because neither of us would have survived it."

Harry did not comment. Snape was right, whether you took him literally or not. He set the quill on again.

Snape gave him a mocking look but recited dutifully, "I must say Voldemort didn't spare the money for my lab. Even the brewing facilities at Malfoy Apothecaries are not better equipped."

"But what use would he have had for the Elixir of Life?" asked Harry, playing along, as if they had never been interrupted. "He already had the Horcruxes."

"Vanity, Potter. Good old vanity. He tried to make everyone believe he did not care what he looked like, but he very much remembered he had once been one of the most handsome men in Britain."

With a chuckle, he added, "Of course, I was not suicidal, so I never explained that the Elixir did not work like that. Assuming that I'd ever managed to brew it, at best he would have looked like a young, healthy half-snake but never again like the Tom Riddle he wished to see in his mirror."

Harry burst out laughing, more because he very much needed some relief than because it was that funny, but it felt good, all the more so because Snape laughed back.

It was hearty enough to draw a beaming and approving Moppy out of the kitchen. She promptly brought a tray laden with an assortment of snacks. She offered beer to Harry, but he preferred a butterbeer. Snape glanced at the beer but reluctantly asked for tea when Moppy gave him a very pointed look, while Harry pretended he did not see anything.

Harry mentally sighed in relief. It went quite well for a first interrogation. Snape cooperated, even if today was only about his youth – and even if he could not help being a little disappointed that Snape had not spoken even once of Lily Evans.

Severus discreetly glanced at his former student while pretending to be busy stirring his tea. It had not been too bad for a first interrogation. His past experiences were rather more brutal, but unless he was mistaken, this new generation of Aurors, all of whom he had, incidentally, taught, were really
different and not just because they were still rather new to the job.

§§§

"Sybil was younger, but she looked and sounded very much like she does now... A silly fraud. I didn't stop to consider the consequences. I just thought the Dark Lord would be amused..." He smiled ruefully. "And he was... At first."

For all he tried to act nonchalant and half-drooped his eyelids, Snape was obviously gauging his reaction. Harry spied the tell-tale sign of Snape's left fist tightly clenched at his side.

"Oh! That Prophecy!" he sighed, thankful for the opportunity to tell Snape, at last. "For all it's worth, I forgive you, you know."

Snape looked away. It was clear that either he did not believe Harry or he did not care for his forgiveness.

Probably both, Harry reflected with some frustration. Then, he noticed that Snape's air of indifference was belied by the way his Adam's apple bobbed up and down under his roll neck.

He had to make him understand, but it was Snape, for God's sake, the man who had never believed Harry Potter. "I know that you didn't kill my parents. It was Pettigrew who really betrayed them, not you, and Voldemort who killed them – then again, not you. I even understand that Dumbledore must have decided it was useful for you to report the prophecy... or he would have found a way to stop you, even if Aberforth did not realize that he should have detained you rather than throw you out." He shook his head. "Really, a simple Obliviate, and it would have been sorted."

After what seemed an interminable silence, Snape said, "My compliments, Potter. I didn't think you had it in you to question Dumbledore's schemes." He made a face. "However, it doesn't excuse the fact that I knowingly reported the Prophecy."

Harry gave him a piercing look. "I have it on good authority that you did not believe in prophecies."

"I was wrong," came the answer, quick as a flash but almost immediately, Snape eyed him suspiciously. "Who told you this?"

"I'll wring Neville's neck if he blabbed to Potter.

Harry smiled. "Minerva. Who else?"

Snape huffed. I should have guessed.

"You can't fool me any more, Professor." Snape shrugged non-committally. "I wish you could forgive yourself about this prophecy. It's time to let go..."

"So, you're a psychotherapist, now?" Harry's smile froze, even before Snape added, quite viciously, "Do you follow your own advice, and are you done feeling guilty about Sirius Black's death?"

Harry flushed. How did he guess?

To Snape's obvious satisfaction, the subject was abandoned.

§§§

"Yes, I thought I had failed... But admit that it was sheer luck that you appeared when you did, just in time to collect my memories."
"You're right, unfortunately." Harry shuddered at the memory. "I may have hated you at the time, but it was still one of the most horrible things I ever witnessed."

He hesitated, glancing sideways at Snape, who gave a long-suffering sigh.

"Ask away. You're obviously burning to know something, and it is not as if I have any power to refuse to answer."

"It's not like that! I am not interrogating you, right now, and you know it."

Snape shrugged. "You can't pretend either that you will never use what I tell you, Auror Potter."

Harry groaned. The man was infuriating, more slippery than an eel, taunting him or changing the subject every time Harry tried to address the issue of his heroism or his sacrifice, or their past relationship.

I will not let him provoke me, he repeated in his head for the umpteenth time. Snape gave him leave to ask, however grudgingly, and he would not let the opportunity slip.

"When Voldemort threatened you, you didn't defend yourself. I saw you raise your wand and then... nothing!" He repeated, with some resentment, "Nothing." He raised a hand in frustration, shook his head. "Why?"

"Sheer reflex," Snape said with disgust, "I immediately realised it was useless, and indeed undesirable."

"But you could have saved yourself if you had wanted to," accused Harry. "You could have told him you were not the Master of the Elder Wand. You knew it!"

"And what good would have come of it? He would have gone immediately after Draco!"

"You would have died to protect him?!

Was there a hint of jealousy in Potter's reaction? Snape briefly blinked at the thought and dismissed it immediately. Ridiculous. "Of course," he said with finality. "I was protecting you, too. As long as he was not the master of the Elder Wand, there was hope for you."

Harry sulked. "Nothing excuses that you didn't defend yourself."

"That's rich," sneered Snape, "coming from you who learned in my memories that you had to let him kill you."

Harry wanted to say something he had rehearsed several times, something like, "I was prepared to die because it was necessary, but you were prepared to die for what you believed you owed my mother, and not even she deserved such a sacrifice..." But there was too big a lump in his throat.

He looked at Snape's sharp features – made even sharper at close range by his scars. They were beginning to fade a little, at last, but you could not watch him and forget that he had very nearly died a horrifying death.

Harry could not help hearing once again in his mind the words that broke every vestige of hate or resentment he had ever felt for this man.

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

Snape had not shouted. He had not cried or pleaded. It was not even a real protest. It was almost a
whisper, the utter disbelief of a man who had offered and given everything of himself time and again... and suddenly realised it meant absolutely nothing for the man he had thought to be his mentor and his friend.

Harry often wondered how Snape had accepted to walk that sacrificial path every day after excruciating day, from the moment he agreed to kill Dumbledore to the final confrontation in the Shrieking Shack. Had he seized the opportunity, when Voldemort decided to kill him?

"I think it was the closest thing to actual suicide that you ever did," he said blankly.

Snape straightened at once. "Are you calling me a coward... again?"

Harry protested. "Never! I just... I can't begin to imagine what it must have felt to realise your death was coming and not do anything."

"You're so Gryffindor! It would have been much worse if I had tried to resist." He gave a grimace of disgust. "He could have actually ordered Nagini to eat me." Harry closed his eyes in horror, as Snape added, ruthlessly, "this is not unheard of, after all."

He's alive. You don't want to appear squeamish but professional. The young Auror resolutely opened his eyes and stared back. He's alive, he repeated in his mind. He looked a little green, but he managed to ask calmly, "Why do you think he did not kill you himself?"

"For the same reason he did not take part in the battle until the very end. He did not want to drain himself." He looked away as he added, "And there are few spells as exhausting as Unforgivables, I can tell you."

Unsurprisingly, they sat in silence after this, both brooding and not really aware that the grey light coming out of the window was fading away.

Harry had never been so relieved to hear Ron coming through the Floo.

Snape stood up, turned the light on and announced, "My restoratives still have to be brewed."

§§§

Echoes of a heated argument carried from the basement. They heard the unmistakable sound of a banged door, followed by the no less unmistakable sound of someone kicking it. Repeatedly.

Soon, Snape's elf appeared at the top of the stairs, seething. "Moppy is pregnant, not a doddering old elf unable to dice properly!"

She waddled along to the kitchen and slammed the door so powerfully they felt the reverberation all over the sitting room. Seconds later, the door opened again. She waddled back to the head of the stairs and shouted, "And Master will keep to his diet! No more beer and crap food with the dunderheads!"

Without waiting for an answer -which did not come anyway- she went back to the kitchen without favouring Harry or Ron with a single glance. The door slammed once again.

Ron gaped at Harry, who gaped back, then sniggered, "Is it me, or does Snape have a house elf that sounds just like him?"

Ron immediately hooted with laughter and Harry was not far behind him.
It did not last long.

Moppy Apparated right in front of them. She snapped her fingers, her eyes fiery. Dubious-looking socks and a pair of dust-covered boxers that Ron instantly recognised as his, a wrinkled pullover (Harry's), crumpled sheets from the guest bedroom and several empty bags of crisps appeared in her hands. She dropped them at the Aurors' feet, wrinkling her nose. "Master's house is not a slum. You clean up your own mess."

She disappeared just as suddenly, no doubt into the kitchen.

Harry cleared his throat, trying not to giggle. "We've just been given detention, I think."

Ron answered with a groan. "Why can't you or Snape have normal house elves? You know... Sweet little creatures eager to please?" Suddenly struck by a happy thought, he asked, a little too eagerly, "Do you think we could manage to get a repeat performance with Hermione?"

But to his utter disgust, Moppy never appeared and there was no sign of her presence when Snape led Hermione to the kitchen for his routine exam, the defiant glare he sent them sufficient to stop any desire to follow Harry might have felt.

§§§

"Professor McGonagall told me about your past relationship..."

"SHE TOLD YOU WHAT?"

"...with an Order member." Harry had anticipated some kind of protest from Snape but he had not expected him to shout or to be so angry.

Still, the wizard calmed down almost at once. His eyes narrowed speculatively though, and Harry could not get rid of the feeling that, despite his outraged outburst, Snape was somehow amused.

"She really told you that?"

"Isn't it true?"

"Yes, but what does this have to do with anything?" he asked with contempt. "Consensual relationships are not a crime, I believe, even for Death Eaters."

"Well, it would prove that you... err... that you had a normal life and you didn't need... didn't have to..."

"To prey on children to have a sex life?" Snape bluntly asked.

Feeling himself blush, Harry managed, "It might help."

"You don't believe it yourself and speaking of this witch at the trial is absolutely out of the question."

"Why? What do you have to hide?"

"It's none of your business and absolutely none of the Wizengamot's."

"It's not the Wizengamot, it's the War High Court."

"Which will be composed of the idiots from the Wizengamot."
Harry nervously stroked his hair. "We need all the supporting witnesses that we can find," he said.

Snape hissed, "Not as confident about the outcome as you've been pretending, are you?"

Harry growled, "Give me one good reason why we can't have the most significant person of your life, for what? Over a decade?... As a witness for you. Professor McGonagall hinted that your 'lady friend' might not like it but that she would testify for you if it was needed."

"Potter..." he used the tone one might use with a particularly obtuse child, "...if people learn who this lady is, the scandal will ruin her."

"That's going a bit far," objected Harry. "This is 1999, not the Victorian Age."

It was Snape's turn to be annoyed. "The old fossils who sit in the Wizengamot are relics of the Victorian Age."

"At least, the public..."

"POTTER!"

Harry shut up but gave him one of his most stubborn looks – the kind of face he had longed to smack when the boy was his student.

"She had perfectly reasonable, personal reasons to keep our relationship a secret all along. I refuse to drag her into the trial for nothing more than feeding the curiosity of dirty minds, and that's final."

"You could let her make up her own mind."

"I said no."

Harry barely refrained from banging his fist on the table. "I'll ask Professor McGonagall to relay my suggestion to her."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "You do that. And you will not forget to convey my total opposition."

Harry puffed his cheeks and exhaled loudly. "Why do you always have an objection when it comes to showing you in a more flattering light? As you really are?" Groaning, he added, unable to restrain himself, "Do you think so little of yourself?"

He instantly wished he could recall the words and Snape's frosty answer was just what he expected. "I am trying to avoid collateral damage, Auror Potter," he gritted out. "I'm afraid whatever I think about myself is irrelevant. The only thing that matters now is what the War High Court will decide that I am, but I will not throw my friends to the wolves in the vain hope to change their minds."

The Professor stood up haughtily and left for his lab.

Moppy followed him discreetly, and very soon Harry heard the usual argument before Snape expelled her from his lab – again.

Chapter End Notes

As usual, this chapter benefited from the helpful input of Traßerse. Any remaining errors
are entirely mine.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

All my thanks to Tra8erse for her corrections and helpful suggestions.

And I'll use you as a makeshift gauge

Of how much to give and how much to take

(Amber Run, I found)

"Healer Granger?" called Snape from upstairs. He must have cast a Sonorus, because his voice was clear but it was obvious that he was at the far end of his room. "Would you mind coming up, please?"

Hermione shot surprised eyebrows at Harry, who only shooed her towards the stairs.

She had not yet been invited upstairs—none of them had—Snape still insisting that she examine him in the kitchen. Everything official was done in the kitchen, at his insistence. Probably because it was the most impersonal and utilitarian room in the house.

She understood that it was his way to keep her at arms length, because she was not his chosen healer, and a former student to boot. He was resolved to maintain a distance between them.

She respected this, since it is not the healer's role to force the patient to share their intimacy. You have to earn trust when people are vulnerable. So, she decided to reveal a little about herself, discreetly, as she went on with the exam, and with humility as Alfred taught her. She disclosed rather matter-of-factly that she, too, had scars from the war—from the battle of the Ministry but also from her encounter with Bellatrix Lestrange. She even tugged a little at her collar to show him where the point of the dagger had cut into her throat, something she had not yet done with anyone else.

"That bitch!" she heard him grumble, before he caught the tip of her wand in his hand to get her to look him in the eyes. When he spoke, his voice was still quite cold but there was something softer, that she was unable to pinpoint, in his stance. "The fact that we have scars proves that we survived," he said.

"Yes," she breathed, feeling for the first time in months that there was someone who could understand what she had been telling him about the scars: that she was not bothered because she thought they were ugly or disgraceful, that it was not the reason she hid them behind a glamour or under thick clothes. She refused to share them with just anyone – to have people make comments as if they were her best friends, just because they happened to see her in the media, or because they thought they had to say something kind or jolly. What happened and how she chose to live with it was her own business.

"I don't remember who first said that battle scars are badges of honour," he said with a surprising humour, "because it's a small consolation when imbeciles gape at you like you're a circus animal." He trailed his fingers along his cheek and the side of his throat and smiled wryly. "Thankfully, I no
longer look like something the cat, or rather the snake, dragged in.” He watched and saw the look on her face. "Sorry," he said immediately, "this was in poor taste."

She instinctively grasped the hand that he had held to his face and hastily tried to remove, and squeezed it with feeling. "I'm just glad Healer Pye could help you, and that he will be able to help many other people like us."

Only when she saw his eyes drift off in embarrassment did she remember that her gesture was hardly professional. She let go, stepped back and muttered, completely mortified, "Sorry, Professor."

This made him look back at her with an almost imperceptible sigh. "There are more important things to be sorry about," he said, with a lopsided smile that made his face look strangely pleasant – almost attractive, in fact. "I believe Constanz would say that wounded veterans are allowed to get emotional... from time to time." He let his voice trail, suddenly very self-conscious himself and unsure how to play down the intensity of the moment.

Fortunately, she practically beamed. "This is exactly the kind of thing that he would say!"

He had never, ever shared his feelings about the war with anyone, except Minerva or Constanz, but this was different. For him to act so impulsively, because he discovered that he sympathised with Hermione Granger of all people, was a novelty.

*Going soft two months before your trial, chided the inner voice of Professor Snape. Rather dangerous.*

Severus protested. *Acting humane is hardly going soft. You know very well how Bella took it out on the unfortunates who found themselves at her mercy. I'm sure that scar was the least she had to endure. She's a Muggleborn, after all.*

*Oh please,* said the mocking tone of his alter ego. *That's how it begins. Longbottom who becomes Neville... Comparing your scars with Hermione Granger... What next? Backslapping with Potter and Weasley? Where will that leave you when you have to abandon everything you know? You will be even lonelier... and weaker... and more vulnerable.*

This time, Severus had no retort ready – because it was true.

Only later did he remember something Constanz told him once, long before the therapy. "The memory of what you've lost may be painful, it's nothing compared to the regret or the remorse of what you haven't lost... because you never dared."

§§§

Before putting her foot on the first step to go up to Snape's bedchamber, Hermione asked Harry cautiously, "Do you know what he wants?"

He wore a knowing smile but just shrugged. "You'll see."

"Draco said the same thing," which only made Harry grin. "It's exasperating," she insisted. "It would be easier if I knew what to expect."

"Eh! I'm just a lowly Auror and I've never been invited to the high places," he said with a motion towards the ceiling. "And in this case, seeing is believing."

She walked gingerly up the stairs, stopping midway to look at Harry over her shoulder. The fact that he was now trying not to laugh did absolutely nothing to reassure her.
Hermione reminded herself that Severus Snape was no George Weasley of the infamous pranks. She reached the top and found herself on a sombre, uninviting landing.

The door of the master bedroom was open. It looked gloomy in the light of one yellow, inadequate bulb simply hanging from the ceiling. It was even worse than the downstairs rooms. There was the same kind of cheap, worn out furniture, a washed-out bedcover, but to top it all, the wallpaper was an atrocious, maddening pattern which screamed 1970s. She blinked, thankful it was faded and stained because she was sure the original colours would have made her teeth and eyes ache, even if her healer instincts recoiled at the sight of the large, unhealthy circles of black mould closer to the ceiling.

Bending her head forward, she got a glimpse of her patient seated in a corner, practically in the dark. She called tentatively, "Professor?"

"Ah! Healer Granger." He beckoned to her to enter, adding in Gaelic, "Fáilte Abhaile."

"Welcome? What could it mean?"

As she stepped in, she felt a powerful rush of magic enfold her and almost blind her. Instantly, she found herself in a totally different room. It was much larger than it had been a moment ago and really luxurious, in a modern way with clean lines and soft leathers in various natural shades. It was much brighter, too, thanks to a myriad of candles.

Snape was comfortably ensconced in a reclining armchair so well-stuffed it looked totally decadent, and with stacks of books on both sides.

Her eyes widened, as she felt like she had stepped into one of those fairy tales, where a poor, seemingly despised hero suddenly turns into a rich, handsome prince.

Rich, very possibly. Handsome… Not exactly.

She did not follow this thought through as she was suddenly struck by the enormity of what she had just felt. She gasped, "You have a Leprechaun Spell on your room?!"

"Of course, he thought, carefully hiding both his surprise and his appreciation. If anyone would know about the spell and recognise it, it would be Miss Granger. He smirked. "When one hosts the likes of Peter Pettigrew, one may not wish them to see things as they are."

Hermione tried to remember everything she had read about the legendary spell, which was said to protect Avalon. All creatures were said to be affected by sensory illusions with a Leprechaun Spell, and not just non-magical people, like with the milder spells on Hogwarts or Diagon Alley.

Snape had not denied using it nor told her she was delusional. That he could have fooled Wormtail, who had been planted there specifically to spy on him, without the Death Eater suspecting anything, whether he was in his human or Animagus form, was an amazing feat.

And that he chose to let her into his secret was such a proof of trust. She grinned like a fool, unable to stop herself, but before she could assure the Professor that his secret was safe, a faint movement drew her attention.

A sullen house elf with her arms crossed over her chest was sulking in the opposite corner like a punished child. She was clad in a chequered silver and green towel that she had draped around her like an imperial toga. The alternate colours did nothing to hide that she was very, very pregnant.

"This is Moppy," said Snape with as much derision as he used to speak about Neville Longbottom in
Potions class. "Healer Granger, would you please explain to this poor excuse for a house elf...", an indignant gasp from the corner answered him, "why no expecting mother is allowed in a Potions lab?"

The little creature gave Hermione the once over and sneered, "If it isn't the little Missy of the knitted hats!"

"Moppy!" warned Snape as Hermione pursed her lips. She was quite used to that kind of attitude from house elves – it was the payback for S.P.E.W., but now that she knew the truth about house elves, it hurt even more.

The elf rolled her eyes. Snape kept her under his unrelenting gaze until she sighed sullenly and curtsied. "Ma'am," she said in a bored voice.

Hermione nodded to the elf. "How do you do, Moppy?"

Moppy only glared.

At least, she did not call her Mudblood scum to her face, like Kreacher, thought Hermione warily.

So, she asked the obvious question – at least for a Healer most recently training in the Maternity ward. "How far along are you?"

The elf deigned to answer, "Ten months", which meant that she was seven to eight weeks away from her confinement, Hermione recalled from the books Snape lent her after they had discussed the house elves.

With a bright smile, she proceeded to explain, as kindly as she could, "I'm sure you know there are many very dangerous ingredients in a potions lab that could harm you or your baby, not to speak of the toxic fumes."

Moppy gave her a disdainful you-don't-say! look and rolled her eyes — again. She turned to Snape and stage-whispered, "Master said she's bright?!"

His lips twitched infinitesimally up and he could not help glancing at Hermione. One of his eyelids fluttered slightly and she briefly wondered if he meant to wink at her but Moppy chose this moment to sniff disdainfully and turn her back, literally giving Hermione the cold shoulder, as a chilly draught blew into her face and shook her robes, making her gasp.

Snape turned to his elf with a puzzled, irritated look. Moppy could give lessons in stubbornness even to Gryffindors, but he was not used to her being so rude.

He was going to admonish her when Healer Granger shifted slightly, catching his attention again. She mouthed "Pregnancy hormones", making him look at the ceiling and roll his eyes dramatically.

Loudly Hermione said, "Of course, at so late a date, malformations are not to be feared any more..." The elf brightened and shot Snape a nasty smile, which froze as soon as Hermione stated, quite tartly, "but exposure to toxics could reach and poison the baby through your blood. Or it could induce an early labour." She added, much more kindly, when Moppy turned to her at last, with a now distressed look, "Your baby's heart is too weak and the lungs are still unable to function on their own right now. You don't want to take that kind of risk, I'm sure."

As the elf shook her head, Hermione added serenely, "But I'm sure Professor Snape already told you so."

Moppy crossed her arms again. "Master needs help."
Master scowled as only he could scowl but Moppy scowled right back, to Hermione's delight. She could understand at last why Draco, and now Ron and Harry, too, found Snape's relationship with his elf so funny. She certainly had never met an elf with such a strong personality. Not many people could stand up to Severus Snape and it was surprising to watch a house elf do so.

She tried to remain serious. "Surely, Professor Snape can't need help so badly that he'd want you to harm your baby... or yourself?"

"Moppy's always been helping Master to prepare his ingredients." The elf whined a little as she spoke, ostensibly to Hermione but her gaze never really left Snape's and she lifted her chin defiantly.

"Always?" Hermione turned to Snape, smiling. "And there we all thought, back at Hogwarts, that you used detentions to have the work done."

He snorted. "What use would most ingredients be if they were prepared by the likes of your friends? And I'd never risk having a student breathe near or even look at those I use for my own, serious brewing." The elf straightened as much as a female in late pregnancy can and preened at Hermione. Snape scowled again. "In any event, I won't have Moppy anywhere near my lab until her baby's weaned."

Hermione could only agree and say so to Moppy. Stubbornly, the elf insisted, "Master needs help now."

"Professor Snape certainly doesn't need help in the lab since he's not going to make any... How did you call it, Professor? Ah, yes... 'Serious brewing' any time soon."

Both Snape and Moppy immediately looked daggers at Hermione and turned to each other to share rebellious looks. She managed to smile serenely at both of them, while inwardly bubbling with laughter.

Snape said petulantly, "I won't drink another of St Mungo's substandard brews."

"It's all very well for you to brew restorative draughts," she answered, trying to sound sensible. "But you'll have to accept some of ours, at one time or another."

"Absolutely not."

"Professor," she chided him gently, "you know you're forbidden from brewing any kind of tranquillizer, soporific or pain killer until the end of your trial, in accordance with the law. Harry and Ron may leave you alone most times, but you know they have to monitor your stocks and any delivery."

Moppy immediately insinuated, "Moppy can prepare ingredients at Malfoy Manor... or at Hogwarts and make the pre-brews."

Hermione's brows shot up. This elf sounded definitely Slytherin.

Snape opened his mouth but Hermione beat him, "I'd rather not if I were you. Even the fumes of a simple Calming Draught could be harmful."

Snape added, "I forbid you to use either my lab at the Manor or Professor Slughorn's. Particularly Slughorn's, he's much too careless."
Moppy stomped her foot. "It's all Master's fault," she cried. "Master had no business getting himself eaten by the evil snake of the Evil Master."

"As I'm still in front of you, Nagini obviously didn't eat me."

"Master nearly died! Master left Moppy ALONE!" The last word was shouted with an unmistakable anguish.

"Considering this," he pointed at her belly, "you won't make me believe you were that alone. It would have been rather difficult to be alone at Malfoy Manor, I think, particularly where a certain Fuzzy is concerned."

Moppy turned a bright crimson colour but Hermione had to admire her spirit. Once again, she talked back to Snape. "Master is mean! Master knows very well that he didn't leave enough no-baby potion when he let the snake bite him."

"As far as I know, Narcissa still provides the female elves with the potion, should they wish it. Isn't that so?"

At this stage, both Snape and Moppy had forgotten Hermione, who was totally enjoying the tennis match between them.

"Madam Narcissa had to buy it," spat the elf, as if it was a dirty word. "Moppy has standards, like Master. She will not drink the nasty stuff not brewed by Master."

"Hence your present state."

Moppy sniffed disdainfully. "The other female elves have headaches, spots or sore breasts with Madam Narcissa's rubbish."

Hermione raised her eyebrows appreciatively. These were unfortunately quite standard side-effects of most contraceptives. She would have to suggest to Snape that he should work on this, if his elf contraceptive was really this effective.

"You do not need to make excuses with me that you chose to have a child," he was now telling Moppy. "I just thought I did not need to tell you that you would be cared for, even in the event of my death."

Moppy began to bawl. Snape stared hard at Hermione, silently conveying that she was not to open her mouth.

As her theatrics did not seem to have any other effect than Snape's exasperated eye-rolling, Moppy soon escalated them to pig-like squealing.

Snape stood, menacing, and took a few steps towards his elf. She stood her ground and did not even lower her voice. He extended his arms, palms down. "Look," he said sternly.

Moppy shut up and walked silently to him until they almost touched. Soon enough, his left arm began to sag slightly despite his visible efforts to keep it in line with the other. The forearm muscles visibly cramped – Nagini's venom had been particularly destructive where it met the Dark Mark.

With a slight grimace, he began to rub them with his other hand but Moppy moved it away and took over with both hands. It needed only a few moments for the involuntary, painful contraction to subside, but Moppy did not let go, fat tears running down her face.
"As you can see," Snape drawled, "it wasn't a figure of speech to say I'm unlikely to brew anything sophisticated any time soon."

"But Moppy can help with the brewing! Master knows she can count and stir," she pleaded. "How will Master heal if he doesn't brew good potions?"

He sighed in exasperation. "I will drink St Mungo's potions," he stated, though it visibly cost him to say it.

Moppy gave Hermione a look of entreaty that she perfectly understood. "I promise I will personally make sure to choose only the best," she assured. "If need be, I'll brew them myself."

At this, Moppy made a face, visibly not comforted by the last bit.

"I don't want you to endanger your little one," said Snape in a soft, fond tone of voice that Hermione had never heard from him. "Is it so hard to understand?"

The young woman enviously thought that she would like on occasion to have someone – someone with Snape's mesmerising voice – speak to her with just as much concern and care.

The elf gazed up into his face with huge, tear-filled eyes. "Moppy hasn't been of any use to Master since Hogwarts."

"Of course you have. I couldn't possibly stay here without you." He added, deliberately provocative this time, "I haven't been of much use to you either."

As if stung, the elf took a step backward and scolded Snape. "The Prince magic was always there. Moppy never lacked anything."

"So what's the problem?" he asked, once more sarcastic.

Huffing, Moppy glanced at Hermione and stubbornly refused to answer.

"I'll leave you alone," Hermione announced, taking the hint. "I think I've said what was expected of me. Should you need me, I'll be downstairs with Harry."

Snape inclined his head in an almost gracious acknowledgement. Moppy simply ignored her.

As she closed the door, Hermione heard the elf exclaim, "Master won't fool Moppy any more. Moppy can smell the danger and the fear, just like..."

Moppy's tirade turned into a faint buzz, proving that Snape had cast a Muffliato spell.

Hermione went down pensively. Harry's encouraging smiles failed to draw the expected amusing details out of her. She just said, "They're obviously very close."

"You can say that. It's absolutely hilarious how alike they are. Moppy speaks like him. She even calls us dunderheads."

She smiled. "Yes... It's rather cute. Don't you think so?"

He stopped her by raising a hand. "Oh! No. No, no, no, Hermione! If you want girl talk, go to Ginny, not me. However much I've come to respect him now, Snape is not and will never be 'cute'. And Moppy can be even grumpier than Kreacher."
There was an umpteenth article in the Prophet this morning, speculating what Harry Potter might be doing right now, having been assigned permanently to Severus Snape's protection by a complacent – and obviously irresponsible – Minister. Or was it possible, the Prophet insinuated, that the former Death Eater was using blackmail material from his time as a spy to get what he wanted from Shacklebolt?

Snape, tired of watching him fume impotently, had practically dragged the Auror to the garden.

His arms full of fallen branches, Harry put them on the heap of dead leaves Snape had gathered. Without looking up, he muttered, "You always called me an attention-seeker, but I'm not."

"Harry Potter, tired of being the Saviour of the World." There was no sting to Snape's words, though.

"I'm tired of people always expecting something from me! And I'm tired of the lies. They are always worse when it's about you." Harry fretted.

Snape dismissed his last words with a careless gesture. "You don't like people's expectations but you've always liked the attention." He didn't let Harry answer, silencing him with an imperiously raised finger. "You could never resign yourself to being just a child... just another student."

Harry would not let himself be silenced. "The adults in charge never seemed to do what had to be done."

"But we did what had to be done." The tone was definite, cool and sharp as a razor. "If you had not always charged recklessly into danger..." He did not finish his sentence, shaking his head meaningfully.

They stared at each other for a while, but without hostility, Harry noticed with a small smile. "I know that... Now." He hoped he sounded reasonable... Mature. He wanted Snape's... Severus's respect. The more he saw of the man and listened to him, the more he thought of him as Severus, just like Hermione confessed to him last night that she did. Ron resisted so far, but Harry was convinced it was more out of stubbornness than real hostility towards their former teacher, since the way he called him the old git was practically friendly now.

"You systematically flouted authority. You wanted to be a law unto yourself, you can't deny that." Snape paused before adding in a more conciliatory tone, "I know Dumbledore encouraged you in this at every turn."

Every time he spoke of Dumbledore, his bitterness was so palpable, Harry could almost taste it. He shared it — to some extent. "He trained me to be like that. I know you had your reservations"

"He was your mentor." He chuckled, "I was only your watchdog."

"I prefer 'protector'."

Snape snorted, "Whatever."

"You really don't realise you made a difference in my life."

"Oh, I do. I made it miserable."

"You also kept me alive."

Snape suddenly felt an urge to look away and scan the street. He answered, in a carefully neutral
tone, "So that you wouldn't die before the proper moment."

Right then, Harry felt the urge to walk to his former Professor and... And what, Harry? Hug him? Put your hand on his shoulder? Shake him to make him understand that you care? He asked himself in self-derision, knowing he wanted to do just that but would never dare.

Instead, he remarked, "You can't forgive him for that, it seems. I did."

Snape faced him again, glaring, "I can't forgive the lies he used to make me believe I truly worked to save you. It is not that I objectively thought you could survive a direct confrontation with the Dark Lord but I..." He sighed angrily, raising a hand in a gesture of helplessness. "I hoped the power ripples of the Prophecy would give you at least a fighting chance if we helped you."

"And it did, Professor! It did!"

They resumed working, but Snape almost immediately stopped again, as if his feelings were too much to allow him to do anything else. "I still don't see the point of keeping the secret of the Horcruxes as he did. There would have been more efficient ways to hunt and destroy them than to send a trio of teenagers treasure hunting, with half the Death Eaters on their trail... or to distil one piece of information at a time." He threw more branches on to the heap. A few fell on the other side.

Harry caught them and put them back with the others, silently wishing for Snape to say more – to go on speaking to him. And he did, with a voice full of resentment. "He always took too much for granted!"

Harry had heard that one many times in the Pensieve, and he knew Snape never really meant it. "He trusted us to be loyal, whatever the cost. And we both were. I don't like the way of it, but I tell myself it must be enough that we won."

Snape shook his head, even if he still did not raise his eyes from his task. "You don't really believe it." He could not see Harry shrug but he did not need to. "How many lives have been squandered because we put out blind faith in him?" He stamped the heap down a little more forcefully than the task warranted. Harry was sure the pressure he felt in the air was Snape's magic trying to erupt out of him – out of his perpetually simmering anger.

"He wasn't infallible – he just managed to make us believe he was," Snape snapped, clenching his fists – and his magic, too. It would not do if Potter were to see him losing control, after all the times he had reproached him for the same thing. "We could have easily lost because of a single wrong move, a single detail gone awry... if I had said the wrong word at the wrong time..."

How many times had he been on the verge of slipping during his nightmarish months as Headmaster, when he had felt like a man trying single-handedly to stop a dam from breaking. Alone... Alone... Alone! Acting and Occluding all day long — with only his memories of Lily to hold on to at night, a bunch of portraits to give him the illusion he could still interact with other human beings, a house elf to believe in him... and his hatred of Voldemort to fight the suicidal urge to just let go.

"You can't reproach him for trusting you absolutely," remarked Harry. "It was well deserved."

Snape shot back, "It was confidence in the power of his influence, not trust."

"He trusted us to trust him," stated Harry with more confidence that he felt, really making a false statement to discover the truth.

He looked at Harry with loathing, though the Auror realised that in this very moment, Snape was loathing everything and everyone: Dumbledore, himself, the circumstances... and of course Harry,
"We did trust him," admitted Snape, more calmly. "But, objectively, I'm not sure anymore that we were right. I think we have just been very, very lucky."

“What do you mean?” asked Harry, more than a little puzzled by Snape’s mood change.

“In hindsight, I doubt he was still sane after his hand was cursed and he was tainted by the Horcrux. I’m sure that it worsened his already overdeveloped tendency towards secrecy.”

He breathed hard, and for a full second there was something in his eyes that reminded Harry of a trapped animal. And then, something seemed to snap and Snape began to kick and demolish the heap in anger.

Harry gasped, and Snape instantly stopped, even if he was still too angry to feel foolish – yet. He growled, “I wonder all the time why I was stupid and blind enough to carry out his orders... His fucking, stupid orders!”

It was for the very first time that Snape used a profanity in front of Harry and he could not help staring wide-eyed.

However angry, insulting, even violent he had been at times, Professor Snape had never, ever been vulgar.

Harry did not know how to react but the full meaning of what Snape said hit him hard as he remembered Salazar Slytherin’s locket and the nightmarish weeks he had endured, taking turns at wearing it with Hermione and Ron.

"The ring," he breathed. "You think it made him... paranoid? That's why he kept so much vital information from us?"

"Yes."

This made so much sense, considering the manipulating power of the Horcruxes, which fed on and magnified your worst fears and tendencies. Dumbledore who always delighted in keeping secrets, in being the master puppeteer… Dumbledore, weakening, dying, manipulated by what remained of the horcrux in his blood into withdrawing into himself, into retaining vital information, even from people he used to trust absolutely...

Harry blurted out, "You may be right."

Snape snorted.

"I admit you're certainly right on that one, though I never truly enjoyed much of his confidence," Harry added bitterly, "You did! So you're the one who could tell."

Snape glared at him. "Turns out he didn't trust me that much – beyond doing the dirty work."

Stubbornly, Harry insisted, "If he ever trusted anyone, it was you." He shook his head several times before he could trust himself to speak.

"I used to be so jealous..." He exhaled angrily. "Just plain jealous, you know. It was always 'Severus this' and 'Severus that' with him... And the way he would sigh and look disappointed when I wouldn't give you proper respect.”
Snape cackled, "He was just the same with me, when I complained about you."

"Yes, but... Even when he could hardly speak and stand after all the potion... The... the poison I forced down his throat in the cave... All he could say..." Harry felt his voice and his control fail him. His knuckles whitened as he willed the tears away. "All he could say was: Severus... Only Severus. Trust no one but Severus..."

He swallowed hard, because it was painful to remember. "When you... I... I couldn't believe it... It just didn't fit into my mind until I saw him fall all the way down... I couldn't imagine you could betray him like that, after he'd placed all his trust in you... And then I ran after you. You had betrayed him..." He looked like a man who is drowning. He cried, "And me! You stole everything from me that night... I wanted you to see what you had done... To shred you to ribbons like I did Draco... To Crucio you... To..." He swallowed, hard. "I could do nothing against you, and I thought you were going to kill me too. I couldn't believe you didn't. I hated you even more."

"Potter..."

Harry stopped him with a beseeching hand. "No, please. It is hard enough." He whispered with anguish, still unable to forgive himself, "It was only after the battle... When it was all over and I had your memories... I realised that you had protected me from myself. Yet again."

Harry stopped, his hands clenched at his sides, gulping painfully.

Neither he nor Snape could say another word. There was not much they could say after that, anyway. Not without something giving way inside each of them.

Not without each man disgracing himself in front of the other.

Harry went abruptly to the shed, mechanically tidying and emptying and lining up the tools. He heard the sound of a roaring fire. Turning around, he saw that the heap of leaves and branches was already consumed, and Snape was rapidly walking away.

Following abruptly, because he was still supposed to stay as close as possible to the man, he heard him walk down – or rather stomp down the stairs to his lab. He felt the raising of Snape's wards but did not feel any qualms about it—Auror duty be damned.

If anything, he felt relieved and yet strangely bereft to find himself alone.

Thankfully, it was Thursday. Tonight, he would see Ginny. He spent the rest of the day counting the minutes until the almost simultaneous arrival of Ron and Hermione.

§§§

Harry chose to Apparate some distance from Grimmauld Place, and even made a little detour before going home at last. He was in no hurry, since the Holyday Harpies were on a tour and Ginny's continental Portkey would bring her rather late.

If the Harpies won, she would be exuberant. If they lost, she would seek angry relief. Either way, Harry would win. He smiled fondly to himself, picturing Ginny in all her moods and glory... until he found he had finally arrived home.

Home.

He paused on the other side of the Place, feeling something tighten in his chest, and not for the first time either.
He stood there, considering the old mansion, invisible to the eyes of the passers-by who got around him, many grumbling about the prat who was blocking the way, gaping at nothing.

Staying at Spinner's End with Snape, in the house that was not and had never truly been home for his former teacher, made him question his own motivations.

Harry had grown up thinking home was were you stayed with family, whether you liked them or not. You did not have much choice in the matter. Privet Drive, he certainly did not choose, but it was the only home, or at least the only place to stay he had as a child. Hogwarts had been the closest thing to a real home, until Sirius's death: a place of a relative emotional safety, if certainly not a safe place.

Then, he had inherited this house at Grimmauld Place. He never wanted it, never even liked it. For the first time, he wondered if it was sane to go on living here, to even try to envision the possibility of raising a family in such a place.

Somehow, it would always be the place Sirius hated and the Order's headquarters, even if the Order meetings were few and far between these days.

He decided that the first thing he was going to ask Ginny was where she would like them to live in the future. They could rebuild the house in Godric's Hollow or create something entirely their own, maybe near Ottery St Catchpole. It suddenly seemed silly to imagine he could ever find closure while staying in Grimmauld Place.

Nobody had ever been happy there.

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Hermione wondered how Snape and Moppy had resolved their discussion but she did not worry. They seemed to be very protective of each other and obviously had a long history between them.

Snape spent hours alone in his lab, painstakingly brewing basic restoratives and vitamin supplements. He was slow but improving and it was obviously as good for his morale as for his health. Moppy attended to the cooking and housecleaning, sometimes enlisting the wizards for help. Hermione was always eager to give a hand when asked. Ron grumbled a little, but only for the sake of it. Snape himself did it without ever being asked, as a matter of course.

Harry maintained a flow of small talk while doing his share. He had endured both Dobby's overbearing enthusiasm and Kreacher's recalcitrance in the past. Though she rarely answered, he rather thought that Moppy did not need their help but wanted company. Once again, it struck him that she was very like her master, who would never say directly what he needed.

As Harry had quickly discovered, the days could only drag on in Cokeworth. Better help Moppy than end up bored to tears while Snape was in his lab and he was waiting for Ron's messages.

In less than one week, an established routine was already in place because there was not much to do.

Harry was Snape's permanent housemate except for the two hours each day when he returned to Grimmauld Place to refresh himself and enquire about whatever Kreacher had decided to complain about that day. He took the evening and the night off on Thursdays because it was Ginny's free evening with the Holiday Harpies.

Mornings were spent in formal questioning or reviewing Snape's case and discussing lines of inquiry, possible witnesses… And trying to get to learn more about the very elusive wizard.
Afternoons were mostly devoted to Snape's various therapies and his brewing while Harry Firecalled
his assistants when he was not honing his fighting and detection spells, or helping Moppy.

Ron or Hermione would arrive around tea time. They operated on quite random shifts determined by
Hermione's training times at St Mungo's but also the frequent emergencies or standing in for her
colleagues. Sometimes, they both appeared—for the sake of spending time together.

Ron did not mind filling in for her at short notice and it was just as well because of the crazy absence
of routine at St Mungo's.

Soon enough, he was a systematic evening visitor, thanks to the muggle telly hidden in Snape's
liquor cabinet.

Snape watched it briefly every day for the Muggle news and weather forecast — it was always either
rain, rain with fog or downpours for Cokeworth this season— but he was quite disdainful of the
thing at other times. Ron's fascination, however, was absolute.

The first time Snape relinquished the remote control before going to bed, he made a scathing remark,
how now would be a good time for anyone to plot a coup considering both Aurors' utter lack of
vigilance. They hardly even smiled, already too busy looking for what was on.

Nothing, however, could have kept Snape from the Premier League football broadcasts when
Manchester United were playing.

Ron and Harry did not understand at first what was happening on the field. Even Harry had no more
knowledge about football than what he gained from Uncle Vernon's shouts or groans on match
ights, while Aunt Petunia haughtily retired to her bedroom with a book – very much like Hermione.

He mentioned casually that his uncle supported Arsenal. This earned him a contemptuous but a
completely expected sneer from Snape. He did not dare add anything else, and certainly not that he
had never actually watched more than a few minutes of a game at a time, because he had to provide
his uncle and cousin with a steady supply of snacks.

Now that he had the opportunity to sit through the entire match, Harry kept trying to fathom how the
players were supposed to engage with each other; why the commentator was at times getting hoarse
from shouting when it did not seem anything was happening until the very last moment or what
made Snape swear or growl and even punch the air on one occasion.

Ron was in the same excited and bewildered state and the two of them were soon commenting and
trying to figure it out through their Quidditch mind-set.

After half an hour of totally inane speculations and comments from the two, Snape gave up and
proceeded to explain the finer points of the game.

He refused to admit that the fact that ManU were on their way to flatten Bradford City was
mellowing his mood and that he could be doing something as mundane as bond through sports with
the two Aurors – just like his father used to do down the pub.

Somehow, it did not hurt to think about Tobias Snape while watching football, because it was the
one good thing he had taught and shared with his son. It hardly mattered now that he had done it
mostly in the (not totally mistaken) belief that if something could attract the boy to the Muggle world,
it would have to be fun.

High on adrenaline after the final whistle, Severus could not help reaching for his wand. Harry
watched transfixed as the doe circled in wild excitement before sprinting away to carry Snape's
gloating, "4-0, and in an away game. Told you so!"

Ron nearly hexed an exuberant elf who Apparated almost immediately, carrying an old, dusty bottle. He bowed. "Master says Fuzzy to tell Master Severus that ManU won but the one match—"

"The nerve! That's four in a row."

"...And that his bet is still on Arsenal winning the championship."

"You tell Lucius that Arsenal only had it easy at the start."

"And Master Abraxas told Fuzzy to remind Master Severus that Manchester United won only by one meagre point last year."

Snape chuckled. "He can..." His voice trailed off as he finally noticed Ronald Weasley once again doubled up in silent laughter.

It happened a little too often for his taste since he left St Mungo's. He looked daggers at the offending boy, just to notice that Potter was in the same sorry state. "Never mind," he said abruptly. "Go tell Moppy that our guests will clear the rest. They're full of energy and can make themselves useful."

As the elf eyed them suspiciously and sniffed, Snape barked, "Off to bed, the both of you."

Harry and Ron jumped, only to realise that Snape was still speaking to the elf and not to them. The tiny creature grinned from ear to ear and disappeared behind the kitchen door in a blink. They heard "Whoop!" and then... nothing.

Harry raised his eyebrows at Ron, who answered in kind, and they both turned to Snape who merely shrugged.

"He can't make her any more pregnant than she already is."

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Silence.

"You're rather... quiet now that you're back home."

Severus sniggers."I've been retelling the events of the last year... I mean the last year of the war... at least ten times to Potter. You can't expect that I would ever wish to speak about it once again."

Silence.

"And the boy seems to think I am his own personal therapist, too."

"Oh! That's good."

"For whom?"

"For him, of course. He may be an adult, but he needs a father figure in his life."

Severus glares at him.

Silence.

"I hear there was a good game last night."
"Granger's been telling tales?"

The healer smiles. "I watched it, too."

The tension in Severus' s shoulders seems to minutely relax.

Constanz says, as if thinking aloud, "It must be something to be there in person. I never did, neither in Germany nor here."

Snape shrugs."It's just like Quidditch. Same idiotic popular fervour."

"That you don't share?"

He smirks. "Not the idiotic part, I hope."

Silence.

"You might consider going again, after the trial. Or to a Quidditch match."

"No."

"No?"

"Apart from the fact that I do not share your over-optimistic hope that I will be freed that easily by the War High Court, I haven't a history of controlling myself very well in a howling mob. Unpleasant reactions may occur... Did occur in the past."

"Careful, progressive exposure could help."

"Careful, progressive exposure..." Severus repeats the words, with an almost comical intent. He shakes his head. "Been there, done that. No thanks, really."

"It may not be the same this time. People know you are a hero."

"Minerva used the same words not so long ago. I will tell you what I told her then: I can't do it again."

"Can't... or won't?"

"Both." Severus snorts, "Even you can't begin to imagine the circus my trial will be. If I am still free and alive after that, I can assure you I will avoid places like Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley like the plague."

"No one can live their life alone or hidden."

"Who said I will?"

Constanz stares, once again trying to understand all the possible meanings of the cryptic words. His patient has become rather evasive of late, in a healthy, playful way that generally comforts him, but he delights a little too much in the ambiguity for his therapist's total peace of mind.

Severus smiles.

"Alfred," he says, calling the healer by his Christian name for the very first time. "I do not think I will need any more sessions in the future."
The healer smiles back, suddenly understanding. "You sure?"

"Yes. But I still need a healer…-"

"See if you can get rid of me."

Severus bites his lip, suddenly nervous. He has carefully rehearsed his words, but it is suddenly difficult to speak them aloud. Constanz waves his hand in encouragement.

"And a friend," he breathes. "I still need a friend."

The healer stands up. Severus does the same, as he watches the healer walk around his coffee table until they face each other and offer his hand. "You have it."

Severus grasps his hand gratefully, even if he still feels out of his depth and very self-conscious. He has never met instant acceptance like this – but then, since Lily, he has never made the first step to offer his friendship to anyone.

"You know," he can't help adding, unable to look Constanz in the eyes. "I will never exactly see you like a normal healer… Err… I hope you won't say it interferes..."

Constanz puts his hand on Severus' s shoulder. "Severus," he says more warmly than he ever dared during the months he had to act professionally around the former spy, "We've known each other for twenty years but I remember you stuttered just like that when you first entered my office to offer your help."

"I was not sure I would not end up in Azkaban," huffs the younger wizard, more for form's sake than anything else.

"Things haven't changed, then."

"What?" asks Severus, pretending to be offended. "I thought you said I was one of those dratted heroes. You old liar!"

"See? We have so much history together that we never had a chance for a normal patient-therapist relationship. I believe it is much too late to worry about it."
All my thanks to my Beta Tra8erse for spotting all these mistakes and inconsistances.

We were the same, just the same

You and I

(Brian Adams, Brothers under the sun)

"Molly Weasley is absolutely furious at the accusations against you, you know," declared Harry. "She wants to testify in your favour."

Snape's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Very decent of her, I suppose. I just fail to see what she could contribute to the subject."

"She's a character witness." He did not add, "We need some," but Snape understood. However, the idea of Molly Weasley extolling his virtues was ludicrous.

"Is this your idea of a joke? I maimed George Weasley."

"She knows it was an accident. And George does, too." Harry cleared his throat and finally confessed, "In fact, everyone in the Order knows."

Snape huffed, "It seems there's no limit to your generosity in sharing my memories."

"They wanted the truth about the battle over Surrey," objected Harry. "And it ended with everyone present that day putting their own memories into the Pensieve and sharing them with all the others. How do you want people to understand if we don't tell them what happened?" He shook his head, annoyed that they had not progressed on the subject of Snape needing to be more forward and, yes, prouder of what he had done. "You've done a tremendous job playing the traitor. It's time to play the hero."

Snape scoffed. "I'm afraid I don't look the part."

"You can look any part you want, Professor," Harry countered almost suavely.

Snape glared almost murderously but, by now, Harry could tell when he was not entirely serious.

"Molly says that she'd much prefer to have Fred with no ears at all but still alive."

He searched carefully Snape's face for the effect of his words but the man did not betray anything… except for a quick fluttering of his eyelids. Ha! Caught you.

"Come on, Snape," he insisted before the older man could shrug it off. "She likes you. She respects you." Harry was not fooled by Snape's cool affectation of carefully pouring himself another cup of tea, and then a thought struck him.
"Molly's always respected you, for as long as I can remember."

"Imagine that," Snape sniggered. "Someone not despising the spy."

"She used to shut us up and to cuff her sons when they… err... disparaged you in her presence."
Harry's tone implied that this was proof enough.

Snape's hand paused minutely in the process of taking the cup to his lips. "I've always had the greatest respect for Molly Weasley," he said neutrally.

"Come to think of it," Harry added, as if thinking aloud, "even when you were mean or rude to everyone else, you were always perfectly polite to her. I also remember she was the only one who could ever get you to stay for tea, if not for dinner."

Snape smirked. "Ah, but then it is always prudent to be polite to formidable witches – particularly when they happen to be good duellists." He saw Harry flinch and insisted, "Or were you too blind to notice? It is her power that keeps the Burrow standing and functioning."

Harry shifted uneasily in his seat. "I confess I didn't know the extent of her talents until the last battle. Do you know that she killed Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Snape nodded. "My point exactly." Softly, almost in a puzzled tone, he added, "Still, I do not see why she would expose herself on my behalf."

He paused thoughtfully, tapping his index finger on his mouth. "I assume it's Minerva's doing. Those two have always been thick as thieves. I can easily imagine her cajole Molly Weasley into helping me, with the help of her tea and whiskey."

Once again, Harry was saddened to see Snape being so suspicious of any proof of care or appreciation that did not come from Minerva McGonagall or the Malfoys. He tried to sound cheerful as he declared,"Whatever, you won't change Molly's mind."

"Yes, the famous Weasley stubbornness... I suspect it is even more of a Prewett trait." He took a few sips. "I suppose it's comfortable to rely on such strong women... If you don't mind being henpecked," he insinuated.

Inwardly, he was laughing at himself, fondly remembering some of Minerva's more overbearing quirks and how much he secretly enjoyed to be fussed over. If you only knew, boy, he thought. If you only knew.

As Harry blushed a little, Snape added, visibly enjoying the subject, "After watching her lead the Dumbledore's Army with Longbottom and Lovegood and how she ruled over Gryffindor Quidditch team, I believe Ginevra is very much like her mother."

Harry coughed before changing the subject. "So, I guess we're agreed that Molly will testify on your behalf?"

Snape pursed his lips. "No, I do not agree."

Harry puffed out his cheeks in exasperation.

"Unless," Snape added with determination, "you can predict what George Weasley himself will say when the Prosecutor asks his opinion on the subject."

"Merlin!" cried Harry. "I just told you everyone in the Order knows that you wanted to save Remus and that it was an accident."
"I'm not trying to thwart your efforts," said Snape coldly. "I am just saying that it will be useless to have Molly Weasley speak in my favour if there is the least dissension on the matter, and George is the chief person concerned."

"I won't say that George is your greatest supporter but he understands it was an accident and he won't make a fuss about it. Everyone will say the same! Satisfied?"

Snape nodded but seemed lost in his thoughts for a time.

"Now what?" asked Harry, fast reaching the end of his patience.

Startled out of his reflection, Snape blurted, "Nothing pertinent to the matter."

But Potter eyed him with a mulish look, almost stomping his foot. "When you become distracted, it's never just 'nothing'."

"If you must know, Dumbledore was livid when he heard. He had told me to be cautious and to do nothing to endanger my cover."

Harry smiled, "But you could not watch a Death Eater try and kill Remus."

Snape nodded briskly, seemingly on the verge of adding something. Harry gave him an imperious glare. He sighed and confessed, "I thought that George was the real Harry Potter."

Harry furrowed his brow but immediately came up with the answer. "Because he was with Remus?"

"I thought he would be your most logical choice." Snape's tone implied it was more of a question than a statement.

Harry smiled, rather wistfully. "He would have been, if I hadn't been carrying Hedwig's cage. We could only fit in the side car with Hagrid." He paused before adding a little hoarsely, "Voldemort killed her, you know? She took the Killing curse that was meant for me."

"No, I didn't know," answered Snape, in a neutral voice.

He quickly excused himself after this, on the grounds of getting prepared for the arrival of Healer Babcock, for his physiotherapy.

Harry followed him with narrowed eyes, sure there was something else than Snape did not tell him. 

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"Errr- Professor?"

Snape merely raised a tired eyebrow. No doubt, Potter was once again bracing himself for one of his 'subtle' attempts to worm out details of the battle or of his childhood with Lily.

"Would you mind… I mean… He asked specifically if he could visit you. He's done so much for the investigation, I told him I'd try… But if you don't feel like it…"

"Stop babbling, Potter! Who wants to see me?"

"Neville."

As if they knew many Nevilles, Harry hastened to add, "Longbottom, I mean. Neville Longbottom."
He swallowed thickly as Snape's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Snape had treated Neville almost as badly as he had treated him and he remembered the open contempt he had showered on his shy friend.

To say that Neville's request had left Harry speechless would be an understatement. So, the herbologist had to explain, several times, that he had visited Snape "a few times" in St Mungo's; that, yes, he had been received courteously and, yes, he was sure the Professor had been at least moderately happy to see him. No, he did not seek any kind of explanation or revenge – what did Harry take him for? It was just to be a courtesy call. *Courtesy...!*

Harry was so unsure and reticent, it ended with an uncharacteristically angry Neville almost shouting in his face, "Oh for God's sake, Harry, just ask him! The worst he can say is no!"

Harry was quite surprised when Snape shrugged and coldly answered, "Well, why not?"

To avoid any risk of the mercurial wizard changing his mind, Harry pressed on,"Is it okay for you if he comes around 18:00 then?"

"If it suits him."

It was Harry's turn to raise his eyebrows.

Snape then proceeded to busy himself with the piles of boxes sent back by the Auror Office just yesterday. They were full of his mail accumulated since the Battle of Hogwarts… At least, the 'safe' mail.

Fan mail (he was surprised to find it was close to 30%), hate mail and requests for help he sent indifferently into the fireplace. The Aurors had already listed all the people who wrote to him, sorted by content, name, sex, address and occupation because they had obligingly tracked down every single one of them.

A clear waste of taxpayer's money, of course, but Severus was certainly not one to argue, especially not when Potter, quite naively, presented him with a copy – because to hand a former Death Eater the names and addresses of the people who wrote that he should be Kissed, thrown into Azkaban for life or drawn and quartered publicly, was certainly helpful but perhaps a little bit unwise.

Occasionally, he would raise one or even both eyebrows when reading a name, Accio the letter and read it. Most he sent back into the fireplace. A very, very few, he kept and put into the smallest pile, the one marked "private."

He carefully scanned business and academic letters, sorting them into several neat piles with rough notes for later use. He sent none into the fire, contrary to what Harry would have expected when he heard or watched some of his reactions. Instead, he had rejections piles too, that apparently rated different levels of answers, from "would interest such and such Potioneer because we do not work with this line of products", "unfortunately illegal but a good idea/to discuss with Alexia", "Darkly illegal/forward a copy to MLE" to "flawed /forward anonymously to our competitors." When a pile reached a certain height, he would cast a silent spell and the papers would fold and fly through the Floo – to his assistants at Malfoy Industries and Malfoy Apothecaries, Harry was told, because, yes, Snape was sitting on the boards of both.

Harry had settled on the sofa with his own files but was much too fascinated by how Snape worked to even bother pretending that he was doing any actual work. He smiled to himself, remembering how the Potions master had never been able to idly stroll up and down his classroom like other teachers while the students were busy with copying, writing essays or routine preparations. On the
An utter workaholic… Just like Hermione, Harry thought.

It was surprising how alike those two were. He was sure that Snape, too, had always done his homework in advance, never letting any loose end stay loose before going to bed and even, maybe, correcting his friends and bullying them into revision. Absolutely brilliant, to be sure, but in a scary way as Ron used to say of of his ex-girlfriend.

Hermione would need a man like Snape, Harry idly thought – a younger and less damaged one, of course, but someone of the same intellectual calibre. He could see now that Ron and Hermione would never have worked in the long run. They did not have much in common, except growing up together and wanting to help Harry, but this could not be enough to become a couple and spend your life together, as much as everybody wished it.

That piece of wisdom actually came from Arthur Weasley. They all heard it from the dining room at the Burrow when he tried to soothe Molly in the kitchen, where she had run to cry over the break up, while the identically crimson Ron and Hermione still sat side by side and clutched each other's hands defensively.

§§§

At 17:50, Snape sat back. He put all his files away, then invaded the kitchen to inspect the tea tray Moppy had prepared. The herbal tea blend passed muster but he made her add more egg and cress sandwiches. Harry wondered if he knew that Neville was particularly partial to them because he had not often been offered these. Last, but not least, he made the elf change the plain kitchen cups for an elegant set Harry was sure he had seen used at Malfoy Manor.

Harry reflected that he still did not know what to expect from one moment to another with Severus Snape. The man was proving more cooperative than he expected. He sometimes acted practically friendly... until he would suddenly sneer, complain or shut himself in his lab without an explanation.

Shortly after 18:00 there was a knock on the door and Harry rushed to it. He exchanged a few words with Neville, in what sounded clearly like coded language.

At last, Neville was ushered into the sitting room, looking around with an open interest and curiosity.

"Yes, this is the entire House of Snape," sneered a familiar voice from the kitchen door frame.

Neville started. "Uh! Hello, Severus."

Harry started, too. Severus?!?

Snape inclined his head in acknowledgement as Neville went on, "It was rather rude of me to stare like that, but I didn't dare hope you would really let me in until Harry opened the door just now. I'm glad to see you've finally put some weight on."

"Thank you," said Snape with a hint of irony. "I think."

Harry winced but to his amazement, Neville merely smiled. He put his cloak down on one arm of the sofa without asking and handed a paper bag to Snape.

Just as unceremoniously, Snape opened the bag. His eyes widened, and then he was reverently
touching what looked like particularly ugly bedding plants to Harry. "Fresh Amazonian sassafras?" he asked, his voice full of awe. "Brasilian wormwood? Where did you get them?"

"Ha!" Neville exulted. "Christmas come early, eh? Let's say it's a very small 'thank you'."

"Small? Do you know how much I would pay at Slug and Jiggers, if they ever managed to get their hands on this?"

Neville shrugged. "I've just received the package from Rolf Scamander… He's corresponding with Luna almost every day now for this paper for the Quibbler about Amazonian Nargles and Snorcacks."

Snape snorted.

"Not a word," warned Neville, "or I'll take them back."

Snape gave him a sideways glance and the bag popped out of sight. Neville laughed and pointed a warning finger at the Professor who straightened in challenge – a mock challenge, Harry realised at once.

Failing to understand the interaction between the two, Harry merely listened, unable to decide if he was expected to referee between them or not.

Visibly seeking Snape's approval -since when? - Neville announced, "He's been providing me with a steady flow of rare plants and, just as you said, Professor Sprout's agreed to let me use the new greenhouse in exchange for a share of any harvest until I can build my own."

"Ah, see how it is all falling into place?" Snape declared smugly. "In fifteen years' time, give or take, you could either run the most specialised business selling fresh, acclimated ingredients or choose to succeed Sprout when she retires. And why not both, if you can build a reliable team?"

Neville straightened, visibly looking far ahead into a bright future.

"Just when did the two of you become so friendly?" interrupted Harry, his tone suspicious and not a little hurt.

Neville started and immediately blushed.

"And when precisely did Longbottom have the opportunity to, I quote, 'do so much for the investigation'?" enquired Snape, in the very tone he had used to grill Gryffindors in class. Harry and Neville unconsciously snapped to attention but it was Neville who got a peremptory finger almost into his face. "You haven't been an Auror for six months."

Neville sighed. Snape's finger now directed him imperatively to the sofa and he sat down meekly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to deceive you but I didn't know when it would be all right to tell you. The truth is that I ceased to report to the Ministry in April, but I still worked for them until September."

Snape grunted, not yet willing to yield graciously.

"Neville was something like our muggle liaison," Harry added defensively and Snape's eyebrows reached his hairline. "I don't know what we would have done without him. He tracked down every missing student all over the world and..."

"Harry..." Neville tried to interrupt the flow of the impassioned defence.
Snape gave a short bark of laughter. "Muggle liaison?" he repeated appreciatively. "You're decidedly full of hidden talents, Neville."

Snape's gaze turned back to Harry, who was still under the shock of hearing Snape calling Neville... well, Neville. "I think maybe I should ask who you haven't seen fit to include in your investigative team."

Harry shrugged a little nervously even as he tried to smile with more confidence than he felt, unwilling to be left out of the good cheer.

"Let me guess," Snape said. "The entire Dumbledore's Army?"

"Yes."

"Am I supposed to be relieved at knowing that most of Gryffindor House," Snape said in a dangerously soft voice, "those who rush where angels fear to tread and somehow always ensure that the whole world is aware of it," he added with a heavy sarcasm, "and the most hot-headed from the other houses are all involved in what the Minister assured me was to be 'a completely confidential investigation'?"

Harry shrugged. "Everybody took a wizard's oath to secrecy."

Just as expected, Snape snorted.

"Anyway, not many people would actually believe that Gryffindors would defend you, of all people," interjected Neville.

He exchanged a meaningful glance with Snape, and they both snickered.

"I at least hope that Granger concocted something creative in case anybody breaks their oath?"

Neville and Harry looked at each other and shuddered.

"She did."

"Oh yes, she did."

"Good," concluded Snape before gesturing them towards the tea table.

Harry could not say why he felt left out, because he was honestly happy for Neville that he had sorted things out with Snape, but he was relieved when the visit ended. He felt guilty about this and had to repeat to himself that, no, he was not jealous. Not at all.

Well, just a little bit.

§§§

"You told me the day before yesterday," Harry said, watching with satisfaction as the Dicta-Quill set in motion, "that Dumbledore was 'livid', I quote, that you had tried to protect Remus Lupin and George Weasley, who you thought was impersonating me. I would like you to explain again, since it was outside a regular session."

Snape pursed his lips, and answered with an obvious resentment, "It was just a personal remark and not that important."

"Let me be the judge of this."
"I assure you it has nothing to do with the acts I will be judged for."

"If it is not relevant, we will not use it."

And Harry waited. Patiently.

They sat glaring at each other for a long time and, of course, Harry Potter got tired of the game faster than Severus Snape.

"I have not yet used Veritaserum, Professor," he threatened.

Snape shrugged. "Then do it... I suppose you have the budget for it, considering that the Ministry seem quite generous with the means they put at your disposal on my account... but then, I suppose nothing's too good for our Saviour."

Harry paled, fully aware of the hidden meaning behind Snape's little provocation but the man smiled with just a hint of irony – as if he had not just alluded to how he had been tortured by the Aurors during the first war.

"Professor, I am convinced there is something very important there, even if you don't."

"And I am telling you again that this is very personal, Potter."

Harry snatched the Dicta-Quill off the parchment. "Off the record, then."

He expected Snape to give him a long-suffering sigh or to sulk, but the wizard gave him a hard stare and enunciated, without more prompting and rather coldly, "When I told Dumbledore that I'd missed and cut your ear, he was furious. We both still thought at the time that it was you and not George Weasley." He shrugged. "He was naturally frightened that I might have injured or killed you. He forbade me to ever try again to rescue you in front of the other Death Eaters."

Harry answered scornfully, "Please! Don't take me for an idiot. You would not be so reluctant and refuse to have this recorded if there were not something more."

"The rest is between Dumbledore and me."

"What?" asked Harry, peeved by the elusive answers. "Another little murder between friends?"

Snape's eyes blazed with hurt and Harry immediately regretted his insensitive provocation but the Professor simply crossed his arms. "I have nothing to add."

"Look, I've been an arse. An insensitive arse. I just feel that you're hiding yet another secret from me. Something that obviously rankles you but if it's to protect whatever respect or affection you think I hold for Dumbledore, I can safely say you couldn't be more wrong."

"Has anybody ever told you that you're like a pit-bull, Potter?"

"No, but I will take it as compliment, coming from you."

Snape bit his lip. Suddenly, he asked, "Why haven't you used Veritaserum on me yet?"

"Professor!"

"It is a legitimate question, I think."

"Veritaserum is used on uncooperative criminals. You are not one of them," asserted Harry before
he realised that a little bluff might help. "But I will use it if I think it is for your own good."

"You want to know too much, and not every truth is worth knowing," Snape countered. "Committing yourself to help me in this trial will change you, Potter, and it will change your friends. It may not be for the better." In a warning tone, he added, "You may think you've seen everything with the war, but there are things none of you want to know..."

"If you think you're protecting my innocence," interrupted Harry, "I can assure you it did not survive learning that I had been raised like a pig for the slaughter."

Snape pinched the base of his nose, closed his eyes and finally sighed, "All right. What do you want to know?"

"I just want to know why Dumbledore was so angry. Honestly, it was a battle! And Remus would have been killed without you. It doesn't make sense!"

"I think he was really furious that I might have injured you, not George Weasley, with Dark magic. At first." He seemed to look at something very far away and sighed, "When we learned that you were safe and that it was George who was hurt, he still insisted that I must not, under any circumstance, intervene directly in your favour. I asked him if he expected me to just sit and watch like when Charity Burbage was killed. He never answered. It took me a while to understand that he didn't want me to be too eager to save you."

"What? But you saved me several times, directly or indirectly."

"Not directly since you turned seventeen."

"This doesn't make sense."

"On the contrary, it makes a lot of sense. Remember Pettigrew's fate? Strangled by his own silver hand because he owed you a life debt that interfered with Voldemort's orders?"

Harry swallowed uneasily. "I can think of only one reason why I should not owe you a life debt," he said in a toneless voice. "But I already do, ever since you saved me on the Quidditch pitch in my first year." He breathed hard but he could not keep the nagging suspicion at bay. "Although... Dumbledore said at the time that you were in my father's debt and that you did it to get even with him. Did it work?"

There was an instant flash of anger in Snape's eyes. "I never owed your father a life debt," he cried. "Never. Obviously, you're still lacking some essential legal knowledge, Auror Potter."

Harry flushed angrily. "Tell me, then."

"What is the other name of a life's debt?"

"A wizard's debt," answered Harry, a little mystified.

"Precisely. And legally, who will you call a wizard or a witch, Auror Potter?"

"Any magical adult above seventeen," recited Harry, fast becoming annoyed at being quizzed like a beginner.

"Exactly. Minors can't incur life debts," he enunciated with a harsh relish. "You owe me strictly nothing for what I did before your seventeenth birthday, Potter."
He raised a forbidding hand to prevent Harry from protesting. "And contrary to what Dumbledore insinuated," he spat angrily, "I didn't owe any life debt to your father, either. Apart from the fact that he acted not to save me but Lupin and Black from the consequences of a murder, we were all underage anyway." He concluded, rather sardonically, "So, you see that our respective slates are clean on that count."

Harry's eyes fluttered as he was trying to assimilate all the implications of what Snape was telling him, but the wizard would not be silenced now.

"There's no way Dumbledore would have let you contract a life debt to me. I often wondered at the timing of Weasley's return when you were trying to retrieve the Sword. You see, Dumbledore had insisted so strongly that I were to do nothing to help... That I could not risk you seeing or identifying me... But you were drowning. I would have been obliged to rescue you if his tracer hadn't chosen this precise moment to finally work and allow your friend to find you."

"So, if Dumbledore did not want me to owe you a life debt, it may have been because... Because...

Harry could not finish. He saw in his mind's eyes Peter Pettigrew's blueish face as he was choking, strangled by his own hand. He gazed at Snape, wishing him to find another excuse, another reason for Dumbledore to deny him Snape's help, but not...

Snape finished his sentence for him, without flinching, "...Because he expected that you might have to kill me at one time or another."

"The Elder Wand," Harry breathed.

"Yes, the Elder Wand," Snape sneered. "Dumbledore planned for me to become its master when I killed him. It took his portrait some time to realise that things didn't turn out as he thought because Draco had disarmed him before my arrival." He stood and took several turns. "So, that left me with only plan B."

"Which was?"

"Why, Voldemort, of course," sneered Snape, pointing at his neck.

Harry shook his head in disgust. "No. No..."

"I assure you, it was... for once... a rather clear path to follow."

Harry gripped Snape's arm with both hands, submerged by the powerful waves of guilt and pain, and by his inability to explain where it all came from.

Snape was startled although he managed not to recoil. He could not take his eyes off Harry's hands on his arm, even as the young man told him, in a low, urgent voice, "I'm sorry. I really meant to kill you. Facing Voldemort was my fate, something I had to do! But you... I wanted to face you... I wanted to kill you... because of him... Dumbledore." He blinked several times, trying to regain his composure, "I'm sorry."

Snape suddenly shook Harry's hand off and went to lean his back against the sink, in what Harry recognised as a familiar posture, one that he assumed whenever he needed to display confidence. "You wanted to make me pay. It's quite understandable. Indeed, anything else would have been surprising, considering how much I nurtured your hate until the... the culmination on the Astronomy Tower," he finished, a little lamely.

Harry realised that the man had as much trouble speaking about Dumbledore's death as he did.
"I do not speak of that night," he said. "I speak of later, when we were wandering around Britain for clues to whatever Dumbledore wanted for me to do. I rarely managed to imagine what facing Tom would be like but I certainly fantasised about killing you. About making you pay." He absently ran his hand through his hair. "I'm so sorry," he said again.

Snape did not answer. His face and demeanour did not betray anything.

Harry blurted, "Why do I have the feeling that you would have faced me and just let me kill you?"

Snape shrugged. "You tell me. I'm not suicidal, even you've already accused me of it."

"I didn't mean..."

Snape interrupted him. "Besides, I had to stay alive until I could find a way to let you know about... your scar."

Harry stood, too, huffing in frustration. The man was slippery as a snake, always avoiding answering the real question.

He planted himself right in front of Snape. "See? You would have let me. You would have tricked me somehow with a vial of memories, maybe letting me believe they were Dumbledore's and then... You'd have let me... Let me..." His mouth was dry and he felt the wild beat of his heart. He swallowed thickly, suddenly furious, barely refraining himself from grasping Snape's lapels. "Kill you... You'd have let me kill you... KILL YOU, DAMMIT! YOU! HOW WOULD I HAVE LIVED WITH MYSELF AFTER THAT, YOU BASTARD!"

Snape never flinched. "You're not a killer, Potter."

"Harry!" They traded glares again. "For God's sake, you could at least call me Harry!"

"You're not a killer."

Harry sighed in exasperation both at Snape's stubborn refusal to call him by his first name and at his denial. He jerked back to a proper distance from Snape. "I hated you so much, I swear I would have done it."

Snape's mouth thinned into a cruel line. "I don't see the problem. You would have lived with the knowledge that you had managed to beat yet another evil wizard. Really, what an elegant solution it would have been, for you to win the wand and to rid the world of Dumbledore's evil murderer all at once."

"WHAT?! You...You..." Harry clutched his fists in impotent rage, desperately fighting the instinct to hex or hit him.

For being right.

Snape softly reached and put his hand on Harry's wrist, effectively silencing him. It was so kind... so affectionate, almost, and so totally out of character that the Auror actually calmed down, totally flummoxed.

"I'm not insensitive... Harry," said Snape after an interminable minute they spent gauging each other. He sounded so resigned, almost sad, that Harry could only gape at him and listen. "But if I had really won the Elder Wand from Albus, you would never have learned the extent of my role in the war. Hence, you would have been spared most of the remorse."
The force of Snape's words hit him in the gut. Snape obligingly turned his head towards the window and stared unblinkingly outside while Harry digested his words.

"You would have let me kill you," he said in a desolate voice. "With no more resistance than you offered Voldemort..."

"I can guarantee it would have been a little more lively. I am sure some taunting would have been necessary."

Harry snorted. "You had it all planned, didn't you?"

"It is very unhealthy for a spy not to plan for every contingency. We need to have a ready excuse for every possibility. It is very illogical for you to feel guilty for something you would have never known."

Harry stood and walked around the table, planting himself in front of Snape. He asked, "Why? Why would you do this?"

Snape barely glanced at him. "Why not?"

"I..." He raised his arms and let them fall dramatically against his sides. "I can't believe you. You would have gone down as a murderer... As the worst kind of traitor!"

Snape shrugged, apparently fascinated by his desolate courtyard. "What if I did? People would have rejoiced. Just another Death Eater down."

"But..."

"I did not have much of a reputation to begin with," interrupted Snape. "And I haven't much right now, despite your efforts."

"Yes, you have," insisted Harry, rather hotly.

"Yes, yes," said Snape, in the tone of one indulging a child. "Hence my forthcoming trial," he sniggered half-heartedly. When he noticed Harry's pained look, he fell silent though.

"I don't believe you," Harry cried. "Everything in me revolts at the thought. One can't just accept death like that."

"Yet, you walked to Voldemort with no hope of survival."

"But I was not alone!" Snape gave him a strange, bemused gaze and Harry realised he did not, could not know about the Resurrection Stone. Yet another thing to explain later. "At least, I knew others would remember me. Grieve for me."

"I wished only for silence and oblivion. I didn't care for anything else," Snape assured the young man. "Only that it was not the right time to die. But then, you charged in, as usual and I was... relieved."

"Relieved," Harry repeated, blandly.

"Yes." He smiled sadly. "At that precise moment, I knew I could let go."

"Do you regret it?" asked Harry cautiously. "Being alive?"

Snape gave him a piercing look. "No."
Harry knew that Snape was lying when the other man immediately looked away. "Professor!" he chided him.

Snape scowled. "I do not regret being alive," he growled. "But it would have been much easier for me to die in the Shrieking Shack."

Harry's last vestige of emotional distance flew out of the window. "I swear I'll do all that's in my power so that you walk free out of the courtroom! And to help restore your reputation."

"But if it were in my best interest to be sentenced by the War High Court," Snape said at last, in a subdued voice. "What would you do?"

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"Moppy?" called Hermione, very tentatively.

The elf appeared in front of her, deeply frowning.

"I think the Professor will need your soothing tea tonight."

Moppy nodded sombrely. "It's already in his teapot."

"I very much fear it will not be enough."

There was a question in Hermione's undertone, that her friends could not define but that Moppy understood. She actually smiled, if a little sourly. "Moppy will tell Miss Healer as soon as Master is grumpy enough to take St Mungo's swill."

Ron tried to smother a guffaw. He elbowed Harry, eager to share in the joke, but his friend was definitely not in the mood.

As soon as Moppy disappeared, Hermione cornered Harry.

Ron prudently stood back. He, too, had noticed how Snape and Harry were both on edge ever since they arrived, and throughout supper. To make it worse, Hermione had been tight-lipped ever since Snape rebuffed her when she offered him a mild relaxant.

He was not surprised to discover that she was plotting behind Snape's back with his own house elf – Hermione would always be cleverer than anyone else. But he was not sure that he wanted to hear about the row that Harry and Snape had certainly had. The only thing that surprised him was that it had not happened sooner.

He looked longingly at the zapper, knowing there was little hope he could get away with turning on the telly tonight, even on mute.

At least, Moppy had left shortbreads on the table. He sank into the armchair and cast a discreet Accio on the plate.

"What's up with the Professor?" asked Hermione, without equivocation. "He's never been so strained and tense since he left St Mungo's, and you're almost as bad."

"We discussed an alternative plan of Dumbledore's today."

"I'm glad to know he had plans, plural," she replied sarcastically, "but if the alternatives were even worse than what we had, I'm not sure I want to hear about them."
Harry's face darkened.

Hermione pointed him to the sofa, and they sat together for their little ritual of sharing things without looking at each other. Ron did not even feel a little pang of jealousy anymore.

They faced one of Snape's numerous bookshelves but Hermione stoically did not let it distract her, although she noticed Ron mimicking exaggerated admiration and could not help smiling when he gave her the thumbs up. She mentally thanked him for always trying to ease the tension, even if it did not work very well.

"Snape was supposed to win the Elder Wand from Dumbledore," Harry said at last.

"Now, this makes sense," she declared. "He would have let us know the truth sooner, then and he could have backed you..."

"No."

"I knew this was too good to be true," she sighed.

Harry did not answer. He was tense again, more out of anger than anything else, she decided.

Ron put the plate of biscuits away. He was considering what Snape's options could have been, had he won the wand, and every single one of them was enough to ruin his appetite.

"Snape wouldn't have been able to help us more than he did," Harry told them, almost mournfully.

Ron froze, staring wide-eyed. He was almost certain of what Harry was going to say next.

"I was supposed to kill him."

"WHAT?!"

Hermione sat bolt upright and grasped Harry's arm painfully, a pleading look on her face.

"Dumbledore always meant for me to be the master of the Elder Wand when I faced Voldemort," he said blandly. "I hated Snape so much at the time... He was to use that hate to incite me to kill him."

Hermione's face crumpled and she put her hand over her mouth to try to contain the pain. "No... No."

"You're not a killer," Ron declared firmly. "I know this sounds like a logical plan..."

"Logical?" shrieked Hermione, rather hysterically.

"Yes, logical," he insisted. "But we know you, Harry. You wouldn't have killed Snape."

Harry's wild gaze travelled between his two friends. "I don't know that, Ron. After you left us, I was so... You wouldn't have known me at times. I didn't recognise myself anymore."

Hermione slapped his arm. "That's enough, Harry. Ron is right. Even then, you would never have been able to kill in cold blood, even with that obsessive hatred you nursed at the time."

"Maybe not in cold blood, but perhaps in self-defence... or to defend one of you, like Molly did... After all, I Crucioed Carrow when he insulted Minerva in front of me."

There was a pregnant silence, before Ron's and Hermione's joined voices repeated, "No. No... NO,"
but this was just a sound, which did not make sense to Harry in his state of mind.

"No one knows before they actually do it," he said bitterly. "One thing is certain, we would never have learned about Snape's true loyalties."

"What?" Once again, Hermione could not believe her ears. "Even Dumbledore could not be so rotten as to condemn him to Azkaban if he survived."

"I hope not… Anyway, I was not to know the truth if I'd killed him." He groaned and thumped his thighs with his fists, while his friends watched in dismay.

He breathed deeply and looked up at last. "Apparently, Dumbledore fed Snape some bullshit about sparing me the remorse and that it would help him to atone... and he bought it. Mind you, he was to do it voluntarily. No stupid Vow or anything to compel him. Just like I had to walk willingly to my death... But it wasn't like that!" He cried.

He clutched his sides and began to rock helplessly. Soon, dry sobs were shaking him.

"Blimey," breathed Ron. "He's finally lost it, too."

Hermione silenced him with a finger on her lips and a furious glare.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered tentatively. "If there are things you want to tell us, you know you can."

She held out her hand, but not too close. He would have to make the effort if he wanted to take it.

Harry's instinct was always to retreat into himself, because he never had anyone he could depend on when he was a child. No Mummy to run to. No Daddy. No one. Nothing, but an old blanket in a dark cupboard under the stairs.

And he would never heal from this, Hermione knew, if he did not look up from the cupboard that was in his mind and reach for something else.

He did not move but whispered, "I was so frightened, Hermione, you can't imagine."

"Tell us, then." She moved her hand slightly closer.

Harry took another deep breath and reached for this hand… this anchor. He entwined his fingers with hers while she bit her lip to prevent herself from crying and distracting Harry. He gestured for Ron to join them on the sofa and to sit beside him, not beside Hermione. Ron came and hugged him, Hermione caught Ron's other hand, and it instantaneously turned into a group hug. After a minute or two, all three of them sighed in relief and let go of the tension.

Harry turned to Ron, "I know you've been furious with me for what you call my obsession with Snape."

Ron grunted non-committally.

"It was not until we came here that I've begun to understand that I've been trying so hard to save him and to look for answers for him because we're so very much alike. I think I somehow hoped that helping him would help me solve my own problems." He coughed. "Of course, it's not that simple, but it helps."

Ron looked slightly horrified.
"What?" Hermione asked sharply. "It's true. Acknowledging you have a problem is already half the solution."

Ron pointed at the ceiling and said in a solemn voice. "I hereby acknowledge that we have a magnificent problem up here." He nodded cheekily at Hermione. "There. Half solved."

She could not help giggling a little and even Harry, in his emotional state, smiled. "I don't know what I would do without the two of you," he said.

"Yes, yes, but don't change the subject," said Hermione.

"Yes, mate, we're still waiting to understand what has got you both in such a state."


Let's go.

"I've learned today that Dumbledore did exactly the same thing to Snape and to me. He calculated that we both needed to die. The only difference is that Snape saw through his plans in the end and had to be convinced to follow the equations, while I was easy to manipulate with just a few words and smiles."

Ron frowned. "Equations? Do you mean Arithmancic equations?" he asked cautiously. If there was one thing he never understood, because of all the complicated calculations, it was Arithmancy. Of course, Hermione took to the subject like a duck to water.

He shrugged. "I suppose it is logical."

"Yes, but there were some variables... Some human variables he had to take into account." Harry shook his head. "Snape says he's not so sure anymore if they came naturally in the results or if Dumbledore used his own assumptions as basic premises."

"Only a Master Arithmancer could tell. Do you think we could get the equations?"

"No. It seems Dumbledore burned them before his death."

Hermione said, in an almost dreamy voice, "It would be a fascinating topic for an Arithmancy thesis."

Ron snorted. "You don't have enough to do with St Mungo's?"

Harry prevented her from answering. "Whatever. The crux of the matter is that Dumbledore calculated that he had to push us into the situations that would slowly strip us of every kind of support... belief... and everything we could hold on to. And when there was nothing left, we would be ready to die."

They shared stricken looks.

"From what I deduced, Dumbledore gave Snape a... a special treatment, if you like, because there were alternatives for him."

Hermione sat back and clutched her head in her hands, with a desperate sigh. "Oh!" she breathed out. "That Greater Good!"

Harry raised a finger and announced coldly, "Plan A. He kills Dumbledore and becomes master of the Elder Wand: I kill him. " He raised another finger. "Plan B, he kills Dumbledore but does not
become master of the Elder Wand: death by Voldemort so that the idiot doesn't discover the truth until it's too late."

Ron added thoughtfully, "Plan C, he does not kill Dumbledore, death by unfulfilled Vow, but the odds for us would have been rather bad, I guess."

"Non-existent."

"I begin to see what you mean by 'nothing to hold on'."

"And the icing on the cake," said Harry with a cold rage, "is that it was to be a ruddy initiatory journey! He sent me on a wild goose chase looking for the Horcruxes to "help me become a man"… And for Snape, it was supposed to be a purifying journey, to atone and save his soul."

"Dumbledore was mad," Ron burst out, "completely mad."

Hermione forced herself to stay calm. "That part about atonement… Was it implemented in the equations, too?"

"Really, Hermione, you'll have to ask him. I don't understand the first thing about Arithmancy. Except that it works somehow."

"But it can also be manipulated or at least used to manipulate people by convincing them that what you want is perfectly scientific and logical." She shook her head. "That's how people like Grindelwald gathered so many followers or how you build a cult."

Ron pursed his lips. "And Dumbledore was pretty close to Grindenwald at one time."

"Except Dumbledore was not obsessed with blood purity or magical purity but with the power of love," Harry said sharply. "He had a strange way to live it, and he needed me to hate Snape. Talk of contradiction."

"Not if it made you act to protect those you love," countered Hermione. "Yes, I can see how there was no place for you to turn to in the end. First, we left Hogwarts. Then, there was no one to help anymore with almost everyone on the run. And the fear… The emptiness… The hunger… Your faith in Dumbledore slowly crumbling. You faith in Ron too, when he left," she said with an apologetic glance to their friend, who gave her a very small smile. "In me, after I broke your wand," she enumerated mercilessly, even as Harry made a half-hearted attempt to protest, "and all the deaths… Dobby… Tonks and Remus… Fred…"

"And Snape. And you're right, there was nothing left, after that," concluded Harry. He shivered and hugged himself pensively. "There was nothing left to do but die… but when I found myself alone in the forest, I was scared."

He looked up, and saw that Hermione was looking stricken while Ron was staring at his hands and they were clenched so tightly it had to be painful.

"I told you that the golden snitch released the Resurrection Stone then. This was not entirely true," he breathed. "It did not open on its own. It opened because I voiced my fear. I said, I am going to die. And it opened." Hermione made a sobbing sound and clutched his hand, but he stared ahead, or he would cry too. "I don't know if I would have been able to do it all alone, like Snape did."

The thick silence that followed was broken by Moppy's sudden Apparition. Hermione stood up without a word and followed her upstairs. Harry gripped the armrest as he followed her with haunted eyes.
Ron bit his lip and shook his head. "I don't know what she's giving Snape, but you have to ask her for some, too."
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

My heartfelt thanks to my beta Tra$erse who knows how to polish my words into something more sparkling.

Hello Darkness, my old friend,

I've come to talk with you again

(Simon & Garfunkel, The Sound of Silence)

"I don't need a therapist," blurted Harry. "You said I could tell you everything. You're a healer and you're my friend. Remember?" he asked quite hotly.

Hermione tried to speak but he did not let her. "We went to hell and back together. We fought together. We were hungry together, picking barely edible plants and rummaging through bins, and we huddled in the same bed when we were too cold and too frightened. I probably wouldn't have made it without you."

He seized Hermione and clasped her to his chest, almost violently, to make his point. She reluctantly returned the embrace, while he whined in her ear, "Why are you letting me down now, Hermione?"

She inhaled sharply before breaking the hug but caught his hand in hers. She wanted to see his face, not to let him feel abandoned when he finally asked for help.

"Of course, I will listen to everything you will tell me, Harry," she said tenderly. "And I will give you all I can, but that's not how psychological help works and I doubt it will be enough."

She lifted a hand to stop him from speaking. "No! You listen to me. There must be a distance, an emotional distance with your therapist to be able to talk about such intimate things..." She hesitated, searching for the right words. "You tell them about emotions so powerful, often so shameful that months later, you may not wish to see them and remember that they know... And they need the emotional distance, too, sometimes even more than you do, to remain objective and not colour their approach with what they know about you or live with you."

"But Constanz is Severus's friend and he is his therapist. He was your therapist, too, and now he's your friend and your boss."

"My therapy was finished before I came to work with Alfred, and we only became friends when we got to know each other better in the work place," she pleaded, trying to make him understand. "As for Professor Snape, you know as well as I do that the MLE ordered him into therapy before he could be released from St Mungo's, and they wanted his mental state certified by our best expert, so they didn't give Alfred any choice either."

"But he did it and they're none the worse for it. They're friends!"

"Alfred did it, but with the greatest misgivings, and they're friends only because Professor Snape
asked him after deciding to stop the therapy," she insisted, fast getting annoyed with Harry's stubbornness. "Honestly! What the MLE asked was totally unethical. Alfred told me several times it was one of the hardest things he's ever done, and he has more than seventy years' experience as a therapist!"

She gave Harry a poke in the ribs to drive her point home. "I'm still a trainee and I am practically your sister! Remember, I was hurting and getting slowly mad and yet, I could never tell you or Ron about the rape. And if I had ever broken down in front of you, you might have been able to comfort me for a time but you wouldn't have been able to help me get over it."

Harry pursed his lips, feeling it was somehow unfair that she would bring up how he had been so blind when she was assaulted and tortured to now refuse to heal him.

"Harry," she said softly, before he could think of an appropriate retort. "Consider this: most parents love their children and most siblings love each other... but if having a loving family or good friends were enough to solve all our personal problems, there would hardly be any use for therapists, and psychology wouldn't even exist."

"I won't see a therapist!"

"And you won't if you don't want to," she chided him gently. "I will offer you the attention and understanding of a friend and a sister. More I cannot do."

His gaze instantly softened. "And more I could not ask. You've always been there for me." He hugged her again, this time opening his arms to warn her of his intention and to give her time to step into them and hug back.

"I won't see a therapist ever again! What I can't tell you, I'll tell Severus." He stepped back and smiled brightly. "He understands everything," he added quite naively.

Hermione closed her eyes and mentally counted to twenty. Harry could not have chosen a worse time to inflict his anguish on Severus Snape, less than one month before his trial. She could not discourage him too openly, not when he had made such a huge step towards discussing his own issues, but Professor Snape deserved to think about himself.

She would make sure that Harry did not overstep the boundaries with his emotional demands and that the Professor found at least some measure of peace and quiet.

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"Tell me something about my mother," Harry demanded. "I think I have been patient enough, haven't I?"

"You have your mother's eyes."

Harry glared, unsure if he was mocked at or if Snape was really so ill at ease that he could not find anything else to say.

"It's the first thing everyone who knew her tells me," he answered neutrally. "You're several years late for a revelation."

"And what was I supposed to do? Call you to my office and say," his voice turned a derisive falsetto, "Oh, by the way, Mr Potter, I used to be your mother's best friend. Let's be chums and when the Death Eaters learn about this, we can all be buried together."
Harry bit his lip, trying not to giggle. Instead of getting angry and nasty – as he would have done when Harry was his student – Snape often blurted out the most outrageous things. Hermione assured him that the Malfoys, too, had the same twisted sense of the ridiculous and, as he paid better attention when he had to meet them, Harry noticed that it was true. Coming from Snape, this was not just funny in a generally caustic way but also very comforting, as it meant that he now treated Harry as an equal.

Harry put a hand on his heart in a melodramatic gesture. "I believe I would have died of shock before the Death Eaters caught us."

"It's comforting to be understood," declared Snape, deadpan. "Fortunately for my survival, incidentally for yours, and for what Dumbledore asked me to do, you may have your mother's eyes, but as for the rest... You're just like your father."

Harry's face instantly clouded over. "And you punished me for that."

"No," stated Snape emphatically. "I punished you for being a liar and a rule breaker. The resemblance just helped me to do this more harshly, and without remorse."

"You are still calling me a liar?!" protested Harry.

"Are you saying it wasn't true?" Snape asked sharply."How many times did I look into your eyes and your mind and see you lying through your teeth... That you hadn't sought out the troll... That you had no idea about the whereabouts of Sirius Black... Whatever I asked – you lied to me time and again! And I am not even speaking of the insults or the torments you wished on me. I remember a certain spider..."

Harry blushed a little as he remembered imagining Snape in the place of the unfortunate spider that the false Professor Moody had used for his _Crucio_ demonstration... but his embarrassment quickly turned into righteous anger, "You used Legilimency on me? Without my knowledge?"

"For your own good," Snape sneered. "Just like Dumbledore did."

"Dumbledore?" parroted Harry.

"How do you think he gained his reputation for omniscience? Or manipulated people so easily?"

Harry shrugged. He could not say that he was that surprised but he was unwilling to let Snape's mind dwell on Dumbledore yet again. He said softly, "I'm sorry, you know."

This managed to surprise Snape. "What for?"

"For hating you. For my father being a bastard to you. For my mother not loving you."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Leave your parents alone... You should try to take responsibility for your own actions before discharging the responsibilities of others."

Harry raised both eyebrows. "Pot. Kettle..." He let his voice trail derisively.

Snape glared. "Don't you dare pity me, Potter, or I swear I'll pity you, too."

Harry chuckled and raised a hand in defeat. "I think we have a deal, sir."

"Stop calling me 'sir!'" added Snape petulantly. He felt somewhat exasperated that Potter was so accommodating that he had no excuse for losing his temper. There was also a growing, if grudging,
respect for the young man who managed so cheerfully to cut the ground under his feet, and without any visible intention to score points against him.

"And what would you have me call you? You don't like me to call you Professor, either, and when I say Snape," Harry said, his voice dropping to a lower, sombre tone of voice, "it reminds me of Hogwarts and of the war."

"Leaves only Severus," Snape said with a faint sarcasm.

Harry flushed, feeling awkward that he had been so transparent but nodding eagerly before insisting, "And I want you to call me Harry, not Potter. You are telling me to leave the memory of my parents alone, but when you call me Potter, I always think you mean 'James'."

Snape shrugged. "I... will... try," he said, as though the words were pulled out of him.

"Thank you... Severus." Harry pronounced his name with relish and a blinding smile. He sobered almost instantly, though, and added wistfully, "I've been waiting to call you 'Severus' from the time I died and met my parents, Sirius and Remus. I expected to see you, too, and that you'd give me some unpleasant but useful advice about self-sacrifice."

"Impossible."

"I see that... Since you weren't dead."

"Anyway, you could only see the closest to your heart, certainly not a man you hated."

"Severus... I don't hate you." He was surprised to watch the shock on Snape's face, although the wizard managed to wipe it off almost instantly. "It's true!" he insisted. "I didn't hate you anymore after I came out of the Headmaster's Pensieve. How could I?!"

Snape actually smiled, though it was a very, very sad smile. "I'm just... It's still difficult for me to believe." He closed his eyes. "I find myself rather tired. I will go and rest a little, or Moppy will shop me to Healer Granger."

Not fooled, Harry watched him leave silently, wondering what he had said to hurt him again.

§§§

Severus closed his eyes and put a hand on his heart, as if this could tame its beating. He could not do it in front of... Harry. Harry. He would have to get used to calling him that.

Lily had gazed at him so sadly. "Not that I'm not grateful," she had said hesitantly before adding in a breath, "but... I can't," and then more forcefully, "I won't."

He had stepped back, knowing it would be more dignified to just Apparate away, but his heart and mind were screaming at him for a little more time – just another look, before she turns away in disgust and returns to her husband... Before you lose her forever... And he very nearly stumbled over something as she walked up to him, grabbed both his arms and began to shake him with a fond, exasperated look. "You don't understand because you're not a parent, but... you must believe me, Sev..." She had looked him in the eyes, and he could see they were brimming with tears.

He bit his lip but could not hold back a small whimper at this memory – the last time he saw his love.

He had embraced her with all his might, as if this could hold his own tears back, and although he must have crushed her, she had fervently returned it.
"I don't hate you, Sev. Do you hear me?" she asked in an unsteady voice. "I don't hate you. I just can't. Not you. Not my Sev."

She knew him so well. To the end, she had been the one who gave. She did not tell him that she loved him when she was married to another. She did not tell him that she forgave him for offering her life by letting her child die. She had just stepped into his arms for the first time in years, to soothe him and to give him solace: I don't hate you.

How could he not love such a woman?

And yet, incredible as it seemed... Now that he could look Potter – Harry – openly in the eyes and see more and more of Lily in him, he could hardly summon Lily's face to his mind without the help of a photograph. He still loved her, and he always would, but the memories that he had used since Dumbledore's death did not evoke more now than fond feelings and the bittersweet nostalgia of first love.

He did not really like the idea that he was moving on, but Lily deserved better from him than to be used as an incentive stick to carry out his abhorrent mission or as a substitute for real life. Not that it worked so well to begin with. Yes, they both deserved better.

He almost laughed aloud, thinking that Alfred would be proud of him if he were here. He grabbed the glass of water on his night stand and raised it in a sarcastic toast to himself. To a brighter future, I suppose. Or, at least, to living without emotional crutches.

Champagne would make for a grander – and tastier – gesture, but Moppy would have a fit if he asked for some, and it would be so sad to drink without Lucius or Minerva.

Fortunately, he still had Minerva.

But it was another face that came to his mind. The face of a young woman, passionate in her questioning, her arguing and even her nagging him into taking care of himself.

Why was he suddenly thinking about Hermione Granger?

Yes, she was a surprisingly pleasant and intellectually stimulating company, but she was too young, too idealist... He would probably never see her again after the trial.

Maybe in this case, it was for the better. To see her as a Weasley bride, her ambitions and brightness slowly quenched by the triviality of housework and child-rearing...

He shuddered and drained his glass, jeering at himself for his absurdity.

Hermione Granger. Rubbish!

§§§

"Your grandparents Evans were really decent people. They always made me feel welcome and they never judged me. Your grandmother used to spoil me whenever she could and your grandfather always explained patiently when he was doing odd jobs and he let us help." He made a face. "I can't say the same of Petunia. She always made me feel like I was some creepy-crawly creature and she would gladly squash me under her foot."

"She never lost her touch," muttered Harry bitterly. "When I was a very young child, I thought that if
my parents had loved me, really loved me, they wouldn't have died and left me at Privet Drive with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon."

He looked inside his mug, as if the warm cocoa in it held answers. He sighed. "I believed that little freaks like me didn't deserve to have loving parents."

He automatically looked up but only read in Snape's eyes the sad understanding and sympathy of one lost, neglected boy for another just like him.

For a very long time, Harry had been terrified that the only person who seemed to have a childhood as rotten as his was Tom Riddle. To acknowledge this aloud would somehow have been like admitting that he was himself a hair's breadth from becoming like Riddle... Like the obsessed psychopath who had marked him as his equal.

Equal. They were equal. Same kind of wand... Same mind? This last thought was too much for Harry, who had spent the two years between Sirius' death and the last Battle oscillating between aggression and depression... denial and rebellion... because the sad truth was that he would die in the war... either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.

At times, death did not seem that bad. He loathed it when he could feel Voldemort through his scar, not only because of the horrors he saw but because it meant that they were one. They somehow balanced each other, like the two sides of an arch vault. If one fell, the other would topple... And if he somehow managed to kill Voldemort, would he not, in his turn, topple into the same madness, darkness and evil?

With such fears gnawing at him, Snape's memories had been for Harry more than the gift of Victory. They had been the gift of Life. The gift of knowing that another had been despised, abused, exploited and tempted by power and darkness, but had turned his back on it. Love, even unfulfilled one like Snape's love for Lily, could really make you surpass yourself and vanquish everything – even the Dark Lords with delusions of immortality.

Because of Snape's memories, it had all made sense at last and gave him the hope that the rest of the prophecy was true enough. He will have power the Dark Lord knows not.

Harry had emerged a victor from the headmaster's Pensieve. A terrified martyr, but a victor. He had been able to walk to his death, not only because there was no other choice but because he knew that if Snape managed to remain true to himself even when he had to commit the most despicable acts, he could resist losing his own self to Voldemort's darkness.

He released the great breath he had not realised he had been holding. Snape had stood and turned away, his face inscrutable again.

Harry wanted to throw himself into Snape's arms, to be held, to open his mind for him to explore and confirm that he was clean, sound in body and mind.

"Severus," he called, pleading. Don't shut me out.

Snape's wary eyes searched his face and he nodded for the young man to go on. Snape rarely offered an opinion but he always listened, even when things were hard to voice.

"I know it was selfish of me... but I couldn't help it. I thought... Even after I learned the truth about their death, I thought that they should have been more cautious." He worried at his lip, waiting for Severus to cut him off and protest, but he did not. "My father... I suppose it's somehow expected that a man will be a hero and defend his family, but my mum... I..." He gasped out, "I couldn't help
feeling that good mothers do not die and leave their son alone."

There was no answer, as Snape's eyes were out of focus and looking far, far away.

"It wasn't until I marched to my death... When I met her and my Dad that I felt... loved. Loved, at last." There was a noise of someone choking, and he realised it was himself. "It was so brief."

He avoided looking at Snape again because he did not want to know what the man felt – the man who had loved his mother. Right now, he knew he could not face the disappointment of Snape's indifference or disdain.

In the end, he could almost taste the silence between them, so thick it felt... so full of angst.

Suddenly, he realised he was the one out of focus and that Snape had moved and was standing right in front of him.

"There was no one in the whole world that she loved more than you," declared Snape. "No one."

"That's what everyone says," Harry whispered sadly, "because she died for me."

"She knew she was going to die for you."

Harry's head shot up and he met Snape's burning gaze. "She chose it," the other insisted. "Days before the Dark Lord's attack. She chose you."

"What do you mean," gasped Harry.

"I told her about the prophecy... that I had messed up and then asked the Dark Lord to spare her. For me."

Harry's eyes threatened to pop out of his head. "But I thought..." Regaining his senses, he demanded, "How? When? Why?"

Snape's lips twitched in a bitter smile. "I sent her a message asking for an urgent meeting as soon as I left Voldemort, after he promised to try and spare her as a gift for me."

"Because you didn't believe him."

"I believed him all too well." He shook his head at his youthful delusions. "But I could not imagine Lily staying out of the way and doing nothing. I wanted her to know and to choose..." his voice trailed off rather hoarsely. "To choose me, of course."

"But you were not on speaking terms. She never forgave you..." Harry trailed off, once again feeling foolish. He had never understood how his mother, whom everyone described as kind, empathetic and able to see the best in people, could not forgive her best friend Severus for the insult uttered under the worst kind of pressure.

"She was my best friend." Snape said, with a strange emphasis and a wry smile. "Of course, she forgave me... After a time, of course... but the summer break is a very long time for teenagers."

"I had no idea," blurted Harry.

"How could you have?" Snape sneered, defensively more than anything else. "Be that as it may, she said that there had to be something she could do to protect you. That she would have to research blood magic."
"So, Dumbledore was right? She used her love to save me?"

"I don't know any more than you do, except that she had Dumbledore send her all the books on blood magic he could find. I don't think he knew what she did either, but it certainly gave him the idea of the blood wards at Petunia's." He paused, his face darkening again. "I was so desperate that my next message was to Dumbledore. He sent me a single Portkey to a meeting place of his own choosing and asked me what I was willing to give him to protect Lily and her family."

"Anything," Harry whispered, "You offered him anything he wanted. If this isn't love..."

Snape was so uneasy he was practically squirming. He cut Harry off, "Well, you know the rest." He shrugged self-consciously. "I'm sure you understand why I wouldn't want to broadcast it to the world, but I'm afraid they will ask me during my trial and I wouldn't want you to learn about it then."

"They may not ask," said Harry consolingly but without conviction.

Snape shook his head. "You told me old Ultima Warbeck would head the War Court. She will ask, and people will know."

"Yes," admitted Harry unhappily. "She's almost as scary as Alexia Yaxley... But Kingsley tells me she's fair, and we will win, Severus!" He grasped Snape's shoulders and repeated, "We will win. People will know that you did it for love and that you saved us all. We will win."

Snape made a face and turned his head away.

§§§

Healer Granger was clearly a witch with a mission as she hurried along the corridors of St Mungo's, barely acknowledging those who saluted her. She entered a small meeting room, carefully closing the door. She cast Muffliato and turned to the single portrait which adorned the opposite wall. The occupant was sleeping, as could be expected. Hermione absently noted that the woman was much younger than in her Hogwarts portrait.

"Headmistress!" she called several times, each time a little louder.

Dilya Agrìpina Derwent, Chief Healer (1715 – 1740) woke up with a start and blinked a little owlishly at first.

"We're in St Mungo's and you're a healer now, young lady," she said amiably. "No need to call me Headmistress... even if it has certainly not been very long since you left Hogwarts yourself? Your face looks familiar."

"Indeed. My name is Hermione Granger..."

"Oh!" interrupted the Headmistress. "Of course! You're Phineas's little friend!"

"Err... We had a few conversations during the war, but I don't think..."

"Yes, yes! He quite likes you. I didn't recognise you at first because of your hair. You used to be rather..." She made a gesture like an inflated balloon around her head with both hands and chuckled good-naturedly. "This short style suits you. I wish I could have got away with something like this in my time."
Hermione smiled. Dilys Derwent was obviously very spontaneous.

"What can I do for you, dear?"

"I need information about something that happened at Hogwarts before and during the last war, but I didn't think it would be a good idea to seek you out there. I don't exactly trust the discretion of the other portraits."

The headmistress gave her a shrewd glance. "The other portraits or one portrait in particular?"

Hermione inhaled sharply and confirmed, "Albus Dumbledore."

"What's he done now?" asked Dilys Derwent, instantly stiffening.

"I would like information about something he might have said or done in the past to Professor Snape."

The Headmistress stated, with considerable rancour, "You should rather ask what he did not do to Severus!"

"You know Professor Snape's trial is coming soon?"

"Yes. How is he doing?" she asked with great concern. "I used to catch little snatches of information here and there when he was still in St Mungo's, but now…"

"He has mended much better than we hoped," Hermione hastened to say. "Physically as well as mentally."

Dilys Derwent let out a strained breath, as if she had been holding it in for a long time. "But?" she asked. "There has to be a 'but' if you're here to see me."

"You know my friend, Harry Potter?"

"Yes. He…" she paused, obviously trying to gauge how straightforward she could afford to be with her young colleague, before shrugging slightly. "He's always had a rather unhealthy fixation with Severus. He's gone from an absolute dislike to a kind of remorseful veneration, when he used Minerva's Pensieve just after the war, but he still appears quite obsessed, in my opinion. I hope…" she let her voice trail.

"They're staying together until the trial, since Harry is in charge of Professor Snape's protection."

Dilys Derwent made a face, clearly showing her doubts about such an arrangement. Hermione pulled a face of her own. "I agree with you it's not the best of solutions, but it works... most days. They have actually begun to mend their fences."

"I'm glad to hear this." The tone remained doubtful.

"Unfortunately, Harry has become quite... needy of late, with all the revelations Professor Snape keeps making about the war. You must know they spend a considerable time comparing notes about Professor Dumbledore and how he treated them."

"And this is what brings me here today."

"Professor Snape has told Harry several times now that all the sacrifices he made in the war, all he
had to suffer was necessary for him to atone for joining the Death Eaters and causing the death of Harry's parents."

"Now that you're training with Constanz, I suppose you know this is a rather common reaction to violent trauma."

"The survivor's guilt," Hermione breathed. "I know. Although it seems to me that Professor Dumbledore went too far and we are not dealing with an 'ordinary' kind of guilt."

"Dumbledore always used to guilt-trip Severus when he rebelled against his most outrageous demands," Dilsy said harshly. "The worst part is that, however ruthless his moral manipulations could be, Dumbledore seemed convinced that he was acting in Severus's best interest. So, he carried a power of conviction that Severus could never resist for very long, since he wrestled with his own demons."

"I surmised as much," stated Hermione, although without any pleasure at being right. "We've suspected for some time that Professor Snape doesn't invest himself in the preparation of his trial as he should, although Constanz is positive there's nothing that would point at any suicidal tendencies."

Dilsy nodded approvingly. "I watched him, too, when he was Headmaster, but he never struck me as suicidal, even then. Resigned to his fate, for sure, but there was always an undercurrent of pride and determination in all his acts."

"However, we've finally learned that he thinks he really missed his opportunity when he didn't die."

"What?!

"He realised before the Battle of Hogwarts that Dumbledore may not have had all his faculties intact when he devised his last plans for the war." Hermione shrugged helplessly. "But he acts as if he still must go through the punishment and agony to get even with fate… or the wizarding world, or maybe Dumbledore himself!" She began to pace nervously, unable to stand still as she tried to share her fears. "He's suggested several times that it would be better for all of us to withdraw and let him face the War High Court on his own."

Dilsy raised her eyes heavenwards and shook her head. "Oh Severus..."

"Only yesterday, he told Harry that, having failed to die as was expected of him, his next best option may be to take all the blame on himself." Hermione mumbled to herself, in pure frustration. Dilsy caught snatches of something that sounded suspiciously like "stubborn as a mule". At last, the younger woman reined in her temper and declared, "I think Dumbledore's somehow managed to convince him that his soul is as damaged as Voldemort's was and that extreme expiation is required to balance what he thinks are his evil deeds."

She could not help raising her voice, inflated at the memory of their last argument. "You would think he could see the difference between a serial murderer who had voluntarily torn his soul into pieces to create Horcruxes, and what he had to do because of the war... but no! Even when he tries to be positive, he's only agreeing to... to indulge me!" She threw her arms up in the air. "I can see that he doesn't believe it deep down... because he's still convinced that what he does is never enough... That it will never be enough!" she groaned in frustration. "How can I make him see...!"

"I know!" cried Dilsy, just as affected as her young colleague. "When he was Headmaster, we used to talk... just the two of us," she specified, "because he never liked to show weakness in front of others... But he needed to confide in someone, or he would break..." She inhaled deeply, to keep her own anger and fear at bay. "He told me that he would not sit for his Headmaster's portrait because
he was sure Dumbledore's death had damaged his soul beyond repair, and that it would be unseemly for anything of himself to survive…”

She paused and was oddly comforted to hear Hermione echo her own sigh. "He's convinced that Dumbledore asked him to finish him off because he already knew that there was nothing left of his soul worth saving… Which was not what Dumbledore meant," she groused, "but the old idiot never stopped to consider that he was pushing Severus too hard. He was always so sure that Severus would always bend but never break. That he knew best…!" she growled.

She shook her head again, before looking up at Hermione with a haunted look. "Of course, Dumbledore was only a shadow of himself when he pestered Severus to put an end to his suffering. In private, he was quite obsessed with his coming death but also confused by whatever Dark magic was coursing in his blood… None of you could see it," she said in a whisper, as if speaking to herself more than to Hermione, "not even Severus, because he was consumed with his own worries and because Dumbledore was such a good actor." She sighed again. "Besides, we couldn't say anything because he was still Headmaster of Hogwarts and we were forbidden to even hint at it."

Hermione was sadly disappointed. "I hoped you would tell me that Professor Dumbledore used an oath or something like this to force Professor Snape to obey him – something that we could reverse now that the war's over."

Dilys shook her head again. "I'm sorry. I'd like it as much as you do that there had been an easier way to help Severus, but whatever his faults, Dumbledore would never have stooped so low. The sad truth is that practically everything in Severus's personal history was bound to make him prey to master manipulators like Tom Riddle or Albus Dumbledore."

"I know, but it is so unfair."

"Severus himself would tell you that life is unfair."

"He would!" acknowledged Hermione wryly. She could practically hear him snorting at what he would call her Gryffindor sentimentality, if she tried again to tell him that he owed it to himself and to all his supporters to give his best effort to clear himself before the War High Court. "I absolutely refuse to be your new cause, Granger!" he had said the last time she tried, with the glare that did not frighten her anymore. "Go waste your pity on someone else. I hear the Wizarding Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is recruiting."

"Severus is quite biased about what most people would take as a sign of interest. He easily mistakes compassion for pity," Dilys said, drawing another telling sigh from Hermione.

"He's rather prickly, yes," interjected the young healer with feeling. "But he has so many reasons to be so… Well, I'd just like him to see that I only have his best interests at heart, just like you do. I wish he could see me as a friend, not just as an ex-student who plays at being a healer," she added wistfully.

"Did he actually say this?"

"Of course not!" protested Hermione, immediately ready to champion Snape. "He's surprisingly helpful whenever I ask him something, without going into the teacher mode or making me feel like I'm imposing. He's the only one who made the effort to explain about the house elves rather than making fun of me or treating me like an idiot. I really enjoy talking to him… even if we argue a lot."

"It's impossible to talk with Severus without arguing at one time or another," joked Dilys.
"It is, isn’t it?” They both chuckled.

"Even so," sighed Hermione, "I know it must be trying for him to be surrounded by the former students who used to distrust him. We all try to make amends but..." She shook her head despondently.

"Patience is all I can suggest," commiserated the Headmistress. "Severus is very suspicious because he was betrayed so awfully by the people he most loved or admired that he has no faith left in his own judgement when it comes to relationships or feelings… But if you’re willing to prove yourself to him, you’ll find that he's worth it."

"I know he's worth it!" cried Hermione. "It breaks my heart to see him so ashamed of all the courageous things he did during the war. It's us who ought to be ashamed that we did not believe in him!"

Dilys could not help smiling at Hermione's impassioned defence of Severus. The young healer clearly felt as much admiration as friendship for Severus... and her feelings were obviously growing into more than friendship.

Dilys could not help smiling at Hermione's impassioned defence of Severus. The young healer clearly felt as much admiration as friendship for Severus... and her feelings were obviously growing into more than friendship.

The headmistress did not know how Severus himself felt about Hermione, but from a few things the young woman said, Dilys thought that he was uncharacteristically friendly with her and saw her as an equal, not as a former student.

After all, his personal history proved that he was rather partial to intelligent Gryffindor women.

Hermione interrupted her musings. "Could you tell me at least if Dumbledore's theories about atonement and redemption have any real magical basis, or if they are just… Frankly, it all sounds like some half-digested Christianity … like those medieval Flagellants who believed they would be saved if they tortured and mortified themselves..." Hermione could not hide the disgust in her voice. "But I have been wrong before with things like prophecies or divination, and this might be just my ignorance or my muggle background showing."

"Ah, but you're right. Dumbledore used his own religious beliefs in his calculations. There is, of course, no real evidence of what a soul really is or why things like a Horcrux or the Dementor's Kiss really work. All we have are mere speculations, drawn from people’s hopes, fears and various religious beliefs about what awaits us in the afterlife." She chuckled, "Even I can't know how I am still living within this portrait. All I have is the conviction that I think, therefore I am."

"Are you telling me that there is no actual foundation for the theory that absolute remorse and repentance could heal a fractured soul?" insisted Hermione.

"Nothing but personal convictions and obscure testimonies from the antiquity. Really, Hermione! Nobody has ever proved that a soul can actually be fractured. The mind, yes. As a healer, you will have to deal with fractured personalities... But we know nothing of the soul, and Dumbledore didn't either." She shrugged. "I never managed to read his equations in their entirety. All I know about them is what I heard Severus discuss with him. If they had not been accurate, Severus would not have been persuaded to carry out Dumbledore's plans to the end... But you know as well as I do that you choose the parameters and hypotheses that you put into your Arithmancic equations, and that's why it is considered a kind of divination as much as a proper science."

"So, the results only reflected the hypothesis based on which Dumbledore chose to work," concluded Hermione with a sombre satisfaction. "Just as I thought. Nothing proves that there was no other option."
The two witches shared meaningful looks, both being very suspicious where Albus Dumbledore's intellectual honesty was concerned.

"Severus was not totally fooled by Dumbledore," Dilys added, "but every time he tried to suggest other variables and hypotheses, Dumbledore dismissed them by telling him that he had already tried them and they did not work out. However, I can't tell if this was true, because I never saw him actually working on his equations. Phineas knows a little more because he could see him at Grimmauld Place. He always said it was all delusions, make-believe and hypocrisy... but as he never liked Dumbledore, I must admit he's very biased."

"What I don't understand is why Professor Dumbledore was so focused on... repentance," Hermione said like it was a dirty word.

"The only thing I know is that he was a rather tortured man. He didn't talk much about the things that were not Hogwarts business, so it was difficult to know what he thought but he was not such a cheerful man in private. I suppose he carried enough of his own guilt or remorse that he needed to think there was something he could do about it."

"It's rather strange to hear this about Professor Dumbeldore."

"He may have been able to fool people with his eccentricity, his smiles and his puns, but he was a deeply lonely man. He never allowed himself to have a private life after Grindelwald."

"Ah!" interjected Hermione. "The death of his sister."

"You know about Ariana?"

"There is this book by Rita Skeeter... Although I know it should be taken with more than a pinch of salt...-" 

Dilys's smile was practically feral. "From what I hear, she has her facts completely right, for once, even with her nasty point of view. Dumbledore never had any significant relationship after he became a teacher and then a headmaster. We would have known."

"That's rather sad," Hermione said, always ready to sympathise with others. "And it may explain a lot."

"Explain, maybe," Dilys said sternly, all her earlier friendliness vanished as her lips thinned into a white, angry line. "But never excuse. You haven't watched him play with Severus's sincere feelings for years like we did."

Hermione instantly forgot all thoughts of forgiveness.

"He liked Severus, yes," spat Dilys, "but grudgingly... And once Harry Potter came to Hogwarts and he knew he would soon have to rely almost entirely on Severus against Voldemort... He seemed to never stop pushing Severus's guilt button, as if he could not trust his own trust in the man but needed to see him yield completely." She exhaled deeply, trying to cool down. "And yet, I can't help feeling sorry for old Albus, too. In his last months, the only personal interactions he allowed himself to have were with Severus, and with your friend Harry."

"You can't be serious!" Hermione interrupted her, once again. "Professor Dumbledore never went beyond very superficial discussions with Harry, and his actions surely prove that he never truly cared for him. When I think how he left Harry with his hateful aunt and set him up to die at the end... Or what he made poor Professor Snape do without giving him the least hope that he might be able to survive."
"You know," interrupted Dilys, "you really should call him Severus."

This was so unexpected that Hermione started. "I wouldn't dare!" she blurted.

"Even to help him heal from the years he had to sacrifice to Dumbledore and to Hogwarts?" Dilys asked bluntly. "It was never his choice to be a teacher, or a headmaster." She smiled kindly, as if trying to coax a reluctant child.

"I'd do anything to help him!" exclaimed Hermione, before blushing a little as she realised she may have been a little too eager. It was rather self-consciously that she added, more sensibly, "But I don't know how he would take that kind of familiarity from a former student who is so much younger and who has so little experience."

"There is that," stated the Headmistress very seriously, while inwardly chuckling as she remembered how Severus used to dismiss Minerva's qualms about their age difference as pure rubbish. "You could suggest that it makes you uneasy to be called Healer Granger all the time when you're not at St Mungo's and ask him as a favour that he calls you Hermione. He will feel bound to offer you the same."

Hermione found herself instantly fantasising about Snape's lips carefully enunciating her name. "Her-my-o-nee."

She heard him say it in her mind, making her glad for the first time that her parents had inflicted on her such a complicated name as he pronounced it – oh so slowly – carefully testing and tasting it.

"Hermione!"

She blinked, as if waking up from a dream. Headmistress Derwent was observing her, a knowing little smile flowering at the corner of her mouth.

Her cheeks suddenly heating up, Hermione could not help asking, "Do you think this will work?"

"It worked very well with Marcus Derwent," affirmed Dilys happily. "My husband, in case you wondered. And more recently, with Phineas Nigellus Black," she added with a saucy wink. "I don't think Severus could be a harder nut to crack than Phineas..."

Watching Hermione's jaw fall open, she added, a little too virtuously to be honest, "Not that I suggest that you would want to seduce Severus, of course... but these Slytherins like to be encouraged a little.' She bent forward and said conspiratorially, "All men are a little vulnerable in matters of the heart, but Slytherins are very, very proud. They need to be sure their attentions will be welcomed before making a move, but they will reward you by being so intense and affectionate..."

"I... I..." Hermione blinked several times, to clear her mind. "This is not what I meant. I am not planning to seduce Sev... Professor Snape." The Headmistress looked slightly incredulous, and she did not want to discuss this highly sensitive subject. So, she asked, "But really? You and Phineas Black?"

Dilys shrugged. "Eternity is a very long time to spend alone, my dear... Phineas's wife was a selfish shrew who was only too happy to remind him that they married only until Death did part them, and my own husband did not find it essential to spend good money on a wakeful portrait during his life." She pursed her lips unhappily. "The sad outcome is that I have very little left in common with his mere likeness, because it gets old very quickly to talk about the same thing all the time. He certainly remembers that I was his wife but... I need at least a little... intellectual stimulation... before being in the mood..." She sniffed disdainfully. "I'm not a brainless bimbo, and certainly not for the mere
shadow of a great man."

Hermione was practically crimson with embarrassment, which only made Dilys chuckle. "And in spite of his pretending to be above human foibles," she went on, "Phineas is as sensitive as he's witty. We are very well suited, even if I say so myself."

Hermione emitted a strange sound, between a scandalised gasp and a repressed laugh. She put her hand on her mouth. "I'm sorry," she babbled. "I never thought..."

"Of course, you didn't. You're much too young for this but remember what I tell you: our portraits are our chance to transcend time and separation. You should consider hiring a good painter for yourself." She pointed her index finger at Hermione. "But before that, you should consider how well suited you and Severus would be together."

"No, no..." protested Hermione, a little feebly.

"Yes, yes," countered Dilys cheerfully. "You would be perfect for each other."

Hermione straightened, although with difficulty, and cleared her throat. "It's the first time someone's tried to play matchmaker with me. I thank you but..."

"Bah!" interrupted Dilys Derwent. "I think you just never noticed before."

"Well," answered Hermione honestly, though unable to remember how the discussion had taken this turn. "My friends often try to set me up with one boy or another but..."

The Headmistress cut her again. "But being boys", she said with great disdain, "they never have a chance with you. You need a man. Someone mature. Reliable... Faithful, too, because it is much more important in a relationship that most of your generation believe. Intelligent, too, of course... A man who won't feel threatened by your brilliance because he knows his own worth without being too pretentious."

Hermione felt herself nodding almost against her will.

"And preferably, one who is not too selfish to learn how best to pleasure you." Hermione nearly choked but nothing could stop Dilys now. "In a word, someone like Severus."

"Headmistress..."

"No, no! You must call me Dilys."

"I... Dilys... I am not looking for a man!"

"Maybe not right now, with your apprenticeship, but even if being a healer is a very fulfilling career, let me tell you it is not your career that will keep you warm and happy at night."

Hermione tried to blink back the bitter tears that suddenly filled her eyes. She wished she could leave but she did not want to hurt or offend Dilys. She liked the older witch and could not blame her for her own failings.

"Dilys! I can't be with a man!" She let herself fall into a chair and pressed her hands to her cheeks. "Not Severus nor anyone else... I... I just can't. I can't!" She was aware that her voice was steadily growing hysterical. Unable to calm down or to explain, she covered her face with her hands and began to cry helplessly.
"Hermione! Have you… Err…" Dilys looked stricken and for the first time seemed to be lost for words. "You're Muggleborn and… err… I've heard what those Snatchers did during the war… Have they… Have you been…?" Hermione nodded, still hiding behind her hands.

"Oh!" exclaimed Dilys, inwardly cursing herself for triggering the reaction. "The bastards!"

Hermione looked up, her eyes meeting the Headmistress's sympathetic gaze. She was surprised, however, to hear her exclaim, "Now I understand what Phineas meant! He must have known what happened to you."

Hermione's mind went blank. "What?" she burst out. "He… he knows?"

Dilys shrugged apologetically. "He must have heard something at Grimmauld Place… Probably your friends discussing what happened to you while he was within earshot, because he grilled me about the available therapies and medicines to help the poor girls who had been raped, tortured and lost the ability to have children. He spoke generally but he clearly had someone in mind and I have rarely seen him so distressed. It must have been about you."

"I… But he always called me a Mudblood!"

"Hermione! In his time, as in mine, Mudblood didn't have the same extreme connotations it has now… And you know he always needs to pretend he doesn't care for anyone or anything. He's as fond and proud of you as of his favourite grand-daughter... and that's saying something!"

Hermione wanted to believe Dilys but she could not help feeling upset and embarrassed that the prudish Phineas Black must have heard Harry and Ron talk about her having been raped and tortured.

"Whatever," said Dilys. "The only important thing is that you can have a long, happy and fulfilling life."

"I know, but I don't need a man in my life. In fact, I have no use for a man at all. Or a woman." She blushed, remembering how Parvati had tried to set her up with a friend of hers.

"Rubbish! You have healed physically. You know you're on the way to healing psychologically, too or you wouldn't be able to become a therapist yourself. There's no reason you couldn't enjoy a loving and physical relationship in the future. I never meant to rush you into anything with Severus or with anyone else. I was just nudge you a little…" She cleared her throat under Hermione's incredulous stare. "Well, maybe more than a little. We are like that in Hufflepuff... always eager to help. Anyway, I'd be very surprised if Severus was ready for more than a harmless flirtation himself. Just don't close the door to something that could make you both grow more than you can imagine."

"I know you mean well," Hermione said rather stiffly, dabbing at her eyes. "I don't normally care when people make innuendos about my love life, but I'd rather we change the subject."

"Oh Hermione, please forgive an old witch who would like to see a wonderful young woman like you happy… And my poor Severus, too. My only excuse is that I care, even if I've been out of line. She raised her hands and fidgeted, as if she wanted to walk out of her portrait and hug Hermione.

Hermione stood up and put her hand on the portrait. Dilys smiled tenderly and pressed her hand at the same spot. Neither could actually feel the other, of course, but it was still very heart-warming.

After a time, Dilys said, contritely, "Phineas will be furious with me when he hears how I've distressed you."

Hermione could not help a watery chuckle at the thought of Phineas Black. "Tell him that I forgive
"As if this would stop him! What I will not hear about my impulsiveness, or about foolish Hufflepuffs who should know better than force help on people and be even more tactless than Gryffindors!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione, scandalised.

"You can expect a serious talk with Phineas when you next manage to spend the evening at Grimmauld Place. He misses you and complains that you never have time for more than a few words in passing. It would be very kind of you to spend some time with him."

Hermione melted. "I miss him too. Tell him that I promise to spend an evening with him quite soon."

Dilys nodded, looking very gratified.

Phineas would mock her, as usual, and tell her that she was a rogue, but he would be so happy at the prospect of catching up with Hermione.

She was sure that he would also come to realise that Hermione and Severus would be a very good match, and that he would consent, albeit reluctantly, to help.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

The quote in bold italic is from Chamber of Secrets.

As usual, Tra8erse made short work of all my mistakes and inconsistencies. If any remains, it's my own fault for changing something yet again at the last minute.

Is it a sin to seek the truth,
the truth beneath the rose?

(Within Temptation, The Truth Beneath The Rose)

"Oh!- Professor, before I forget," Hermione said cheerfully – more cheerfully than she actually felt but it was the best way she could find to bring up the subject, "I spoke to Dilya Derwent today."

Snape instantly turned suspicious. "About me?"

"You're not my only patient, you know," she said, huffing just a little and rolling her eyes for good measure without actually answering. "But Dilya asked how you're doing and said to tell you that she misses you. She also passes Phineas Black's regards."

Snape's face softened instantly, and she felt less guilty lying to him. "Thank you," he said, in a tone that was practically amiable coming from him. "When you next see either of them, please tell them that I miss them, too, and that I would visit if I could."

"Of course," she said before offering tentatively, "I could also bring Phineas Black's portrait from Grimmauld Place. Would you like that?"

He sat bolt upright, more eagerly than she ever remembered. "You would do this?"

"It wouldn't be the first time I dragged him around in my bag," she jested. "Somehow, I think he wouldn't object so much this time."

"He will object," declared Snape, amused, "but I'm positive he will like every minute of it."

"I believe you're right."

"Anyway, it's very kind of you, Healer Granger." He had seldom spoken so warmly to her.

Now, Hermione! Do it. "Please, Professor! It's very embarrassing outside St Mungo's when people I have known for years call me Healer Granger all the time. It feels like somehow they don't see me for myself anymore," she said with a slightly apologetic smile. "Would you call me Hermione? Please? It would also feel less like I'm an imposition on you."

"You're not an imposition. At least, you haven't been for quite some time, Hermione," Snape conceded, before biting his lip in a strangely self-conscious gesture. After a pause, he added, "It
would be only fair that you use my first name, too."

Her eyes widened and she closed them briefly, as if she could not believe what she heard. "Thank you, Severus," she breathed out in a strange, almost sultry voice. The voice insipid idiots like Rebecca Babbling used with him.

He blinked, his first thought being not her, too, although he felt like his heart had missed a beat or two.

Merlin! This will never do.

He answered rather coldly when she next commented on the good results of his routine exam but she neither took offence nor made any remark. She just wished him a good evening and Flooed away.

Severus was left feeling rather foolish. He must be imagining things.

Or worse, it was all wishful thinking on his part, after having been alone for so long. The first pretty girl who smiled at him and he was no better than a teenager.

He kicked the kitchen chair so efficiently that he winced at the resulting abuse to his toes.

§§§

Sunday lunch began quite awkwardly at the Burrow. Arthur and Molly had informed the children they had important news to share.

Ginny begged for and obtained a leave of absence from the coach. Only Charlie, who could not leave the Dragon Reserve with the nesting season in the full swing, and Ron were missing.

Ron had volunteered to stay with Snape, because it would have been cruel, despite Harry's protests, to leave him in attendance at Spinner's End while Ginny had the entire week-end free for once. Hermione was there too, Molly having insisted that she was family.

Minerva's presence was no surprise either, since she was Molly's best friend and had probably known what she was up to before everyone else.

They were barely seated when Molly dropped the bomb. "We're going to move."

This announcement was met with thunderstruck silence.

The Weasley children all criticized the old, dingy house but the Burrow was the family home, and contained all the memories of their childhood. They had heard Molly complain often enough of what she would do if she had money for another home – a neat cottage, with good plumbing for a change.

Now, with the children grown up and Arthur's career blooming at last, they had the means to make their dream reality. The brood shared dismayed looks. No one dared say anything though, because they all knew it would sound selfish. The parents deserved to think a little of themselves.

Arthur smiled. "It can't be such a surprise, now can it?"

Four red heads nodded sheepishly.

Fleur, Angelina and Hermione did not dare say anything.

Fleur thought that it was high time Beau-Papa and Belle-Maman moved to some place more comfortable and elegant, even if she had come to like the quaint little house. She found herself
regretting her children would not be able to share all their father's wonderful memories of the place, but she was not overly sentimental about material things. Wonderful memories can be built anywhere – as long as we have love.

Angelina did not feel entitled to an opinion, since she did not yet qualify as the latest addition to the family, the marriage being scheduled only for August, but she would never let George talk her into living at the Burrow – because, unless she was very much mistaken, this is what his calculating, almost avaricious look promised right now. *No way, Darling,* she tried to convey in a fiery glare. *We've managed to get over Fred's death. I didn't put my foot down about living in Diagon Alley in a flat so full of memories to settle for the Burrow next.*

Hermione pretty much shared Fleur's opinion. Her parents' house, without any magic built into it, was much more comfortable than the Burrow and easier to maintain even now that she only visited occasionally. Still, she knew the next generation of Weasleys were going to miss something without the Burrow.

It was Harry who blurted it out, for all of them, "*You're going to... to get rid of this house?*" He was incredibly disappointed. The Burrow had been his first glimpse ever of what a true home felt like, and what he had dreamt of having for himself from then on.

He already knew there would never be seven children – Ginny was absolutely adamant there would be no more than three, "*or you find a way to carry them yourself and you stay at home to care for them.*" But when they decided to get rid of Grimmauld Place and build a house in Ottery St Catchpole, it was with the express hope to be able to visit as often as possible.

"*Of course not,*" answered Arthur. "*We're going to build our new cottage at the far end of the orchard. The Burrow is part of Molly's project.*"

He nodded to his wife to explain. "*Minerva's offered me a teaching post at Hogwarts.*"

Minerva confirmed, "*Professor Flitwick needs an assistant for the younger years now that he's Deputy Headmaster. Your mother could handle you, I've no doubt she can handle our students.*"

Molly let them digest the news, then instantly nipped their interest in the bud. "*I refused.*"

"*But, Mum!*.."

"*Oh, no!*"

"*You'd be so good at it.*"

There was a general outcry.

"*I refused, because I have another project that's been close to my heart since the very first time we welcomed Harry here. When Hermione joined the club,*" she added with a warm smile to the young healer, "*I was sure I would just have to do it one day.*"

She knew she had all their attention. "*The Burrow is to become a day care centre. It will be a place where parents who work or who want their children to meet and play with other magical kids their own age can leave them for a few hours or the whole day... But we will also welcome Muggle-raised children up to twelve after school hours and for summer camps so that they can learn our customs and what being magical means before going to Hogwarts.*"

She turned to her husband. "*And Arthur's been inspired to suggest that whenever an Improper Use of Magic squad has to intervene in a muggle neighbourhood for a case of accidental magic, the first*
choice offered the family would be a coaching session under the oath of secrecy rather than just send
the Obliviators."

"When I consider the number of Muggleborn repeat offenders under the age of eleven, it's simply the
logical thing to do," Arthur explained with his usual modesty. He smiled at Hermione. "Your own
file states that the squad had to Obliviate you, your parents and several of your neighbours four
times."

Hermione sat bolt upright. "What? That's the first I've heard about this!"

Arthur merely laughed.

Harry laughed too, pointing at Hermione. "Are you telling me she would have arrived at Hogwarts
knowing even more magic that she did?" He shook his head. "I don't think Kingsley considered her
when you made your proposal, or he would have been much too frightened to sign the Decree."

Hermione was too far to swat him but she nodded to Ginny who obligingly did it for her.

"Oi!" Harry gave his girlfriend a not-you-too look while massaging his sore arm. Ginny only gave
him an angelic smile and blew him a kiss. He smiled back and leaned to pepper her mouth with small
kisses of his own.

Minerva interrupted the mushy display. "This will also make our teachers' work much easier. I
always found it stupid and an enormous waste of time and energy to give us the task of breaking the
news to the Muggleborn and their family straight before recruiting them for the school, and then…it's
just hope for the best."

Molly added, "What Minerva isn't telling is that she spent a long time building a kind of curriculum
for me."

"It was long only because there are so many challenges the Muggle-raised face when they arrive at
Hogwarts. Just compiling the more frequently asked questions the Heads of House, Madam Pomfrey
or the Prefects have to deal with took days!"

Hermione could not contain her emotions. She had confided in Molly more than once, telling her
how much she learned about the Wizarding world when she visited – much more than at Hogwarts
where it was sink or swim, and with mockery or scorn at every turn simply because she did not
know any better.

She stood up and walked to Molly to hug her. "It's a marvellous idea, and I can't think of anyone
who could carry it out as well as you will. You can count on me for medical advice whenever you
need it."

She sat wistfully while everyone else bombarded Molly with questions or offers of help.

It was in this kind of situation, when they all spoke about sending their own children to Molly's
centre, that it hurt to remember that she would probably never have a family of her own.

She slipped away, walking to the end of the garden – to the old apple tree they called Crookshanks's
tree. She smiled fondly, though a little sadly as usual, at the portrait of her cat that Molly had
engraved on the trunk. He would make the motions of cleaning himself, sharpen his claws on the
bark or mew when he saw her. When the Weasleys had to leave the Burrow during the war,
Crookshanks was nowhere to be found. When they returned, they never found any sign of him,
either.
No doubt countless children would delight in watching him move on the tree, when the day care centre opened. Hermione smiled at the thought.

Maybe she should consider looking for another familiar.

She laughed at herself. _Ready to turn into a cat lady._

§§§

That night, for the first time since the return of the Dark Lord, Severus had a wet dream.

He woke up with a start, out of breath and to the uncomfortable feel of a sticky nightdress. Afraid and disgusted at first that his bladder had betrayed him, he finally had to admit it was not urine.

He did not know if he ought to have been relieved or embarrassed at what was supposed to be a teenage manifestation. He began to worry whether it meant he would never regain his control and stamina or if it was just the sign of a slow return to normality.

Unlike what he was offered for his eyesight, there was no muggle laser correction for _this_ and even potions were not 100% efficient – not when _this_ had been damaged by Dark Magic.

Anxiously summoned, Constanz took it very matter-of-factly, if with a bit of teasing. "Your diencephalon, which regulates the instinctive part of the physiology of sex, is back to normal. It now only needs to surrender to the cerebral cortex for you to be fully healed."

He smiled, waiting for Snape to inevitably grunt, "What does this mean, in plain English?"

"That your body is sending your mind a message," the healer stage-whispered as if this was a marvellous secret. "Something like, 'I'm back to normal, but neither of us will be all right until you give us the motivation for a few good orgasms.' And I am not speaking of the kind you get all by yourself, although it is a good place to start if you will only remember to go slow and sensual rather than rush into it."

It was a rare occurrence indeed when Severus Snape was left speechless or when he flushed crimson.

He did both.

§§§

"Miss Granger." Phineas Black's portrait acknowledged her presence with satisfaction and bowed to her.

"Headmaster Black," answered Hermione in the same tone. "It's been such a long time."

"Indeed. Dilys took me to task for calling you... that name," he said rather stiffly. "The one Severus hates so much... and that has been used lately to insult the Muggleborn. I owe you an apology. It was never my intention to disparage you, Miss Granger... although I must admit I might have used the word a little too often to rile my fellow portraits."

Hermione smiled kindly to the old gentleman. "Dilys also said that Mudblood was not an insult in your time."

"She always wants to believe the best of everyone, which makes her over-optimistic. Muggles of her days would also tell you that "nigger" was not an insult but merely a statement of fact."
"Tell that to the African slaves."

"Exactly. It was not perceived as an insult, because even those it applied to were mentally conditioned to accept it. However, Mudblood," he pronounced the word in a cold, pedantic voice, "is a typical example of a semantic shift. Do you know that in Dilys's time, Mudblood simply meant a half-blood?"

"How so?" asked Hermione, instantly curious.

"Mix materials with different properties like a solid with a liquid and you get mud. Mix witch or wizard and muggle and you get mud-blood or half-blood. In my time, the word was not yet the insult it is today but it was definitely a pejorative. We used it to speak of Muggleborn social climbers who pretended to be more assimilated than they really were." He coughed uneasily. "I'm deeply sorry that my lamentable use of the word led you to believe that I did not respect you, Miss Granger."

"Oh please, don't Miss-Granger me! Dilys assures me that you like me," she teased him, just for the pleasure of seeing him squirm uneasily. "I have enough pleasant memories of our conversations to believe that I practically abducted you in the first place."

"You did," he said, with more admiration than rancour.

"See? We go back a long way and you must call me Hermione, like you would a young relative. Let's forget the rest," she said generously.

He coughed again. "And I believe it would be awkward if you called me Headmaster in front of Dilys. I would be honoured if you called me Phineas," he said with another bow.

Hermione graciously inclined her head to accept but could not help asking, rather impishly, "Dilys is a great lady, isn't she?"

"Indeed, she is," he said, as uncharacteristic red spots broke out on his cheeks. "But I believe you wanted to talk about Dumbledore and his mystical delusions?" he inquired, visibly eager to change the subject.

Hermione instantly turned serious. "I want to understand how he managed to manipulate all of us, and particularly Professor Snape into following the secret plans that now seem so far-fetched... There must be something we can do. We can't let him influence Sev... err... the Professor up to his coming trial."

Phineas Black gleefully stored away her slip of the tongue for the future discussion with Dilys.

"In a word," he said in a solemn voice, "Dumbledore believed in the concept of Pharmakos."

"The Greek version of the scapegoat?" she asked, immediately scandalised. "The victim who is sacrificed for the faults of another to appease the gods? Only they did not sacrifice animals but human beings!"

"Exactly. I see you know your history of magic," approved Phineas. "And do you also remember how they used to choose their sacrifice?"

Hermione reflected and enumerated, "An offscouring, rejected by most... Mistreated by nature... Considered the ugliest of them all... Worthless son of a worthless father... Unfortunate, poor and wretched... A reprobate..." She faltered, realising she knew one man, one wizard who had these insults and disparagements constantly hurled at him, first as a student and then as a man and even as a teacher.
Phineas Black bent towards her with a sly, nasty mile. "Do you recognise anyone you know in this description?"

Her mouth opened in a horrified 'O' but she could not make any sound and put her hand over it.

The Slytherin Headmaster sneered. "I will tell you who earned all these names for himself."

Hermione began to shake her head in silent denial but he went on mercilessly, "Everyone at Hogwarts would have told you when he was first sorted that he did not belong. He was a poor, despised half-blood, shrouded in scandal. He only had the one friend, even when it turned out that he was one of the most brilliant minds who'd ever attended the school..." He paused dramatically and enunciated slowly and with relish, "Albus Perceval Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

Satisfied with Hermione's thunderstruck look, he added softly, "They say one never gets over one's childhood."

§§§

1892

"Gryffindor!" the Sorting Hat shouted.

Albus Dumbledore walked as proudly as he could to the Gryffindor table, although there was not much applause from his new house mates. They found there was not much to boast about having the son of a notorious criminal in their midst. If anything, the other houses seemed rather relieved not to have him.

Headmaster Black gave him a sardonic look, as if he had just lost a tremendous opportunity.

Albus wondered if he knew that the Sorting Hat had offered him a choice between Gryffindor – his parents' old House – and Slytherin were he would flourish. He had chosen Gryffindor because his mother expected him to be courageous and to hold his head high and who were more courageous than Gryffindors?

His heart beating a tattoo, trying very hard to pretend he was not affected by the curious and hostile stares, or by the sneers from those who noticed the patch-up all around the hem of his father's old school robe, the redhead sat at the first empty place he found. He only realised too late that it was empty because the other students tried to keep their distance from the sickly-looking boy with a greenish complexion who had been sorted just before him.

Elphias... yes, Elphias Doge, the Deputy Headmaster had called him. Obviously, he was just recovering from Dragon Pox.

Albus did not care. Catching Dragon Pox was the least of his worries, right now, and it was not as if the poor guy could help it. But then, he could not help who his father was, either, and nobody seemed to realise it.

He did not want to think about his father, but he could not help remembering him telling, with fire in his eyes and the obvious resentment of a Muggleborn who has just been passed for promotion because of his birth once again, "You will show them, Albus. You are good with magic, and powerful... You will do better than me. You will show them all."

Elphias greeted him with a grateful smile, as if Albus was doing him a great favour by sitting beside him.

The gangly redhead, who had not felt appreciated for quite some time or made welcome for even
longer, smiled back so warmly, so happily that Elphias knew then and there that he had found his best friend ever.

§§§

"You can hardly imagine the tremendous scandal it was at the time. The revenge Percival Dumbledore took on the boys who had attacked his daughter was of a frightening savagery. Maybe, he had suffered himself at the hands of Muggles before he learned he was a wizard, and it triggered something... Something more than the need to protect and avenge his daughter. At least, that's one of Dilys's theories," he said without enthusiasm.

"It would not be unheard of," said Hermione softly.

"What he did is unfortunately nothing that would surprise us today – not after all the horrors committed by the Death Eaters." He carefully avoided looking at Hermione, and she guessed he was thinking of what happened to her.

Young Albus had a hard time from the first. Not only did he have to bear the shame of having his father in Azkaban but everyone had an opinion about what he was or should be.

Some thought he had to be a Muggle-hater, just like his father. So, he was treated with suspicion by the Muggleborn and the so-called liberal minds – mainly his Gryffindor mates. They just refused to remember that he was a half-blood himself.

Others, particularly the pureblood, thought that he was a symbol and that he should be the standard-bearer of their cause, to stand for a more vigorous defence and even retaliation against the Muggles.

He would have been completely isolated if not for his friend Elphias Doge. Fortunately, he was incredibly clever and immediately became an asset for his classmates with all the points he earned for Gryffindor. Every year, he would be cheered when yet another prize secured them the House Cup.

He never grew close to anyone other than Elphias. You could not say he kept people at arm's length, because he joined cheerfully whenever he was invited, which happened more and more often since he was pleasant, witty, and knew how to have fun – although the Headmaster was convinced he refused to trust anyone too far. All in all, he had a good time at Hogwarts.

Alas, it did not last. Three years later, Aberforth arrived and was sorted into Gryffindor, too. Despite their physical likeness, it was difficult to believe they were brothers. Where it seemed that insults glided off Albus like water off a duck's back, Aberforth always answered back. More often than not, he would end up in a brawl or hexing other students. He barely made it through his OWLS, and could not leave Hogwarts soon enough.

Albus hated to have Aberforth destroy his accomplishments and the appreciation he had earned from his peers, when all the points he garnered where lost by his brother. Aberforth, for his part, accused Albus of being a Judas and of not caring for him and for their family's reputation. Albus retorted that someone had to pay when a scandal happened but that he did not see why it should always have to be him.

He had a brilliant career ahead of him and he could not wait to walk away, forget and shed the weight of his father's crime.

Headmaster Black did not know much of what happened in the interim years before Dumbledore came back to Hogwarts as a teacher. What he knew he pieced together from the rare interactions between the Dumbledore brothers when Aberforth joined the Order of the Phoenix and from the
gossiping of his fellow portraits, particularly Violet Bagshot, Bathilda's mother in law.

When his mother's death dashed his hopes, Dumbledore returned home to take the mantle of the head of the family and breadwinner but he was full of resentment.

Clearly, he believed he had found how to erase the past at last and transcend his less than stellar situation when he met Gellert Grindelwald. He was infatuated and, according to Violet, who liked the diversion at her old home and spent an inordinate time spying on her daughter-in-law's handsome young cousin, the two of them spent all their free time together.

Phineas deduced that planning a world revolution and subjugation of muggles was a much needed relief for Dumbledore in his situation, all the more since his relationship with Gellert fuelled his admiration for his visionary views of a better future, where powerful, enlightened wizards ruled the world.

When Ariana died, he felt so guilty that he did not react when Aberforth called him a murderer at her funeral and assaulted him in full view of everybody.

The guilt grew as Grindelwald gained influence, and then power. It was by then impossible for Dumbeldore to ignore how enthusiastically he had shared Gellert's ideas, even helping him to shape them, to give them the appearance of rationality and logic, ready to be developed in what would become his most popular work, the Manifesto For The Greater Good.

"I think that was the turning point for Dumbledore," Phineas declared. "He had to atone for so many things at that point: betraying his father's memory, abandoning his siblings, encouraging the Darkest evil wizard yet known to mankind to put into practice his violent and racist theories... He put all his intelligence and considerable talent into building resistance against Grindelwald."

"And yet," objected Hermione, "he stayed at Hogwarts while others actually fought the war against Grindelwald. He told Harry he hid like a coward. How do you explain it?"

"Love moves the hearts of men in mysterious ways," Phineas pronounced with more disgust than fascination. "They both built armed groups but only fought through third parties. Maybe they both feared their own unresolved feelings when they knew a duel between them could only be to the death."

"And Dumbledore could not kill Grindelwald in the end," reflected Hermione.

"One can only wonder whether Grindelwald would have killed Dumbledore if he had won," Black wondered aloud. After a meditative pause, he went on, "So, you understand that Dumbledore might have suspected young Tom Riddle of framing Hagrid for the murder of Myrtle Warren or noticed that he surrounded himself with a bad lot, but he never made a real effort to prove the truth of his suspicions. He was too busy with his Order of the Phoenix to really care."

"But wasn't it obvious, even at the time, that something was very wrong with Tom Riddle?"

"In all fairness, nobody noticed anything beyond Riddle being involved with the wrong kind of friends, but they were all purebloods from respectable families, while he was a poor half-blood himself." The headmaster shrugged. "It seemed logical that he would try to make connections and use his obvious charisma when he could."

"Are you telling me that the rise of Voldemort was so unpredictable?" Hermione asked, with a hint of disapproval in her voice.

"I don't think that kind of madness can be predictable. You can only recognise the signs in
"With all due respect," objected Hermione, "I believe that keeping an eye on a destitute, orphaned young wizard living in the muggle world should have been a priority. My friend Harry's and Professor Snape's childhoods are just other examples of the same failings which continue to this day."

"There are no such institutions in our world," Black conceded, although with the unconvinced air of someone who does not understand what poverty and neglect really are. "Anyway, this great failure to identify Tom Riddle as a potential threat was a sore point for Dumbledore. He came to identify his own circumstances as a youth and then those of Riddle as the seeds of potential Darkness, and the influence of Gryffindor House as the only thing that stopped him from going over to the other side."

"Hallo!" snorted Hermione. Black snickered as well. "Modesty was never Dumbledore's greatest quality. He came to believe that it was Grindelwald's constant exposure to the Dark Arts at Durmstrang that made all the difference. Since the greatest supporters of teaching all aspects of magic, including the Dark Arts, were found amongst the Slytherins, due to the traditions of the House, it was an easy step to paint all of us Slytherins as the champions of Darkness. Tom Riddle's descent into Darkness only seemed to confirm him in this view."

"So, that's when the discrimination against Slytherin began?"

"Right in the aftermath of Grindelwald's defeat," Black confirmed. "Although the fact that we are generally not very interested in teaching did not help our cause."

"I never thought about it, but now that you say it, the only Slytherin teacher I can remember, apart from Professor Snape, of course, is Professor Sinistra."

"Indeed. Slytherins generally go into business or choose independent professions."

"Like the law. Draco once told me that Gryffindors are absolutely useless in a court room, unlike Slytherins."

Black's small smile was a visible proof that he agreed with Draco but chose not to press the point. Instead, he asked, "So, you have never wondered why I was, before Severus, the only Slytherin to ever become Headmaster?"

Hermione blushed. "I confess I just assumed it was because you lot were so unpopular."

"No," he sighed. "There has always been a shortage of Slytherins on staff at Hogwarts. I never was a teacher myself. I have absolutely no patience with teenagers. I only accepted the position of Headmaster as a favour to my old friend Evermonde when he was Minister."

Hermione sniggered a little while pointing out that it could not have been such a hardship to become the fourth or fifth top official in the Wizarding world.

Black instantly took objection. "What? It's true. I hated it, but all the other candidates were Mudbloods!"

Hermione saw red and stood up, ready to leave. "Professor! I was willing to accept your excuses, but I'm done listening..."

"And what did I tell you about my time's Mudbloods?" he asked sharply. "They were just a bunch of
opportunists, ready to sell us all to Muggles! They would have indoctrinated our students, thrown us to the dogs, just to help them win their so-called Great War!"

Hermione's jaw dropped. "The Great War? You mean the First World War?"

"Yes," Black said through gritted teeth. "Do you also happen to know how many died?" He did not give her the time to answer. "Eighteen million! More than the entire magical population. One million dead just in Muggle Britain!" he ranted. "We had the right to defend our Statute of Secrecy! There were victims, magical victims, of their propaganda."

He swallowed hard. "My own son… my Phineas… he said he could not stand by and watch people die when he could help. He had to go and get himself killed for… For..." He deflated right in front of her eyes, suddenly looking his age. "Even magic can't do anything against their bombs. Ursula… my wife," he said in a hoarse voice. "She was never the same after that... She burned his face off the family tree, saying to all who wanted to listen that he was not dead... that he had shamefully abandoned us to live with the Muggles, but that he was safe and well..." He abruptly turned his back – to hide his emotion, Hermione guessed.

"Phineas," she called tentatively. "I am truly sorry. I didn't know but I feel for you. I understand that you had to do what you could to help."

She heard him take a deep breath. Slowly, he turned to face her again and sat down, as if nothing happened.

"Of course, you could not know," he said with just a hint of bitterness. "There will always be a fresh tragedy to banish the memory of the previous ones." He leaned back, smiling sourly. "You understand now why there weren't many people at Hogwarts to protest against the rising discrimination against the Slytherins. Dumbledore was not the only one who equated the Pureblood cause with Grindelwald, so it was practically inevitable."

Resentment turned his voice cold. "Just as it was inevitable, years later, that he would notice another incredibly brilliant misfit half-blood sorted into Slytherin and immediately mark him as a potential threat... and allowed, if not encouraged, his Gryffindors to crush his spirit as soon as possible."

"You're speaking of Severus, aren't you?" This time neither of them noticed or cared about her use of Snape's first name.

"Yes."

"So, instead of trying to help, the headmaster just decided that an eleven-year-old was already beyond redemption?"

"He always found perfectly good excuses to avoid punishing that group of bullies...""

"The Marauders!"

"The infamous lot! To think that my own great-great-grandson was one of them!" Black fumed for some time, before going on. "Dumbledore had to change his tune with the first war, though. First, the new recruits in his Order... all Gryffindors, of course... were much more ruthless than he expected and less manageable. And then, Severus happened. He offered his life to him to save Lily Potter, and I'm still not sure how Dumbledore made this fit into his world."

"When I was a student," Hermione said thoughtfully, "I thought they were friends... when in fact Dumbledore was only manipulating him."
Phineas Black suddenly looked a little embarrassed. "I do not pretend to understand Dumbledore's attitude or his reasoning. I believe he genuinely cared for Severus. You should have seen how he moved heaven and earth to have him cleared after the first war... What I think is that he was also secretly ashamed of caring because Severus did not fit anywhere in his belief system and challenged it."

"It no doubt helped when he had to decide who he was going to make the villain in the Martyrdom of Saint Dumbledore," stated Hermione, looking thoroughly disgusted. "Correct me if I wrong. In his fear of death and growing paranoia, Dumbledore must have seen his opportunity. He thought staging his death almost like a sacrifice would save him from his guilt and his retribution for Ariana's death in the afterlife. It had the distinct advantage of killing several birds with one stone, and of keeping Severus under his thumb even in death."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Phineas. "You're really the brightest witch of your generation! By having Severus kill him, he helped him to regain Voldemort's trust and secure his place as the Light's Trojan Horse... But it also made it possible for him to achieve what he believed to be the best way to atone for all his past failings." He sniffed disdainfully. "He hoped to become the innocent victim, offering himself for the salvation of the world..."

"The only innocent victim was Harry!" interjected Hermione sharply.

"Indeed." Black nodded in agreement. "As for Dumbledore, he hoped that staging his own death as a sacrifice would turn him in the other world into the supplicant who seeks purification."

"But what about Severus?"

Phineas Nigellus smiled bitterly. "Believe it or not, Dumbledore was convinced that he was doing him a favour and that they would both benefit from becoming pharmakoi together."

Hermione gasped incredulously, which made Black turn even more sour. "Severus was going to die so despised and misunderstood that it could only tip the scales in his favour. Never mind that he had to go through one excruciating ordeal after another. You see, Dumbledore was convinced that going through utter despair is required for purification."

"For the others, you mean," cut Hermione. "For himself, he secured a very dramatic but rather painless ending."

"I don't know if it was that painless, from what I heard, but, yes, he hoped that securing for the Light the means to vanquish Voldemort would be enough to save him from too harsh a retribution. In his mind, he was kinder to Severus than he was to himself."

"This is disgusting. It's nothing more than using his death, and Severus's, for some kind of horse-trading."

"I never said Dumbledore was a sane man," Phineas sighed. "You should have seen him rummage in our library here because he did not want Madam Pince to know what he was reading... and lap it up because he had lost all common sense where his own death was concerned." He sneered. "What he did not know is that I can recognise every single one of our books just by the binding."

Hermione leaned forward eagerly. "So, you can tell me which books he was studying?"

Phineas gave her a piercing look. "I hope you've grown out of that childish belief that since it's written, it has to be true?"

"If I hadn't, reading the Prophet would be cure enough, I think."
Moppy was laughing and crying at the same time and dabbing at her eyes with the corner of her towel. She could not wait to tell Fuzzy and took a few dance steps in the kitchen, stroking her belly as the child joyfully kicked, too.

Master could hardly believe his eyes when Healer Hermione (she had asked Moppy to call her Hermione) brought the portrait of Headmaster Black.

Just after they fixed it on the wall, Headmistress Derwent peeped out from the side of the frame. Phineas Black had hastened to stand and offer her his seat, and the three of them had a most happy, if rather emotional, reunion.

Healer Hermione stood beaming at Master's side. He had caught her hand and squeezed it in heartfelt thanks, just standing there, unable to speak or to let go for several minutes.

If he was surprised when the Headmistress insisted, "Please, Hermione, stay. We owe you too much," or when Headmaster Black joined in and called her Hermione, too, he did not show it, his lips still firmly pressed to contain his emotion.

It seemed to become increasingly natural for him to call her Hermione and for her to call him Severus with the two painted portraits being present.

Moppy stopped dancing, rather breathless. She could predict great, happy things in the future, and a proper Snape home for her baby.

And if Master needed a friendly nudge, Moppy would be there to help – as always.

Snape was repeating it to himself for the umpteenth time.

It was not Hermione he had dreamed of last night.

Or the night before.

The faceless woman who bestowed her favours on him had short brown curls, but it meant absolutely nothing. A lot of women have brown hair and wear it short.

Not in the wizarding world, a wicked voice whispered.

It could not be the same woman. This one was leaning against Weasley who had his arm around her shoulders as they perused the Prophet's latest hypothesis about where the Ministry might be hiding Dumbledore's murderer. The journalist speculated whether Shakelbolt could have Snape partially Obliviated before the trial to hide the darkest secrets of the Order of the Phoenix.

Hermione Granger was much too young, anyway.

His inner demon whispered again. Too young to be a heroine? Too young to be a healer? Too young to sleep with Weasley?

Shut up. His dream woman just happened, thankfully, not to be either Minerva or Lily.

Hermione Granger was not interested in him, and he was not interested in Hermione Granger. Not in this way.
They were just friends.

Comrades.

He suddenly remembered the feeling of the woman's soft, round breast in his hand, the warmth of her peachy skin...

He could not help his gaze from slipping to Hermione's chest.

His fingers unconsciously crooked a little. Same size, if he was any judge.

He scowled, only to have his three ex-students look questioningly at him.

He closed his eyes and sighed.

He was an idiot. A frustrated and delusional idiot, all because he was cooped up in his home and seeing only the one woman daily.

He should be checking the last details of his escape instead of daydreaming.

Or of dreaming at all.

"I think I may need something to sleep tonight. Do you have anything on you, Healer Granger?"

She sat bolt upright. "What? But you haven't needed…"

"Never mind," he ground out through clenched teeth before leaving rather abruptly, unaware of the desolate eyes that followed him.

§§§

It was not until the middle-game of their second chess game that Snape asked, rather casually, "Won't we see Granger tonight? I thought she would dine with us."

Weasley was good. Very good, and had won their first game, but Severus was determined he would not win this one.

Ron shrugged, wondering how he had not seen how Snape would manage to corner his rook... but he was certainly not going to risk his king's knight as the older wizard clearly wanted. "Said she had to check some reference or other for a case. She must be in St Mungo's Library." He chuckled. "That's what Hermione does. When in doubt, go to the library."

Snape frowned at the chessboard. "You're rather placid for someone who's just been jilted by his girlfriend for books."

"Mmmm," mumbled the redhead absently. "Not my girlfriend anymore."

"Oh?" Snape asked casually, before moving a pawn in a bold move Weasley certainly would not expect from him. (Except he did.) "I know I've been out of the world for two years but the teachers at Hogwarts were under the impression there was something serious between you and Miss Granger."

Ron blushed slightly—damn redhead skin!—but looked Snape squarely in the eyes. "This something was another casualty of the war."

Snape's eyebrows reached hitherto unscaled heights but he did not do platitudes. He simply waited.
"We're just friends now. At least, she forgave me..."

The look of puzzlement was so fleeting that Ron Weasley, that lazy, selfish, immature schoolboy would have missed it entirely. Ronald Weasley, Auror and war veteran, did not. He looked back frankly, if with a self-conscious smile.

Not so long ago, Ron would have been the first to scoff at the idea of appreciating Snape's discretion, and of confiding anything to him.

Surviving a war and growing up will do that to a guy: black and white were still black and white, but were now confined to the chessboard as far as he was concerned. He found it hard to distinguish between all the shades of grey real life was made of – particularly after he had to face his own shortcomings and cowardice, and learn to live with them.

Besides, he knew so much now about the man in front of him that he felt bad about it.

The initial smugness of being in the thick of things had soon worn off after assisting in the interrogation of a few war criminals – who underplayed everything – and investigating in depth the victims, who much too often took you for a confidant and a counsellor.

Snape was different.

And that last move was brilliant, damn the man.

Ron would never be one to worship Snape like Harry or Neville did, but he cloaked himself in his Auror persona every morning when he put his uniform on. It enabled him to understand at last how Snape had been able to act so masterfully during the war – teacher, spy, Death Eater by turns, all the while keeping his secrets.

He was good with secrets, yes, and he would not be one to gossip either.

"I abandoned them, you know," he blurted, almost against his will.

Snape showed his interest by another swift glance from the board.

"When we had to take turns wearing Slytherin's locket..." Ron paused, looking enquiringly. Snape nodded to confirm that he knew what Ron meant. "It turned me totally paranoid."

"You're not the only one, it seems. The curse from the ring had the same effect on Dumbledore."

"Yes," Ron sighed. He hesitated but finally told the truth, finding it strangely liberating to say it aloud. "It made me believe that Harry and Hermione were sleeping together behind my back and laughing at me."

Snape castled his king, making Ron groan in frustration.

"Add the total lack of directions from Dumbledore... The lack of food... Of everything... I just lost it. I left them."

Snape looked up, unable to feign indifference. "I left them," repeated Ron with a grimace of self-disgust. He was relieved, however, that Snape’s face betrayed only curiosity. "I gave Hermione an ultimatum: either she came with me and abandoned Harry or I wouldn't have anything to do with them anymore. She tried to make me see reason, but I was unable to listen to anything."

He made his next move, less clever than usual, and looked up. "You think I was an idiot, don't you?"
"Considering I took the Dark Mark at the same age, I'd rather not discuss the idiocies one can commit under pressure."

Ron snickered and considered Snape's comment sufficient prompting to go on. "I repented soon enough, of course, but I couldn't find my way back. Her wards were too strong and they moved continually."

Snape's queen finally seized his rook with an unholy howl of triumph echoed by the wailing worthy of a Greek chorus coming from the rook and all the chess pieces that had already been taken by both players. Snape glared and the chess pieces toned it down at once, some of Ron's even mumbling apologies.

Ron raised his eyebrows in awe and would have remarked on Snape still having it in him but a faint move from the Professor's hand prompted him to go on. "When Dumbledore's Deluminator finally brought me back, they were exhausted. Starved like you wouldn't imagine. But they had survived without me."

He made a defensive move which would not change the outcome of the game that he was losing, but he did not care. What he wanted to say was more important, because he had not yet been able to confide in anyone who would not feel obliged to commiserate with or console him.

"If I hadn't saved Harry on my way back, I'm not sure what kind of reception I would have received. Hermione gave me a good dressing down," he noticed how Snape's lips twitched upward and he involuntarily did the same, "but she forgave me. As did Harry, thank God. We tried to get past it and to date after the war... but she was just too fragile after..." He let his voice trail down, unable to find the words.

He was surprised when Snape nodded. "Bellatrix."

Ron flushed crimson and silently cursed himself for this. He hastened to say something – anything rather than have Snape ask questions he would not know how to answer without betraying Hermione. "I was not mature enough to understand what she'd gone through, I suppose. In fact, you could say she has a knack of making me feel silly and immature."

Snape inclined his head and considered Ron curiously. "The very fact that you realise you may not have been mature enough is a proof of maturity, in my book."

Ron's jaw dropped and it was only when his own king irately swore at him for abandoning him in check that he realised he had been gaping like an idiot for a full minute. He looked up and his gaze met Snape's.

"Now, Weasley," Snape drawled. "Don't let it go to your head. It may be another twenty years before I pay you another compliment."

Ron could not help chuckling, as he gave up, knocking over his own king. "You bastard," he said affectionately.

Harry soon emerged from the Floo, returning from Grimmauld Place with fresh clothes and hair still standing on end from shampoo.

He was happy to find Snape quietly sipping tea and Ron another hot cocoa. The crumbs on his side betrayed that Snape had eaten his fair share of shortbreads, something Moppy could have told him he had seldom done since Dumbledore's death.

"What's on the telly?" Harry asked cheerfully.
"You go for breakfast and lunch," insisted Ron, "and you relieve me by tea time."

"No way. It's your family. You should spend the greatest part of the day with them."

"It's your family, too, and you haven't that many opportunities to spend time with Ginny. Besides, I'll have Christmas Eve, when Hermione is free. You should rather pity her for working on Christmas."

Harry gave in. Christmas was in ten days and Snape had arm-wrestled Kingsley into giving his consent for Lucius Malfoy to visit since he was the Secret Keeper. The two of them had plans for Christmas, before Lucius would Floo back to spend the evening with his family.

It lifted most of Harry's qualms about Snape feeling lonely and even more abandoned at this time of year, even if Hermione had told him he was projecting his own feelings on Severus. He actually had a family – a real, caring family, even if it was still hard at times for Harry to accept that it was the Malfoys.

"I don't need anyone's pity," interjected Hermione. "Christmas day is not the worst time for working at St Mungo's. Sure, we're understaffed, but generally there aren't so many emergencies, either, mostly happy ones like childbirth. Everyone seems determined to liven things up. There's to be little parties in every ward, both for the staff and the patients, and I understand friends and family can come and go more freely than usual."

"Is it too late to suggest you switch for Boxing Day?" Snape asked, almost solicitously, although there was a wicked gleam in his eyes. "This way you could spend Christmas at the Burrow."

Hermione gave him one of her no-nonsense stares. "What do you have in mind?" She did not quite put her hands on her hips, but the intention was there, and Snape very nearly laughed out loud. If he had the word in his vocabulary, he would have been inclined to say that she was a dear.

"The 26th is a game night," he declared with great satisfaction, "and Man United's playing Chelsea."

"YEAH!" shouted Ron and Harry.

Hermione made a face.

"Mmmm… It's the busiest day in St Mungo's. I've heard there is a constant flow of people with hangover, indigestion and all sorts of stupid accidents involving Christmas gifts," she added, pouting for appearance's sake. She has already decided to avoid another game night at all costs but still sighed unhappily to make the guys feel guilty. "I guess they will be happy to have me."

Harry and Ron's briefly stricken looks made her feel better, in a rather wicked way.

Snape bowed mockingly. "Indeed, your sacrifice is appreciated."

She huffed, but smiled when he graced her with one of his own half-smiles.

She felt a little flustered when Ron gave Snape a sidelong glance then looked speculatively at her.
Chapter Notes

As usual, you may thank Tra8erse for her thorough beta work. I also must apologize for the delay in updating. I had serious health issues for several weeks and then had to work doubly hard to catch up with my schedules.

Find me a miracle

(Dead by April, Falling behind)

"Snape!" bellowed Harry angrily, as soon as he finished reading the documents Ron had just sent him after collecting them at Andromeda Tonks's.

He ran down the stairs to the lab and pounded on the door. He did not care that Snape hated being disturbed when he was brewing. He was supposed to be under constant supervision, so he had better not complain – not when he had been hiding this from Harry.

"One moment!" was the irate answer.

Harry listened with growing impatience to the sounds coming from the lab. He was about to pound again when the door opened. The lab was so hot and stuffy, it took his breath away. Snape's face was glistening with sweat and even the protective grease was melting and dripping from his hair as he glared at Harry. "What's so urgent?"

Harry stuck the papers under his nose. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" snapped Snape, snatching them. He began to read and comprehension dawned on his face. "Well, it hasn't come up in the discussion so far. It's not as if it was that important when I had no proof to offer."

It was Harry's turn to glare. He did this two inches away from Snape's face, and with a snarl he had not used with the man for a very long time. "You don't think that exonerating evidence must come first in our discussions?"

"You call this exonerating evidence?" countered Snape with disdain. "My name isn't even on Lupin's notes... And he should never have made any notes to begin with!"

"Don't you start! This is prima facie evidence and Remus left it were only a member of the Order could discover it. You must..."

Snape cut him off impatiently and gestured towards his alembic. "Let me finish bottling this and clean myself up. I'll join you upstairs."

Without waiting for an answer, he slammed the door in Harry's face. The Auror pursed his lips but suddenly the ridiculous side of the situation struck him and drew a smile. Some things did not change.
He went to sit down and review the notes, determined to listen calmly to whatever stupid excuse Severus would come up with: this time, for not telling him that Remus had been his contact in the Order all along.

He had shut the subject down the first and last time they broached it, by tersely responding that his contact was long dead and that spies do not leave incriminating evidence behind.

Harry had let the matter drop, since they had so many things to discuss, but with the nagging feeling that Snape, as usual, had an ulterior motive. So, he charged Ron with looking for any note Remus might have left behind about his sources of information for the Order of the Phoenix.

Ron had gone through every hidey-hole the Lupins had ever used with a fine-tooth comb. He did not find anything, but something did not feel quite right in the room at Andromeda’s the couple had last occupied.

Nymphadora and Andromeda had both acted like the women whose husbands abandoned them without warning during the Death Eaters' brief stint in power. Nymphadora ostensibly returned to live with her mother, both seemingly lonely and bitter, all the more since the Auror found herself pregnant. The Snatchers had searched the Tonks residence several times, ostensibly looking for clues about Ted Tonks’s possible whereabouts, but they were obviously under the clear orders to find evidence of Nymphadora’s links with the Order or of her staying in contact with her husband. And yet, they found nothing.

Ron had gone back to Andromeda’s place twice, trying to figure out what he might have overlooked. The last time, he just sat at the desk, trying to envision how Remus would manage the Order's intelligence from home and how he would think when it came to hiding the information. He knew he would not have told anything to his mother-in-law for her own safety. Tonks would have known, though, to be able to fill in for her husband at a moment’s notice. So, it had to be there, but noticeable only to someone who knew them well.

"So," Snape interrupted Harry's musings, only frowning slightly as the Dicta Quill began to write. This was to be a formal deposition, then. "Where did Weasley find this proof of Lupin's stupidity?"

"Remus was far from stupid and I refuse to be baited. You, on the other hand, have some explaining to do. Why didn't you tell me he was your contact?"

"Because you wouldn't have believed me. He wasn't supposed to leave anything behind!"

Harry gave him an incredulous look but said nothing.

"Seriously," Snape asked, "where did he leave this? It was incredibly dangerous for all concerned."

Harry answered rather smugly, "At Andromeda's and in plain sight."

Snape raised a curious eyebrow and the Auror chuckled. "Transfigured as a portrait of Tonks on the shelves. They always searched the shelves or tried to find hiding places, - behind the photo at the back of the frame, too. They never considered the photo itself." He paused, giving Snape as smug a look as if he had discovered the documents himself.

"And what made Weasley think, when the Snatchers didn't?"

"Why, Tonks, of course. She was holding a crystal vase full of blooms."

Snape gave him a pointed 'I-have-no-time-for-your-silly-riddles' look.
"In the entire time Ron sat there looking at the picture, whether Tonks was smelling the flowers or showing them off with pride, she never once spilled even a drop of water."

Snape could not help chuckling, too, when he remembered Lupin's wife's extreme clumsiness in everyday life. "My compliments to Weasley."

"Yes, but you still have some explaining to do."

"What explaining? Even Order members would have a hard time believing me if I suddenly declared that I sent information to the werewolf I had ousted from Hogwarts and bickered with every chance I got," Snape said in a scathing tone. "Particularly if all I could add was that, sorry, but he can't confirm anything since he's dead." Snape shook his head. "People would just think it's a bit rich, particularly coming from me."

"I would have believed you!" Harry protested. "I was raking my brain, trying to decide who was your contact, since it had to be the last person one would think of. If he hadn't been killed so early, I would have bet on Moody."

Snape shuddered. "The very thought is disgusting."

"My next choice was Remus," Harry said with a small shrug.

They sat silently for a few minutes, Snape brooding and Harry waiting patiently.

Almost patiently.

"Severus," he said when he could not bear waiting any longer, "How did you..."

"I did nothing. It was all Lupin's doing," the older man sighed. "It was after your godfather's funeral. Nothing like a good funeral to make people reconsider their life's choices, I suppose," he snorted bitterly. "Lupin was blind drunk and pounded on my door in the middle of the night."

"At Hogwarts?"

"Of course, at Hogwarts. Even I am not callous enough to show my face at Grimmauld Place right after Black's death. When I saw Lupin, I very nearly Stunned him, because I was sure he wanted to smash my face in. He would not have been the first to wish to do so."

"But no, he just started ranting and telling me I was a bastard because I did not attend the ceremony, but immediately after, he declared that he was glad I wasn't a hypocrite and didn't come. And then, most surprisingly, he started to apologize for all the Marauders' faults."

Snape sat back with a faintly disgusted look, the same he must have sported when confronted with an apologetic but totally hammered Remus, Harry guessed. "I had to let him in to avoid making a spectacle."

Harry tried to hide a chuckle, as he imagined the scene but at one look at Snape's best put-upon face he burst out laughing. It only earned him a dark look.

"I managed to make him drink a hangover cure and waited for him to come to his senses. He did not, but went on with the apologies. I told him I wanted to sleep, and threw him out."

Harry could not help chuckling again.

"The next evening, he knocked at my door, more politely, and with a bottle of Firewhiskey in his
hand."

Harry stared incredulously. "Are you telling me you made up by getting drunk together?"

"Many people would tell you there are few things more civilized than getting drunk together."

"I don't believe you."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Of course not. The bottle was empty, and Lupin was drunk again. I gave him another hangover cure, had to listen to his maundering and apologies once again before I managed to send him on his way. The day after, he visited again. He was drunk."

This time, Harry found nothing to laugh about. The realisation of the extent of Remus's distress after Sirius's death and how he had been too wrapped up in his own grief to notice, made him feel guilty. "What did you do?"

Snape shrugged. "It was two days to the full moon and I was exhausted with brewing complex speciality potions, from Mr Lupin's Wolfsbane to the cures for a certain Know-it-all who was still in a coma at St Mungo's after her close and entirely avoidable encounter with Dolohov," he said with a pointed and venomous glance. "I had no time to spare for that kind of drama, so I just put him to bed... on my sofa," he clarified, noticing Harry's startled look. "Then I left him with a note stating that he had better not be there when I returned or turn up drunk again if he wanted his Wolfsbane."

Harry listened so expectantly it made Snape nervous. He stood up and went to lean against the window. It gave him the excuse to look outside. "The next day, he was sober... but he still wanted to apologize. I just... gave up, I suppose," Snape admitted. "I accepted his apologies. I may have even called him Remus." He huffed at Harry's delighted grin. "I shouldn't have because he kept coming back after that. He apparently wanted to be... friends," he sneered, with an ostentatious gesture.

Harry began to smile but the other man looked daggers at him and nipped his hopes in the bud. "I couldn't do it."

"Oh." was all Harry managed to say, disappointed.

"Oh, indeed," growled Snape, turning back to face him. "What did you expect? What did he expect? That we would embrace each other, kissing and making up? It may have been his hope, it was never mine!" he railed. "I had no desire to spend time with him, reminiscing over the good old days... the same good old days when I could never know where and when they would ambush me... All their so-called innocent pranks and insults... Or the werewolf who tried to grab me when Black dared me to go to the Shrieking Shack...." He exhaled loudly, exasperated. "I just couldn't! And stop looking at me as if I kicked your puppy! It's not as if you didn't know that I am a bastard!"

Harry looked sadly at the man he used to hate. "We both know you're not. At least," he said, attempting levity, "you're not just a bastard."

Snape was spectacularly annoyed, hating to be judged, except on his own terms. His eyes narrowed, and Harry just knew he was going to say something hurtful.

"It was even worse with your godfather. I know he was wronged by the Ministry and suffered," he conceded, "but only common decency stopped me from going to dance a merry jig on his grave. I hated him with all I had and he did the same. And everyone, every time, supported him, simply
because he was himself and I was me. You can't get over something like this at the drop of a hat."

"I did," said Harry thoughtfully. "When I saw your memories."

"This only proves you're a much better man than I'll ever be," declared Snape with finality.

"You can't forget but it doesn't mean you can't forgive," Harry said with an infuriatingly knowing smile. "You're a good man, Severus, because you could have taken your revenge easily, and you didn't."

"That's enough. You know what you wanted to know. I think it would be best if you left me alone." Snape turned his back at Harry again and ostensibly contemplated the back garden.

Harry refused to comply, for once. "You still have to tell me how Remus came to be your contact."

Snape pursed his lips but deigned answering. "Nearly. Out of guilt."

Harry gave him a shrewd look. "His or yours?"

"Both. He kept trying to win me over. He used to submerge me in his thanks and apologies every time he received or came to collect his Wolfsbane. Unwanted gratitude is rather tiresome, and it irked me to be left feeling the insensitive swine, particularly with Minerva insisting I should give him a chance. You could tell I did it for her, for I wouldn't have done it for anyone else."

"Even for Dumbledore?" questioned Harry, a little surprised. "I'm sure you were still friends at the time."

Snape bit his lip and paused before adding, reluctantly, "Even then. Minerva's friendship and approval were much more important than Albus's... because they were genuine!"

"But you never considered telling her the truth about Dumbledore's death?"

"No one could know, apart from my indispensable contact. Even then, it took a posthumous message from Dumbledore to convince Lupin that I was still on your side. He would never have believed me otherwise, whatever I might say."

"So, Remus knew."

Snape sighed bitterly. "Yes. How ironic, isn't it? The secrecy was so well-planned that the only person who could testify in my favour is dead." He sniffed with disdain. "Dumbledore correctly surmised that not even Bellatrix would ever suspect me of collaborating with the werewolf everyone knew I hated."

"He will still testify," Harry interrupted kindly, "with these papers."

Snape pulled a face. "I will have to explain why my code name was Sniv."

"It's a small price to pay."

"No," Snape retorted, determinedly. "Nothing but my complete humiliation will satisfy them, whatever the verdict."

"Severus..." Harry's voice trailed off, tinged with as much affection as uncertainty. "Nobody can humiliate you if you do not let them."

Snape's sneer was clearly tainted with distress. "I believed this, too, when I was your age. I used to
turn it into rage and defiance, just like you... but Scrimgeour and your predecessors in the Auror office taught me otherwise... And many others since. You can pretend you don't care only for so long."

Harry could not help standing up and walking to grasp Snape's shoulders. He did not quite dare hug him when he felt the man start in surprise. "Then, the rage will be mine, for your sake. Nothing can humiliate you in my eyes. And I can safely say that I speak for all my friends, too. And yours! Minerva... Molly... Arthur... Many, many others, at Hogwarts and in the Order. You're not alone, Severus. We have your back."

Severus hated it when his defensive walls cracked like this.

He was her son. The face was mostly James but the heart was Lily's. Suddenly, a thought seized him, the thought that he tried to suppress as hard as he could. *Life made him more like me than his blood father.*

Of course, he did not manage to get rid of the thought in the following days. *He seeks your opinion. Your ideas... You formed his mind as much as Albus had... He really likes you now.*

He refused to acknowledge the "he loves you" that preyed upon his mind more and more often, or silenced it with cynical thoughts.

*Yo u're just a replacement father figure because they're all dead.*

But the old hates were old indeed, buried with Sirius Black and his own therapy, and fading away... And Harry's trusting smile was never far when he saw him, and it was unsettling in a sweet way to watch the young man's eyes light up when they greeted each other at breakfast or when Harry came back from Grimmauld Place, even if he had been away only a few hours.

Severus was at a loss to name what he felt when Harry gifted him with a ready smile, a spontaneous grin or any sign of friendship and unconditional acceptance. Until then, he had only felt this kind of soft and protective feelings for Draco. He had experienced a milder version with Neville before willfully redirecting them towards friendship. This was different, because his entire adult life had revolved around the idea of keeping Lily's son safe.

Several times, he caught himself before calling him "Boy" or – Heaven forbid! – "Son".

How he understood Albus now. It felt so easy. So natural. It had the potential to be addictive.

The *Snape* in him felt utterly awkward and had nothing helpful to say – nothing at all, until Severus found himself ready to wrap the Christmas presents.

Just to pass the time, of course, and because he had nothing better to do, he had somehow distilled enough *eau de toilette* for Minerva, Molly and Hermione, for all his former friends and colleagues, for the entire Weasley family, for Harry and his friends and…

And he was ridiculous.

It had been years since he had prepared so many Christmas presents... and what made him believe that they would be well received, coming from him?

They would laugh or think he was trying to buy them off.

He hesitated to Evanesco the whole lot. This is what Professor Snape would have done... if he had been stupid enough to prepare for Christmas that last year at Hogwarts.
Except it was Snape who thought, "It's unseemly to waste so many good ingredients. You don't really care what they think, you do it for yourself. Just imagine they're your Slytherins and be done with this."

Indeed, he had always made a point of caring for his charges when no one else cared, because he knew how it felt to be the odd one out. Every Slytherin of his who was unloved enough or unlucky enough to be left at Hogwarts during the holidays received at least one thoughtful gift from him and a personal card. Those who were sent nothing for their birthday had it celebrated by their whole dorm with their favourite dishes and sweets provided by the kitchen elves on his orders, and the secret contribution from their Head of House in the pool always enabled them to buy what they wished for.

No, he had nothing to blush about the way he treated and defended his Slytherins against the rest of the world. As long as he could, he would do just the same with the people who had helped or appreciated him when it counted.

Moppy was only too happy to wrap all the presents in silver and green for him, adding cute moving snake ribbons everywhere, just like in the good old days. She even managed to extract from her old friends at Hogwarts what biscuits and sweets each and every one of Master's friends or allies liked best when they were students.

Since he was always appreciative of her efforts, it was only Master's Chess Partner – Ron's new title, as far as Moppy was concerned – who had the honour of sampling everything and to be asked for his opinion. She strutted about like a Malfoy peacock when the redhead declared that her baking was even better than his mother's, until he had to warn her that if she ever told anyone, he would deny it.

§§§

It was Christmas Eve and, as agreed, Ron and Hermione were spending the day at the Burrow while Harry stayed at Spinner's End with Snape. Around tea time, Hermione would come check on Snape as usual, while Ron relieved Harry.

It would be the other way round on Christmas Day. Ron had finally convinced Harry that he was looking forward to being in sole charge of Snape for Christmas – or rather to watching all the Christmas classics the satellite TV in the house had to offer.

As he put it, with both Snape and Lucius Malfoy at Spinner's End, if anyone was stupid enough to plot an attack against the Professor, the two former Death Eaters were more likely to protect Ron than he to have to protect them. Besides, with Snape's wards and crazy booby traps, you were always much safer on the sofa than anywhere else.

As expected, Harry had laughed and conceded that he would be much happier himself at the Burrow on Christmas Day with Ginny, Hermione and the rest of the Weasley tribe. Even the TV could never compensate enough for feeling like a third wheel with Snape and Lucius Malfoy.

Molly was only too happy to plan not one but two Christmas dinners so that each of the boys could have his own gourmet feast.

Right now, however, Snape's morning tea was getting cold, as he perused the latest issue of La Gazette de l'Alchimiste. It had been delivered from the other side of the Channel no more than five minutes ago by an impudent seagull that scoffed at the owl treat Snape distractedly offered it, busy as he was unfolding the magazine, only to snatch Harry's buttered and honeyed toast instead.

Harry was left grumbling, even as he ate another toast, all the more because Snape had only glanced at him with a faint smirk while the seagull flew away.
It was not raining, for once, because it was much too cold for that. The chilly draught that had entered the kitchen with the seagull made even Moppy shiver as she hastened to close the window. Everything outside looked frostbitten in the morning mist.

"Do you think we'll have snow?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Longing for a white Christmas? I've never seen one in Cokeworth," scoffed Snape.

"But it could be a good weather to go outside, wouldn't it?"

"There's nothing to do in the garden when it's so cold."

"What would you say to going somewhere other than the garden?" Harry asked, much too casually to be disinterested. "It can be invigorating to walk in the fresh air."

Snape sat bolt upright. He considered Harry speculatively, without a word.

The young Auror remained unruffled as he extracted two Foe-Glasses from his pockets and handed one to the former spy who automatically began to check it. "I thought you might be up for a walk in the neighbourhood. In the park, maybe... or down the river."

Snape crossed his arms and sneered, "And I suppose our path would take us, just by coincidence, to the Evenses' old house and, by the very same coincidence, to all the places I used to haunt with your mother and that I spoke of?"

Harry had the grace to blush. "Why not?" he said, as if that explained everything.


Snape's expression instantly turned into a scowl.

"ARE YOU MAD?" he shouted. "Or do you want to offer Dawlish the perfect opportunity to throw me into Azkaban right away and to sack you?"

"Don't be so paranoid! I have it all planned."

"Ha!" Snape snorted and lifted the Foe-Glass. "Is this supposed to be your plan?"

"Of course not, Severus!" Harry hastened to say, with more confidence than he really felt. "It's just a little reassurance since I guess you do not trust me fully to keep you safe."

"I am safe enough on my own," was the haughty reply. "I don't need anyone's protection."

Harry smiled. "Then there's nothing to stop us from going out."

Snape looked him up and down, before relenting infinitesimally.

"I won't need this," he said, handing back the Foe-Glass to Harry who whistled softly.

"I take back what I said. You must trust me at least a little."

Snape gave him a sour look. "I do not trust anything from the Ministry, particularly when it is so freely offered. You know, timeo Danaos et dona ferentes..."

Harry could not help looking at the Foe-Glasses with some suspicion now, even as he told himself that Snape's paranoia was turning contagious.
"Do you trust me?" Snape asked, surprising the younger wizard.

"Of course!" was the spontaneous reply.

Snape snorted but called Moppy without further comment.

The elf appeared with a hopeful grin. "Master needs help?"

"Yes. I need my Foe-Glass, and if you could bring Lucius's as well..." In the blink of an eye, Moppy was handing him with a flourish two incredibly beautiful artifacts, artistically carved all over the frame with powerful protective runes.

"...I was going to say, after asking Lucius properly," finished Snape.

Moppy instantly looked offended. "Of course Moppy asked!"

Snape raised a derisive eyebrow. "Are you telling me you managed to ask Lucius?"

The elf's ears turned a much darker shade. "Moppy knows better than to go and wake up Master Lucius and Lady Narcissa so early," she said defensively. "Moppy asked Fuzzy to tell them as soon as they go down for breakfast."

As Harry made a praiseworthy but an entirely ineffective attempt at not laughing, Snape turned to him and confirmed, with a half-smile, "Before ten thirty is considered the crack of dawn at the Malfoy Manor."

He handed Harry one of the Malfoy family's Foe-Glasses.

They were obviously very costly things, not only real works of art but also much more sophisticated than those from the Ministry. Harry could not help feeling a little envious.

"I'd feel much safer if you consented to use this one... And to return those," Snape said with a dismissive gesture towards the Ministry equipment.

Harry shrugged. "If it will put your mind at rest..."

Snape smiled thinly. "Then indulge me, and test them for Traces... No!" he added urgently as Harry was already taking his wand out. "Only when you return them to the Ministry," he admonished the Auror.

Harry blew a raspberry, but only said, "As you wish." It was certainly prudent to indulge Snape until they actually visited Spinner's End.

"I wish for you to do it now."

This time, Harry rolled his eyes, knowing Snape was taking advantage of his eagerness, since he was not supposed to leave Snape alone, even for a short time. He bowed with mock obsequiousness. "Yes, Master. As Master wishes."

"You'd make a sloppy house elf," commented Snape dryly. "Do not even try."

Harry was still chuckling as he Flooed to the Ministry, but he certainly was not when he returned a few minutes later. "How did you guess?" he asked, rather incensed at his superiors.

Snape shrugged. "I didn't guess. It was a common trick of Yaxley's when he headed the DMLE. He
never trusted the Aurors to tell him the truth. Considering how I'm being framed from inside the Ministry, it is only logical to assume that someone must be continuing the practice. Don't you think so?"

Harry pursed his lips. "When you put it this way, yes." He paused pensively. "You know, I really hope Kingsley will be able to clean up the Ministry after your trial."

Snape did not make any comment, his doubtful face was sufficient to convey his pessimistic view of the matter. He stood up and began to walk upstairs. He turned briefly to order, "Transfigure yourself something really warm, totally Muggle and not too fine. It wouldn't do to stand out in this neighbourhood, even if it's doubtful we'll meet the shadiest characters so early in the day."

§§§

"Holy Mother! If it's not our Russ!"

Harry watched as Snape, who had instinctively reached for his wand, stilled and slowly relaxed. He acknowledged, "Mrs Hathaway," even before turning around with an expression of fond exasperation.

The very old woman, hanging on her ambulatory, beamed. She fearlessly let go of her walking aid to grasp Snape's forearm with both hands. "Oh Russ! It must be... I think I haven't seen you since Mary Pinhoe' funeral! When was it again?" she asked, to no one in particular, "1994, 1993?"


"Nearly five years!" she exclaimed, scandalised. She gave Snape the once over. Her eyes widened in dismay as she took in the changes on his face. "You've almost got a proper hair cut for once but..." she carefully traced the scars on his face and neck, and Harry gaped as Snape let her do it, even if he harboured a long-suffering air. "Russ!" she exclaimed. "What's happened to you?"

Snape hesitated.

"He's just out of hospital," volunteered Harry, which earned him a deathly glare from his former teacher.

"What happened?!" the old lady insisted.

"An accident."

"Oh, with that blasted motorcycle of yours, I suppose!"

Snape did not answer, letting her follow her assumption. Harry was more than curious. A motorcycle? Why not, after all? Snape was Sirius's age. He was in fact much more likely than Sirius to have some sort of Muggle vehicle.

Mrs Hathaway had turned her attention to Harry and eyed him, openly curious. "Your son?"

"No," Snape hastened to say.

"Curious, I could have sworn... Something in your face looks familiar, young man."

Snape gritted his teeth before admitting, "He's Lily's son."

Harry grinned. "How do you do, Mrs Hathaway? Please call me Harry."
"How do you do, Harry?" She was beaming as she told Snape, "Such a charming young man! I'm glad you brought him here. I suppose you came to see where your mother lived?" she asked Harry. Before he could do more than nod, she turned around and pointed at the house just behind her – one of the few well-maintained in the street. "See this house, Harry?"

"Yes?"

"It's mine. You must come and have tea with me." She grinned. "I've known your grandparents, and your mother and your aunt, too, of course, for twelve years. I still have many photographs to show you."

"Not today, Mrs Hathaway," interrupted Snape.

"Monday," she ordered.

Harry complied readily. He liked her.

She turned to Severus. "You too, Russ."

"I'm sorry but I have business on Monday and I don't expect to be in Spinner's End again any time soon."

"Humph!" snorted the old lady in disbelief.

Before Snape could say anything, Harry intervened. "It's true, he's got to return for further treatment. He's here today only on my behalf."

Mrs Hathaway turned to Snape, all concern again. "You must take care of yourself, do you hear me?"

"I do."

She made a dubious face. "Come and see me next school holiday, then. Don't wait too long, boy. I may not be around much longer, you know."

"I will if I can."

§§§

Harry's professional reflexes made him notice at once the woman’s interest as they passed her by. He was not so lost to all his responsibilities, even with his dream of visiting the place his mother came from with Snape as his guide having finally come true.

The woman was plastered with make-up and wore rather garish clothes. If she had been a witch, he would have written her off as the kind of occasional prostitute you generally meet at the end of the month in Diagon Alley, on the way to the red district of Knockturn Alley but not so close that the resident streetwalkers or their pimps would dare come and openly set on them.

He tried not to stare and give her a pretext to accost them. He still did not know how to behave with prostitutes and he did not want to make a fool of himself in front of Snape.

He pretended to himself it was due to his awful memories of getting lost in the Floo and then in Knockturn Alley as a boy, and not, absolutely not, to his inhibitions about sex... (What inhibitions? Ginny told him loudly enough that she was satisfied, didn't she?)

He was surprised when Snape gave the woman a second look, stopped short and called, "Linda?"
She smiled gratefully and answered shyly, which was rather odd considering her less than discreet outfit. "Russ! I wondered if it could indeed be you."

She spoke with the thick accent that seemed to be Cokeworth's trademark and stepped up eagerly, like she was going to fall on Snape's neck but she glanced a little uncertainly at Harry and froze in her tracks. "I didn't know if you'd recognise me."

"You'd be really annoyed if I didn't tell you you're hard to forget."

This made her giggle in a rather silly way. "You and your sweet talk," she said, giving him a friendly little tap. Snape did not flinch, which again surprised Harry. "You haven't changed. Not even a grey hair to your head... Not like me without the colour..." She was a little embarrassed as she finally noticed his scars. "Except these," she hastened to say, "but it's nothing for a bloke." She kept glancing at Harry. "Your son?" she finally asked.

"No," was his companion's rather resigned answer.

Harry bit his lip to refrain from laughing. The mistake was fast becoming a habit.

First, it had been the Pakistani grocer, who had caught Russ in a bear hug, and turned out to be his old primary school mate Shahid. He informed them that he had succeeded to his father three years ago, loudly called inside and introduced them to his children and his wife, enumerated the offspring of his numerous brothers and sisters – whom Snape apparently knew, too. He of course inquired about Snape's marital status and declared that Harry looked like him. He was surprised to learn that they were not related, but since he was Lily's son, it was practically the same, wasn't it?

Snape's face had revealed nothing, which made Harry wonder what he was thinking. They had a hard time turning down Shahid's invitation to dinner with his brothers and nephews to watch Boxing Day's game without giving offence.

Then there had been the meeting with Mrs Hathaway.

And now, Linda, too, believed Harry might be Snape's son.

This time, though, Snape volunteered more jovially than Harry had ever heard him speak, "Meet Harry. He's Lily's boy. I'm giving him the tour of Cokeworth and showing him all our old places."

Her mouth formed an astonished O. She eyed Harry much more warmly now. So warmly, in fact, that he soon found himself squashed against her ample bosom, while she babbled, "She was a right one, your mam. And so smart! Just like Russ. You've got her eyes! She got lucky to leave here but I was so sorry to learn she died in that accident." A helpless glance at Snape proved that he clearly enjoyed Harry's discomfiture.

"Thank you," Harry managed to say when he finally extracted himself from her embrace.

Linda grinned at him before turning to Snape. "I wouldn't have believed you would stay in touch with Tuney, even for Lily's boy."

Snape took a disgusted look that made her laugh. "I didn't. I met Harry as a student in the boarding school where I used to teach."

"I bet he was your favourite student."

Both answered at the same time.
"Not exactly."

"Absolutely not!"

Which of course had her in stitches.

"We didn't get along at all when I was in his class," explained Harry, "but I discovered after leaving school that he had known my mother, and that he wasn't such a bad guy after all."

Snape snorted. Harry protested, "Hey! It's true!" And Snape laughed. Actually laughed, and Linda joined him. There was definitely something in this squalid place that made Snape fit in, in a good way, however surprising it sounded.

"And you, Lin? What news?"

She began to expound about her son's apprenticeship and her daughter's sentimental adventures and a dream job in a beauty parlour in Leeds. She talked about a lot of people Snape apparently used to know, too, but Harry was soon lost in the description of the things and people he never heard of. There was finally an awkward little pause. She glanced at Harry a little nervously before declaring proudly, "Michael should be released for good conduct in March."

"I'm happy for you."

"Not for him?" she teased.

Snape shook his head. "For him, too, but I'm mostly envious. Tell him he's lucky to have a good woman waiting for him."

§§§

After they walked in silence for some time, Harry cleared his throat. "You were very kind to Linda." He did not exactly disapprove, but he was upset, he did not know why. He had no right to judge Snape, even if he was on friendly terms with a… He did not even dare think the dirty word.

Snape glared and answered with a tough tone. "You wanted to see Spinner's End and this is Spinner's End, so don't turn up your nose at people like Linda."

Harry tried to deny it but Snape did not let him. "I know what you think, but Linda's not a prostitute. She probably receives men occasionally, but this is because her man is in prison and she lives off benefits. It's as much for company as for money... She's certainly not the first in Spinner's End and she'll likely not be the last."

He looked at Harry so ferociously that the younger man felt the need to tell he was sorry.

Snape grumbled, "If we hadn't had magic..." but did not finish the sentence. Harry understood his meaning though. Without the way out Hogwarts offered them, Snape and his mother might have turned out just like Linda and her husband.

Harry burned to ask if he had ever sought Linda's company but he did not dare. Yet, as it happened so often, Snape guessed what he was thinking without any need for Legilimency. "I went out briefly with her when I was sixteen."

"Oh?" was all Harry managed to say.

"It was shortly after the... incident after our OWLS. Lily still refused to speak to me and Linda
thought I needed to be consoled. In fact, she's very much the reason why your mother finally relented."

Harry blinked as understanding struck him. "She was jealous!"

Snape turned rather smug. "It worked out very well for the both of us, since Michael was jealous, too, and finally asked Linda out."

They did not exchange another word until they arrived at Snape’s and Harry could not contain his curiosity any longer.

"Who was Mary Pinhoe?"

"Our closest neighbour. She was a friend of my mother's."

"So you attended a neighbour's funeral in 1995."

"I was here. I could hardly avoid it," he answered defiantly.

"Mrs Hathaway hasn't met you for more than four years. She isn't a witch, and yet, there are spells on her house and her person to repel people with malicious intent. How do you explain that?" Harry asked, almost casually.

"I don't."

"It is not safe for an old lady to be alone in that kind of neighbourhood."

"I guess it isn't."

"You really won't say?"

"What are you doing, Potter?" asked Snape venomously. "Searching for fresh evidence against me?"

"Finding fresh evidence that you care for old Muggle ladies?"

Snape huffed and began to retreat downstairs.

"I wonder if there were protective spells on Mrs Pinhoe's house as well," Harry called out loudly.

Only the banging of the lab door answered him.

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"Moppy!" called Ron, rather obviously annoyed.

"What can Moppy do for Master's Chess Partner?"

The Auror was pressing at random the buttons of the zapper. Whatever the channel, the image was deformed and there was a black, flat line in the middle of the screen. There did not seem to be any sound either.

"What happened to the ruddy TV?" he demanded. "It doesn't work."

Moppy crossed her arms and lifted her chin before answering in the same tone. "It is not Moppy who's always fiddling with the ruddy zapper, the ruddy TV or the ruddy decoder, and Moppy's
magic doesn't work with Muggle electricity."

While Moppy disappeared, Ron pursed his lips. It was not that he feared Snape anymore, but he did not relish the idea of telling him something was wrong with his installation.

Before he could decide how to do it, the master of the house walked downstairs.

"What is it Moppy's telling me?" he asked, none too gently.

Ron handed him the zapper. "See for yourself. This is all I could obtain since I turned it on."

Snape zapped from one channel to the other to no avail. "This looks like an excess of magic..." His voice trailed off and he closed his eyes with a groan. "The Foe-Glasses!"

"There is a game the day after tomorrow," worried Ron. He did not mention his own hopes for a quiet Christmas Day spent watching TV and eating whatever delicacies Moppy would keep him supplied with.

With a sinking feeling, he realised he was going to be bored stiff, while Snape and Malfoy had fun on their own.

Snape pouted before casting his Patronus. "Luce, there has been an overload on the TV and sat. I'm afraid I need a visit from BSS. Promise him what he wants, as long as we can watch the game the day after tomorrow."

Lucius Malfoy's peacock Patronus soon appeared. "I'll try to sweet-talk him into coming to your rat hole, but who will provide the protection?"

"Potter."

The peacock scoffed. "Potter. You've got to be kidding me."

"He was raised a Muggle, like me."

"I'm concerned about discretion. Dawlish's bound to know if it's one of his Aurors. What will Potter tell him? What will our little friends at the Ministry do when they learn about B World and the rest? Did you think about that? We don't need this before your trial."

Snape cleared his throat. "Neville Longbottom, then."

There was a choking sound.

"I assure you he knows how to navigate the Muggle world."

"Humph!"

"Luce!"

The peacock blew a raspberry – a truly disturbing sight – and vanished, leaving in its wake the echo of Malfoy's last words. "Oh all right! But it will be your fault."

It was Ron's turn to cough and catch Snape's attention. "BSS? B World?" he asked noncommittally.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I trust you not to breathe a word about this. To anyone," he insisted.

"Cross my heart!" promised Ron, ready to sell his soul for the telly.
"Belfoy Sat Services. A small division of Belfoy High Tech World, which happens to be the most successful Muggle subsidiary of Malfoy Industries."

Ron snickered. "Belfoy, huh?"

Snape sniffed. "The Malfoys always provide for their own. Lucius has a Squib uncle and a gaggle of Muggle cousins," he said. Ron's jaw practically fell to the floor. "They may not be magical, but they have the same business acumen as any Malfoy. One of Lucius's cousins, Mark, is in charge of BSS and will hopefully do me the favour of coming and fixing this quickly."

Ron grinned, "For once, I'm sure I know something about the Malfoys that Hermione doesn't."

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Much later in the evening, Ron yawned discreetly – for him – while Snape was deciding on his next move. "I wouldn't mind if you dated Hermione, you know," he said, seemingly out of the blue.

He had got used to ending the evening watching the telly and, even if he loved playing chess, his mind had been wandering for quite some time.

It was Christmas Eve, he was stuck at Spinner's End with Snape, and he could not help thinking he would have been much happier at the Burrow and if someone would have liked to be in his place, it was Hermione. Rotten life.

He realised, even as he said the words, that he had probably made a huge mistake.

"If you expect me to let you win for this generous offer, you're delusional."

Ron allowed himself to release the breath he had been holding, while waiting for Snape's reaction to his blunder but could not help noticing that the man's colour had heightened.

"She really likes you, you know." This earned him a sharp glance before the Professor resumed his apparent fascination with the chessboard. "She's not ready to admit it yet, but I've watched the two of you and I think you would be good for each other. You will need to be patient, though, and not pressure her into anything."

There. My good deed for Christmas.

Snape did not answer but watched with satisfaction as his knight slaughtered one of Ron's pawns.

The next move was made in silence, until Ron could not help saying somewhat bitterly, "At least she's alive. You have your chance with her."

Snape took offence instantly. "I may have been in love with Lily Evans when I was your age, but I'll have you know I did not obsess about her for twenty years, contrary to what's written in the newspapers."

Ron started. He had been following his own train of thought and never imagined Snape would take his remark personally. "Oh, no-no-no!" he said hastily. "I was speaking of myself. No offence meant."

Snape was still eyeing him with suspicion.

"You know I dated Hermione," Ron felt obliged to say. "But…" He nerviously brushed a strand of hair behind his ear. "It's difficult to explain. After the war, we tried… but more because this was
expected of us than out of real desire, if you see what I mean."

Snape nodded.

"I always found myself comparing what I felt with Hermione with what I'd felt when I dated Lavender Brown, back in our sixth year." He sighed. "I don't understand it myself... I never truly cared for Lavender, because she kept embarrassing me in front of my mates but... I always ended up regretting I was with Hermione instead of her."

He looked at the ceiling for quite some time, grateful that Snape did not comment. If Harry had been present, he would have guessed Snape was thinking of their unexpected meeting with Linda.

"I don't know if it's remorse or what, but I regret I will never have the opportunity to... to make amends with Lav."

Snape frowned. "I don't understand. Why would you not make amends, as you say, with a girl you've obviously never forgotten? You're a war hero. You're not bad looking..."

"Why, thank you, Snape!"

Snape rolled his eyes. "Seriously. Is she with someone else?"

Ron looked straight ahead although his cheeks took on a pink tinge. "No. She... She's dead. Fenrir Greyback killed her during the battle of Hogwarts."

Snape looked perplexed, obviously trying to recall something. There was a lengthy silence, as Ron brooded over Lavender and Snape was mentally reviewing Minerva's memories of the battle.

After a time, he asked, quite confidently, "Then how come Miss Brown's name is not on the Memorial of Hogwarts?"

"What?!" exclaimed Ron. He had gone to the Memorial only once – the day they unveiled the commemorative plaque for Fred. The Weasleys' mood had been so dismal then, what with Molly bursting into tears and Hermione urging him to try to find Malfoy who had slipped away when everyone was looking for him... He had no time – and no real wish – to go through all of the 250 names carved in stone, but he remembered the grief and the guilt he had felt whenever his eyes caught the name of someone he used to know.

In fact, he had carefully avoided looking for her name.

"No, no, you must be wrong. I saw her..." He shuddered. "Hermione blasted Greyback away from her but she was... she moved so feebly... She... I saw her die," he said haltingly.

"You saw me die, too," said Snape, not unkindly. "And yet..."

Ron could not control his anger. "How dare you..." he began indignantly.

Snape held up a hand in an appeasing gesture, then tapped his forehead. "I spent enough time in Minerva's Pensieve going through every name engraved on that stone that they are engraved here, too," he declared. "I remember clearly that after 'Babbling, Bathsheba', the next name is 'Burke, Reginald'. The nephew of a Death Eater after a teacher and a colleague. I am sure. There is no 'Brown, Lavender' on that memorial. Either this is an inexcusable mistake, and I don't believe for one second that Minerva would allow it, or..." He did not finish.

Ron stood up abruptly, not caring that his chair fell down behind him. He bent and seized Snape's
lapel and searched for the truth in his eyes. "Are you sure?" he asked in a blank voice that turned almost desperate as he unconsciously shook his former professor, repeating, "Are you sure? For God's sake, Snape!"

Snape gripped his wrist and extricated himself, "I don't see what I would gain from such a cruel joke. As a spy, I had to learn how to memorize details and data. I am sure."

Ron straightened up, bumping into his upturned chair. He winced but lifted it without a word before letting himself collapse into it. "How...? How could they leave her out after all she'd done?" he asked angrily, although there was a frightened and distraught undertone to his voice. "I must go to Hogwarts," he decided.

"There is a quicker way, if you would allow me. I could show you Minerva's memory of the Memorial."

Ron blinked several times, dumbfounded that Snape offered to share his mind with him. He generally disliked the experience, although it was standard training for Aurors, but, this time, he leaned forward with a determined look. "Do it."

Snape raised one eyebrow, surprised at the young man's swift acceptance. He raised his wand, sharing a meaningful look with Ron for a few seconds. The young man gave him a firm nod. Snape barely whispered "Legilimens", and Ron suspected it was only for his benefit, the man could do magic wandlessly as well as wordlessly.

He had no time to ponder the extent of Snape's mental skills. An outside observer would have been surprised to watch the two wizards silently staring in each other's eyes without a word, until Snape's hand fell down and Ron blinked again, this time as if waking up.

"Her name's not there. Her name's not there," he repeated blankly. He gazed imploringly into Snape's face. "What does it mean?" he asked with anguish.

"That she's not officially registered as deceased," Snape spoke softly, even kindly, fully aware that the question was rhetorical. The young Auror was just too upset right now to say aloud what he had already deduced.

If Lavender was not dead, it could only mean that she chose to disappear.

And for the victim of a werewolf to disappear, it could only mean...

"The battle happened something like ten days before the full moon," Snape said, his words cutting through Ron's thoughts and fears. "She may not have been turned but suffered from the same sort of... consequences as your brother."

Ron searched Snape's face, while his own lit up with new hope. "Do you think so? Then why..."

Snape held his fingers under Ron's eyes then slowly stroked all the way down his own fading scars. "I understand women find some things much harder to bear than men."

Ron's eyes widened in horror as he suddenly realised what Snape meant. Lavender was alive but she might be disfigured and so traumatised that she preferred to let everyone think that she was dead.

"I must find her," he blurted.

Snape refrained from pointing out that it might not be easy to find someone who chose to disappear from the wizarding world without all the resources of the MLE. And even then... He smirked
inwardly. He was planning to prove precisely how difficult it was in the near future.

He just said, "It might help if she knew that St Mungo's can now heal scars caused by Dark magic."

Once his words registered, Ronald Weasley beamed at Snape and drew him into a bear hug that the man never anticipated. "You're the best!" he said giddily before running to the Floo.

Snape took a step back with a little shudder. He knew how to deal with crass boldness, with people showing off or being insulting. He knew how to deal with every single ugly pretension or sin of his fellow wizards.

He had never been able to deal with raw vulnerability or suffering.

Not Weasley, too.

He listened without the words really registering while the young man pestered his brother Bill with the questions about his symptoms and treatment that he had never thought to ask before. Until Fleur called from afar and insisted it was time to go to bed.

By that time, though, Snape had retired to his room.

What had he done to the Fates that they would make everything so much harder for him! What once seemed easy enough – slip through the Ministry's highest security protocols and disappear after his trial, or die trying – was losing its appeal with every day spent in the company of his former students.

Disappear and then what?

What would he have to live for?

Told you so, sneered Professor Snape's voice in his mind. You should have never let any of them find a way to your heart.

Strangely, it was a memory of Albus Dumbledore, for once, that brought him hope.

"Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

I'll hold you to it, Albus. You owe me this at least.
Chapter Notes

All my thanks to Tra8erse for good editing work and helpful suggestions, as usual. All remaining errors are entirely my own.

Hold your breath and count to ten

(Adele, Skyfall)

Harry had assured Snape that the Aurors would be discreet when they forwarded his Christmas mail and presents after the mandatory search of everything sent to him. Snape did not voice his thoughts, to avoid another emotional outburst from Harry, but he cynically believed that the search would not take too much of their time: apart from Minerva and probably four or five other people, he did not expect much for Christmas.

Yet, he woke up to the noise of crumpled paper and gliding things. His wand was drawn out before he even opened his eyes.

He blinked several times, incredulously taking in the pile of untidily rewrapped cards and boxes overflowing from the top of his desk. He could not remember ever seeing so many, even for his first Christmas with the Malfoys.

He sat stiffly against the headboard for a long time, at a loss about who could have sent them and why. He cast one detection spell after another, until he was satisfied at last that there was nothing dangerous in the pile. Of course, the Aurors were supposed to have tested everything, but the episode with the Foe-Glasses did nothing to ease his profound distrust in them.

He eventually Accioed the whole lot and began to read the names. Minerva, of course. Molly Weasley – and Arthur signed, too. His colleagues at Hogwarts – these, he had hoped for, after the friendly notes they all kept on sending via Minerva.

There was a group gift from the Slytherin students at Hogwarts: as a booklet containing personal wishes, thanks, assurances of support plus home-made bookmarks and beautifully ornate labels for his potions vials. It was, apparently, their own initiative, since Horace made no allusion to this in his own card, as he would be bound to if there was the smallest chance of taking some credit for himself.

People from the Order and Dumbledore’s Army thought of him, too… All in all, practically the same people he had sent cards and presents to, although he never thought to see the day Aberforth Dumbledore would send him season’s greetings and bottles of his home-brewed Christmas ale.

Madam Maxime had clearly written Hagrid's message for him but he had signed it with a great flourish and there were several big blotches that looked suspiciously like tearstains. There was a small note explaining that Hagrid had made the fruit leathers himself. As they were not supple at all but almost as hard as wood, Snape would have had no trouble to deduce it by himself, but it was good to see that the gatekeeper's health improved so much. The card even hinted that he might be back at Hogwarts by September the 1st and that they could go for a pint.
Had he been standing, Snape would have had to sit down at the sight of the next present. Elphias Doge had always looked down his nose at him and yet, he was sending his best wishes and the assurances of his support, as well as Dumbledore's original research notes about the twelve uses of dragon blood, "because I feel you will understand them better than I do and make sure that they are published and acclaimed as they should be. Albus always meant for you to have them but never found the time, with all his duties, to search through the shambles in his old trunks that were ultimately willed to me. There are many more notes of his that you may wish to sort through."

There was an even more baffling postscript that read, "In spite of what some people may believe, I have never swung that way."

He must have gone senile, Snape thought, even as he tried to keep his hands from trembling while he laid reverent fingers over Albus's handwriting, unmistakable even as a very young man.

Albus always meant for you to have them.

No, it did not mean anything. He threw the notes away, trying to summon the usual resentment against the man who had manipulated him so thoroughly… Before Accioing them again and despising his own weakness, and the tears that pooled in his eyes at the mere sight of the notes.

Albus always meant for you to have them.

He spent a long time reading the notes, everything else forgotten. He immediately compared them to the final publication, since he had learned Dumbeldore's alchemical work by heart as an apprentice. The thought process and the experimentation methods were just as fascinating and innovative as he had expected.

He put Albus's notes carefully on his nightstand, unable to process how he could still admire and love the man so much, while hating him for what he had made him do. It was a pity he would not be able to publish the notes himself but he would find a way to bequeath them to Hermione. He doubted Doge would mind.

Almost reluctantly, he began to sort through the rest. Many cards came from the ex-NEWT students to whom he gave a leg up at one time or another. Slytherins, of course, but quite a few from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, too, and even the odd Gryffindor had thought it necessary to write to him. It was not surprising per se to receive cards from former students, but he had not taught Potions NEWT classes in four years and, statistically, grateful students tended to write for two years after graduation, before their professional circle expanded so much that writing to a former teacher – and one they had rarely been very fond of to begin with – seemed redundant and tedious.

He tilted his head, trying to fathom their motivation before giving up, still baffled. It could not be for his influence over the Board of Malfoy Industries, since everyone and their neighbour knew he was to be tried and found guilty by the War High Court in less than a month's time. Indeed, it could even be detrimental for them one day, since the DMLE may keep track of the people who showed support to the most notorious war criminals at one time or another.

He had, of course, expected wishes and gifts from his few friends like Alfred Constanz, Pius Thicknesse or Kingsley Shacklebolt. He was puzzled by some others. He had never been on more than nodding terms with Garrick Ollivander or Augusta Longbottom.

Rebecca Babbling's not very subtle Mother Santa card was not exactly a surprise, but the personal attention from several of her colleagues were, including a packet of homemade chocolate truffles from Healer Babbock and an invitation to dinner with Healer Pye "as soon as you are available" at an unpretentious curry house they both used to frequent during their respective apprenticeships.
And why would Xenophilius Lovegood, whom he had met maybe twice in his life and never on friendly terms, send him a free lifetime subscription to 'The Quibbler'? Clearly, he was as barmy as ever.

After reading one friendly or encouraging card after another, Snape almost welcomed the one piece of hate mail, inconspicuous enough that the Aurors obviously missed it.

The card, simply inserted into a book, was pure Muggle cliché, complete with reindeer, a benevolent Santa and a surfeit of green and red garlands all over. Under the golden *We Wish You A Merry Christmas*, there was a simple "I thought about you the minute I saw this book" written in nondescript block capitals and signed in an illegible scrawl. The book was Muggle, a French rarity – an original edition, too.

Somebody still had enough money to spend on expensive warnings to the traitor or, rather, traitors, since the choice of French indicated that Lucius was probably targeted, too. *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, by Vernon Sullivan – the mocking pseudonym of the eccentric writer and musician Boris Vian.

Snape knew of only one person amongst the Inner Circle who was cunning enough in his fear and hate of Muggles to actually learn as much as he could about them and to engage Severus, the resident expert on Muggles, in earnest discussions… And that person was still listed as 'missing' after the Battle of Hogwarts. He obviously counted on the fact that you could seldom find an Auror who spoke French and would understand the meaning of the title, while being sure that Snape did: *I spit on your graves.*

Suddenly, the incident with the Ministry's Foe-Glasses took another, even more sinister, meaning.

As he cautiously opened the book, there was something like a faint breath of air and Snape felt the tingling of the spell that recognised his magical signature. His shields were firmly in place but he could not help a small shiver as words appeared and shone on the front page, before slowly bleeding away from the paper, line after line.

*It will be my pleasure*

*To make you pay.*

The words disappeared swiftly but there was no mistaking the handwriting. Snape released his breath, only then realising he had been holding it.

Here was the concrete proof that he was not paranoid without reason, as every one hinted that he was. He had been right all along to never, ever let himself go soft and hope for the best, like all those who kept repeating that the war was over. It would never be over. Cut one head, others would always rear again.

He weighed the book in his hand, satisfied that it was straightforward personal revenge, after all. *This* was how things should be. *This* he knew how to deal with, he told himself before turning to the chaotic pile of "normal" mail and presents. *That* excessive display of warm support and feelings he had never asked for, and he refused to take most of it at face value. *Too little, too late*, he thought somewhat resentfully. A single wand move stashed the whole lot away.

He did not pause to consider how he would have Incendioed undesirable gifts or hypocritical messages in the past. He turned and swung his feet over the side, ready to get up.

Moppy had obviously been lying in wait, since she Apparated as soon as his toes touched the floor.
Wound up as he was, he hardly had time to lower his wand before she threw herself at him, bursting into tears and repeating disjointed endearments, promises and thanks.

For a brief instant, he thought she knew about the 'anonymous' threat, but he realised almost immediately that she simply wanted to convey to him, in a very hormonal way, how much she enjoyed his gift. He had brought back from the attic his old cradle, covered in dust and cobwebs. The wood had been imbued with baby soothing draughts by his mother when he was born but they were still effective. He had carefully cleaned, downsized and painted the cradle in Moppy's favourite silver and green. He had renewed the protection spells and even added a clever alert charm that Hermione had learned in the maternity ward of St Mungo's. She had been only too happy to help when he asked for tips on what might be useful for new parents.

It had been no mean feat to be able to hide what he was doing from his inquisitive elf and he had even had to recruit Fuzzy's help to distract her.

Moppy clung on to her Master and hid her head in his lap for so long that Snape had time to grow annoyingly emotional himself. (The first time they had been so intimately close, he had been the one sobbing his heart out on her chest, while Moppy Apparated them from the Potters' house, in the nick of time before Hagrid arrived to collect baby Harry.)

As soon as she loosened her grip, he cast a drying spell on the wet patch she left on his nightdress and gruffly said, "I hope it's a boy, and an only child. I refuse to suffer another hormonal episode any time soon."

Moppy challenged him, "Or what? Will Master give Moppy clothes?"

"I'm quite sure even that wouldn't rid me of you," he answered in kind.

The elf grinned cheekily. "Master is right. Master knows that Moppy will follow him to the ends of the earth."

He could not help but grin back. "I know, Moppy."

She was already gone to prepare his breakfast but he could still hear the echo of her happy laughter. "I know," he repeated to himself, still smiling and suddenly forgetting that his trial was only a few weeks away. Or rather, it did not feel so important or so impossible to face right now.

His gaze focused on the old, tattered Oxford English Dictionary squeezed between his Encyclopedia Magica and the Muggle Encyclopedia Universalis his father had bought on credit when he had got his first job. He remembered how his mother used as a bookmark a card his father had sent her so very long ago, at the beginning of their marriage, when he was away longer than usual on a building site.

He flipped between the pages to find it. He ran his finger over the card and, for the first time since he was a child, he did not scoff at the gushing sentimentality of the printed words.

Home is where the heart is.

§§§

In the end, the grinning Lucius lookalike (ten years younger than the original, though, with short, light brown hair and none of the bitter lines left by Azkaban) parked the Belfoy Sat Service van in Spinner's End in the early Christmas morning.

Neville, also grinning, had already made sure no one was spying on them despite all the variations on
the Invisibility and Notice-me-not charms he had cast on the van along with half a dozen Muggle-repelling spells, before carrying a cardboard box inside. Mark Belfoy brought a toolbox and a basket full of gift-wrapped presents.

Snape was waiting for them near the coat stand and welcomed them with a sharp, "You've been told this is totally illegal and could be dangerous, haven't you? I expected you to have the sense to park somewhere in Manchester and use a Floo."

Belfoy gave Neville a nudge, making the young wizard stage-whisper with a smug smile, "Told you so! Drinks on you."

Lucius's cousin chuckled. "And a happy Christmas to you too, Severus! Actually, it's my fault. I feel quite claustrophobic in Floos, and I didn't relish the idea of being blown in the dark and dirt again."

Snape grunted but took a step forward and shook hands with him.

"Merry Christmas, Mark," he said reluctantly, but his smile belied his apparent sourness. "Thank you for coming on such short notice... and on Christmas day, too."

"Bah! It won't be long... And you know it's always a pleasure to show you, mighty wizards, that you're helpless without us. Besides, you will be able to pass our Christmas presents to the rest of the family."

Snape endured a slap on the back then turned to Neville.

"Thank you, Neville, and a Happy Christmas to you, too."

"Merry Christmas, Severus, and it's my pleasure. It was the first time I rode in a van and Mark is great at explaining everything."

"Merry Christmas!" called Ron, coming out of the kitchen. Neville was surprised to see he was in uniform, until he remembered that Lucius Malfoy was expected. He grasped Ron's forearm, who did the same with a grin, they slapped each others' shoulders with the other hand and shared more Christmas wishes. Finally, Ron turned to Malfoy's cousin and said, "How d'you do?" taking in the family likeness at a glance. "I am Ronald Weasley."

Mark Belfoy answered in kind and offered his hand. Ron felt slightly guilty to be so relieved that he could indeed feel no magic in the man.

"I've never been in a real van," he said, in an effort to be friendly. "May I have a look? I'd like to be able to boast to my family. My father used to have a Ford Anglia and..."

"Weasley!" called Snape impatiently. "We may be doing all this for the sake of football, but do I really have to remind you that you're supposed to protect me, not to take rides in Muggle vans? Just as Mark is supposed to repair this TV set and return as swiftly as possible to his family."

"Spoilsport!" muttered Ron and Belfoy at the same time. They each gave a surprised side glance before spontaneously smiling at each other.

"Coming, Severus," the Muggle said more loudly with an exaggerated sigh. "But your bodyguard should inspect the van for safety." Neville huffed in mock outrage, which earned him an impish wink. "One can never be too cautious."

Snape snorted, his pointed look proving that he was by no means deceived. "Suit yourself, Weasley, but I don't think Mark would want his van to meet the same fate as your father's car," he uttered with
disdain, before turning impatiently towards the TV.

"Hey! It wasn't my fault!" protested the Auror. "Besides, I just want to have a look. I would never leave you alone," he added virtuously.

The smirk Mark gave Ron was pure Malfoy, but the young wizard could not have cared less as he deftly caught the van's keys.

Neville, who could see Snape's face, watched him roll his eyes. He wondered, not for the first time, how different classes would have been at Hogwarts if they had known how much of Severus's intimidating manner was make-believe.

And if he had not been a spy… If he had not had to watch out constantly for what Death Eaters's children would tell their parents. He sighed inwardly. Or if pigs could fly and he would just relax.

§§§

When Hermione and Harry arrived, Ron looked very satisfied with himself, even if he blinked frequently because of eye strain.

They missed Lucius Malfoy by mere minutes and Snape was already back in his lab. "They spent the time coming and going between the lab and Snape's room." He stretched his shoulders and happily patted his belly. "Don't ask me what I ate, there was a lot of open sandwiches and little thingummies I'd never tasted before… But they were good! Very good."

Hermione took in the red eyes, limb stiffness, then the crumbs all around the sofa and the empty plates, glasses and mugs on the coffee table alongside the remote control. Moppy was at Malfoy Manor with her significant other and Ron had obviously been too busy with the telly to bother with cleaning.

She sighed, "You'll have a hard time returning to normal. You've become a right couch potato."

Harry snickered. "Yes, you could easily become another Big D before he took to boxing."

Ron gave them a mock-hurt look. "It's Christmas, and all you can think of is insulting me? Even Snape wished me happy Christmas first thing in the morning! And I'll have you know Weasleys never grow fat or flabby."

"How lucky!"

Soft footfalls on the stairs interrupted them, heralding the arrival of the master of the house and making Harry shuffle his feet like a child.

He had asked Snape to wait for this very moment to share gifts with him, Ron and Hermione.

He had spent last night and the whole of Christmas day at the Burrow with the love of his life and their family, and it had been everything he could hope for. And yet, he was as full of anticipation as if he was still six, waking up to the sound of Aunt Petunia in the kitchen and expecting the kind of Christmas his schoolteacher had read to them about: goodwill, love, and even a special kind of magic, the magic of Christmas, that seemed to be acceptable, for once.

Of course, the Dursleys had swiftly killed his hopes in the bud… But the house in Spinner's End, so Muggle and now so familiar, and Severus's constant and increasingly less reluctant presence felt like the home Privet Drive should have been when he was a child.
He did not wish they could stay here longer than what was scheduled before the trial. He did not expect Snape to turn merry and fatherly just because it was Christmas. He simply knew that he was healing here and that it was like a rematch, to compensate for the past. Sharing Christmas gifts with Snape, Ron and Hermione who were the most important people in his life once he went to Hogwarts, and in Snape's house, too, felt like an important part of the process. He hoped it could be the same for Severus.

§§§

After Ron left, Harry went upstairs to change and take a shower. They had gone a little late and he had been too tired, anyway, to go to Grimmauld Place and back.

Had it been Ron, Snape would have been sure he was intentionally giving him and Hermione some alone time, but Harry was completely oblivious. Snape could not help telling himself that if Harry, who regarded Hermione as his sister, did not spot any partiality for him in her demeanour, it was because there was none… Even after she spontaneously threw her arms around his neck to kiss him thank you for the exquisite Chinese painting of a mountain garden and pond, with the mischievous Kneazle disturbing the carps – not to mention the fragrance bottle she had found at the Burrow, like everyone else.

Ronald Weasley had given him a knowing wink but Snape now thought that, just like his comments last night, it only proved that he felt guilty for pining for Lavender Brown even when he dated Hermione. He must be hoping that she would find someone – anyone, even Snape – before he found his missing first love.

The fact that Severus had been so eager to wish he could believe Weasley made him quite angry with himself. Inwardly sighing, he turned to the young woman, reminding himself that they were at least friends, if nothing more.

He took in his hands, one after the other and with proper respect, the two wine bottles Hermione had selected from her father's wine cellar and brought him. They were exceptional vintages, one white and one red wine, and difficult to come by. He raised his eyes and told her how much he appreciated her gift.

"And you must thank your father for me, too. Had it been me, I would have found it difficult to part with such wines as these. If there is anything I can do to show him my appreciation, you only have to ask."

He was surprised to see that she was blushing, but in a distressed manner. For a brief instant, he wondered if she had taken the bottles without warning and only just understood their value, only to dismiss the thought at once. Hermione would never act like that, of course.

He carefully put down the Alsace Vendanges Tardives Gewürztraminer1990. "Are you alright?" he asked.

She shook her head, more to clear her thoughts than to dismiss his concern.

He frowned. "Please. I can see something's wrong."

She blurted, "I miss my parents." She had carefully contained her feelings at the Burrow, even when it meant she had to force herself to be merry along with the others, but there was something about Severus that urged her to confide in him, now that she knew him so well.

Cautiously, Snape asked, "Surely, you know you should not let Molly Weasley or any of your friends
interfere with your relationship with your parents? They would understand if you preferred to spend..."

He shut up as he watched Hermione hastily turn away, but not before he had time to notice with dismay her suddenly glistening eyes.

Inwardly calling himself names, he instinctively took a few steps forward. Hermione blinked her tears away and faced him, very much aware that she owed him an explanation, although she could not yet brace herself to meet his eyes.

"I love the Weasleys," she sighed mournfully, "but if I went to the Burrow, it's because there was nowhere else... Or, rather, no one else to go to." She finally looked up and he was struck by the look of self-loathing on her face.

"I... I Obliviated my parents before going on the Horcrux search with Harry and Ron."

He could not contain a surprised gasp.

"They forgot who they used to be and my very existence. I sent them to Australia under a different name. I only meant to keep them safe," she explained almost pleadingly – as if he would judge her, Severus thought, utterly stunned. "I meant for it to last only until the end of the war... or to spare them the suffering if I was killed but... I... It's become irreversible," she said with a small sob. "They are different people now... and there is no place for me in their life."

She took deep breaths before she could add, "They think of me as a young friend they met by chance while I was touring Australia. We write or call occasionally, because they like me and I can't find it in myself to stay away but..." She bit her lips. "They are supervising a charity Christmas barbecue for their local Church. I know they would welcome me, but I would feel more miserable than the poor it was organised for if I had gone."

Her face crumpled, a prelude to tears. He led her to a seat. She followed blindly and, without thinking, he sat on his haunches to be level with her and took both her hands in his.

"What you did was incredibly courageous, and a real proof of love," he said softly, and waited for her to choose whether to respond.

She took a deep breath, looked at the ceiling as if searching for some inspiration or courage. "The way you handled the bottles and read the labels," she confessed with some hesitation, "Almost reverently... You just reminded me of my dad... And it's stupid, because I chose these bottles precisely because I knew you were the only one who could appreciate them as he did but I... I..."

"Shhh!" he said, interrupting her nervous babbling. He gave a light squeeze to her hand to which she responded with a pained smile. "It's only natural for you to think of them today... Particularly if I remind you of your father," he said, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. Of course, she was bound to lump him together with the generation of her father and people like Black, Lupin... Maybe even like Flitwick or Argus Filch.

He probably did not succeed because she cut him off, "It's just that I have older parents... That is... I didn't mean..." Her voice trailed off. "I'm sorry. I'm digging myself into a hole, but right now, I feel unable to explain anything."

"Let's say," he drawled, "that the way I handle a bottle of wine reminds you of your father, because he is obviously another man of great taste and elegance."

He had hoped to make her smile and diffuse the tension but it did not work.
She whispered, “You're right,” before closing her eyes and hiding her mouth in her hand to contain the choking sobs. Worry made him forget how awkward the situation really was, with him trying to console the woman he did not want to fall in love with, because whichever way you looked at his situation, he would soon be out of the picture, either dead or (hopefully) on the run.

"I know it's stupid..." she began, but found herself unable to go on. She looked self-consciously at her feet, willing the foolish, childish tears away.

"It isn't stupid," he said with conviction. "With my own parents, I never had the relationship you had with yours. I can safely say that I've hated my father for thirty years, even after his death and yet, this morning I found myself reading a love letter he sent to my mother when they were newlyweds. It helped me remember that there was a time we were happy," he revealed with a candidness that surprised even him.

Hermione nodded several times as he spoke, because this was exactly how she felt.

"Everything that reminds you of your parents in happier times is precious," he went on, "because they loved you and were good parents." He pressed her hand again. "Even now that they can't remember who you really are, they still want you in their life. It may not be what you would like, but it proves that, even if they lost the memories they shared with you, you are still your parents' daughter."

She nodded again, sniffing helplessly at the same time. With a tiny smile, she blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes. She was more peaceful now but he did not dare move.

"They did not care very much for Christmas," she told him, more cheerfully this time. "More often than not, they would travel abroad for holidays and as they were very fond of skiing and I'm not, I would stay with my grandmother... Or later, after she died, with one of our neighbours who used to look after me when I didn't go to school... But I never felt neglected or that they didn't love me enough."

She paused, shaking her head in wonder. "You know, I often heard painful stories about being magical in a Muggle family and feeling alone or rejected... And I am not just talking about Harry..." She shook her head sadly as he acquiesced, knowing exactly, as the son of Tobias Snape, and a Hogwarts teacher, what she meant. "It may be because they had waited a long time before deciding they were ready to have a child, but even when we did not understand why I was different or why strange things happened around me, they never freaked out or loved me less."

She smiled so tenderly at the memory that he felt something tear in his heart. He instinctively reached for her face and barely stopped himself, letting his hand fall back uselessly. He felt his cheeks heat when he noticed that she was staring at his hand with round, almost tragic eyes. She had seen his move.

Before he could stand up and retreat, she put her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his waist. After a few thunderstruck seconds, he cautiously did the same. Hermione drew a breath – a soft sound of relief, as if she had been struggling to achieve some kind of goal and barely succeeded.

They closed their eyes at the same time, both unwilling or unable to grasp the significance of the moment.

Snape's knees were killing him but he did not care, as he felt her slowly relax against him. He quietly inhaled the soft perfume on her skin. For a while, he pretended the situation was perfectly normal and even dared to gently stroke her hair.
She sighed something which almost sounded like his name.

He kept his eyes closed, savouring the moment. As if they had a will of their own, his lips gently pressed on her head.

He almost startled when he felt her do the same to the base of his neck. Everything seemed to still, apart from the ghostly heat of her breath on his skin, as if they had reached the eye of the storm.

Of course, it was the moment Harry chose to come down.

They hastily stood up together at the sound of his feet joyously rebounding on the steps, as if they were caught committing a crime.

"I hope my eyes aren't red?" Hermione asked in an urgent whisper.

Snape shook his head, although he would have had a hard time telling if it was true or not.

He pursed his lips at Harry's definitely ill-timed arrival, although part of him felt relieved that he had no time to make a fool of himself. He had been so tempted to really kiss Hermione. He only had to bend a tiny bit… But it would have been taking advantage, even if he knew she would have welcomed him in the heat of the moment.

She had been distressed because of her parents, and it was so easy at her age to look for solace in small physical intimacies without giving them much importance. He only had to think how naturally she touched or hugged Harry or Ronald all the time.

Or to remember his own teenage years. He had thought nothing at the time of sleeping with Linda while longing for Lily, and Lily herself had eagerly used James Potter's willingness to be the shoulder to cry on, even when she did not like him.

He turned to greet Harry.

The young man's wide smile barely dimmed when Hermione almost immediately bid them good night. Severus could not help being a little resentful that Harry's attempt to stop her from leaving sounded half-hearted at best.

Hermione pleaded the late hour and an early shift, although she glanced a little nervously at Severus while saying this, before promptly disappearing through the Floo without a look back.

Snape watched her go with a sinking feeling, made even worse by the knowledge that there was absolutely nothing he could have said or done in front of Harry, and that it would be unbearably awkward, if not nearly impossible, for him to apologize later.

§§§

Harry mentally thanked Hermione for guessing that he needed to talk to Severus alone.

Snape had put on Harry's present, a beautiful antique signet ring, with no other comment than the socially expected thanks, but the way he kept staring at his hand and then at Harry with narrowed eyes or discreetly explored the beautiful intaglio representing the Slytherin crest with his fingertips was enough to prove that he had guessed what the ring really was.

In his turn, he had presented Harry with a small, unbreakable dropper bottle mounted as a pendant, along with an opaque, unmarked potion vial, but with such an imperious glare that Harry had not dared ask what it was or open it in front of the others.
Thankfully, Hermione's delight in her painting – an original silk scroll from an obscure period of Chinese history only she and Snape knew about, as well as Ron's enthusiasm for the Complete Monty Python box set spared him from the need to do more than thanking them in return.

Harry had discreetly opened the vial when they did not look and almost gone into cardiac arrest as the golden flecks made him realise that he was holding a full bottle of Felix Felicis – a quantity sufficient for a lifetime, even if he spent the next century hunted down by another megalomaniac wizard, and probably worth a king's ransom.

He managed to deflect Ron's curiosity for the time being by acting as if his gift was something he was embarrassed to discuss. He made a few oblique references to an exotic, non-addictive hallucinogen Sirius had rapturously described in one of his letters to Remus Lupin that they found at Grimmauld Place. As expected, Hermione swiftly changed the subject with a glare that meant "We'll discuss this later", while Ron waggled his eyebrows to let him know that, yes, they would discuss this later but that he expected to share.

Harry sat comfortably on the sofa, slightly surprised that the older wizard seemed to have his mind on something else, after all the attention he was giving the signet ring just before Harry left.

Harry crossed his arms to let Snape know that it was time for a frank conversation.

As expected, Snape's attention focused back on Harry almost instantly, if with a resigned sigh. "This is a rather intriguing gift," he said guardedly, "coming from an Auror."

Harry merely smiled. "But maybe not so unexpected... coming from a friend."

"No. Merely being... cautious, I think you would say."

"Harry Potter, cautious? Stop the press."

"I am, for your sake."

Snape did not bat an eyelid at the term, which cheered Harry up even more, although there may have been some provocation in his tone as he added, "One could almost wonder whether you're beginning to question your career choices, like Longbottom did."

"No. Merely being... cautious, I think you would say."

"Harry Potter, cautious? Stop the press."

"I am, for your sake."

Snape did not reply, but simply took the signet off. Presenting it to Harry between his thumb and forefinger, he asked, "How does it work?"

Harry chuckled. "I thought you knew, since you immediately guessed what it is."

"I merely recognised it," Snape answered, as they both gazed at Cygnus Black's Portkey ring. "After all, I've seen this heirloom, or rather its painted copy, often enough on Phineas's hand."

"According to Cygnus Black's notes from the time when he worked for the DMLE, it can take you through any kind of wards or magic dampening field," Harry announced proudly.

Snape gave him a swift, shrewd glance, but his gaze immediately returned almost greedily to the ring. "If I remember correctly, he used it to travel back and forth between the Ministry and the newly established Azkaban prison. I remember Phineas telling me that his grandfather refused to spend there one minute more than he had to when he supervised the place... Not that I blame him," he said bitterly.

This had an immediate effect on Harry who turned deadly serious. Matching his actions to his words, he explained, "You press the signet into your other palm, like this." He then handed the ring back to
Snape, adding, "The keyword is elsewhere."

Snape’s face and tone were carefully neutral as he asked, while putting the ring back on, “And where is elsewhere?”

Harry raised both hands apologetically. "Grimmauld Place." Snape made a dismissive gesture, to show that he did not care. "Right in front of the strongroom fireplace," Harry went on. "No doubt it was meant to give the wearer the time to look for valuables in case of an emergency. There are matching crests on all sides of the mantel. You fit the signet to the top right crest, state the place you want to go, and it will take you there as long as it is in Britain. I went through the wards of the Minister's office." At Snape's grimace, he hastened to say, "Oh no, Kingsley doesn't know. And I checked later with Security, it did not register."

Snape smirked. "It may have to do with the fact that Cygnus was one of the founders of the Unspeakables."  

Harry nodded. "I guess so. I also tried to cross the Channel and the Irish Sea," he said apologetically, "but it didn't work. The farthest I could go was Jersey and the Isle of Man. So, you're stuck in Britain but it's not that difficult to use another Portkey if need be." He chuckled wryly. "It seems the Blacks were not always this side of the law, or else they were as paranoid as some other people I could name."

Snape shrugged. "I'd say they always thought they were a law unto themselves, and when paranoia has a reason, it's merely caution."

Harry chuckled briefly before relapsing into silence, as did Snape. They sat for a while, both pondering when or why Snape might need to use the secret Portkey.

At long last, Harry produced the Felix Felicis out of his pocket. "You know, I'm not that careless that I'd need this amount of luck."

"You're an Auror, and you're Harry Potter. One never knows... Or rather, I suspect that trouble will find you anywhere you go."

Harry gave him a piercing look. "You seem to think you won't be around to protect me much longer, considering the quantity in this bottle."

Snape did not answer. He suddenly found fiddling with the signet ring around his finger endlessly fascinating.

Harry insisted, "Do you know what I think?"

"I'm not in the mood to play Little Legilimens," replied Snape with obvious reluctance.

"You've watched over me for as long as we have known each other. I believe you don't expect to be able to do this in the future."

"Since I don't plan on joining the Auror Corps, this is a safe assumption. Besides," snapped the older wizard almost petulantly, "I don't see why you think I would. I am not your father."

"I wish you were," Harry countered earnestly.

Snape shook his head with a sigh. "Did you have too much to drink?"

"I'm serious."
Snape growled lowly, "Oh, and your life would have been so much better in this hovel and with my nose and looks on your face!" His face contorted in disgust. "Have you seen what Spinner's End does to people? Can you imagine your mother as another Linda? Ha! We would do anything to leave this behind... And we did!"

"But you would have loved me," Harry said in a challenging tone.

For a few seconds, Snape looked like a fish, trying to speak but unable to do so.

"You know I'm right," Harry insisted.

Snape sneered, "My father loved me when he wasn't drunk and when he had money, which didn't happen very often. I'm not sure he was the best role model, but he was the only one I had. Don't you know that abused children make the best abusers?" He was getting so angry that he had to stand up and take a few paces before he even could go on ranting. "What kind of a father do you imagine I would have been? Do you really believe the way I treated you when I was your teacher was all an act? It was not!" he spat venomously.

"Then that makes two of us," insisted Harry, standing up, too, to confront Snape. "What kind of father material do you think I am?"

"You're so protective it's ridiculous!" retorted Snape. "Of course, you're father material."

"Protective, eh? If it's all it takes," Harry countered hotly, "you've protected me, and the other students, too, for so long you can say the same about yourself. Hell, you let Voldemort attempt to kill you to protect Draco!"

He put his hand on the stopper of the Felix Felicis. "I wonder if I need to drink some to make you agree with me."

Snape took an urgent step towards Harry, ready to stop him. "Don't be silly, Potter!"

"Then," answered Harry, practically shouting, "don't pretend you don't care when it's obvious that you do!"

They glared at each other, until Snape turned and sat back with a huff. Harry did the same.

With a theatrical sigh, Harry put the vial on the coffee table.

"Why do I have the feeling that you haven't kept any for yourself?" he asked.

Snape looked at the vial, almost longingly, then caught Harry's gaze. "Because I didn't," he said with raw honesty. "I've been told it would be close to suicidal with my history of addiction. A rather radical contraindication, I'd say."

Raising his hand to show his new signet ring, he swiftly changed the subject. "You don't seem to have great faith in the justice of this country, either."

"When dealing with inside foes, I don't," agreed Harry.

Snape smiled wryly. "At least I can now tell you who's behind this."

Harry sat bolt upright. "What?"

Snape retrieved the mysterious card and the French book. Harry had no more clue than his
colleagues when he saw them, until Snape explained.

"It was very foolish of you to open it alone."

"On the contrary," Snape countered, "I am certain the message would not have activated if I hadn't been alone."

"Probably not," conceded Harry. "And, in the end, it was worth it, since we now know who we're looking for."

§§§

Hermione removed her make-up and brushed her teeth with extra care, willing herself to focus on the routine rather than on her foolish feelings and stupid behaviour. When she could not delay any longer and had to finally rinse her mouth and clean her toothbrush, she sighed tiredly.

Things would not get easier because she avoided her own gaze in the mirror. It would certainly not help with Severus Snape either when they met next.

She could hardly believe that she had thrown herself at him twice in half an hour. All right, the first time could hopefully be attributed to enthusiasm. It was Christmas, after all, and she had not expected another gift, and certainly not one so thoughtful as the silk painting, even after they discussed cats, Chinese paintings and the Song period extensively. But there was no excuse for the second occasion.

Severus was only trying to console her. It was obvious he was way out of his comfort zone when he tried to touch her cheek but found himself much too self-conscious to do it.

She had been so disappointed that she had practically grabbed him, leaving him no choice but to hug her back. And when he kissed her head – something you do to a child! – she could not resist kissing his neck, just at the spot where she knew his skin would be so soft and warm. She had felt him stiffen, almost like she used to do herself when she had one of her flashbacks. It was the only thing that stopped her from covering him with open-mouthed kisses, something which had never appealed to her before, even when reading a heated description in one of Ginny's racy novels.

In retrospect, she was aghast at her own shamelessness, and she did not even have the excuse of having had too much wine. Thankfully, Harry chose the right time to interrupt.

What was wrong with her that she went to pieces where Severus Snape was concerned?

She had spent months avoiding any situations that would imply personal or intimate interactions with anyone other than the friends she already had, mainly Harry, Ron, the Weasleys and her old mates from Dumbledore's Army.

She was steadily refusing to go on dates after her few attempts since her break-up with Ron all ended in a fiasco, citing her medical studies and her time-consuming, gruelling schedule as an excuse.

She schooled herself into feeling nothing but clinical interest and professional care when she was touching the patients. Several senior healers had even told her that she had been promoted so swiftly not only because of the rate at which she assimilated medical knowledge but because of the obvious maturity of her dealings with the patients. She had an instinctively good bedside manner, with just the right level of personal interaction – something which was much harder to learn than mere healing techniques.

"I'm not upset," she told her reflection in the mirror angrily. "I will never be upset because of a man. Any man."
Yet if daydreaming about Severus at the most random times was not upsetting, she did not know what was.

She could not help remembering the burn of his dark eyes as they searched hers, the way he kneeled before her and took her hands in his... But she also remembered how he pursed his lips as if he had just tasted acid and immediately turned to Harry, so that he did not have to face her any more.

And yet, she would not change anything even if she could. He had held her with such tenderness. He spoke so gently, finding the right words, as usual, and talking about his own experience to put her at ease. She always felt so close to him, with so many things in common between them... And there was also that secret, shameful part of her that he made feel and want, against her own will, and she did not like it.

Had Severus been handsome or charming, she would have instinctively protected herself against the lure of attraction. She would have maintained a proper, professional distance in all their dealings.

Instead, she had allowed herself to become fascinated by the mystique of the spy, the brilliance of his mind... By her own compassion and admiration at his courage in carrying out Dumbledore's cruellest orders and the unfairness of being treated as a war criminal. She had sought his advice, his opinions. They had discussed the elves' laws, music, potions, art, history, sociology, cooking, politics... Everything.

She snorted, angry with herself. It did not mean he felt more than friendship or benevolent indulgence. All right, she may be exaggerating a little: benevolence and indulgence were not the first things that came to mind in relation to Snape... But how many times did she listen to Minerva rave about what a good Head of house he had been? How he knew to coax their secrets out of abused students or to earn the trust and affection of his Slytherins? It showed that he was a very empathetic person, both by nature and because of his job, but nothing more. You could tell by the fact that he had immediately thought that she was equating him to her father, no doubt because he believed she was too young, and probably too foolish to be more than a friend.

But she was not Harry! She was not looking for some sort of substitute father. She was looking for...

No!

She was not looking for anyone or anything. It was high time she stopped listening to Dilys Derwent, who would talk Hermione into falling in love with Severus Snape if she let her. Dilys was a great friend, but she was just like Molly. She could not imagine that anyone could be content to stay single – but she did.

What she felt for Severus was nothing more than a crush. Yes, that's what it was. A crush. Nothing more.

It will pass swiftly enough, but right now I'm feeling and being a little foolish.

She was suddenly struck by a horrid thought. Maybe he noticed. Maybe this is why he looked disgusted. He did all he could to escape Rebecca Babbling, and now he finds he's stuck with me.

It was fortunate that she would not be able to spend more than twenty minutes at Spinner's End tomorrow, just for Severus's routine check up. And she could certainly manage it in a quarter of an hour. Yes, she would show him she could be cool and professional.

She clenched her teeth. She refused to be the silly girl with a crush on the dark hero. It was hardly serious and there was no way he would ever be interested in a former student, and a Muggleborn,
She could not help remembering how cruelly he had dismissed her when Draco disfigured her with the Densaugeo hex that made her teeth grow like those of a beaver. "I see no difference."

Severus had almost apologised when he explained that Crabbe and Goyle would have reported him to their fathers if he dared to be sympathetic toward a Muggleborn, but it hurt so much at the time... She was so self-conscious at the time about her horrid buck teeth that her parents refused to straighten up, because it could be done more efficiently if she waited until she was older. And the constant taunting about her blood status did not help.

Her hand automatically went to her Mudblood scar, but she aborted the gesture.

No. He was not like that. Severus may not return her feelings but he would never despise her for her blood status.

But how was she going to face him again?

*Like you faced everything else. One step at a time.*

She gazed purposefully in her own eyes in the mirror. *I won't let anyone upset me, and certainly not a man.* She nodded resolutely at herself.

*Even if it's Severus, who's so different from all the other men and boys I've met.*

She crossed her arms and made a face at her reflection. *Bad thought. The sooner you stop thinking about him, the better.*

She resolutely picked her books and notes and decided that taking on her next assignment for Healer Smethwyck would make her forget her worries – but even then, she could not escape Severus Snape as she found him to be one of her case studies.

Smethwyck could not resist since Snape had gone into cardiac arrest no less than six times before he could finally stop the haemorrhage with the antivenin and carry out the debridement of all the necrotic tissues around Nagini's bite. (Of course, all cases were supposed to remain anonymous, but really, how many people had been torn and bitten by a magically altered snake, or survived thanks to the revolutionary antivenin they brewed themselves and had the forethought to ingest beforehand?)

Reading the details of Snape's critical state when he was brought into Smethwyck's ward made her shudder in retrospective fright at the thought of how close they had been to losing him until Lucius Malfoy tricked the Aurors into bringing him to St Mungo's to deliver more antivenin.

Much later, after tossing and turning in her bed for a long time, she reflected bitterly on how traitorous one's mind can be. As soon as she closed her eyes, she kept feeling drawn and falling into the same unfathomable eyes or gasping at the ghost memory of his embrace. She felt all hot and bothered, almost like when she dreamed of Ron at Hogwarts and ended up touching herself, but she would not do it.

She had not done it since… Since.

Sadly, the first person that came to mind to help her sort out her feelings was Severus.

And there was just no one else. Ginny had already left, the Holiday Harpies having been scheduled for yet another tour. There was no way she could talk about Severus to Harry or with Ron. Draco was much too close to Severus to be objective, and he would probably tell his mother, if only to
redirect her matchmaking towards Hermione. Molly would try to meddle. Dilys would understand, but she had decided that Severus was her perfect match and would not budge an inch. Phineas would flush and cough before calling Dilys to the rescue.

It left only Constanz.

No way. Alfred will just nod and smile or tell me that I need to let my emotions and physical needs flow their natural course.

Her friends were annoying, and it was just a crush.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, including answering personal messages. Life has been a bit rocky lately, beginning with my youngest's bright idea to put my laptop on a chair to have it out of the way. What do you think happened? (One clue: there was a big "crack" involved). Special thanks to Tra8erse who managed to edit this chapter as efficiently as always, in spite of everything.

Oh, and I am properly ashamed of what I did to Jane Austen. (Blushes).

And objects in the rear view mirror may appear closer than they are

(Meatloaf)

First thing in the morning, Harry sent Ron his Patronus, although it was his friend's morning off.

The redhead was rather grouchy when he arrived through the Floo, but Harry's message had been urgent enough that he did not linger in bed. A swift glance around the sitting room and at Harry's and Snape's long faces stopped him from making his usual fuss about getting up at what he considered the crack of dawn.

They did not exchange more than nods. Harry was setting up the dicta-quill with grim resolution. Snape seemed more on edge than Ron had ever seen him.

Ron put his hand on the quill to stop it from writing down his words. "Before you begin, you may tell me why you want me to hear this deposition rather than send it to me as usual."

"I will not send this deposition to the Ministry," Harry answered sharply. "You will hand it personally to Kingsley, and only after he consents that you test him for Imperius," he added, pointing at a strange device that Ron had only seen used by the Unspeakables or in St Mungo's for official medical evaluations.

Ron immediately protested. "No way. Kingsley is the ruddy Minister, and you know how strong-willed he is."

"Pius Thickeness was, too," Snape cut in. Immediately turning to Harry, he pointed at Ron. "Besides, before you send the messenger to get himself killed..."

"I know what we've decided!" barked Harry irritably. Startled by his reaction, Ron let go of the quill but had no time to do more than goggle before his friend put the scanner to his head and he suddenly experienced the uncomfortable heat associated with brain testing for mental curses and mental damage.

"If it makes you feel better," Harry said without looking him in the face, "Constanz has already tested me." Ron closed his mouth without saying anything and waited for the results. He was
positive he was just himself.

"Why all the fuss?" he asked more calmly than he really felt. After all, he had heard so many horror stories about mind control and ordinary people committing crimes under influence, or Pius Thicknesse deciding and ordering things he would never have even considered when in his right – and free – mind.

Harry did not answer immediately, as he tried to apply just the right pressure with the scanner, exactly as Constanz had shown him. "Because we're facing an expert in mental manipulation. Considering how he managed to plant all these accusations against Severus at the very beginning of our Auror training, there's no telling who he might have influenced. I don't think any of us had been Imperiused, but he might have been planting triggers or something."

Ron glanced at Snape who confirmed grimly, "Corban can do this."

"Corban... Yaxley?"

"Yes. He sent me a very interesting Christmas gift, and the day before yesterday, the Foe-Glasses Dawlish let Harry borrow carried a trace designed by Yaxley to spy on his own people when he was head of the DMLE. Of course, it might just be a coincidence."

Ron snorted. "Since when do you believe in coincidence?"

"I don't."

At last, Harry put the scanner back down. "Nothing, of course, but I won't have anyone in on the secret of the investigation who has not been tested."

"Hermione..."

"Has already been scanned by Constanz and sent her Patronus right after that to chew me out. Said she couldn't understand why I didn't call you both back as soon as Severus told me... And that she wants all the details tonight."

All three wizards grimaced at the prospect of having to deal with Hermione in a mood – although for different reasons.

Severus kept his particular misgivings to himself but Ron sighed, resigned, "Yeah, I can imagine."

He finally noticed that the dicta-quill had been writing down everything they said since he released it. Without pause, he immediately went back to the subject. "Of course, it makes sense. Yaxley was only listed as 'missing' after the battle of Hogwarts, not officially dead. He was Head of the DMLE for Voldemort, but even more importantly, he's been a Ministry official for years. He would know where to look for files or how to plant false information."

His gaze searched Snape's, seeking confirmation – but the man looked away. His wooden countenance did not fool Ron anymore. He glanced at Harry to make sure that his friend would wait patiently until Snape decided to speak, in his own time.

Finally, with obvious reluctance, the Professor admitted, "Of all my surviving 'brothers', Yaxley's certainly the one who has a more personal reason to feel vindictive."

Ron nodded encouragingly, while Harry felt like pouting – and instantly berated himself for the absurd twinge of jealousy. Interrogating Snape was not his personal privilege, but he had got used to it being just the two of them. Even worse, Ron seemed to understand Severus better than Harry did
at times, and it rankled a little. First Neville... Hermione... And now Ron. Harry was left feeling he
was missing something about Severus, and he did not like this.

"Amongst the members of the inner circle, we shared a somewhat similar situation."

Snape knew that his former students would have rolled their eyes at his stilted language if they had
dared, but he could not help it. It was a defence mechanism so deeply ingrained as to be his second
nature.

He stood and took a few steps to give himself the time to gather his thoughts.

"Corban is a Pureblood, of course, but from an impoverished branch of the Yaxleys. Like me,
he didn't have much to offer Voldemort in the way of money or relations, but he had a lot of talent
and his usefulness as a spy inside the Ministry."

He paused and blinked several times—another proof of the unease he could not repress.

"I would not say that we were friends... Rather that he tolerated me, for my usefulness... The
'misfortune' of having a Muggle for a father came in handy when he needed help with all the
questions he had about the Muggle world."

"He was interested in the Muggle world?" Harry's tone was incredulous.

"He strongly believed in 'know thy enemy'... He's the only member of the inner circle, apart Lucius
of course, who didn't think it beneath him to mingle with Muggles to learn about them... It was not
by chance that Voldemort chose him for the DMLE..."

Snape was slowly pacing now and punctuating each turn in the room with another sentence.

"He was the only one who didn't underestimate Muggles and who seemed able to devise reasonable
protection plans against them... Rather than boasting unrealistically about how we could wipe them
out in a single wand move if we so wished," he remarked sarcastically.

After a thoughtful pause, he added, "He surprised me more than once with his ability to blend into
the Muggle world."

"What do you call 'blend in'?"

"Going down the pub and talking to the regulars without making stupid remarks about 'eclectricity'
or 'jellytone'... Visiting exhibitions or attending a concert without attracting undue attention... Going
shopping to discover the latest trends and innovations and being able to ask questions without being
too obviously ignorant... Things like that."

Harry frowned. "You did all this with him?"

Snape sighed."Regularly, although he's what you'd call an over-achiever. Even between the wars,
he was forever seeking me out for clarifications about all kinds of subjects or for 'exploratory
expeditions' as he called them... But he also liked to impress me with the things he had learned all by
himself." With a bitter little sneer, he added, "He always needed to prove that he was better than
anyone else."

"So, he can hide among Muggles."

"Yes. I feel positive that when you find the bookseller who sold him my'Christmas present', they
will say there was nothing off or suspect about him... That he didn't wear strange clothes, look or
say anything out of the ordinary."


They both shook their heads. There was even an ironic little smile on Harry's lips that made Ron remember the odd looks he got whenever he found himself in the Muggle world. (Worst of all, it was generally from children or old ladies and for some reason, Harry always found it particularly comical, while Hermione just bit her lip or closed her eyes and chided "Ron!" under her breath – although he could never understand what he had done.)

Mildly annoyed at himself for taking it personally, he asked, "Do you think that Yaxley is trying to infiltrate and take over the Ministry or that his sole motivation is revenge?"

Snape shrugged. "It depends on whether he's on his own or not," he said, "and how many Death Eaters managed to escape and regroup." He raised interrogative eyebrows at Harry.

Ron coughed to catch their attention and looked pointedly at the dicta-quill. They would have to discuss this – and the sooner the better – but it would not do to leave any incriminating evidence of their sharing official secrets with Snape while he was a still a suspect.

Snape smiled wryly before going on. "When he was appointed Head of MLE and I was made Headmaster, he decided that the similarity in our personal histories and careers must have some significance. He began to seek me out again and tell me that we'd shown the others what we were truly made of... Me by killing Dumbledore, and him by Imperiusing Pius Thicknesse... That we were the most brilliant and the most useful." Another sneer. "He had great expectations," he said through his teeth.

"Is he gay?" asked Ron, totally out of the blue where Harry was concerned, if his round eyes were any proof.

Snape considered Ron with grudging respect. "Yes. How did you guess? Not many people are aware of the fact and I'm sure he managed to purge any possible information about his private life from his file."

"Just a feeling. I think I'm beginning to see where you're going."

Harry's gaze travelled between his two friends, surprised to see a faint flush on Snape's face and commiseration on Ron's. His eyes rounded once again as he finally grasped Ron's meaning. No. He blinked. No way.

Snape shifted uneasily, stifling another resigned was annoyed to feel the beginning of a very uncharacteristic blush tainting his cheeks. In fact, he felt it flaming even further as he met Harry's shocked gaze.

It was inevitable that he would have to talk about Lily, but he had always jealously guarded the rest of his private life. There was no way now that he could keep that distasteful episode back.

He resisted the urge to clear his throat. "Yaxley resented my ties with Lucius and Narcissa... That is to say..." He exhaled slowly, hoping he was not too obvious, while trying to formulate a watered-down version of events.

Neither Harry nor Ron seemed inclined to make fun of the situation, which was a relief, but he felt the need to drive the point home as he explained, "There have always been rumours and speculations about my relationship with Lucius. After his marriage, most people expected that Narcissa would kick me out of Malfoy Manor." He snickered softly. "When that didn't
happen and even the most obtuse had to recognise that we all peacefully coexisted, many people assumed that we were a ménage-à-trois… Since it would be the only way to circumvent their Fidelity vow.” He snorted. "Most people have that sort of mind. They find it easier to believe the worst, even if there is a simpler and more plausible explanation. It's too much to expect them to believe that we could feel honest, simple affection and friendship without anything perverse in our relationship. So, we made the most of it."

Harry suddenly wondered how Draco had felt about it. He had no doubt the little ferret loved his godfather, but it must have been pretty embarrassing at times. He could see the convoluted negotiations they often witnessed between the Slytherins in a new light, all of which boiled down to the others offering Draco various kinds of bribes to intercede with Snape for them. He never thought anything about it at the time, except that Malfoy was a cheeky little bastard because he would always, and rather contemptuously, up the stakes until most of his mates gave up or made fools of themselves.

And when you thought of the rest of their happy family...

He remarked cautiously, "I guess that didn't help matters with Bellatrix Lestrange."

"Indeed. She oscillated between insinuating that I was the main reason Draco was the only child and hinting that it was a blessing that Draco's nose didn't look like mine. She wasn't the only one, but as she was always ready to flare up at any imagined slight against her sister, it somehow justified the gossip, at least within the Pureblood circles." Snape pursed his lips unhappily. "It was never a comfortable situation, but all these assumptions were useful… Except when they were not, as was the case with Yaxley."

He glanced as discreetly as possible at his former students and was relieved to see that they still did not look disgusted.

"He tried to convince me that…" He paused in the middle of his sentence and took a deep breath. He did not want to repeat the man's humiliating proposals. Not in front of Harry and certainly not if they were to be repeated in a courtroom.

And not if there was the slightest likelihood that Hermione would hear them. His feelings were already complicated enough where that woman was concerned.

Another discreet cough from Weasley brought him back to the matter at hand. In the end, there was no way to escape this new humiliation.

"Corban wanted to convince me that he had more to offer than Lucius and Narcissa. He insisted quite often that the two of us would be unbeatable if we were also..." He could not help pulling a wry face. "Together."

Harry asked cautiously, because they had to avoid any possible ambiguity in a formal interrogation – and because he wanted to know, even if it was sick, "When you say together, you mean... romantically? As a couple?"

"Yes."

Ron whistled silently but it was Harry's look of disgusted fascination that shook Snape out of embarrassment. "Oh, grow up, Potter! Quite a few people are so inclined, or Lucius and I would never have dared to play that game... But it made things rather awkward with Corban Yaxley, who's the real thing."
Harry rebelled. "It's not your being gay or not that disturbs me," he argued.

No? asked Snape's ironical smile.

"It's... Yaxley. Him... Thinking that he had a chance with you!"

Snape reflected bitterly that not so very long ago, Harry would have blurted, "It's... Snape" with the same disgusted conviction... And that he would very probably still react like that if he knew that Severus had noticed what an attractive specimen of the opposite sex Hermione Granger was.

Not that he would blame him – he blamed himself and did not need anyone's help in doing so. What kind of addictive, pathetic fool was he, to always pine for the brilliant and inaccessible women who would never really love him back?

These bitter musings were interrupted when Harry insisted, in a still incredulous voice, "Yaxley was in love with you all that time?!

"Apparently. Although he had a strange way of showing it," he said, remembering all the barbs against non-Purebloods he had heard over the years. "He said that he... 'fell in love' with me when Voldemort congratulated me for killing Dumbledore and he remembered how he had watched the old man fall from the tower." Snape faltered a little but confessed, as truthfully as ever, "He said a lot of things... That he'd struggled in vain... That his feelings couldn't be repressed... In short, he said he was willing to overlook my unfortunate blood status at last."

Ron said with a horrified laugh, "He's a nutter!"

As Snape looked daggers at him, he quickly amended, "Hey! I didn't mean it like that! Who would be barmy enough to fall in love with somebody for murdering..." He caught himself when he realised Harry was glaring, too. "Right," he mumbled. "A Death Eater. A sadistic, murdering Death Eater."

"Not to mention how insulting his proposition was," Harry added thoughtfully.

Snape closed his eyes and pinched the base of his nose tiredly. Of all the consequences of killing Dumbledore, that one had really been the icing on the cake, and would probably feed even more rumours and speculations about his love life. Just what he needed, on top of everything else!

§§§

In the end, Hermione took things rather mildly, if Harry said so himself.

She must have been more tired than she let on, considering the dark circles under her eyes, because she dispatched Snape's daily physical summarily. No more than ten minutes after they had entered the kitchen they were already back and taking their seats next to the two Aurors.

Ron kept glancing at them as if something was wrong, which, of course, drew Harry's eyes, too. All he could see was that they were both rather subdued. Maybe a little on edge, which was not altogether surprising.

Hermione crossed her arms and asked, with considerable asperity – a sure sign of worry, "So?"

She looked pointedly at Harry, who could not help glancing helplessly at Ron and Snape for help. Ron kept looking down, like he did at Hogwarts when he hoped the teacher would call on someone else. Snape just sat with a faraway, bitter look on his face. However, he roused himself enough to point at the card and book on the table and tell Hermione, "See for yourself."
As expected, Hermione easily deciphered the French title, read the card and immediately understood the threat. "There must be something else, or Harry," she pointed her chin at her friend, "wouldn't have made a great to-do for a threat in bad taste."

It was not a question.

"There was a message," conceded Snape. "For my eyes only, of course. It was from Corban Yaxley. 'It will be my pleasure to make you pay', it said."

"You're sure it was from him?" she asked, before sighing, without letting him the time to answer, "Of course, you're sure. Forget it."

She tapped her fingers on the armrest, thinking aloud, "The expert in Imperius. Had Pius Thicknesse and a handful of key people under his thumb for months. I see," she said at last, and none of the men doubted that she had already summed up all the implications of a possible Death Eater infiltration inside the Ministry.

She bit her lip briefly before remarking, "This seems a very expensive and convoluted way to send a threat, though. And I'm not sure I can see the wisdom of showing his hand before the trial."

She looked at Harry, then at Ron. "Unless it's just a nasty way of spreading panic and distrust inside the Ministry?"

Harry shook his head sombrely. "No. I brought Foe-Glasses the day before Christmas that turned out to have a trace on them… A trace designed by Yaxley himself." He shrugged. "I found out because Severus here still refuses to admit anything that comes from the Ministry into his home. He said that thing about fearing the Greeks that you're so fond of, too…"

"Timeo Danaos?" Hermione asked, glancing for the first time at Snape with the semblance of a smile. It cheered him up a little.

"Yes, that one. You'll have to write it down for me. I'm sure it's the sort of thing I'll need in the future. You know…" he said with a sigh, thinking of the political training Kingsley had insisted on. Hermione nodded, without comment.

"Anyway, as I was saying, Severus had me return the Foe-Glasses to the Ministry and test them there."

"I expected Harry to find the trace," interjected Snape. "But I believed that Dawlish and the big wigs of the DMLE simply adopted Yaxley's spell because it came in handy for spying on his investigation… Until I received this," he said, pointing again at the book.

Hermione fully turned to Snape, with what he thought was a much too piercing look. "Then, if it's indeed Yaxley, he must have a more personal motive on top of political revenge."

He pursed his lips at Harry's give away gasp and glanced quickly at Ron, who made a helpless gesture, as if to say, "What did you expect? It's Hermione!"

"Corban likes using flamboyant gestures to make his point," conceded Snape reluctantly. "This is his way to let me know, and Lucius, too, in case you didn't guess, that he will strike even if I am under 'the Ministry's protection'… Which reminds me," he said, turning to Ron with suddenly narrowed eyes. "You told me you would negotiate a solution for the Malfoys' protection with Shacklebolt."

Ron smiled a little nervously. "Removing the trace on their wands seemed good enough for Lucius and Draco."
Snape nodded in approval.

Hermione frowned. "Kingley consented?" She sounded dubious, which was excusable when you knew how much the Minister distrusted Lucius Malfoy, however useful he may have found him.

"On a temporary basis." Ron gave her a toothy, totally forced grin as he explained, "But Harry insisted I used the brain thingy on Kingsley himself before giving him the information about Yaxley. I can tell you it helped with conveying the urgency of the situation."

Snape and Harry both snorted, while Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "This I can believe. It had the same effect on me."

"I left all three Malfoys busy strengthening the Manor's wards..."

Snape smiled grimly, while the other two squirmed uneasily in their seats. Knowing what Death Eaters considered a fitting punishment for traitors, it was no wonder the Malfoys were preparing for any kind of intrusion or attack.

"... And activating a few items I chose not to look at too closely, or I might have been obliged to confiscate them," Ron added piously.

Snape smile grew wider and rather nasty. He was obviously satisfied with the solution.

"Right!" interjected Hermione. "But that doesn't tell me why Corban Yaxley feels the need to taunt you," she said, focusing on Snape once more. "It would be much safer to keep the element of surprise. So, is he that kind of criminal who needs to boast and unconsciously wishes to be caught?" Snape shook his head and she finished with what was certainly a pout, "...Or there is something you're not telling me, and I want to know what it is!"

Snape was instantly on the defensive, even though could not help admiring her quick mind. "Is it not enough that I betrayed everything Corban believed in? It's reason enough, wouldn't you say?"

"Please!" She snorted. "There are much faster and easier ways to 'make you pay', as he phrased it, and he didn't need to specify that it would be a 'pleasure' for him... You call him Corban. I take it you were friends, or at least there is a reason he is taking your actions in the war personally. What is it you're not telling me...? And they know what," she said, pointing an accusatory finger at her friends, "because they've been avoiding to look me in the eyes since we started."

Snape leaned back against his armchair, closed his eyes and sighed tiredly. "Of course," he said with grudging approval, "I should have known you'd piece half the tale by yourself."

A muffled sound, like a repressed chuckle, made him glare at Weasley with a clear if mute promise of retribution. The redhead looked down, but too late to hide a smile. A swift glance at Harry confirmed he was doing the same.

"Well, best to rip the plaster off."

"If you must know," he told Hermione bluntly, "Yaxley fancied me and convinced himself after Dumbledore's death that we would become a power couple amongst the Death Eaters."

She made an odd sort of noise, gawked at Snape, whose wooden face of course betrayed nothing, then at the boys – but she still failed to catch either Harry's or Ron's eyes because now they were looking at their shoes. Right, confirmation enough.

She swallowed several times, took a deep breath and asked cautiously, "And how... How did you
Snape's nerves, already frayed, threatened to snap. He clenched his jaws and glowered at Hermione, effectively silencing her. "I didn't. When someone like him is 'willing' to 'overlook' your blood status, he assumes that you are flattered, whatever you may say."

"But surely..."

"There was nothing to do," he said with icy finality, "Short of telling him that he could not have made me any offer that would have tempted me enough to accept it... And I couldn't afford to offend him and make another enemy at the time." He pursed his lips at her stricken face.

That's done it! Angry with himself and with her, he spat, fully aiming to shock, "At first he assumed that I declined out of some misguided loyalty to the Malfoys. Then he decided that it was my inability to 'perform' that made me shy."

He sneered, almost happy to see her blush and shrink under his glare, "He offered to prove to me that he had enough stamina for the both of us. He even made a habit of waiting for me outside every meeting," he was practically yelling now, and viciously, "Even at the risk of incurring the wrath of the Dark Lord who hated being left waiting, just so that we would be seen arriving together and that he could boast..."

"Severus!" Ron's sharp warning stopped him in his track. "There's no need to tell us the details. Hermione never said that you encouraged him."

Snape sat back and crossed his arms in a surprisingly childish gesture, refusing to say another word. Not that any of the trio wished to hear anything more.

Harry was just as crimson as Hermione. Snape's anger reminded him of the only interrogation session he would have been grateful to foist on someone else. In that session, he made Snape tell him what he knew of Voldemort's rape policy and about the neutering potion he had to take when he returned to active spying to avoid being dragged in. Constanz had given him a very detailed report about the effects of the neutering potion Snape had been using, but he had to officially ask the party involved about every symptom, urge – or rather its absence – that he experienced during the years on the potion.

Ron was young enough that he felt his cheeks heat up, too, at Snape's casual mention of his impotence and Yaxley's advances, but he was also worried about the effect Snape's tale might have on Hermione. Would it revive old fears or put her off men? And would Snape's hurt pride destroy any progress they had made towards each other?

A covert glance at Hermione proved she was miffed, which in his opinion was the lesser evil. At some point, she would cool down, as she always did. It would be a different matter if she had crawled back into her shell.

Snape, who was watching her closely but unobtrusively, could not decide if she was peeved about Yaxley's blood prejudice, his own failure to turn him down or his ruddy temper and lack of tact.

"Corban... Cormac... There must be something wrong with these names," she muttered cryptically.

He was close enough to hear but could not make sense of it. Instead, he forced himself to ask, "How many Death Eaters are really missing, Potter? I hope you can tell me now."

It always hurt a little when Severus regressed to calling him Potter, but Harry thought that if that was the only manifestation of his worry and embarrassment, they would be lucky.
Reluctantly, he recited, "Yaxley, of course, but there is also Dolohov, Rowle, Travers, Jugson..."

With each name, Snape's brow darkened a little more and the line of his lips grew whiter and thinner. When Harry did not name them along those who volunteered to take poison to avoid a life sentence in Azkaban, he had made his own list but he had also hoped until now to be wrong. Hermione inhaled sharply next to him, which made it clear this was news to her.

"...Nott, Mulciber and Alecto Carrow."

"Alecto Carrow?" asked Hermione. "But... wasn't she tried along with her brother?!"

Ron cleared his throat. "She was tried and condemned in absentia. People assumed she was in Azkaban because her sentence was announced together with her brother's but when they were arrested, he created a diversion to enable her escape. That's when Dolohov, Jugson and Travers managed to flee, too. The official press release was just ambiguous enough to avoid frightening people by letting them know how many high-ranking Death Eaters are on the run."

Hermione crossed her arms and snorted. "Typical."

"The Brotherhood had quite a number of safe houses," interrupted Snape. "Don't tell me they weren't investigated. I passed on a full, up-to-date list to Lupin no more than a fortnight before the Battle of Hogwarts, with all the passwords."

"Of course, they were," answered Harry, sounding frustrated. "But with everything in disarray after the battle, there were delays for many of the safe houses abroad."

Unwilling to look at Snape's angry face, Harry turned to Hermione. "The Aurory caught most of the lower ranking Death Eaters who knew of only one or two safe houses in the country. They got Selwyn, who was too hurt to travel farther and Crabbe, who didn't want to leave the country without knowing if Vincent was dead or alive. But you know how it is when you need an international search warrant."

"I can imagine the excuses and delays," Snape cut in again. "It's what enabled the creation of safe houses in countries sympathetic to the Death Eaters cause to begin with."

"Well, Kingsley had to deal with that... And with the fact that many countries behaved cautiously before officially recognizing his legitimacy as Interim Minister."

"Politics!" exclaimed Snape and Hermione at the same time. They locked eyes, shared small smiles and shrugged at each other almost apologetically.

Ron felt like the temperature in the room was returning to normal and sighed inwardly in relief. He had no wish to be caught in a crossfire between those two.

The alarm clock on the mantel buzzed, reminding them that it was football time.

Ron beat Harry to the zapper, while Snape stood up with Hermione. She wished the boys a good evening but they merely waved at her. Snape swiftly checked on the boys, making sure they only watched the screen. He caught her wrist to stop her from grabbing the Floo powder but let go at once. He leant to speak softly in her ear, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

She froze. There was an interminable five seconds gap before she could raise her eyes to his face. She hoped he could not hear the beating of her heart, because she could. "I could say the same," she managed to say. "I know how difficult it can be to talk about a situation you never wanted but had to put up with."
And she was gone. He called Mopy, and trays immediately appeared on the coffee table. He turned his armchair for a better view and settled in.

The teams were full of fighting spirit for their final match of 1999. The game was hotly contested and exciting but, even with ManU’s hard-fought win 3-2 over Chelsea, neither Snape nor the boys felt much like celebrating in the end. They went to bed almost immediately after the final whistle.

§§§

After all the emotions of the previous days, Harry hesitated to visit Mrs Hathaway but another glance at Snape's tight lips and obstinately knitted brow helped him decide that a few hours away from the brooding wizard could be a good thing. Ron had been rolling his eyes at him and making shooing motions towards the door for quite some time, so he finally announced that he was leaving – but not without Snape giving him another scowl.

His misgivings disappeared when the old lady greeted him in her sitting room. The coffee table was laden with a tea tray, cakes and a pile of photo albums.

Snape had deigned to disclose that Helen Hathaway had been the neighbourhood's social worker for years, privy to everybody's secrets, whether they needed her or not. She knew everyone, even now, and had a lot of friends.

She had been rather close to Harry's grandparents and had been instrumental in their decision to stay in Spinner's End and involve themselves in the community. The Evanses were very much out of place when they arrived because they did not know what they signed up for. The house was simply the only one immediately available on the list the company gave them when Harry's grandfather was sent to Manchester – they discovered why pretty quickly. Other people would have fled at the first opportunity, but not them. Not after they met Helen Hathaway, her husband who was a town councillor at the time, the pastor and his wife, who also happened to be Petunia's schoolmistress.

Mrs Hathaway had a lot of photographs to show Harry, just as she promised: drinks or dinner in the garden with his grandparents, parish activities, since his grandmother had been very active there and always brought along Petunia and Lily, and later on Severus Snape, too, who was always in Lily's tow.

"Oh, I knew every one of Little Tuney's tricks." Mrs Hathaway chuckled. Harry nearly choked on his tea at hearing anyone call his formidable aunt Little Tuney. Then he reflected that Mrs Hathaway was certainly no ordinary woman if she could call Snape 'Our Russ' to his face and survive.

"Your grandparents, too, of course, so none of us believed her when she said she had just 'forgotten' to leave a registration form at the Snapes. She would have been more convincing if she had told us that she gave it to Eileen. The poor woman would surely have put it in a corner and forget everything about it... But Margaret didn't blame Tuney for her little lie, because the man could be rather intimidating, even for an adult." She grinned impishly. "She went herself and shamed Tobias Snape into signing his consent. I wish I had been there to watch! When she had her mind set on something, nobody could resist your grandmother. After that, there was no question ever about Russ participating in the Sunday school or afterschool activities."

Next, Mrs Hathaway showed him the albums full of pictures of children at some kind of sports or cultural activities. His mother was quite the popular girl, while his aunt assisted the adults – a sure way to feel important and to avoid mingling too much with her peers from Spinner's End.

As they were growing up, Snape began to appear in a growing number of photos, too.. He was always right beside Lily, and Harry was surprised to see that not only was he poorly clothed but
much smaller than Lily and most other children – in fact, he was practically as scrawny as Harry had been before Hogwarts – until he suddenly seemed to sprout to his adult height in a matter of months.

By then, he and Lily were generally holding hands or had their arms around each other's waists. He was even smiling in three photos, and openly laughing in one, where Lily was performing some wild dance with another girl.

"They were always together," confirmed Mrs Hathaway. "And best friends, too, of course," she said with an emphasis that made Harry understand the local meaning of the expression at last.

"They were barely old enough to be," she sighed, "but that's the way it is in Spinner's End. They didn't know any better. None of those young people did. They couldn't. Not here, not when there was nothing to do all day but hang out together and listen to the elder teens bragging."

She paused, looking sad and angry at the same. "We did not have the means to keep them busy enough to stay out of mischief... And in the end, even your grandmother, with all her principles, could not stop her girls once they wanted to be like everyone else and taste the so-called freedom."

She seemed to speak to herself as she mumbled in her teacup, "Many people blamed me, but I never had the heart to refuse condoms to the boys. They were nowhere near adults when they came and pleaded with me... But they would have done it anyway, and they at least tried to be responsible," she said, suddenly looking up and straight into Harry's eyes, almost accusingly. He helped himself to another buttered slice of nut bread and munched on it conscientiously.

"I took the girls to the family planning clinic as soon as possible, of course, but for 'emergencies' the doctors there left me a stock of supplies because there was nothing else to do," she explained, with a fatalistic shrug. "I've seen and tried to help too many girls in an 'interesting condition' to care about what people said... Even the pastor or a good friend like Margaret."

"Are you telling me that my mother...?"

"Not your mother, no. She and Russ were at least careful. Or lucky. When I asked, Lily always assured me that she had all she needed from their school infirmary. I had a hard time believing her the first time she told me, but as nothing happened and she never needed help going to the planning clinic behind her mother's back, I suppose that was true."

Harry filled in the missing dots and deduced that Snape must have brewed the needed potions. He had a hard time imagining Madam Pomfrey handing out contraceptives to the female students. (Ginny or Hermione would know, but he certainly would not ask.)

"And Lily at least did not need maternity benefits to be able to leave her parents."

The former social worker knew everything about the disillusionment and bitterness of teenagers who thought they had no future when they watched their parents without jobs, money or hope. Some of it was difficult to hear, because it was his mother and Severus, but all these revelations about the 1970s and the life in a working class suburb, heavily hit by the economic crisis, kept Harry glued to his seat. In all the years he had spent at Privet Drive, he had never learned even a fraction of this, since his aunt never spoke of her past... And he was beginning to understand why.

There was no way somebody as class-conscious as Uncle Vernon would have married her if he had known that she was not exactly leading the sheltered, middle-class existence her family background as the daughter of a telecom engineer suggested. Aunt Marge already thought him rather daring for marrying his secretary and that the least said about it, the better.
Harry also concluded that his mother may not have been so different from her sister, after all. He had always thought Aunt Petunia must have married Vernon Dursley for his position and the comfortable life he offered her. He wondered whether James Potter's fortune was the decisive factor for his mother's change of heart about the boy she used to call a toe rag, since she was just as eager to leave Spinner's End as her sister.

Snape himself had hinted several times that being magical was their only chance to escape the lack of prospects and social stigma of growing up in Spinner's End and that they would have done anything to leave for good… Even marrying a man you used to loathe, or becoming a Death Eater, it seemed.

It was a very sobering and rather bitter thought that his parents as individuals gave him nothing to be specially proud of, except their deaths, particularly since he had also come to wonder what his life would have been like if Severus had been his father.

He could well have been. Snape had as good as told him that he had been his mother's boyfriend, and Mrs Hathaway offered him even more evidence and the assurance that everybody in the neighbourhood expected Russ Snape and Lily Evans to end up together.

The young boy stayed with the Evanses more often than with his own parents, and no one could blame him for it. By the time the Evanses moved to Cokeworth, Eileen and Tobias Snape were both so broken that their son wandered everywhere after school rather than coming home.

He was not the only one, but all the other boys in the same situation that Mrs Hathaway used to know turned out rather badly. It was a pity, really. Such a gifted, proud man Tobias Snape had been… And so happy when he had brought back home his highbred bride. Of course, Eileen had a hard time adjusting to Spinner's End, even if it had still been rather respectable before the mill closed down… Love Ever After can be difficult to live on a craftsman's income for a young woman who had obviously been used to being served, not to keeping house herself.

"What did she look like? She was no beauty, of course, but there was an intensity in her eyes, a sort of... passion. You always felt like they were as deep as wells and you could fall into them and drown there. Tobias certainly did!" She laughed rather baldly. "And when she smiled, she was just like Russ, or rather he's just like her. He's a different person entirely when he smiles, isn't he?"

Mrs Hathaway was lost in her reminiscences, and did not notice that Harry did not reply. In fact, he did not know how to tell her that he had never seen Severus Snape smile more than a thin, sad or sarcastic half-smile, or that he had never heard him laugh happily until he saw him joke with Linda and Shahid the day before Christmas.

"He's very like his mother... Apart from the nose, of course." This was said kindly, for once – Harry could not help noticing with a twinge of shame. "...That he unfortunately took from Tobias's side, along with his height... And his intelligence."

Why, yes, Tobias Snape was very clever. He may have been working class and could not go higher than his apprenticeship because of the war. (Harry startled and had to remind himself that she was speaking of World War 2, not of Grindelwald.) She insisted that Tobias had ability and proved that he could be his own boss and lead teams. He was very much sought after professionally. In fact, it was not the lack of income that turned Severus into a neglected child, but it being squandered on alcohol and gambling, when Tobias started haunting pubs more often than he was home.

Harry was surprised when Helen Hathaway, who had been sorting through the many boxes for quite some time, triumphally produced several photographs of Eileen and Tobias Snape socializing with their neighbours. They were young, enthusiastic and nothing like he had imagined based on Snape's memories. Severus himself was in his proud father's arms, sporting a great if only partially toothy
He had visibly been a happy baby, with parents who doted on him... But he was still a toddler when Eileen miscarried and drifted into chronic depression.

"Of course," commented Mrs Hathaway, "people did not know anything about 'depression' back then, but it was just that!"

Harry nodded at regular intervals because it was expected of him, but thankfully she did not need more to tell her tales. He told himself that he was happy to just listen, look at the photos and enjoy the walnut bread and the plum cake. He tried not to dwell on the fact that he would probably spend days, if not nights, pondering about all these revelations and wondering what he could keep to himself and what he had to report as evidence for Snape’s trial.

"It didn't help that Tobias had to leave her for days. With the mill closing down, there was not much building or renovation work to find around Cokeworth." She shook her head, still regretful about those lives turning so sour. "She really tried to grin and bear it, for Russ's sake, but she tended to relapse regularly, particularly around family occasions like Christmas or Russ's birthday. She would write to her parents and send them photographs of her son that she asked me to take for her."

She chuckled sadly. "She never gave us more than a few hints, but we understood that her parents were rich and very full of themselves. It is not exactly surprising that they never answered, but it would always depress her even further. Most of her rows with Tobias, back then, were about that. It was not just a question of pride for him. What he could not understand was that she still tortured herself by looking for the approval of the 'pretentious arseholes who never cared for her', as he put it."

Harry could not help smiling. Severus Snape had a much better education than his father but he could see where his brutal candidness came from.

"And then, not long after Russ started school, he apparently did something that made her very happy. Probably some intelligence tests because she was insufferably proud. Tobias seemed to be proud, too, but also a little in awe, as if he didn't know how to deal with it." Mrs Hathaway bent forward, adding in the tone of confidence, "She said that 'now' her parents would be happy to pay for his education – probably at one of their posh public schools. You can imagine that Tobias was not happy about that. He declared several times that he was capable of giving his own son proper education, and that Russ did not need help from the people who would always look down on them."

She poured herself another cup of tea and insisted that Harry take another slice of plum cake. He complied just to please her. All this intimate drama left him with his stomach in knots.

"But her parents never relented. They wrote back..." She was fuming. "They may have been important people, but I can tell you, if I had ever met them, I would have given them a piece of my mind! I wasn't the only one. Tobias was furious, too, because their answer was like a death blow for Eileen."

Harry waited with bated breath, but as Mrs Hathaway vituperated against the cold-hearted people who did not deserve to have children, he interrupted her a little impatiently. "Do you know what they actually wrote?"

"Not much but it was so heartless, I'll never forget it. It began with 'We can't have a grandson, since we have no daughter' and it went on with nice things like 'do not bother us any more... We have nothing in common... You chose to debase yourself in mud, so you will have to live with it'... I'm telling you, what kind of lowlife would write something like that to their own child?" She shook her
"All this was to explain how Eileen and Tobias ended up in the office of that psychiatrist in Manchester. He persuaded them to give those drugs a try. The antidepressants – they seemed miraculous at the time." She snorted. "It was a disaster. Eileen literally switched off. There is no other word."

It was not difficult for Harry to guess that the Muggle antidepressant had seriously interfered with Eileen Snape’s magical core.

After that, Mrs Hathaway explained, even Tobias gave up. It is then that he took to spending more and more time in the pubs to avoid his home, and to fighting when people told him it served him right for marrying above his station. And then, when he went home at last, he would lash out at Eileen, and much too often, at their little Russ, too.

Mrs Hathaway sighed repeatedly as she recounted the sad tale.

Fortunately, Russ, and Lily, of course, were different. "But not in a bad way," the old lady hastened to say, as if Harry would take offence. It was difficult to explain – at this, Harry managed to look clueless. They were both very clever. Always playing or studying together, probably because they had so much in common. So, nobody was really surprised when it transpired that they were both some kind of gifted children and would get a grant to study in a special boarding school.

They came back only on holidays, but it was obvious that the school was good for them. Severus, in particular, was much healthier and managed to escape the consequences of his stunted growth as a child. Even the pediatrician at the health centre was surprised when he surpassed all the projections of his growth chart and ended up as tall as his father.

Mrs Hathaway confirmed Snape’s description of his mother’s death. The police wrote it down as an accident, but it seemed that the entire neighbourhood knew that Tobias had finally managed to kill Eileen in one of his drunken bouts. He paid for it soon enough, drinking himself to death in a matter of months now that he had no one to return to.

When asked, Lily confirmed warily that Russ had left for good and moved South. It was obvious that she did not approve of whatever he was doing now.

"Still, it was a big surprise, I can tell you, when she turned up with another man. It was your Dad, of course, and they were such a beautiful couple!"

They married almost immediately after leaving school.

"The last time I saw Lily and Tuney was at your grandparents’ funeral. You can't imagine how many people turned up. They were very well-liked, and the fact that they died together made it even more tragic for the community."

The only comfort was that their daughters were married off and visibly well-cared for by their husbands, even if it was obvious the two couples were not on speaking terms.

"It was years before I saw Russ again. One day, I was in my garden and I hear one of those big motorcycles turning the corner... You know, the kind that always surprises you because they do not make as much noise as you'd expect, and very low-pitched, although they're so big?" Harry nodded, making a note about asking Snape at last about his bike.

"I didn't expect it to stop, but it did. It was him!" She shook her head with fond exasperation. "'Passing through Cokeworth', he said! On the way to Scotland." She smiled.
knowingly. "It was easy to work out that a woman was waiting there for him."

Harry thought she deluded herself and mistook Hogwarts for a woman.

"He never said, but we all thought he'd enlisted in the Army and gone overseas."

Harry hastened to take another slice of cake and eat a very big mouthful that would take forever to munch on, because Mrs Hathaway was leaning towards him with an alarming gleam in her eyes. She was clearly hoping he would tell her what he knew.

She smiled mischievously, and he blushed, his mouth full of cake, and feeling very transparent. She settled for the next best thing and proceeded to tell him the things she herself deduced, stopping after each morsel of information to see how he reacted.

"He told me he lived in Wiltshire..." Harry nodded, since Snape considered Malfoy Manor his true home.

"And you know it's a training area for the military." The nod was more reluctant, but it was true, after all. There was an Army training estate near Salisbury.

"And he has that presence, you see, and always so sober and disciplined, when he used to be so wild! I can tell you nobody would dare bother him or his house, even if they were desperate for money and knew it was empty."

Harry quickly finished his cake, refusing to comment on this last part, although it hit rather close to the truth. Before Scrimgeour reformed the Aurory, the Death Eaters had been the only kind of an almost disciplined armed force in Wizarding Britain. (The Order of the Phoenix did not bear thinking about. Courageous as they were, they had no formal training.)

He had to tell Mrs Hathaway at least a few things, though. She already knew he was a teacher in the very boarding school he had attended as a teenager, but she was surprised to learn that he had been Harry's teacher – his chemistry teacher. "In my last year, he even taught us self-defence," he said wickedly.

"Aha!" she triumphed, her guess that Russ must have been in the military before teaching confirmed.

When Harry told her that he had discovered only after leaving school that Snape and his mother had grown up together, she immediately supposed it was due to Tuney being jealous of Russ, because she must have recognised his name on Harry's school reports. Harry did not disabuse her. His relatives may have learned the hard way that you could not stop Hogwarts letters from being delivered, but they never bothered to read them.

He left feeling rather thoughtful, after having been handed the leftovers ("Russ was always fond of my nut bread") and told that he should come back whenever he wanted to talk about his mother, and with Russ, if possible.

Feeling bloated after too much cake and too many revelations, he walked a little without direction, losing his way several times before he could safely take his wand out and cast the Point Me spell.

The door opened as soon as he walked through the gate. "Where have you been?" asked Ron a little impatiently. He would not say it, but he grew quite anxious when Harry did not turn up on time. He knew that they had all been rather careless since Christmas. Orders were still orders, though, and the danger very real.

"Having tea with an old friend of my grandparents, and I will even be able to use some of what she
told me for the trial."

Ron sighed, relieved. To cheer him up, Harry handed him a carefully wrapped towel, with the rest of the plum cake and the nut bread.

"The nut bread is for Severus, but you can have the cake."
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Last chapter before we begin the countdown to Snape’s trial...
As usual, you can praise Tra8erse for making this chapter fit to read.

Heavy thoughts tonight

And they aren’t of Snow White

(Metallica, Enter Sandman)

After all the emotions of the previous days, Harry was thankful that the last two days before the New Year were much less eventful.

Snape disagreed.

It almost – almost – made him regret at times the days of their enmity, when the young Gryffindor would have done anything to avoid him. Now, when he refused to answer or shut himself away in his ivory tower, he was served with the look of a kicked puppy or with the noisy sulks worthy of a four-year old – or Draco.

He felt very vulnerable, drained by the young man’s growing emotional demands. He was seemingly unable to deny him, almost in the same way he had never been able to refuse Dumbledore’s demands, even when it was his life on the line.

§§§

“Mrs Hathaway says that you used to have a bike.”

“Mmm.” Even if he had wished it, Snape would not have dared lift up his eyes from his reading. Nothing short of a stern rebuke could discourage Harry Potter these days. If he would at least wait just a little longer, so that I could finish this paper...

“Where is it? How come we never heard of it?”

Obviously not.

Snape puffed out his cheeks in mild exasperation then briefly lowered his newspaper. “I sold it to one of the Belfoys when you came to Hogwarts. Something told me I wouldn’t have much time left for holidays or travelling for pleasure, and I was right.”

Harry pulled a face at the implied reproach but it was not enough to silence him for more than thirty seconds.

“What kind was it?”
No answer.

“Severus?”

Tsk.

“Kawasaki Z 1000.”

“Wow! Does it mean it was a 1000 cc? Sounds great.”

Snape tried to return to his reading, although he was already resigned to more inane questions from the sports-mad Gryffindor.

“When did you buy it?”

“1982.”

“Before or after Azkaban?”

The paper lowered so violently, Harry jumped in fright, Auror or not. He instantly regretted the morbid curiosity that prompted him to ask the question when he saw Snape’s face.

“After,” the ex-spy informed him in a suave tone completely at odds with his grim look. “When I had the use of my hands again, no thanks to the Aurory.”

“Err…” It was all Harry could manage. Until now, they avoided talking openly of the days when the Ministry had been torturing their opponents, and only very briefly touched upon the question of Azkaban, merely checking and confirming the dates of Snape’s arrest, trial and release. Harry mentally kicked himself, because he should have remembered that hearing the name of the nightmarish prison was the only thing that could make Sirius go to pieces or turn Hagrid into a clam.

“Listen, I’m sorry…” Harry started, but when he locked gaze with Snape, the man sneered maliciously and he found himself unable to go on.

Harry looked away and shuddered, remembering, a little too late, the Hogwarts motto: never tickle a sleeping dragon.

There must have been something about Harry’s expression that infuriated Snape further. Maybe the nervous little twitch of his mouth or the way he tried almost immediately to school it into careful neutrality, because he leaned forward with a menacing look. “Since you want to know so much, I bought the bike when I found myself buried alive at Hogwarts… And don’t tell me I am exaggerating,” he spat angrily, although nothing was further from Harry’s mind. “Or that there were many people who envied my position at the School.” It sounded like the things he must have been told, repeatedly, probably by Dumbledore. “You know nothing!”

“Tell me then! That’s all I ask,” pleaded Harry earnestly. “I only want to understand, so that I can help.”

“Huh, what is there to understand? After my trial… The first one, of course,” he said with pointed sarcasm, “I couldn’t show my face anywhere without being set upon by the righteous citizenry.” Snape laughed, seeing Harry’s suddenly stricken face. “Ah, I see you only remember the fear and distrust that I met whenever I went when you were a student… And it was fifteen years after the facts! I’m sure you put in only on my being a miserable bastard… But right after the war, people were so sure they were safe from Voldemort, their courageous little hearts longed to prove they had not just bowed their head or looked the other way. Back then, they remembered that I had been a
Death Eater, not that Dumbledore vouched for me. Being spat on or pelted with dirt or stones was the least that would happen to me.”

He scoffed unpleasantly, satisfied with Harry’s dumbstruck horror. “For months, Dumbledore didn’t even dare to put me on the duty roster for Hogsmeade weekends... First time he did, Aberforth had to call him and Minerva to the rescue.”

“I didn’t realise it was that bad,” whispered the young Auror.

“Of course you didn’t! Do you understand now what I’ve been trying to tell you? It’s not just a matter of a few bad articles and of people in the street staring at you for a while until they move on to the next scandal.”

“We can offer you protection for however long...”

“And how long, exactly, would that be?” inquired Snape mockingly. “Another fifteen years? Twenty? For how long do you think wizards hold grudges?” He shook his head before asking bitterly, “And how long before the Ministry reconsider, or have to make budget cuts and recall the ‘protection’? Or what if they decline outright, for political reasons, like they did with Lucius or Pius Thicknesse?”

He locked eyes with Harry. “I don’t trust them. Kingsley has to make ‘concessions’ to so many factions... And he may not stay in power that long, anyway.”

“We’ll do all we can!”

“I know, Harry,” Snape said tiredly, “But I can’t be the optimist you and your friends are...” He inhaled sharply. “I’ve lived through this once... And back then nobody accused me of being a paedophile or a rapist.”

He realised that he was crushing his newspaper when Harry looked at the irremediably crumpled thing in his hands and winced. The boy was probably thinking it might have been his windpipe. As he tried to smooth out his paper and regain his composure, Snape knew that either was hopeless.

“But it’s different now... ” began Harry, more to reassure himself than out of conviction.

Snape cut him off aggressively. “Why do you imagine it will be so different, this time around?”

“Because apart from having you exonerated by the Wizengamot, Dumbledore never did anything to help and support you!” Harry cried out. “And neither did the Order!”

Snape snickered, “Dumbledore volunteered Minerva to help me.”

“You make it sound as if she doesn’t care for you.”

“Quite the opposite. Dumbeldore foisted the task on her because she was the only one who ever cared.”

“I care!” pleaded Harry.

Snape sighed again, quite tired with the two of them always rehashing the same arguments and going nowhere. “I know, but... what’s really left for me here? Did you actually think beyond the trial? Let’s say they let me go free... Will I have to return to Hogwarts, my personal crime scene?”

Harry asked, troubled, “Do you wish to return to Hogwarts?”
“Hell no.” Snape’s voice was filled with loathing.

“Why do you fear something that won’t come to pass?”

“I wouldn’t put it past the War High Court, if they feel inclined to be generous, to combine house arrest with some sort of community service, brewing and teaching for them. There are not that many Master Potioneers left in this country, and none other with teaching experience. When Slughorn retires next year...”

Harry closed his eyes. He did not know anymore whether to moan about Severus’s paranoia or rejoice that he could at least envision the possibility that he would not be sent straight to Azkaban. “But what if they acquit you, unconditionally?” he asked as neutrally as he could. “Are you really unable to imagine that you could stay and take your rightful place in society?”

Snape stared at the ceiling and exhaled loudly. “In my experience, there are always strings attached,” he sneered. “And what is my ‘rightful place in society’, as you say? Heroes or villains, we are just public property – as you well know yourself. People will expect me to write my autobiography, with juicy details about Voldemort and the Dark Revels, and if I don’t, they will invent these details. Or they will stalk me to see when I will hook up with the women who hang around the Ministry celebrations to have it off with the war heroes.” He pointed at the pile of newspapers and magazines. “This would make the front page, since bedding Lily Potter’s faithful swain seems to be something to be desired these days... Much more important than trying to understand why the country split into the two camps for decades, so as to avoid it happening again.” He sunk his head into his hand. “I’ve had enough. I’m tired of all this.”

“Severus...” Harry leaned forward, put a tentative hand on his shoulder and squeezed. It was kind of funny to feel so protective of Severus’s emotions, when he was very aware that most of the time he was the one who needed reassurance. “Whatever happens, you will not be alone.”

He was surprised to feel Snape’s hand return the gesture on his arm after several frozen seconds.

“Thank you, Harry... But you know, I did discuss this with Minerva until I couldn’t take it any more,” Snape said, sadly. “I will tell you the same thing I told her: in the very unlikely event that I am acquitted, I’ll go abroad.”

“But what... What about me?” cried Harry, looking hurt. “And Neville, Hermione, Minerva, Constanz... Ron! And... And...” He was feverishly trying to think of more people that Snape cared about. “Errr... The Malfoys!”

Harry had the meagre satisfaction watching Snape’s resolve waver. “What about us, your friends?” he insisted. “We need you!”

“Strangely enough, you’re one of very few people who would miss me,” admitted Snape. “But honestly, I don’t think this would make up for the rest. Besides, Lucius and Narcissa would certainly welcome a change of scenery, too. If not for me, they could be safer and happier living on one of their estates in France or Italy.”

There was a pregnant pause.

“Anyway, I don’t believe that they will let me go free.”

The young Auror forced himself to stay calm, even if Severus’s mulishness made him want to scream. “Right!” he said a bit too forcefully. “You know what I think and what all our friends think... But have it your way, for now. Just know that we will do all we can to prove you wrong,
Snape gave him a swift, shrewd look. It suddenly struck Harry that it was precisely what Snape expected him to do. He just waited for him to find the solution by himself. Of course! The man could not take it himself for medical reasons, but he had made sure Harry had a full bottle of Felix Felicis at his disposal. He would have to ask Hermione for help in distributing small doses in turns, or…

“Careful, Potter!” warned Snape, only too aware how easily Harry got carried away. “It is not to be wasted or used casually.”

“Oh, don’t take me so literally. You know what I mean!”

Snape raised quizzical eyebrows. “On the contrary, I find that you don’t make sense most of the time.”

Harry’s answer was a cheeky smile. “At least, your present gives us a definite advantage.”

“Perhaps,” admitted Snape, as he allowed himself to savour the small feeling of hope. It would not last, of course, if only because it would be dangerous to indulge in it too often.

Emboldened by his returning good mood, Harry finally asked the question that had been bothering him for so long, “Why did you buy a bike, by the way? Why not a… I don’t know… A racing broom?” Snape’s derisive snort made Harry chuckle. “Or a car… A sports car? Why not a sports car, if you wanted to go Muggle?”

“I did not want to ‘go Muggle’,” Snape retorted. “I just needed to be able to go where no one would know me… Far from the Wizarding world. I also needed to have some independent means of travel in the Muggle world, and a bike is much easier to park or to hide than a car, particularly a showy sports car.” (He smirked inwardly, trying to imagine Harry’s reaction if he could see the cars the Malfoys kept on their Capri property, particularly Narcissa’s pink Lamborghini coupé or Lucius’s Maserati.)

Some of his smugness must have leaked out somehow, because Harry considered him with a knowing smile. “Aaah, I can see how a 1000 Cc bike would be essential, and so much simpler and easier than Apparating,” he teased.

Snape sniffed haughtily. “Spies have to be discreet.”

The young man only laughed at this. Snape chuckled, too, conceding defeat. “I needed to feel free. At times, I felt like murdering the students, Dumbledore or my dearest colleagues. And it did not get better with time!”

“It’s a pity then that you did not keep your bike. I bet it was green, on top of everything,” Harry said, feeling free now to bait Severus a little. “I can just see it, all Slytherin green and silver, and...”

“It was sleek black,” corrected Snape.

“Of course! And all that black leather... Yeah, you must have been very discreet... James ‘Snape’ Bond.”

Snape shook his head in disgust. “James... The very idea!”

Harry’s smile vanished as he realised he had put his foot in it once more.

Fortunately, Snape looked more amused than angry. “Feel free to call any son of yours after your
father but never, ever join that name with mine.” Harry nodded sheepishly.

“And for your information,” Snape added loftily, “there is no better way to hide than in plain sight, particularly when wearing a helmet. Do they teach you anything in the Aurory? People remember the bike, not the biker.”

“You can’t claim you didn’t enjoy driving at top speed. Not to me. Nobody buys that kind of monster just to potter along.”

Snape tried, but failed to conceal a smirk.

“Do you have a driving licence?”

“Why? Are you traffic police, now?”

Harry laughed and, to Snape’s relief, dropped the matter, assuming that he, like Sirius, relied on his magic to avoid the Muggle police.

It was not that Snape did not trust Harry, because he did, but it would not be safe for either of them to saddle the Auror with the knowledge that Severus Snape – and Lucius Malfoy, for that matter, had gone to great lengths to get on the right side of the Muggle authorities, thus ensuring their cover as ordinary citizens, which would be very useful if they ever had to disappear without a trace.

Harry’s quip about James Bond had been a lucky guess, although it was more Lucius’s inspiration. Snape’s had been his father’s collection of crime, war and espionage novels with more conventional heroes. Indeed, he once contemplated the cliché cyanide capsule for himself if he ever had his cover broken by the Death Eaters, but he never had the time until now to look for a more satisfying and refined solution than ruining his teeth.

So, of course, Snape did have a driving licence. Several even, to different names. He could become Monsieur Rogue, a Frenchman, Signor Piton, an Italian or turn into a Latvian chap by the name of Strups. Whatever the name or the country, he was a model citizen with a perfectly legitimate background.

He had the matching identity cards, voting cards, current accounts, taxpayer accounts and social security registrations, since he was on the payroll of Belfoy High Tech World and of a handful of its discreet overseas subsidiaries. He had always wisely invested the income that he did not need while at Hogwarts, and his investments were diversified, untraceable by the Ministry and could be easily cashed in anywhere.

He could disappear, blend into the Muggle crowd and they would never find him again.

The trouble was, he was beginning to regret the fact. When he told Minerva that he had nothing to live for in Britain, he had hurt her. Yet, they both knew that she had been the last tie that bound him to the country, but they did not have that kind of relationship anymore.

Now, he had a surprising network of new friends he felt responsible for. Harry, he had sworn to protect. He could see how damaged the boy still was, and so young! He badly needed a true mentor, and it was obvious he would reject anyone who was not Severus.

So did Neville, in whose life a bomb was ticking away and he did not even suspect this... Someone would have to be there to help with damage control if it ever went off.

As for Ronald Weasley, he still had a hard time deciding if he liked him or not, some days. Even so, he had spent so many years consumed by his regrets about Lily that he could not help feel
sympathetic toward his obsession with the missing Lavender Brown. Also, he could not wish for a more challenging chess partner.

And there was Hermione, of course. If he had still been the man he was before Voldemort’s return, meeting a woman like her would have been his one reason to stay. Now though she was his best reason for fleeing, before he hopelessly and completely lost his heart to her.

Allowing himself to love her and woo her would require a leap of faith, of the faith in a better future that he had buried with his hopes the night he killed Dumbledore. Still, survival came first. The rest would have to wait.

§§§

With each passing day, Moppy trod more heavily, sighing, puffing and generally tired and unable get on with her usual work.

When Snape suggested that she stay at Malfoy Manor to be near Fuzzy and have other female elves close by, she threw a tantrum.

“Moppy’s baby will be born here. The first Snape elf must be born in Master’s home.”

“And what are you, if not a Snape elf? A piece of furniture?”

“Moppy’s magic is Prince magic. Her baby must be born in Master’s home to be a proper Snape.”

“Malfoy Manor is my home.”

“Master is not at the Manor, and it won’t be Master’s home anymore when he has his own family.”

“Not anytime soon.”

Moppy gave him a piercing, mocking look. “Soon, Moppy says.”

“Not bloody likely.”

She stomped her foot. “The baby will be born here!”

“What would happen if your baby were born at Malfoy Manor?” Harry cut in, curious. “Does it mean that they would be a Malfoy’s elf?”

Moppy answered scornfully, “Of course not!”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“Elves bonds grow stronger where the Master has blood wards. It makes the baby healthier and more powerful.”

“I have blood wards at Malfoy Manor, too,” Snape reminded her.

“Bah!” scorned the mother-to-be. “Only good enough to keep Madam Bella’s stinking nose out of Master’s rooms!”

Harry gaped at the elf’s easy dismissal of Bellatrix Lestrange’s frightening power.

“Only the best for Moppy’s baby,” she insisted.
“Have it your way,” conceded Snape, his dismissive tone belied by the affectionate squeeze he gave his elf’s shoulder.

“But Moppy wouldn’t say no if Madame Narcissa sent Fuzzy to help with the housework.”

“All right,” agreed Snape in the tone of obviously false resignation. “I suppose I have to get used to his being under foot, too.”

Harry could not help grinning, and neither could Moppy, although soon the elf scowled again. “Moppy doesn’t want Malfoy elves to help with the delivery.”

Snape’s eyebrows shot up. He knew of few households where as many baby elves were born as Malfoy Manor, since Bellatrix’s and Rodolphus’s elves had converged there after the war, begging to be around Narcissa and Draco. So many, in fact, that Narcissa had sent several to Andromeda, to help her sort through all her husband’s, daughter’s and son-in-law’s things as well as care for baby Teddy.

“Moppy prefers the Hogwarts elves. She wants Zimpsy and Winky.”

“Winky?” Snape asked, rather doubtful. Zimpsy, he could understand. She was Moppy’s best friend who helped her adjust when she arrived at Hogwarts after being cast out by the Princes, and some kind of matronly authority amongst the school elves. But Barty Crouch’s former elf? “With her drinking problem, do you think it would be safe to let her...”

“Winky and Zimpsy!”

At Snape’s long-suffering sigh Harry snickered. All things considered, it was much less exhausting to deal with Kreacher.

Until Moppy turned to him with a speculative look in her eyes.

“Kreacher was sweet on Winky when he was at Hogwarts, and he is not getting any younger. If he wants to find a mate, he has to do it soon.”

This was news to Harry, who considered Kreacher an old Grinch nearing senility.

“Fuzzy will need Master to tell him off when he bashes his head because Moppy shrieks giving birth, and another male elf to cheer him up.”

“Ah!” Snape said, beginning to understand.

“Kreacher will be perfect,” the elf declared with her arms crossed over her huge belly, visibly daring Harry to object.

It was Snape’s turn to laugh up his sleeve at the look on Harry’s face, when he was clearly failing to envision Kreacher try to cheer up anyone, let alone a frightened, expecting father, handing cigars out or whatever elves did when celebrating a birth or, even worse, being romantic with the pathetically insecure Winky.

Harry’s eyes widened and a strange look of dread settled on his face. He was wondering what he was going to do and what to tell Ginny if Kreacher ever asked to bring his alcoholic sweetheart to their home.

§§§
“Why do you still wear hideous things like this?”

Harry was holding Severus’s favourite nightshirt between his thumb and forefinger with un-concealed disgust.

They were hanging out the laundry in the garden, because Moppy had decided in her nesting frenzy that the house needed to be cleaned from top to bottom before her confinement, beginning with the linen.

Snape had to forbid her to carry or lift anything, even with magic, so she consoled herself with ordering everyone around, and not only her mate who had come to the rescue.

Fuzzy’s exuberance and eagerness to help reminded Harry of Dobby but Snape had no patience with any kind of fussing, particularly coming from a disgustingly happy and grateful elf. The Professor would cross his arms and stare Fuzzy down. The elf, obviously a fit mate for Moppy, would shut up with a cheeky smile, clearly only humouring the Master. For good measure, he often winked at Harry behind Snape’s back.

Moppy insisted that nothing could beat the freshness of clothes dried in the open air, so here they were, freezing themselves in the cold, windy December morning while Fuzzy was busy polishing floors that were already so gleaming that they would have been a slipping hazard in a muggle household.

“Where is the Cokeworth rain when you need it?” grumbled Harry to himself, before taking it out on Snape’s nightshirt again. “I guess it’s the same horror you wore back in my fourth year. It’s so worn out.”

Snape did not dignify this with an answer and went on hanging up the fresh washing.

“You know, you are allowed to change your style,” insisted Harry.

Snape did not answer but stopped and examined his old, grey nightshirt seriously. “I like it because it’s comfortable.”

Harry repressed a laugh. “It’s also totally naff. Did you ever try pyjamas? I hear they knew about them even in the 1960s.”

“I always found the waistband uncomfortable on bruised flesh. This nightshirt is so old that the cotton has become extra soft and...” He stopped short when he realised Harry was gazing at him with his usual conscience-stricken expression when he let slip the details revealing how harsh his life had been. He cleared his throat. “I suppose I could give pyjamas another try after the trial, if they let me go free...”

“When!” Harry insisted, decided to be even more stubborn than Severus until he understood. “Not if, when.”

§§§

“So,” enquired Harry in a slightly slurred voice – not surprising after everything he had drunk that evening. “What are your New Year’s resolutions?”

He was waiting with Snape, Ron and Hermione for the New Year Countdown of BBC One’s 2000 Today event. Ginny being on tour, he had declined going to the Burrow.

Ron had declined as well. Arthur and Molly had organised a grand party with a lot of people their
own age, for once, whom they had not seen in a long time, what with the war and all the subsequent mourning. It was also a public relations event of sorts, as tonight they would announce their new living plans and the launch of Molly’s daycare centre project to all their acquaintances. Ron shuddered at the mere thought of the music, which would be Celestina Warbeck and all his mother’s favourite singers, which, sadly, were absolutely not his.

Another reason to avoid the family home at all cost was that Molly Weasley had planned it as a dating trap for her single sons, who would have to partner her friends’ single daughters – those who had nowhere better to be or would be dragged there by their own matchmaking mothers. Percy was the other target, but being entirely oblivious to everything beyond his work, he absently nodded his assent, and even thanked his mother for including him in the festivities, the idiot.

Ron had been horrified to find out that he could now compare notes with Draco Malfoy, whose mother had decided, after spending too much time at Andromeda’s doting on baby Teddy, that he was in need of a wife – since she was herself very much in need of grandchildren. The ferret had only managed to curb her matchmaking by encouraging her to sponsor an orphanage and spoil the children there. (Come to think of it, the sooner his own Mum could busy herself with the children of the daycare centre, the better.)

Hermione had been only too glad to join the three men after her shift. She knew she was rather pathetic, but despite her decision to keep Severus at arm’s length and get over him, there was no place she wished to spend the evening more than his ramshackle old house, with him and her two best friends.

“I will do everything to find Lavender and see her healed,” was Ron’s immediate, earnest answer. The others all nodded in understanding. Feeling the blush creep up his cheeks, he resorted to his usual tactic of playing the clown to diffuse the emotion that threatened to become overwhelming. “That,” he said, “and turn in my reports on time, remember to keep the toilet lid down so that Hermione doesn’t give me yet another lecture about proper hygiene and spend less time in front of the telly. Err, no. Forget that one.”

Hermione laughed but bit her lip and shook her head, refusing to answer, when Harry turned to her. “C’mon!” he insisted. “You normally have entire lists of things you plan to do. And that you actually do, which is even more depressing for ordinary guys like us.”

She gave him a small smile. “All right. I will see Severus exonerated.”

“This is very kind,” said the interested party, “but I don’t think New Year resolutions work like this. It’s supposed to be for improving yourself.”

“So, Ron can decide to move heaven and earth for Lavender, but I can’t do the same for you? Chauvinist!”

Snape merely raised an eyebrow. “I just think you would have a better chance looking for a shooting star and making a wish.”

“My, my, Professor! I didn’t know you and Sybill Trelawney were such kindred spirits.”

“Why do you only call me ‘Professor’ when you try to insult me?”

“Must be a habit from St Mungo’s. Calling all those pompous bigwigs “Healer” or “Master” all the time...”

“Are you saying I’m a pompous bigwig, too?”
“I wouldn’t dare,” she told him in a tone much too respectful to be sincere, before adding a teasing “Professor.”

“I believe there isn’t much you wouldn’t dare,” he said, eyeing her speculatively. “But I never realised you were so cheeky, too.”

“You never realised a lot of things about me,” she said, gazing back at him through half-closed eyelids.

Harry listened to their banter before turning to Ron with a slight, interrogative frown. “Is it me or are they… flirting?!” He felt ridiculous as soon as he voiced his thought. There was nothing obvious in what they said, save for their unusual playfulness and something in the way they looked at each other.

Unfortunately, Ron nodded, which had the instant result of making Harry ogle the pair in horror.

They had to be more drunk than he had suspected, even if he had seen Snape have only one modest half-glass of wine and Hermione maybe two glasses.

“Severus,” he called, determined to stop this nonsense before they realised what they were doing and the resulting awkwardness ruined the mood. “What are your resolutions?” He could not hide his relief as both Snape and Hermione turned towards him without any hesitation or self-consciousness.

“Let me see,” the man said, knitting his brow and tapping a finger on his temple as if he was thinking very hard. “I think I will try not to curse any journalist before the trial. Oh, and also refrain from killing either of you, even when you get on my nerves.”

“Too kind!” commented Ron, before turning to Harry. “And you,” he asked his friend, “what will you try to do in this new millennium?”


“I know, but like any other simple, ordinary person I prefer round and symbolic numbers. So,” he said, pointing at the telly, “like the rest of the planet, I’m going to cheer in the new millennium in five minutes and let science nerds like you and Snape celebrate next year. Of course, it would be nice if you had the decency to leave us all the champagne.”

After the expected round of chuckles, Harry at last declared, “I want to train to become an Animagus.”

Ron scoffed, “Whatever for? They say your Animagus is the same as your Patronus. What use would you make of being able to transform into a stag? Trying to get yourself killed by muggles in the shooting season? I can tell you I have no wish to ever find out what life as a terrier has to offer. Apart from being able to pee on signposts whenever I feel like it, I can find nothing to tempt me.”

“Ron!” Hermione protested in a scandalised voice for form’s sake, but she was laughing like the other two.

He shrugged before returning his attention to Harry. “So, mate, care to explain?”

“I’m just curious,” Harry said, glancing almost apologetically at Snape. “My father was an Animagus and I wonder if I can do it.”

“I don’t see why you couldn’t,” Snape said, very aware that Harry was somehow asking for his permission, and, as always when it became clear how much the young man needed his approval, he
found it disturbing. “You should ask Minerva. I know she helped several people to learn how to transform safely.”

Hermione bestowed an approving gaze on Snape, but she was pursing her lips with concern as she returned her attention to Harry, who smiled gratefully and almost adoringly at the older wizard.

What did he have to be grateful for? He had the right to try to follow in his father’s steps, even if Snape hated James Potter. It was high time for Harry to become as self-sufficient psychologically speaking as he was in all other things, but he still refused to hear of counselling.

Maybe she could whisper a word in Ginny’s ear. Her friend might endure, for the time being, Harry’s emotional neediness and having to take all the initiative in their life together, but she could not imagine that the fiery redhead would tolerate for too long his constant looking for Snape’s or her own parents’ approval before making decisions when she was not around.

Soon, the countdown began, and she forgot everything else.

When the chimes of Big Ben finished resonating and the fireworks erupted, the Trio applauded, hugged and kissed each other.

Ron spontaneously went to shake hands with Snape and even dared to slap him on the shoulder. The older man gave him a pointed look, but he was practically smiling, so this did not count as a real threat.

Hermione kissed him on the cheek, briefly, to avoid being tempted to do more. She managed not to blush when he raised her hand to his lips in return, just as briefly, alas! But with a gaze that seemed to burn holes in her heart and her belly.

Harry bit his lip, took one step towards Snape, but he had hesitated a tad too long. The Professor had already turned away to take the bottle of champagne out of the ice bucket – eager to hide the soaring feeling he seemed unable to contain when touching Hermione. He opened it with a swift, practised gesture, filled the flutes and handed them to each of his guests.

Then, with a small, almost wistful smile, Snape silenced the telly. He called for Moppy and Fuzzy, who walked in, carrying Phineas Black’s empty portrait. They settled it on the mantel and took their place at Snape’s right, holding hands and beaming to each other. Hermione wished them a happy New Year and a healthy baby, with Harry and Ron adding their own wishes.

Dilys Derwent and Phineas Black entered via the right side of the frame, saluted Snape and then everyone else. There was a round of wishes, before the portraits turned back to the master of the house with expectant looks on their faces.

Snape cleared his throat. His cheeks slightly flushed, he took a breath and began singing, in a surprisingly soft and throaty voice,

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?”

Moppy and Fuzzy immediately joined him, then Dilys made her clear voice heard in the first chorus. When she not very discreetly elbowed Phineas, his warm tenor resonated in the little sitting room, too.

After a few stunned moments, Ron and Hermione joined in when Dilys prompted them with a small gesture, and then Harry as Hermione took his hand and squeezed it.
“For auld lang syne, my dear
For auld lang syne,
We’ll tak a cup o’ kindness yet
For auld lang syne!”

Harry was the only one who did not know at least the chorus by heart, having seldom had the
opportunity to take part in the usual celebrations before he was a teenager, but his visible happiness
and emotion more than made up for any faltering or dissonance.

Snape’s voice weakened midway through the song. It was soon reduced to a hoarse whisper but,
being the host, he made a point of honour to finish, even if he could barely be heard anymore.

In the end, everyone but the two Slytherins, who blinked rather suspiciously, had tears running down
their cheeks. They could not have told if it was more out of sadness for all the friends and family they
had lost, or out of happiness for being here together, despite all that separated them in the past. Since
the end of the war, and for some years to come, most people who had lived through the war would
react just like that.

This time, as soon as the song ended, Harry threw himself at Severus, who hugged him back without
too much self-consciousness. “Thank you!” the younger man whispered fervently in the ear of the
older.

“What for?”

“For surviving. For being you. For letting me into your life.”

“You have nothing to thank me for,” rasped Snape, hoping the others would attribute the hoarseness
to his vocal cords and not to emotion.

Hermione watched them, unable to admit that what she felt was jealousy, until Ron put his arm
around her shoulders and drew her into a hug with a sad, knowing smile. Even as she gratefully
returned it, telling him that he was “the best”, she could not help regretting not being in Harry’s
place but it would not be very wise. Instead, she conjured her otter Patronus and sent it to the
Burrow, to Luna and Neville and to Alfred Constanz.

Within minutes, a flurry of Patronuses was whirling in and out of the sitting room, coming from or
going to all their friends and carrying warm wishes.

Abrasaxas Malfoy suddenly popped into Black’s portrait. He quietly put a hand on the Headmaster’s
arm in thanks for letting him in. He kissed Dilys’s hand with an old-fashioned courtesy before
bowing to the others, but the way his eyes focused on Severus, it was clear he came only for him.
Severus’s face brightened instantly when he saw the old Malfoy, and he practically abandoned
Kingsley’s Patronus on the spot in his haste to greet him.

“Severus,” the Malfoy patriarch said, in a voice full of contained emotion. “You look good. You…
You look good,” he repeated with relief, as if he did not believe what he was seeing. He cleared his
throat and said, “I would have come earlier, but Lucius told me to wait… That you would prefer that
your scars healed properly.”

Snape flushed slightly. “Even St Mungo’s staff found them unsettling at first…”

“And you always hated being seen at a disadvantage,” the older wizard finished for him. “I can
understand that,” he added gruffly.

The two of them enjoyed a discreet conversation before the blond wizard left for a mysterious
destination that at least to some might not have been so mysterious, considering the wink the returning Dilys gave him as he was leaving, and a faint blush spread on his fair skin.

“The opera ain’t over till the Fat Lady sings,” she called out to Malfoy’s retreating back.

Phineas Black, who had obviously been drinking while they retreated to give Abraxas and Severus a little intimacy, almost choked, trying very hard not to laugh.

The choking promptly turned into a diplomatic cough when Severus scowled at them. “We’re not in the eighteenth century anymore, Dilys,” he said. It was obvious, though, that he was as much amused as annoyed by the portraits’ antics. “Try for a little decency.”

“Bah! The Victorian era’s over, too,” she replied, as saucy as ever. “And I have it on good Gryffindor authority that they knew how to have fun even then.”

Severus felt a hand on his forearm and turned to Hermione, meeting her merry eyes at once.

“Does she mean our Fat Lady of Gryffindor?” she asked, with a sort of awed curiosity. Snape nodded, a faint, amused smile on his lips. “Draco told me his grandfather was rather a ladies’ man but, in spite of all the time I spend with Dilys, I still have a hard time imagining that all these portraits have an entire existence of their own.”

Snape shrugged with a studied nonchalance. “Abraxas likes his women with meat on their bones, as he says, and you must admit that the formidable Lilian admirably fits the description.”

“Lilian? I never knew her name in all the years I was at Hogwarts.”

“She doesn’t want the students to get overly familiar.”

“Only platinum blond wizards, then?”

“When they are portraits and come to Hogwarts to try and cheer unhappy spies who are stuck there teaching potions to dunderheads, yes.”

“You love him,” she said kindly.

“I know it sounds strange,” he said a little bashfully. “But he’s been the closest thing to a father I’ve ever had. In fact, he would have adopted me had he not died so soon.”

“Draco told me.”

Snape shrugged fatalistically. “It wasn’t to be.”

“One can only wonder how differently things would have turned out if you were Severus Malfoy.”

“I don’t believe they would have been so different. Voldemort would have killed him anyway, and neither Lucius nor I had much of a choice after that. Abraxas could not give me his name,” he said, with obvious regret, “but almost everything I am today, I owe to him.” He considered her in silence for some time. There was an almost dreamy look on his face, as he declared, “If ever I were to have a son one day, I would call him Abraxas.”

“The poor boy!” Harry said in mock commiseration. He had moved nearer in time to hear.

Ron, who had obviously tried to keep him away, smiled apologetically, although he could not help commenting, “Abraxas Snape. That’s quite a mouthful.”
“I can’t say I’m overly fond of the name, either,” Hermione said, wrinkling her nose.

“Not as a first name,” conceded Snape, “But Abraxas he would still be.” He did not understand why it was so important to make this point, but something prompted him to do it. There were too many ‘ifs’ between the present moment and his dreams, but he could indulge once in a while. It was New Year, after all.

“Why not?” Hermione replied, strangely moved that he cared so much for his father figure. After all, Malfoy Senior genuinely cared for him, and it was better than calling his child Albus or any of Dumbledore’s names. That, he would only do over her dead body.

Wait, where did that thought come from?

“Family planning, Severus?” Harry joked, although a small hint of suspicion still remained in his gaze.

“Don't be silly,” the answer was all the more harsh because Severus recognised that he had been daydreaming stupidly about Hermione holding a child that looked like the both of them… And he thought he had crushed this particular type of longing for good when he almost decided to propose to Minerva, and she got here first when she asked him to make sure that her contraceptive was fail-safe, because it was out of the question that she would ever have another child so late in life. “I've no use for love or a family in my situation.”

Had he been able to see the hurt in the eyes of the young woman next to him, he would have instantly regretted his words.

“But I’m sure love could have some use for you,” Ron said, trying his best to mend the situation, wanting nothing more than to cuff Harry, and Severus, too, for good measure.

Snape snapped back, quickly destroying the mood completely, “’Used’ is something I've been a little too much in the last two decades. Not to speak of the sterility of those who have been repeatedly hit by the Cruciatus. I would hardly be planning something so outside the realm of possibility.”

Brilliant, Ron groaned inwardly, as Hermione’s eyes instantly filled with tears and she excused herself to go to the bathroom before either Severus or Harry could notice.

When she returned, some ten minutes later, it was Ron, once again, who was waiting for her. She smiled, letting him know that she was alright.

An unmistakable cat was butting her head against Snape’s nose and joking in so thick a brogue that even he barely understood half of it – Minerva McGonagall was obviously very lubricated, which meant she must have drunk more than all of them together. Snape’s Patronus playfully pursued hers, then gambolled around for a while after the cat disappeared with an indignant meow.

Harry tried to grab it. He instantly found himself surrounded by what looked like moonbeams and let go. “It tickles!” he cried, laughing, as the beams reformed themselves behind him.

Hermione watched the Patronus set off at a gallop to carry Snape’s wishes to the rest of Hogwarts staff with a smile tinted with sadness and resignation.

It was a doe.

He was still in love with Lily Potter.

Her eyes met Dilys’s, and she tried to convey her feeling of betrayal. The Headmistress smiled
affectionately and told her discreetly, “It’s not what you think.”

But she did not have the heart for anything anymore. She was tired and had a headache.

Harry, smiling rapturously since he had seen the doe, too, grabbed her waist and kissed her cheek. “He’s incredible, isn’t he?” The way he stared at the man, it was obvious he was speaking of Snape, his personal hero.

“Yes,” she answered, more dryly than she meant.

Incredible, yes. Lily Potter might have been Harry’s sainted mother, but Hermione could not understand how an intelligent, sensitive and sensible man like Severus Snape would still obsess over a woman who had not been such a very good friend or a very faithful girlfriend, either. She ended up, of all people, with the very bully who had made Severus’s years at Hogwarts a living hell, for all that she had to know what was going on.

Severus might have unwittingly caused a chain of events leading to her death but he had more than atoned for it. And yet, he still loved her… Just like Hermione could not find it in herself to stop being attracted to him.

This could not be healthy.

Not for Severus, not for her… And certainly not for Harry.

§§§

Alfred was almost bent over with laughter, which really annoyed Hermione. It was not easy to speak of her feelings about the situation and she did not like having them mocked.

“Really, Hermione! You almost make it sound like Stockholm Syndrom. I think you’re letting your imagination run a little too far.”

“I did not say it is Stockholm Syndrom,” she said in a clipped voice. “I never implied that Severus abuses Harry or that Harry is helpless. I just said that Harry completely identifies with him and doesn’t seem to have an opinion of his own anymore, except that Severus is a god walking amongst us. This is going too far too fast.”

“Why is it such a bad thing, in your opinion?”

“I fear what will happen when Severus finally tells Harry that he’s had enough. He’s ridiculous at times and clings to him like a toddler.”

“Bah! Severus will snap, they will fight and sulk and then they will go on.”

“You’re way too cool about it. The consequences could be disastrous for the trial.”

“I don’t think so. People do not fight if they do not care. These two both carry tremendous guilt about how they treated each other, but they are also intelligent and sensitive people. They have already recognised that these weeks, when they are practically alone together, are a unique opportunity. I am entirely confident they will have it all sorted out before the trial.” He looked at her with narrowed eyes, although he was still smiling. “You, now, are a different story.”

“What?” She tried to joke, “Do you mean I am neither intelligent nor sensitive?”

“Quite the reverse, meine kleine Puppele, but in this case, you are thinking too much for your own
good.” Constanz wagged a warning finger. “I know very well you get cold feet every time you begin to feel too comfortable with a man. I think it’s you who has a problem where Severus Snape is concerned, not Harry Potter.”

“Really, Alfred. How can you say that?” she protested. “Most of my friends are men: You, Harry, Ron, Draco, Neville…”

“Yes, but you were not comfortable with my calling you ‘Puppele’ until my wife told you that’s how I call my daughter and grand-daughters. You treat Harry as your brother. You have ended things with Ron as soon as they got a little heated – not that I blame you,” he said, holding up a beseeching hand to stop her from protesting. “You were never on the same wavelength.” He went on, mercilessly, “You joke often enough that Draco is only attracted to blonds who look a lot like his mother, and Neville is besotted with Lovegood’s daughter.” He concluded with a small, knowing smile, “None of us is potentially dangerous for you.”

“And you believe Severus is?” she asked warily.

“You have noticed at last that he’s a male, but your mind still sees this as a very dangerous thing.” He patted her hand affectionately. “It isn’t. Once you let yourself believe you’re safe, you will be able to embrace the situation – and the man, hopefully, and fully enjoy it.”

“You know,” she said with a little huff, “you sound just like Dilys Derwent.”

“Then it is high time I met this lady. Everything you tell me about her is fascinating.”

Hermione groaned, but mostly for appearances’ sake. Alfred’s words annoyed her, yes, but mainly because who likes to have their vulnerabilities pointed out to them so ruthlessly?

She was wary around men, but Severus Snape had pierced all her defences before she even noticed it. It was painful because it was one-sided, but in spite of all her resolutions, she seemed unable to stay away or to stop thinking and worrying about him.

Still, Alfred was right about one thing: it gave her at least a small measure of hope. Maybe one day she would be able to feel like a woman for more than the few minutes she spent with Severus Snape.

The trouble is, she had nothing to appeal to a man.

She had stood in front of her mirror after seeing Severus’s doe. She made a merciless inventory of her assets, or lack thereof.

There was not much hope for her if she was competing with Lily Potter.

Everybody who had known Harry’s mother said that she was a very beautiful young woman. In the photographs Hagrid gave Harry after his first year she looked stunning, particularly when compared to Hermione. An eye-drawing bosom, an hourglass figure, incredibly green eyes, an engaging smile… Considering her Head Girl status, she must have been brilliant but, unlike Hermione, confident enough not to feel the constant need to show off, so she was very popular, too.

In short, Severus’s dream woman was not the annoying know-it-all with ridiculously frizzy hair, small breasts (at least not large enough to draw men’s eyes), and no dress sense.

For most people, Hermione was a walking brain, but men do not fall in love with brains. She knew that she was the exact opposite of sensuous, with a laundry list of inhibitions that almost made her climb walls at the mere thought of getting friendlier with any of her dates. That is, when she still dated…
And what did it say about her that at the ripe old age of twenty she did not want to date anymore?

“I’ll never be as attractive as Lily Potter,” she said aloud, before adding with a good dose of self-pity, “In fact, I’m not sure I’ll ever be attractive at all.”

Alfred shook his head. He had heard this all too often. “Just be yourself. Real relationships can only flourish when people see each other as they really are.”

“It will not be enough because I will never be enough.”

The old Healer huffed exasperatedly. “You know, you remind me of someone. He’s incredibly gifted, a genius in his field. He’s proved many times over that he’s a faithful friend, ready to put his life on the line for those he cares for and for what he believes in, just like you. He’s survived frightful ordeals during the war but never strayed from the line of what he saw as his duty.”

She knew he was speaking of Severus.

“Because of that, he’s convinced he’s absolutely unappealing and has nothing to offer a woman, although over the years no less than three of the most brilliant witches I ever met have become attracted to him,” he said, looking meaningfully at her, “and probably others he was too oblivious to notice. And yet, he’s convinced love is not for him and he should not even try.”

Hermione sighed. “I am not claiming I am original. I am just saying that I can’t compete with the memory of Lily Potter.”

“You should be glad that you can’t.”

Her eyes widened at his blunt, almost angry response.

“Severus and Lily had been even closer than you and Ron ever were, and they could be just as mean, jealous and stupid as any other teenagers. His memories of the girl are certainly not as idyllic as you think.”

“But his Patronus is still a doe, like Lily’s!” she cried helplessly. “It proves he’s been longing for her all this time.”

Constanz gave her a piercing, evaluating look.

“What makes you assume that it was not the other way round?”
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

As usual, all my thanks to Tra8erse for her useful suggestions, meticulous corrections and for making this chapter so much better.

A warning to the people,
The good and the evil,
This is war.

(30 seconds from Mars, This is war)

3rd January 2000 - Countdown to trial: D-14

After the holidays, the beginning of January is usually rather slow in terms of information: the official address of the Minister to the nation; gossip of the funniest, most eccentric, most boring or most exclusive society parties; minor news items, like drunken magical accidents, that would not have otherwise made the papers but for the lack of worthier things to report.

Not this year, though. Snape's trial scheduled for the 17th of January, the media embargo negotiated by Percy Weasley on behalf of the Ministry ended as soon as people finished nursing their New Year hangovers.

The press immediately burst with headlines about the forthcoming war trial – the Trial of the Millennium, they called it.

As usual, the Prophet hit harder. The 3rd of January front page screamed Severus Snape: Scoundrel or Saint?

Rita Skeeter stuck to simply asking questions, but her particular brand of innuendos sent Snape's friends into a towering rage.

She recalled that around the end of the first war Severus Snape was a young man with ambiguous sexual proclivities and dubious associations with the Death Eaters. Eyebrows were raised when he suddenly found favour with Headmaster Albus Dumbledore – an old, solitary closet homosexual with a dangerous attraction to Dark wizards like Gellert Grindelwald. (Proof and detailed revelations in this eye-opening biography, available from all good book stores: The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore).

Dumbledore's protection and favour went so far that Snape became the youngest tenured teacher at Hogwarts in three hundred years, and the youngest Head of House ever.

Suspected of being a Death Eater, Professor Snape was arrested on Hogwarts grounds in January 1982. Less than a fortnight later, he was acquitted and made a spectacular comeback at the school
after Dumbledore arm-twisted Barty Crouch and the Wizengamot into recognising that the young man had been his personal spy amongst the Death Eaters.

In May 1997, Harry Potter himself witnessed Dumbledore's death at the hands of Severus Snape. As a consequence of this murder, Snape was richly rewarded by Tom Riddle who made him his most trusted advisor and had him appointed as Headmaster of Hogwarts as replacement for Dumbledore himself.

The Order of the Phoenix, primarily Minister Shacklebolt and the Boy-Who-Lived himself, Harry Potter, now claimed that these acts were necessary as part of Snape's cover as a spy, but was there not at least a hint of ruthless ambition there? Of opportunism and ingratitude? Many people were convinced that Snape was in fact playing both sides. Surely, it is not just anybody who can kill their mentor and friend, just as it is very sad when an old man's affection can be manipulated and when a great wizard is losing his grip due to old age...

And now, after the second war, it was Harry Potter's turn to become Snape's champion.

Was it not just as surprising as Dumbledore's sudden support seventeen years ago? Even more so, when one considered how Severus Snape used to berate Harry Potter as an arrogant, mediocre and reckless student, while Harry Potter's distrust and hostility towards the Potions master was well-known, at least until the very year Snape killed Dumbledore.

All of a sudden, the Boy-Who-Lived was spending an inordinate length of time with Professor Snape under the guise of regular Saturday night detentions, for an obscure reason that was never really written down but that Albus Dumbledore condoned, – like he did everything that Snape did at Hogwarts.

After Dumbledore's death, Snape fled the school… But so did Harry Potter, shortly after the Headmaster's funeral. Where did the two of them disappear?

The only objective fact was that the Boy-Who-Lived was not seen again until the Battle of Hogwarts, where he revealed publicly that Headmaster Snape had been masquerading as a Death Eater all along only to help the Light, and that he did it because he was in love with Harry Potter's mother.

How strange. Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter. Here were two great wizards. And yet, with an interval of eighteen years they suddenly began to champion Severus Snape, a wizard devoted to the Dark Arts, famous for his frightening mental skills, whom neither of them had particularly liked to begin with.

How not to suspect mental manipulation? …Or perhaps worse? The Muggles have a word for situations where helpless victims, when staying long enough at the mercy of some tormentor, come to admire, love, support and defend them. They call it 'Stockholm Syndrome'.

(None was more furious than Hermione when reading this part, after her careless comments to Alfred Constanz about Harry and Severus's relationship.)

Rita Skeeter concluded by announcing that she was planning to write a biography of the ex-Death Eater and that her readers would be astonished by the stunning background and career of Severus Snape, the wizard whose life mirrored Tom Riddle's in so many ways.

Of course, the polemic flared up instantly because everyone had an opinion about Severus Snape.

Professor Snape had been a prominent figure in many a family's discussions between parents and
offspring since his very first term as a teacher. He was also a common subject of conversation between former students, one of those safe memories everyone could relate to: "Do you remember the punishment that bastard of Snape gave the whole class when Tom (or Matilda, or Marcus...) blew up their cauldron in our fifth (or fourth or seventh...) year?"

Surviving Snape's class was considered a far more significant experience and proof of coming of age than passing your NEWTs, even if most students did not pursue Potions beyond OWLs – because they either loathed the class or could not meet the Potions master's standards.

Those who attended Beauxbatons or Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts were not only usually much weaker in Potions, they were actually pitted by their peers for having missed Snape's teaching. In retrospect, many considered his Potions classes as one of those character-building experiences without which something is definitely lacking in your life, like teenage binges or childbirth.

So, discussing Snape, at least before Dumbledore's murder, was guaranteed to quickly break the awkwardness when ex-mates ran unexpectedly into each other after a long time. It eased the catching-up. "Snape finally wasn't worse than my boss... my ex... my neighbour... Do you know what they dared to do?"

After Dumbledore's death, Professor Snape was still a hot subject, but one to be avoided at all costs. He had the dubious honour to become the embodiment of treachery, but He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had ears everywhere. You would have to be very foolish or suicidal to express an opinion about one of his followers in public, particularly one who was by then Headmaster of Hogwarts and a prominent official of the regime.

And then, less than one year later, hundreds of people watched in stunned terror Harry duel Voldemort and consequently heard the revelation of Snape's loyalty.

What was deemed to be the established truth about Severus Snape was once again spun 180 degrees.

After this, the Professor's faithfulness to the memory of Lily Potter was much too good a story for the media to let go of. Papers painted him either as a sensitive suitor crushed by the death of his one true love, or as a creepy pervert obsessing over an inaccessible, dead woman.

With that kind of publicity, Severus Snape's notoriety soared to unheard-of levels internationally to the point that, years later, he would still be named third in any quiz about the Death Eaters War, after Harry Potter and Voldemort, but before Albus Dumbledore, Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, Minister Shacklebolt or even the legendary bogeywoman, Bellatrix Lestrange. It would become a truth universally acknowledged that Severus Snape had loved Harry Potter's mother to the point of sacrificing his youth and very nearly his life to avenge her and protect her son.

At a much later point in history, the two Headmasters, Dumbledore and Snape, would even become enmeshed in folklore. Children of the children of the children of those who fought the war would tell how the two great wizards hid and nurtured Harry Potter, until the day he could claim the Death's wand and kill the Evil Lord Voldemort. They would speak of the return of Merlin, saying that Dumbledore had his looks but that, just as the first Merlin was a Slytherin, too, it was Snape who had his brains and heart. At one point, historians would even raise doubts about Snape's, Dumbledore's or Harry Potter's existence and extrapolate that they were latter-day variations on the Arthurian legends.

But our story takes place long, long before imagination and tradition will rewrite history, and the 3rd of January article was only the first of a series, constrained only by the need to respect the secrecy of the investigation.
4th January 2000 - D-13

Severus was grim as he read the news. He was not the only one, either, were it at Spinner's End, Malfoy Manor, Hogwarts or the Burrow.

The War High Court panel had just been announced. All of a sudden, the trial became much more real and tangible.

By custom, fourteen judges had been selected amongst the members of the Wizengamot by drawing lots.

By law, the Chief Witch would preside over them.

Ultima Warbeck had assumed the position right after the war by default, simply because she was the most senior surviving member of the Wizengamot. She had been since properly voted in by her peers. She was a fastidious stickler to rules with a reputation for fairness – mostly earned by steadfastly refusing to let any faction dictate her votes and opinions. Her sharp tongue and political neutrality, which her fellow members had regarded as faults for many years, now became assets that could be useful in restoring the image of the Wizengamot, tarnished over the years by the well-founded reputation for corruption and more recently by the collaboration of the great number of members with the Death Eater regime. Her only oddity was her constant bickering with her former fiancé, who was also on the Wizengamot, and whom she had abandoned almost at the altar more than a century and a half ago.

Hermione obtained permission for an extended lunch break from Constanz and Flooed to the Malfoys to discuss the court with Draco and his parents. Alexia Yaxley made a brief appearance around coffee time to confirm their opinion. It seemed to be a rather even split between the Order supporters and their opponents but the lawyer had her doubts about at least four judges, whose positions and alliances had surprisingly shifted since the end of the war. The shadow of the other Yaxley, Corban, hung over the meeting.

Hermione could not help expressing concern about it. Draco told her, a little offended, that all the Malfoys could throw an Imperius off, that it was not a skill reserved for Potter. Alexia Yaxley pursed her lips and let fall, quite coldly, "The first and last time I allowed Corban to manipulate me was before you were born."

To Hermione's surprise, her face softened as she turned to Lucius, with an affectionate, almost apologetic smile. He shrugged. "Water under the bridge, Alexia... And it was my own fault."

He made a face at Hermione's obvious curiosity, and resignedly explained, "Around the time of my father's death, Corban managed to convince the entire Yaxley family to pool funds to gift Alexia with a trip abroad for her birthday."

He hesitated and glanced at Madam Yaxley, letting her explain the rest. "I should have suspected something was wrong, since the Yaxleys hardly gave me the time of day back then, what with my having been unable to give my husband an heir and his still leaving me his money when he died, but I took the gift at face value, because it was much too tempting," she said bitterly. "When I came back, Lucius had taken the Mark, because I had not been there to untangle his inheritance. They properly trapped him in a tangle of obstruction and threats of asset seizure. He had to seek the Lestranges' help or risk losing everything. We were both soundly manipulated," concluded the lawyer with disgust.
"I didn't know," commiserated Hermione, somewhat guiltily. It had been all too easy, when she was younger, to assume that people became Death Eaters just because they were despicable pureblood supremacists.

The band of Slytherins all shrugged dismissively, which made Hermione feel even worse. She was staring the very prejudices and misunderstandings that drove the country in a civil war, and even the major actors like the Malfoys simply seemed resigned to this.

She had no time to say anything or exhort anyone, though, since the lawyer stood up, announcing she had to return to her office. Before stepping into the Floo, Madam Yaxley turned to Hermione. "Corban won't catch me unawares this time, I assure you." There was a dangerous gleam in her eyes, and a nasty smirk played on Lucius Malfoy's face before he turned the discussion back to the trial.

Hermione had not expected that Kingsley Shacklebolt himself would act as prosecutor.

It was the most controversial part of the procedure, because of the fusion of powers that Hermione found inappropriate. Lucius explained that it was, paradoxically, the only thing that would not be contested by the opposition because it could be pretty embarrassing for them.

When Cornelius Fudge appointed himself as the sole representative of the Ministry in politically sensitive trials, the Wizengamot happily endorsed his decision, tired as they were of dealing with inflexible fanatics like Barty Crouch. Nobody protested when Rufus Scrimgeour and then Pius Thicknesse did the same.

Minister Shacklebolt had declared at one point that he was working on a judicial reform with the intention to create a Ministry Prosecution Service and to appoint an Attorney General. Until then, he still had to fill the part and prosecute for the Ministry in the War High Court trials.

He had proved very competent so far, more so than any of his predecessors, but when told so, generally with the intention to flatter, Kingsley only responded sternly that it proved his point, since he had trained to be a lawyer before becoming an Auror.

Everything else, however, was up for debate.

First of all, many disgruntled Wizengamot members, those who had not been selected, claimed that the selection had been rigged.

Little as the public knew, it was the very generous allowance that made absentee members in the sessions of the Wizengamot a rarity, rather than personal convictions or the sense of duty. Hermione was even more scandalised to learn that, for a War High Court or any special court session, the total amount of allowance was doubled and shared between the lucky fifteen judges.

"Hell being paved with good intentions," Draco told her with a snigger, "it was originally meant to help the judges resist the temptation of corruption."

His father snorted loudly but refrained from saying aloud that corrupt judges had their uses. Instead, he elaborated, "But past Ministers used it much too often to reward their supporters."

Hermione frowned before understanding dawned. "You mean the sélections are rigged?"

"Of course," Lucius chuckled drily. Draco coughed and his father amended, "At least, before Shacklebolt. I'm sure everything is as fair as it is supposed to be, now."

This seemed to cost him a little to admit, but Hermione's sarcastically raised eyebrows made him
raise the corner of his mouth. He huffed just a little as he went on, "It was often useful while it lasted. You understand now why so many Wizengamot members feel bitter at being left out… Not to mention the lost opportunity to be in the limelight or to learn Severus's secrets first hand."

Indeed, Skeeter and Co. had made a point of relaying the open discontent of several popular figures on the Wizengamot.

Cornelius Fudge was certainly the most vocal.

Since the end of the war he had been ceaselessly trying to make his comeback, but the Lord Electors chose Kingsley Shacklebolt over him as Minister. Then, the Wizengamot preferred to him that old harridan, Ultima Warbeck. He felt entitled to be bitter, all the more since he had hoped that the selection for the War High Court would be rigged. As former Minister, he knew all the ropes and would have managed to 'bend' the selection in his favour – but it was not rigged, damn that misguided and stupidly honest fool Percy Weasley!

So, Fudge made a nuisance of himself and the Prophet was only too happy to help. He claimed that calling a War High Court for Severus Snape alone was yet another clear example of the way the new Minister was squandering the taxpayer's money. A regular session of the Wizengamot could have handled the case of Dumbledore's murderer easily enough, with much less suspicion about the selection of judges.

He threw mud at anybody and everybody he could think of, speaking of the incompetence of the staff Shacklebolt hired from amongst his cronies in the Order of the Phoenix, and of their open bias in favour of the accused, particularly that of Arthur and Percy Weasley.

(In the next edition of The Quibbler, Xenophilius Lovegood would gleefully ridicule the ex-Minister by reminding him that he recruited Percy himself as his personal assistant, always promoted people like Dolores Umbridge, Corban Yaxley or Alfred Runcorn over Arthur Weasley, because the man was described as "hopelessly honest" in the staff records, and that he made a point of requesting Auror Shacklebolt's escort whenever he had a sensitive issue to deal with.)

Fudge also denounced the choice of the much too young and inexperienced Harry Potter as the Auror in charge of the investigation, and the decision to put Snape in protective custody rather than in Azkaban – the only fit place for murderers, terrorists and Death Eaters.

Harry was furious and did not understand why Kingsley or Percy did not rebut the pompous incompetent's allegations immediately. He tried to contact them, only to be told not to worry, because they had 'everything under control'.

When he handed Snape the note, the other man merely shrugged and said he did not see why he should doubt Shacklebolt who was a sly old fox, but Harry was much too angry to listen.

Hermione kept quiet, but was inwardly fuming, too. It was at the times like these that she regretted turning down the Ministry's job offers – if only for the opportunity to tell Kingsley in his face when he was acting stupidly.

They might think Fudge was a spent force, but he capitalised on his having been Minister between the wars, the time people now remembered with nostalgia, as retrospectively it seemed carefree and prosperous. He posed as the Man of Peace, as opposed to Shacklebolt whom he painted as a man of war, along with all the members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Ron did not say a word but, after sharing meaningful looks with Snape, announced that he would be dining at the Burrow. He hoped to get hints from his father – or, hopefully, from Percy himself.
Hermione reflected that it was doubtful that Percy would be able to escape the Ministry before midnight, and even if Arthur were willing to tell Ron (who worked for the Ministry, too) anything, he would be reluctant to do so around Molly. It was all very frustrating.

Harry’s smothered laughter interrupted Hermione’s ruminations. Looking up, she noticed that Harry put on a neutral expression and carefully avoided looking at her but Snape was gazing just above her face, strangely fascinated.

She huffed. She did not need to touch her hair to know that, once again, the dratted thing must have been twitching. It was the downside of wearing it so short.

She stood, a little briskly. "It's time for your physical, Professor." She hoped she sounded dignified.

Snape stood, too, with a sigh and followed her into the kitchen without a word.

Hermione cast the diagnostic spells and went through the usual tests in silence. She frowned at his blood pressure and the obvious signs of stress, but she knew she could do nothing.

It was the same yesterday, and she did not expect this to change before the end of the trial.

They did not have a lot of solutions, since giving a defendant about to stand trial any kind of mind-altering substances was forbidden. They only had pediatric dosages at their disposal now, but those were not strong enough to make a difference for someone like Snape, while still capable of plunging him back into his addiction to pain potions and sleeping draughts if used until the end of the trial.

Occlumency would help, but Constanza had discussed it seriously with Severus. There was always a backlash when he released the control over his emotions, and a drain on his magic that he could hardly afford while he was recovering. Severus had reluctantly agreed to reserve it for the trial, and only as a last resort.

Silence stretched between them. She had learned to read him, and it tore her up to see how hard he was trying to appear cool and indifferent, and to hide the shame that his vitals betrayed his true level of stress. She tried not to fuss but was unable to leave him to his misery, no more than she was able not to want to take advantage of the few minutes they were alone together.

She needed to talk to him and he needed a diversion. Maybe it was the right time to discuss what had been on her mind since the New Year. She had hoped that Harry would broach the subject again himself, but if he did, it must have been when she was at St Mungo’s.

"What do you think of Harry's desire to become an Animagus?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

She cringed inwardly at her own lack of subtlety, even if Dilys had told her to "Just ask him, I bet he won’t be surprised." She tried to forget the Headmistress's wicked little smile as she added, "Don't beat about the bush. For one thing, Severus doesn’t like it… And a couple must learn to discuss things plainly."

"Dilys!"

"What? It's a good training, whoever you will end up with."

"I don't want to 'end up' with anyone."

"It's a safe decision. Choosing a life partner is meant to be only the beginning."

Hermione had chosen not to answer, mainly because she was used to never having the last word.
with Dilys Derwent. She was beginning to understand why Professor Snape seemed to be in a state of constant frustration where Headmaster Dumbledore was concerned, even when the two men had been on friendly terms in her early years as a student.

So, here she was, wondering if she made a mistake, as Severus Snape looked up and seemed to consider whether he was simply going to tell her to sod off or give her a good dressing-down.

"It's his own business," he said at last, thankfully not unkindly.

"You looked rather annoyed when he told us."

"If I was annoyed," Snape answered firmly, "it was for his sake. He shouldn't feel obliged to ask for my approval of what he does." He shrugged when he noticed her evident relief. "If he wants to follow in his father's steps, who am I to object?"

"I've been wondering..." She bit her lip, but it was not out of bashfulness. She eyed him too speculatively for this. She was just wondering how direct and inquisitive she could afford to be.

She probably means to be subtle, he thought, watching her with amused fondness. "Ask away, woman," he sighed, with exaggerated resignation.

Hermione realised that it was much more exhilarating to be called 'woman' by Severus Snape than 'darling' or 'sweetheart' by Ron back when they dated.

In retrospect, she should have realised why it felt so wrong, coming from someone she still loved so much: she just was not in love with him. On the downside, she had to acknowledge that she was in love with Severus, even if it was not the wisest thing she could do.

"I'm surprised you never tried to become an Animagus yourself," she confessed. "I can't help thinking it would have been quite useful while you were a spy."

The words made him pull a face. Still, the understanding in her smile made him answer with just a little hint of the irritation he felt, "Not everyone can become an Animagus. It requires a certain frame of mind I am not sure I possess."

"And here I thought that Occlumency would help."

"No, Occlumency works like a sort of voluntary schizophrenia. One has to compartmentalise one's thoughts, instincts and reactions to hide and control them. I have it on Minerva's authority that it is precisely the opposite with Animagi."

"But not altogether impossible?"

He raised a knowing eyebrow. "Very few things are really impossible for a determined witch or wizard."

She smiled even more widely. "I believe this is true."

"Minerva always insisted that I should at least try, but in truth, it never appealed to me."

"Why?" she asked, genuinely puzzled by his obvious reluctance. "I find there's something appealing in the idea of being somehow... More spontaneous. Free to let your inner, more primitive self take the upper hand from time to time." She spoke a little longingly now, clearly thinking of herself.

Oh, to feel free, even for a few hours...
Snape would have none of this kind of indulgence. "Our 'primitive' selves, as you say, are nothing more than savages," he declared with finality.

"You're much too severe," she protested. "I think it depends on the person, not on the animal form."

"And that's different how?"

"Decent people will still act decently in their Animagus form."

"If you say so," he said with a wry smile. He was actually thinking of Minerva, who most people thought so prim, and proper, and collected. He knew how she would change when she was angry and go hunting. It is certainly much more civilised to kill butterflies or mice than people, but it only proved that she had found a safe way to harness and release her aggression – which she did not deny.

"Professor McGonagall, for one."

He chuckled, amused that she unconsciously followed his line of thought but with a slightly different conclusion. "I rest my case."

"I will tell her," she threatened amicably.

"I don't care. Minerva already knows the worst about me." Turning serious, he added, "You should discuss it with her, though. There is a reason why registration is a legal obligation for Animagi, and it is for this very reason that so many people avoid it."

Hermione pouted. "Because one can take advantage of others?"

"Of course. It always comes back to power, in the end."

She thought how sad it was that he did not have a shred of illusion or faith left in his fellow wizards. Then she reflected that, after experiencing on her own flesh, and now professionally in St Mungo's, the consequences of ethnic cleansing according to the Death Eaters, some days she had not that much faith left, either. Let alone…

"Severus!" she exclaimed, feeling the need to warn him. "Do you know that Rita Skeeter is an Animagus?"

He blinked. "How would you know this?"

"Do you remember the Tri-Wizard Tournament? All those horrible articles about Harry and me? And everyone else?"

He nodded with narrowed eyes.

"I caught Draco and his friends talking to a beetle. And pouf, all they said was in the Prophet the next day."

"It doesn't prove-" he began half-heartedly, but she interrupted him.

"But it does! The next time I spotted the beetle, I trapped it in a containment jar. It was Rita Skeeter!"

Snape's mouth opened in surprise that almost instantly turned to anger. "Do you realise the risks-"

"She's an unregistered Animagus. She risked much more than I did."
"Skeeter had powerful patrons and they could..." He stopped abruptly, before sighing with a hint a resignation, "But you’re a Gryffindor, of course."

"I certainly don’t regret stopping her, or blackmailing her later into interviewing Harry for the Quibbler."

"That was you?" Snape asked, with some very gratifying awe.

"Yes," she declared proudly.

"I always thought that was Albus," he said, looking pensive. "I told so to Voldemort."

"What matters is that Harry had at least one opportunity to announce Voldemort’s return."

"I still say you were very, very lucky."

He could see she was not persuaded, while he retrospectively shuddered at the mere thought of what could have happened if Voldemort had learned she was responsible for that piece of bad publicity. He decided that it was no use to frighten her now, although she had to realise the danger of playing with people who have too much to lose.

"Power corrupts," he pronounced, "and the particular power to hide who you are and to use the animal senses and capabilities that humans don’t have is dangerous. Do you know that it is a cliché in wizarding whodunits to make the murderer an unregistered Animagus?"

"Yes, and they are indeed so cliché, that I’d much rather read a good muggle mystery."

"The point is that decent people supposedly have nothing to hide, hence the obligation to register."

"You would have had a lot of things to hide," she said meditatively.

He sighed, seeing that she had completely missed his point, while she wondered what made him do so.

"Are you an Animagus, after all? An unregistered one?"

"I already told you I am not," he said, rather offended. "Whether or not you choose to believe me..."

"I believe you," she exclaimed. "It’s only that I can imagine so well you being a secret Animagus on top of all the other things you did."

He rolled his eyes. "I have no use for a vulnerable Animagus."

She considered him with open curiosity. "Why do you think it would be vulnerable?"

"A doe can’t defend itself other than by trying to outrun predators. It is naturally a prey. All the more reason for me to avoid my Animagus spirit," he concluded with a mien of disgust.

"You’re certainly not a vulnerable wizard. I don’t believe you would have been a doe. I wonder what your original Patronus was."

"Was?" He laughed mirthlessly and pulled out his wand. "Expecto Patronum."

The doe appeared instantly. It paused to consider Hermione, sniffing her slightly but bolted behind Snape when the young woman instinctively tried to touch its muzzle.
She looked up to find him watching her with a wistful expression.

"It's always been a doe," he said. "But, of course, everyone just assumes that it changed to mirror Lily's."

She was so surprised, she could not think of anything to say but stood there, open-mouthed.

"Albus himself always believed that it must have changed under Lily's influence. I suppose my being... What I am... Makes it impossible for anyone to entertain the thought that I would be able to conjure something as graceful and beautiful as a doe by myself." He shook his head, before adding self-deprecatingly, "I hardly believe it myself most of the time."

The doe came from behind him as if it felt the need to comfort him and nuzzled his hand. He smiled sadly down at the graceful emanation of his inner self.

"I don't really know where Lily's influence begins and where it ends," he said, finally looking at Hermione again. She held her breath, knowing he was about to reveal something very intimate. "She found out about Patronuses from a book sometime during our second year and could not rest until we practised together to try to produce one. It just happened that we produced the same one."

Dumbfounded, Hermione could not help asking, "Who conjured it first? You or Lily?"

"Believe it or not, I did." She felt oddly relieved, as Snape explained, "Lily was reading aloud to instruct me on how to cast the spell. It took me a while, but once I managed it, it was unmistakably a doe. Maybe not as clear and strong as this one," he said, gently petting the affectionate Patronus. "But close enough. When it was Lily's turn, she first produced an unformed mist, but very soon, another doe emerged."

"Oh!" Hermione said, feeling silly about all her assumptions. So little is known about the way the unconscious produces a Patronus. Lily and Severus must have been very close, or they shared a true kinship of minds. She did not think that they were old enough to long for each other romantically in their second year, but the truth was much more beautiful as it was.

"Does," she repeated, in a dreamy voice. "Matching does." It spoke of so much innocence and inward beauty... She could not say it aloud, fully knowing he would scoff at the idea.

"I was thirteen, but very small and underdeveloped," he said somewhat reluctantly, although he was sure she found this in his medical record. Hermione nodded somberly. She did indeed know Snape's record almost by heart, including Poppy Pomfrey's report, when she diagnosed him in September 1973 with malnourishment, stunted growth and exhaustion due to the excess of manual work with his father.

"Constanz thinks that my Patronus shows I was vulnerable at the time, and that my personality and sexual identity were still undefined." He cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable. "He actually used the word 'innocence'."

So do I, she thought sadly, fully aware that he would take it as a mockery if she actually voiced it.

Indeed, his voice was laced with sarcasm as he claimed, "I'm very aware that I'm nobody's idea of a gentle soul."

"Don't be so sure," she felt compelled to say.

"Please," he answered, scoffing at the idea. "The fact that I'm not an utter bastard doesn't make me the embodiment of Raphael's little angels. I wouldn't like the halo, anyway."
"Halos are for saints," she pointed out, "Not for angels."

"Know-it-all!" he said, in a tone that was practically affectionate, coming from him. When said like this, she certainly did not mind. "People would expect my Patronus – and my Animagus if I had one – to reflect what they believe me to be at heart... Something frightening, disgusting or lethal," he admitted ruefully. "Say, a spider, a scorpion or a snake... Or some sort of predator."

He shrugged, making clear that he had been fully aware of his students' speculations over the years. "It simply appeared as a doe, and I didn't question it at the time. In fact, Lily and I were practically convinced for a very long time that most people must have a doe Patronus."

He pursed his lips into a thin, bitter line. "You may imagine how I felt when I discovered what James Potter's Animagus was." He tried to laugh but it only came out as a bitter chuckle. "I may have been as much in shock at this as at the werewolf trying to Attack me."

The doe dissipated, leaving Hermione feeling somehow bereft. Severus seemed fascinated by his own feet and it took him some time before he could look up and go on, "I certainly didn't want to risk facing either of them in their Animagus form."

The way he told it, Hermione felt a shiver of fear along her spine. She managed to ask, "Did they know about your Patronus?"

"Of course, not," he jeered, "or I would have never heard the end of it."

So, that was what he meant by 'a vulnerable Animagus'. He had never tried to transform because he was terrified of what the Marauders' own Animagi could do to his doe. Harassment and bullying often contain some form of sexual humiliation on top of the verbal and physical violence, and it was obvious from Poppy's files as well as from Phineas's and Dilys's tales or what Harry spied in Snape's pensieve that Dumbledore had overlooked a lot of outrageous things.

"Never mind what Voldemort would have deduced and done if he had known."

She could not help sighing. There were so many layers to this man, and each seemed to uncover a fresh vein of dark secrets or emotional traumas.

"To be fair, I'm the first to admit I find it difficult to imagine what kind of natural affinity I have with an animal that symbolises sweetness and femininity." He chuckled drily. "No doubt, there are those who would say that life obviously didn't make me a typical male. They would take that as proof that either I'm really sleeping with Lucius and the likes of Yaxley, or I must be in strong denial."

She shrugged. "In some traditions, the doe also represents protection and the quest for hidden knowledge. That's typical you!"

He blinked.

"It's a compliment," she told him with aplomb, "And I expect you to take it gracefully."

"Why, thank you..." he said with less irony than usual before pursing his lips. "Even if I can't help feeling disappointed that I didn't outgrow the doe... If only to stop being seen as the fool who pines for a dead woman."

 Aren't you? Hermione wanted to ask. She wanted to be sure of his feelings about Lily, absolutely sure – but he had already taken offence when she seemed to doubt him when he said he was not an Animagus.
"You shouldn't," she said. "Your doe is adorable."

She spoke with unmistakable sincerity but he pulled a face. "You could not choose a different word?"

She smiled cheekily. "It's very sweet, if you prefer."

"It's even worse."

"Nice? Pleasant?"

He shook his head, trying to hide his smile.

She affected a frown of deep concentration, before exclaiming genially, "I know. It's cute!"

"Impertinent woman," he said, his tone lighter than it had been for several days. It earned him a happy grin that he immediately filed in his heart as Pensieve-worthy. How come this witch could lighten his heart so easily?

"Many people assume that Lily's and James Potter's Patronuses matched because they were so very much in love," Hermione said thoughtfully as she heard his derisive snort. "I assumed as much when I first heard about it, and so did Harry, but I understand now that they both found their Patronuses long before becoming involved."

"There is love and then there is compatibility," he said, instantly turning sarcastic. "I suppose their Patronuses were proof that they were very compatible, even if I wouldn't go so far as to say that they were made for each other."

"Since you shared the same Patronus, I would say that you and Lily were certainly much more compatible."

"Or too much alike," he said with a shrug that finally convinced her. "Harry is still dreaming of might-have-beens and about another timeline where I would have been his father." He was clearly disapproving. "I try to tell him that Lily and I wouldn't have lasted, but he's much too stubborn to listen."

Hermione felt like cheering or dancing at this clear dismissal of his attachment to Lily. "You're one to talk," she joked. "I believe you're much more stubborn than Harry... And this is not a compliment," she added severely when he bowed rather smugly – although her smile contradicted her own words.

§§§

Ron returned immediately after dinner. It was no use waiting for Percy. His father only had time for a quick bite himself before going back to the Ministry for another late Cabinet meeting.

The Minister was now running a constant flow of security meetings to prepare for Snape's trial but also to decide how to deal with the opposition and the media. Arthur was not sure what Kingsley really had in mind, but he seemed oddly satisfied with the reactions of the opposition so far.

Ron himself, as well as the other Aurors, had several meetings scheduled with Head Auror Dawlish, mostly to rehearse security procedures and for the inevitable updates. The Ministry was preparing for a siege, be it by the press, the public, the political activists always ready to use any occasion to draw attention to themselves, or Death Eater terrorists.

There was also a renewed stream of howlers and death threats against Snape, but all in all, nothing
that they had not anticipated.

Ron glanced a little nervously at Snape, who stood and went to stir up the fire before leaning, much too casually, against the fireplace. "Let me guess," said the Professor. "Since the Ministry published the composition of the War High Court today, tomorrow they will read out the indictment." He sounded resigned.

"Yes," admitted Ron, hating to be the harbinger of bad news.

"Well," was all Snape could say.

The trio shared concerned looks while Snape stayed by the fireside, apparently calm and indifferent but for his left fist tightly clenched around the hem of his pullover. That was still his tell, Harry noticed sadly.

Severus repeated to himself that none of this was a surprise. Shacklebolt had warned him, before he left St Mungo's, that everything would erupt in the last fortnight, since this was part of the deal struck to enforce the media embargo.

Percy had impressed on the journalists that the Ministry took the threats against Severus Snape, who had not yet revealed all his secrets, very seriously, and that they would all face charges if sensitive information was released at the wrong moment before the trial.

The media agreed to wait until January before raising the big ruckus. In return, the Ministry promised that, unless certain sessions were held in camera by the Court to protect state secrets or to grant anonymity to the victims who had requested it, they would allow reliable representatives of the press in the courtroom. It was a threat as much as an incentive, since no journalist would run the risk of having their press badge revoked just before Snape's trial.

§§§

5th January 2000 – D-12

There was no need for the Prophet to find catchy titles to arouse the public's interest. Simply listing the main charges against Severus Snape did it all too well.

High treason.

Crimes against wizardkind.

Terrorist conspiracy.

War crimes.

It was plastered in bold all over the front page with his last official photograph as Headmaster.

Snape's hopeless love for Lily Potter may have fired the imagination and fantasies of hundreds of people – particularly witches – but when you looked at his harsh, grim features, he certainly looked the part of Tom Riddle's right-hand man.

Other outlets, like the Quibbler, were much more restrained, even if they all published the same list. The Quibbler's headline read "Innocent Until Proven Guilty", the point other journalists felt the need to remind their readers of, too.

They also published interviews and statements of various people such as Molly Weasley, her son
Bill, Minerva McGonagall or Elphias Doge. They all officially declared their support for their friend or colleague Severus Snape and stated that they were confident that he would prove his innocence.

Several journalists tried to obtain statements from Harry, Ron or Arthur Weasley, but to no avail, "obligation of discretion and confidentiality" being the only answers they could get.

As for Hermione, they just could not get to her. Whenever they tried, Healer Granger was always busy giving consultations, training with one or another healer, in the operating rooms or off duty.

Whatever side they supported, all newspapers significantly increased their circulation, a sure indication of interest on the part of the public, who swept up almost every available newspaper in the last two days.

§§§

Harry was impatiently pacing around the table in the cramped little kitchen, while Snape was having physiotherapy in the sitting room. He was very edgy, all the more since the Professor had not said a word after reading the Prophet but sat stiffly at the breakfast table, without touching any food.

Not that Harry ate much more, to Fuzzy's obvious distress – the elf had taken on breakfast duties since Moppy slept later and longer in these last days of her pregnancy.

Hermione was desperately trying not to ignore Harry's nervous fidgeting. Constanz had let her leave as soon as they finished reading the daily press review Draco had decided to run for all of them until the end of the trial. "Go to him," he had told her grimly, "and call me at once if you think I can help."

She was now listening to Snape cursing Healer Babbock, who was once again refusing to let him exert himself beyond his capabilities.

"I am telling you I've got a second wind!" Snape kept insisting. "I can do another set. I want to!"

"But your forearm tendons can't afford the effort, since you carry too much tension in the shoulders as I've been telling you," Babbock explained for the umpteenth time with the same patience. "You will complain tomorrow that you can't dice or cut as you wish because of the soreness, not to mention the constant ache all along your arm."

"Then I will work my muscles harder, and the soreness will go away."

"It would go away if it were muscle soreness," Babbock countered with just a hint of exasperation. "You've got tendinitis as well as bursitis in this forearm. You must be more careful or..."

"I don't have time to be careful!" was the stubborn but somewhat panting answer.

When Harry sighed, "Here we go again!"

Hermione frowned."He does this often?" she asked, instantly concerned.

"Regularly."

Babcock's voice rose again. "A fat lot of good it'll do you when... Merlin!" The healer's voice suddenly rose, concern mixed with annoyance. "You've done it again!"

Hermione was already standing, shooing Harry away from the door, and peering cautiously into the sitting room that had been transformed, like most mornings, into an exercise room.
Babcock had pushed Snape, whose left forearm was shaking helplessly, into his armchair. He was rubbing it with a cooling salve and lecturing his former teacher in the voice one generally uses with naughty children. "We had to replace all the tendons dissolved by the venom reacting with your Dark Mark. Of course, the new ones can't be as supple as those in your good arm! And why do I have to remind you that, combined with your medicines, this also makes you prone to cramps?!
Really, Professor, you do yourself no favour when you put in more effort into these exercises than I ask for."

Harry pushed Hermione to the side to have a better look himself. At the sudden move, both Babbock and Snape looked up. Snape tried to scowl, but it was obvious he was in too much pain to really care.

Babbock pursed his lips and addressed himself to Hermione. "See what I have to deal with?" he sighed. "I hope you have a better success making him understand what's in his best interest."

"He's here, in case you didn't notice," groused Snape.

"But you won't listen to me, so I hand you over to Healer Granger. I hope she will make you see reason." He turned to Hermione. "He's earned himself the whole RICE sequence, now. Rest, Ice, Compression-" he enumerated coldly, although he turned a little so that Snape could not see him wink at her.

"And Elevation," Hermione completed the list just as coldly. She scowled at Snape. "There, are you happy now?"

"You don't understand," he said sullenly.

She leaned menacingly until they were practically nose to nose. This distracted him from the pain. "I understand very well but you will rest your arm, even if I have to tie you to your bed!"

There was a guffaw behind them. Harry.

"Is this a proposition, Hermione?" Snape tried to joke, although there was no conviction in his low, tired voice.

"No, Severus," she said, deadly serious. "This is a decision."

He closed his eyes and, somehow, his entire posture and face shifted a little. His forearm stopped trembling. When he opened his eyes, in their cold and hard expression they instantly recognised the terror of the dungeons. Now that they all knew a different side to his personality, this was particularly disturbing.

"I need to be fit for my trial."

Hermione clucked her tongue. She wanted to remind him that he had promised Alfred not to Occlude but knew better than taking him to task in front of Harry and her colleague. "And you will be," she said, more pleadingly than she meant, "if you will only listen to Healer Babbock."

Snape looked up at the other healer, who was observing their interaction with great interest. "Ten days," he said, trying not to sound defeated.

"Done," answered Babbock, quick as a flash. "But on my terms."

Snape stared at him for what seemed like an interminable time. The young healer stared back, although he still found Snape's gaze as unnerving as when he had been his student.
"I trust you," Snape said at last, almost threateningly.

Babcock blinked before giving a start when Harry pounded him on the back and stage-whispered, "Welcome to the club! It's not as hard as it sounds."

Snape snorted but Hermione put a warning finger an inch from his nose. "You, shut up!" she commanded.

Snape began to open his mouth, before thinking better of it as he watched the ends of her hair begin to stir.

In a true whisper, this time, that neither Snape nor Hermione heard, focused as they were on each other, Harry told Babcock, "Thank you, Yann. I'll owe you one."

§§§

The evening papers published another statement by Cornelius Fudge, who accused the Minister of lying to the Wizengamot about the severity of the charges against Snape in order to protect a criminal.

For once, the answer from the Ministry was immediate.

Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley, as spokesman for the government, denounced the opposition's poor ploy of raising controversy for the sake of it. Judicial procedures had been respected to the letter. Besides, what could be a better proof of the seriousness the Ministry accorded to the charges than calling a War High Court rather than dealing with them in an ordinary Wizengamot session, as if Severus Snape were merely accused of ordinary crimes? Minister Shacklebolt and his government adhered to the sacred principle which is presumption of innocence, though. They did not write people off as criminals before they were tried, a basic principle of democracy Lord Fudge seemed to have forgotten.

§§§

6th January 2000 - D-11

The publication of the indictment gave the signal to the foreign media to join the dance around Snape's trial.

Draco sent the most significant articles with his press review. There were titles like Severus Snape: the end of Dumbledore's era or Snape and Dumbledore: Britain's two-faced heroes.

On the one hand, it was comforting to read that they did not doubt that Severus Snape truly was Albus Dumbledore's man and believed that many of the charges would not hold in front of the War High Court.

On the other hand, they raised the right questions: does the harshness and necessities of war excuse everything? Many thought that any verdict the War High Court would hand down would be unsatisfactory.

Beyond stating that he rather shared these opinions, Snape refused to discuss the matter and immersed himself in furious writing and work – so furious, in fact, that Hermione almost cried out when she stole a look at what he was doing: he was putting all his papers into order. He clearly did not expect to return.

It was obvious from Ron and Harry's grim faces that they reached the same conclusion, but none of
them dared to say anything. They all respected Snape's need to bring what he could under control.

Inevitably, the sensationalists in the foreign press immediately focused on the charges of rape and sexual abuse of students, while the British media were still treading carefully around the taboo question.

People knew but pretended this did not happen. The war, yes. Horrors, of course. Death, exile, deportation, even mass killings. But rape as a terror tool and the accompanying shame? The unwanted pregnancies, with bastard children of the Death Eaters and snatchers brought up by the muggleborn or progressives' families? The exploding abortion numbers during the war? Certainly not. This part, that touched so many families in the most intimate, the most secret or sacred part of their lives, they refused to discuss.

In the previous rounds of War trials, most victims were not summoned to court, and the press obligingly did not raise the question.

However, titles like *Hogwarts: a school above reproach?* and even an outrageous *The Hogwarts Paedophile Ring* were bound to echo in Britain, once the first shock wore off.

7th January 2000 – D-10

Ron suspected that Moppy did it on purpose.

Hermione insisted later that it was not possible, but he would not put it past the elf to decide when she wanted to go into labour, because she did it before Snape had time to do more than stare helplessly at the Prophet for ten minutes.

*Rape and violence at Hogwarts*

*15 families press charges against Snape, Ministry reveals*

*How many more?*

Rita Skeeter had obviously managed to get her hands on the complaints, but she only hinted at their content, no doubt careful to avoid the Ministry investigation into the breach of confidentiality or her being barred from the courtroom. She only named Allison Hatter, the young Gryffindor who died in Azkaban, since her story had already been revealed during Amycus Carrow's trial. Her smiling face had gone around the world as the symbol of Death Eater brutality.

Snape discarded the paper when Fuzzy Apparated in front of him in a panic. "*Master! The baby's coming!*"

Snape stood and ran upstairs, to the elves' rooms in the attic, shouting at the same time to the father-to-be, "*What are you waiting for? Fetch Zimpsy and Winky!*"

"*And Kreacher?*" Fuzzy asked desperately, "*Moppy said Kreacher, too.*"

"*Yes! But go, go, go!*" Before he finished the first "*Go!*", Fuzzy had already Apparated away.
Some of them want to use you,

Some of them want to be used by you

(Eurythmics, Sweet Dreams)

For some reason, Moppy's contractions slowed down several times and nothing happened for hours to the obvious dismay of the males waiting downstairs.

Snape demanded every twenty minutes to be told how things were progressing. Fuzzy would never dream to annoy females elves at a birthing, even of his own child, but he took the opportunity to stand at the master's side, his arms crossed as imperiously as the Professor's. Kreacher, convinced that it was his role as the father's support, was taking the pose, too.

After the thirteenth or fourteenth time, Zimpsy, usually the model of the eager, cheerful house elf, ground out, "Things are as they should be. Master Headmaster must not worry. Babies always come out in the end." The tone was as close as she would ever get to tell a wizard, and her former Headmaster, too, to go to hell and she promptly bashed her head against the banister for this, before Apparating away.

Snape managed to wait almost an hour before asking again, more cautiously and via his Patronus, if Moppy was all right.

Harry was writing yet another report and trying to ignore Snape who was pacing as nervously as if he was the father – more in fact, since Fuzzy now sat on the kitchen floor with Kreacher, both swaying in a butterbeer-induced stupor and occasionally giggling or speaking disjointedly.

Harry had confiscated the remaining bottles of butterbeer and hoped the two elves would have sobered up by the time the baby actually came.

At one time, he seriously considered getting Snape drunk, too, or Stunning him, to get some peace.

Hermione could not get there soon enough for Harry. For Snape, too, who urged her to go upstairs as soon as she arrived from St Mungo's.

Of course, Hermione was eager to offer her help but Zimpsy and Winky fiercely refused to let her enter, if with much self-berating, apologies and head bashing.

Horrified, she hastily retreated downstairs, feeling guilty for driving the elves to self-harm, even if she had learned from Severus that it was their instinctive way to contain the brutal flashes of magic that build under stress and that, just as judokas will immediately hit something hard to diffuse the pain of a blow, it did not hurt.

"They didn't want you either?" groused Snape.

Hermione smiled ruefully. "I was told it's elves' business."
He grumbled something that sounded like "stubborn females" but Hermione refrained from lecturing him. He was so visibly worried, while trying to hide it under the grumpy act.

When Ron arrived, he informed them that Kingsley had the judicial assistants of the DMLE and of the Wizengamot running all over the place and that it had given rise to the wildest rumours at the Ministry. The only thing he could tell was that Percy looked more determined than worried when he met him in the hallway but, of course, he could not get anything from his uptight brother, who hardly ever spoke to him at work 'to avoid the rumours of favouritism'.

§§§

8th January 2000 – D-9

Moppy's son was born shortly after midnight, but even the father was not allowed in the room before mother and baby were properly bonded, cleaned, fed and, in Moppy's case, at least a little rested.

The rest of the household was introduced to the newborn after breakfast. Hermione transformed back the sofa and armchair she and Ron had slept on and they ate rapidly, passing the press review between them and for once giving it only a cursory scan.

Fudge protested yet again against Shacklebolt's handling of the War High Court procedures, and against every single one of the Ministry's policies.

The other newspapers were hardly better. It was all about politics and speculations about a possible shift of majority that would put Shacklebolt in difficulty for his next reforms. They all left the 'Rubbish', as Draco had labelled it, for later. It was the same re-hashing of speculations about where Hogwarts featured in the Death Eaters 'Cleansing Policy' and about Snape's role in it.

The baby was the cutest little thing the Trio had ever seen. It was their first opportunity to see a baby elf—all eyes, rosebud, puckered little mouth and with his silky looking ears still furled up against his head, but did he have powerful lungs!

Snape, who was kneeling in front of the crib to have a closer look, immediately swore that he had inherited them from his mother. "And for Land's sake, Moppy, give him what he wants! He's obviously starving."

Moppy snorted, grabbed her master's hand and put it on the baby's head. He instantly calmed down, turned his still myopic eyes towards the big, dark, blurred figure of Snape and purred.

Snape went alarmingly rigid and his former students wondered during a brief moment if he was going to bolt but he merely turned his hand and very softly grazed his knuckles against the baby's cheek.

"How will Master call him?" Fuzzy asked, placing himself at Snape's side in the time-honoured fashion of the father elf presenting his child.

"Puck," Snape decided, although he could not help looking at Hermione to watch her reaction.

She was delighted. "It's perfect," she exclaimed, "if the parents approve."

Moppy nodded at Fuzzy, who was grinning like a Cheshire cat, and put the small, purring bundle into the cradle of Snape's hands. The bonding took hold, attested by the goose flesh on Snape's arms, his hair bristling and the baby's purr turning to the steady buzz of a racing broom as his ears unfurled like flowers.
Moppy and Fuzzy purred, too, and stretched like cats bathing in warm sunlight.

Hermione, who had watched in silent awe, looked up at Snape, whose hair was pleasantly tousled now, with melting eyes. "I've never seen anything so beautiful," whispered the ex-champion of elf liberation. "You're so lucky!"

Ron and Harry murmured approvingly. Neither was at his best when it came to express emotions but they were affected, too.

Not everyone seemed happy, though. Sobbing sounds came from the corner where the other elves had retreated when the wizards entered. Zimpsy seemed calm if a little sad, but not the other pair.

"Master Regulus!" bawled Kreacher.

"My poor master," echoed Winky, clinging to him and crying in his chest.

"Poor, old Kreacher," he sobbed, even louder, tightening his hold on her shoulders.

"Bad, useless Winky," she whined, fraying the edge of his towel in her distress.

Harry was beginning to feel guilty as he realised the kind of bond Kreacher had lost when Regulus Black died, and that he could never offer him to replace. Observing that the two elves were making their way to the nearest wall, probably to bash their heads on it, he said impulsively, "Hey! It's all right. You can always have a baby of your own."

Instantly, Kreacher and Winky turned greedy eyes on him and stopped crying. Under their stare, Harry suddenly felt like Little Red Riding Hood the second after she asked the wolf why he had such big teeth. Ron must have felt the same thing, because he gulped, "Ow!"

"Master agrees?" Kreacher asked in an overawed voice, gripping one of Harry's knees like in a vice while Winky gripped the other one with the same silent desperation.

Harry faltered, "Err... Err... I must ask Ginny... But why not?"

Hermione, who found impossible to look away from Snape and the baby for long, added her helpful piece. "When she meets Puck, she won't be able to say no."

Harry shared a dubious look with Ron, neither really understanding how women could so instantly become besotted with babies, however cute they may be. He coughed. "Well... If it's all right with Ginny, I'll say yes."

He looked at little Puck again. The baby was still purring, although his eyes were beginning to close and he was smiling beatifically. Suddenly reconciled with the consequences, he impulsively declared, "Hermione's right. I don't see why she would say no."

Kreacher and Winky instantly let go of Harry's knees and prostrated themselves in front of him. Before he could protest, however, his elf swiftly took hold of Winky's hand, turned to share a happy smile and a purposeful nod with her and Apparated them away.

(Ginny would often remind Harry, whenever Kreacher, Winky or their equally stubborn offspring drove them mad, that she could think of several reasons why it was a bad idea to tell his elf to take a mate and reproduce.)

Snape sighed heavily, as if he was waking up. He handed the baby back to Moppy and left, without another word.
Hermione, Ron and Harry lingered a little. Harry was wondering a little late if he had made a mistake and tried to convince himself that all would end well by watching Moppy happily rocking her son, before she put him back in his silver and green cradle and shooed the humans out.

They found Snape in his armchair, looking gloomy.

"Is something wrong?" Hermione immediately asked. "Do you feel some kind of aftershock?"

He shook his head but, seeing that she would pester him until he told the truth, he finally admitted, "This child is yet another responsibility. Where will that leave us next week when...-" He did not finish his sentence but made a large, sweeping gesture.

"We'll just have to make sure you return as soon as possible," Hermione said, in a tone brooking no contradiction.

§§§

Hermione was summoned to Constanz' office in the middle of her consultations in the Emergency Ward.

"What's up?" she asked, surprised. "It's your day off."

"My Floo here is the only one in St Mungo's secured to 'you-know-where'. They will call you in a minute." He stood. "Don't worry, I'll cover for you."

"But... Yann Babbock returned not half an hour ago and he didn't say anything." Instantly alarmed, she blurted, "Or did he call you directly?"

The old wizard shook his head. "No. It's your friend Ron who contacted me."

"Then, why don't you go?"

"I agree with the proposed treatment," he said with an impish smile, "but the implementation is quite outside my experience… And my competence."

Before she could ask what he meant, the fire turned green.

Constanz winked, before resolutely closing the door and activating the wards.

She knelt before the fire.

It was indeed Ron.

"What's up?" she asked, without giving him a chance to speak first.

"Nothing! Everyone's all right." He coughed nervously, looking guilty, as if he already knew she was not going to like what he was going to say.

"Ron! I don't have all day," she said impatiently. "You know I'll Floo in less than-" she checked the clock, "three hours. We're short-staffed with the week-end and there is such a queue in the Emergency ward that they called me to help. I hope you didn't disturb Alfred for nothing."

"It's Snape."

She interrupted anxiously. "You said he was all right?"
"He is, but he wants to have a haircut. To look his best for the trial."

She remained speechless for a few seconds. "You bothered Alfred and now me with this? If you need help, ask Draco."

"I already asked Draco. And his father. And his mother, too! The trouble is... We can't have a magical stylist."

"Of course, you can't have a magical stylist. Don't they have an elf who can do it?"

"No, they don't. Apparently, it's not something elves do. So, there isn't much choice," he said, beseechingly.

Her temper instantly flared up. "If you've disturbed me in the middle of my shift to ask me to cut Severus's hair, let me tell you that I have never done anything like this. Your mother would be a much better choice."

"Certainly not Mum!" he hastened to say, shuddering at the mere thought of the bowl cut she used to inflict on her sons before they went to Hogwarts. (It was small wonder Bill and Charlie still refused to approach anything resembling scissors. Even Percy, for all his devotion to his mother and his preference for shorter hair, went to a professional, "because it's expected of a Ministry official").

"What he needs is a Muggle hairdresser, but..." He was practically whining now. "They all say he needs a stylish hairdresser. Snape says there isn't one in Cokework and that no decent professional in the whole Manchester district would willingly come in his neighbourhood. Not that I'd blame them, mind you." He showed all his teeth in a desperate attempts at a smile. "He wants you to find one and bring them to him."

Indignant, she spat, "I'm a healer, not a personal assistant."

"But it's you who actually told him to make himself presentable for the trial... And the Malfoys insist that only one of the hairdressers featured in this magazine would do."

Hermione gingerly caught the slightly crumpled Vogue Hommes International that came across the Floo and turned to the marked pages with a snort. Of course. No Malfoy would accept to have their precious hair handled by anyone not coming from Vidal Sassoon's or Phil Allen's.

She snorted, "Can't they ask their Belfoy family?"

"Mark Belfoy will drive the hairdresser to Snape's but Draco said that better nothing than what passes for elegance in their set."

She rolled her eyes at Draco's snobbery. "And how do they suppose I would know any celebrity stylist? Besides, it's Saturday afternoon! They're certainly ready to close down."

"Lucius Malfoy said that it was going to be a walk in the park for you, and that, with the week-end, whomever you choose won't be missed." Her eyes narrowed and Ron hastily added, "Hey! I'm only the messenger."

"Are you actually telling me," she said in a menacing voice, "that Malfoy suggested I abduct a Muggle hairdresser, Confound them and maybe their whole family in the bargain and that both Harry and you, as the Aurors in charge, agree with him?"

"Well... It's not as if we have much choice about the matter."
"What?!

"I mean… There's no need to abduct them. Malfoy gave me Muggle money to make it worth their while. Here," he said, handing her a waddle of big notes. "And Harry's gone to the Ministry to get Kingsley sign him a temporary Obliviator licence, just in case. But I'm sure we'll not need it."

She pursed her lips in disapproval.

"Snape actually said that, as far as he's concerned, the stylist who shortened your hair would do."

She managed to scowl, but actually felt quite pleased.

"He also said that Monday might of course be easier to convince someone to earn an extra."

She nodded, beginning to feel a little reconciled with the scheme.

Ron clearly hesitated.

She barked, "What else now?"

"It's just… Tomorrow's Snape's birthday. I think it would be nice if he could have his haircut then and feel… Tidier, I suppose. There isn't that much time left before the trial."

Hermione's mouth fell wide open at Ron's thoughtfulness but she quickly gathered her wit. "Is it really your idea?"

Ron flushed. "Err… It was Malfoy's, in fact. Draco, that is. Owled Harry to remind him about the birthday. He said his godfather surely deserves a little something to cheer him up before the trial."

Hermione smiled fondly. She guessed Ron had already asked his mother for a birthday cake, since the elves were busy with their baby.

It was exquisitely funny to watch how the Malfoys had learned how to play Harry and Ron and guilt them into doing their bidding, at least where Snape was concerned.

That poor, lonely wizard, in his drab, isolated home… She chuckled to herself. Yes, that kind of tripe would work very well with Harry, who always empathised with the poor, little Half Blood Prince – forgetting that Snape had spent nearly all his adult life in the comfort of Hogwarts or the lavish luxury of Malfoy Manor.

Still, it would be nice if Severus had a fresh haircut for his birthday. She laughed at herself for her own melting sentimentality and began to leaf through the magazine and ponder what kind of haircut would suit him best.

No doubt, her hairdresser would think Severus was some kind of gangster with all the secrecy, the shady neighbourhood and the big notes. Well, it couldn't be worse than masquerading as Bellatrix Lestrange at Gringott's.

She decided that she would tell her that Severus was her boyfriend to convince her to follow her instructions and not his. No doubt, he would choose something much too plain and utilitarian. An asymmetric fringe and maybe one or two longer locks, like this model, would enhance the intensity of his gaze. Yes, there was no denying that he exuded restrained passion and a predatory sort of
confidence… That his powerful presence made her feel…

She stopped in her tracks, suddenly realising where the words came from.

*I'll never read another Witch Weekly,* she swore, remembering guiltily that she had not been able to refrain from perusing the old magazine in the waiting room when she saw his face on the cover, and that these were the very, silly words she had read.

Yes, he certainly could be passionate when he taught; he would instantly pounce on any careless student ready to blow up their cauldron or who had the misfortune to anger him, like a wildcat on a prey… but there was a big difference between this and actually calling him intense, hot *and* sexy.

She snorted at the memory of the florid descriptions in Witch Weekly. Whatever they wrote, they would never dare publish a photograph of what he really looked like after several hours brewing, covered in protective grease. He was obviously hot, then, but not in the sense they meant.

She carefully did not ponder on the fact that she did not mind these days what he looked like when he just came from his lab, as long as he seemed happy to see her, or that she felt absolutely no qualms about telling her own gossipy hairdresser that he was her boyfriend.

She walked briskly to the Emergency Ward to collect her things. A former Hogwarts mate, a chatty Hufflepuff, slightly older, who had once spent the night at the Infirmary in the bed next to hers, was reading the very same Witch Weekly in the waiting room. She recognised Hermione and engaged her in conversation, first on the pretext of expressing concern about her old aunt who was consulting with another healer and then on the real subject, namely if she was really Snape's new healer now. She soon attracted quite a few other nosy witches around, while the rest listened – or faked not listening – in sudden, expecting silence.

When she managed to extricate herself, more curtly than she usually did in professional situations, Hermione was fuming.

*How dare they!*

*I swear I'll hex the next person who has the front to ask me if that thing about long hands and feet, and big noses, is true!*

As if she would tell, even if she knew.

When she calmed down a little, she tried to see the bright side. At least, these witches did not believe Snape was a hardened criminal, even if she hated when cheeky patients tried to discuss Snape with her.

Thankfully, not everyone believed the lies in the Prophet. Most people accepted that Snape was a war hero. Some clearly suspected his true motives but expected him to be cleared, whatever he had done, just because the Order of the Phoenix wanted it. Others thought that Fudge was out for Snape's blood and might succeed, if only as a means to oust Shacklebolt.

§§§

*War High Court expanded into Plenary High Court*

*Shacklebolt Calls Fudge's Bluff!*

Timing the announcement to make the front page of the evening papers, Minister Shacklebolt had finally answered Fudge and all his detractors.
Warned by Lucius's Patronus, Snape hurried to set the wireless and catch the rerun of Kingsley's speech.

"I can't understand why certain people choose now to contest the War High Court," the Minister declared. "They pretend to discover reasons why we should do it a mere ten days before the trial, when they had weeks to discuss and contest the procedure. A majority in the Wizengamot voted to call the War High Court again to judge Headmaster Snape. I don't understand why I have to remind them that's how it works in a democracy."

"Questioning the competence of the War High Court, the very institution that was established to deal with such cases, and at such short notice, is but a poor pretext to stir trouble at the very moment when our country needs to send a strong message to the rest of the world. We must show that we present a united front for justice, equality and, above all, for reconciliation. That we can go beyond partisan positions to promote unity, after decades of division and war.

"You know I refuse politicking but I also refuse to have the coming trial contested in any possible way. To those who now pretend that Justice cannot be served if the whole Wizengamot is not present, I say, so be it! The War High Court will sit in as Plenary High Court. The Constitutional Council of the Wizengamot and the Magical Law Administrative Authority both gave me the go-ahead today, considering the extreme seriousness of some of the accusations against a Headmaster of Hogwarts, who is still, by law, the guarantor of education in our country. And to appease the belated scruples and so-called preoccupation about public monies that have been expressed in the media these last days, I will add that there will be no additional cost.

"I insist that all this is possible only because of the efficiency of the staff of our Department of Magical Law Enforcement and of the staff of the Wizengamot. I must salute their dedication, diligence and commitment."

Indeed, to manage to pull a Plenary High Court off at such short notice was no mean feat. This Special Court had never actually been summoned, because it was only supposed to judge felon Ministers and top officials, or exceptional enemies of the State. Had Grindelwald been judged in Britain, or Voldemort, if they had managed to arrest him when he was alive, they would have faced this particular jurisdiction.

To defer Snape to the Plenary High Court was to give him back, even if only for the duration of his trial, the status of member of the Government that Headmasters of Hogwarts held in the past and that Voldemort had briefly restored.

Hearing this, Snape found it difficult to believe. "Unless there's a trick somewhere," he wondered aloud, as usual expecting the worst. "Like an exception to the abolition of the Dementor's Kiss."

"No," instantly objected Ron. "Kingsley would never have pushed for it otherwise."

Snape grudgingly had to admit he was right.

Harry did not say anything. He sat brooding and it worried Hermione even more. Generally, he would have been the first to defend Kingsley.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said automatically, before realising his friends would likely misinterpret his meaning, considering Hermione's alarmed face or Snape's manner instantly turning even more suspiscious. "I was just wondering whether Voldemort would have dragged me before the Plenary High Court if Dobby hadn't rescued us at Malfoy Manor."
"Oh!"

"That's what I had long suggested to him," Snape confirmed grimly. "Even the worst of tyrants need the appearance of legality. It would have bought us a little time to try..." He did not finish his sentence. His face clouded over even more – a sure proof that it could only have been a last ditch attempt. He did not say it, but he had always known that the support of Corban Yaxley would have been indispensable then, and inevitably dearly bought.

Ron tried to change the mood by joking about Fudge and his cronies. Obviously, none of them expected Kingsley to have the guts to call the Plenary High Court. They would certainly find it a hard pill to swallow, even if they had almost handed the solution on a plate to the Minister.

But that was only Shacklebolt's first bombshell insisted the Wireless commentators, who had been droning all this time about the first part of the Minister's declaration, before rerunning the next part.

"As far as prosecution is concerned, I have never shied away from the role our institutions give me. As usual, I will do my duty and assume the role of State Prosecutor. However, I have several times expressed my conviction that it is not sound or fair for the political head of the country to take such an active role in the Special Courts. In my opinion, it creates a confusion of powers that is not healthy in the long term in a democracy. Therefore, I have decided, as the law permit, to appoint an Assistant Prosecutor. I offer this role to Lord Fudge. I hope he will accept this olive branch and do me the honour to assist me with his experience and help us prove to the rest of the world that, whatever our personal convictions, we can all work together to see Justice served."

"Fudge?! That bastard?" Harry almost strangled himself.

"Oh! But it's a clever move," commented Hermione. "Just consider. If Fudge refuses, he will lose a lot of credibility. And if he says yes, he can't go on contesting the Court."

"I believe he's too vain to let slip the opportunity to strut about in the Courtroom and begin campaign for his re-election," Snape commented.

"Yes, it would be a good opportunity to try and steal the show from Kingsley," added Ron.

"He will make a point of trying to corner you with his biased questions and comments!" cried Harry, the memory of his staged hearing for use of underage magic still ever-present in his mind.

Snape easily dismissed his concern. "Even Kingsley will try. It's his role as State Prosecutor, and as he said, he will do his duty."

"I'm sure Kingsley hopes Fudge will overdo it and bring discredit upon himself," added Hermione.

"I still say it's a dangerous game," Harry insisted. "Fudge... Yaxley... It's a lot to deal with at the same time."

"It was never going to be easy," Ron added, proving they were of one mind on the question, "But this will surely complicate matters."

He did not know how right he was. They had not yet digested the news and sat for dinner that the Head Auror's horse Patronus appeared and barked at Ron, "Emergency security meeting in 15'. No dawdling!"

§§§

9th January, 2000 – D-8
Fudge accepted Shacklebolt's offer. It irked him to have to pretend that a Plenary High Court was the answer to his demands, but being Assistant Prosecutor in a one of a kind Jurisdiction was a promising beginning if he played his cards well.

He declared that he was honour bound to make sure that the Court get to the bottom of Dumbledore's death and Snape's role in the war and that Justice was served.

In the Prophet, there was yet another slanderous article by Rita Skeeter, just for a change. It was a compilation of the basest accusations and suppositions that had ever been written about Snape, peppered with outraged and vengeful comments from people in the street. The journalist herself was shown in Diagon Alley, asking people for their opinion and gleefully signing autographs.

There was also one of the ancient photos Skeeter seemed so fond of unearthing. This time, Snape, already a teacher since he wore his famous frock coat, played to the gallery with Rabastan Lestrange and Evan Rosier, their arms around each other's shoulders. They were smiling – or as close as the young Potions master would ever come to, since one corner of his mouth lifted up, until Rosier made a gesture that looked like a signal and they all took stupid, outrageous poses.

A single caption above the photograph summed up Skeeter's opinion. *Birds of a Feather.*

Harry, watching anxiously for Snape's reaction, worried at his lip as seconds and then minutes passed and the man did not react beyond staring intently at the page.

"*I need to meet her,*" he declared at last.

"*Who?*" asked Harry, puzzled.

"*Rita Skeeter.*"

"*What? But it's impossible!*"

Snape chuckled mirthlessly. "Nothing's truly impossible. *What about a discussion through the Floo? She could come to Alexia's office and...-*"

"I don't think so," immediately cut in Harry. "*Neither Dawlish nor Kingsley will consent.*"

"You would have to ask them to be sure of the answer."

Harry only adopted his most mulish look, which seemed to amuse Snape rather than annoy him.

"*Harry,*" he said softly, fully knowing that calling the young man by his first name still had the power to mollify him. "*All I ask is for you to try. I don't think Kingsley will say no when you tell him that I think I can reach an agreement with Rita Skeeter.*" With a point of humour, he added, "*And don't pretend to hide behind your Head Auror when you don't want to do something."

"*I don't need to hide behind anyone and that woman is a viper!*"

"*I thought she's an insect?*

Harry huffed. "*Very funny!* he said in a tone that implied the opposite. "*What do you expect to gain, meeting that lying bitch?*

"*Some kind of mutually profitable transaction. And for the record, that lying bitch used to be a friend of mine, too."

The Auror shook his head several times at Snape in utter disbelief before putting his head in his hand.
in a melodramatic gesture. "With friends like Rita Skeeter, you really don't need enemies."

"With friends like her, I avoided much unwanted publicity in the past," was the other's ready answer. "And there are things here that do not sound like the Rita I know."

He drummed pensively his fingers on the armrest.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that she writes this precisely on my birthday. It's her way to say that her hand is forced. In fact," he insisted, "I think it is a call for help."

"A call for...-" Harry began incredulously, before frowning. "Our friend Yaxley?"

"Maybe."

"What makes you say this?" asked Harry, still unconvinced. "All I see there is her usual way to spread discord and try to destroy a reputation. Yours, right now."

"In case you never noticed, she's never truly maligned another Slytherin until now. Right after the war, she rather tried to emphasize my role."

Harry sneered. "I remember. She called you my guardian angel. The hero in the background," he spat out before sobering abruptly. "She was right, of course. Do not misunderstand..."

Snape's amused snort cut him short and he smiled sheepishly.

Rita Skeeter was always nasty, rather contemptuous of everything and everyone, but no matter how Harry raked his brains, he could not remember one occasion when she reached, with a former Slytherin, the height of malice that distinguished the smear campaigns she regularly embarked on against Dumbledore, Harry or their friends.

When you thought about it, she had all the worst Slytherin tendencies.

"So, she's a Slytherin, too?" he asked, for form's sake. In retrospect, it explained so many things.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Did she ever strike you as your regular Hufflepuff?"

§§§

The hairdresser was duly impressed by her stand-offish customer and the handsome young men who attended him.

There was something odd about the cautious way they all acted around her and seemed to constantly watch themselves. She was soon convinced that they were dangerous. Drug or arm dealers, maybe even spies.

Even Miss Granger, this discreet and very polite customer, she would not be able to see in the same way ever again. She was still wondering how she had let herself be persuaded to come in such a place, even for the amount of money she was offered for a simple haircut.

Thankfully, they did not act as she would have expected – as villains in a James Bond movie, and she did not feel threatened. After all, villains are supposed to drink strong liquor, not innocuous, soothing herbal teas with home made cake, as they shared with her.

Snape was glad he had put a drop of Calming Draught in the woman's cup. It made her stop all the nervous glancing, as if she expected they were going to cut her throat and she abstained from the mindless chatter he had expected.
What annoyed him was that he could tell, even without seeing what she did, that she did not listen to his instructions for just something simple. Maybe, the one drop was too much for a muggle? But no, he used to put at least two in his father's cup the last year he came for the holidays, and it was barely enough to prevent his more violent bouts.

At least, she worked with the confidence of a true professional who knows what she is doing.

"It's perfect," Hermione decreed, after looking him over with a critical eye. Harry nodded approvingly, even if Snape suspected he was trying not to laugh. He turned to Ron with growing suspicion but the young Auror only gave him an approving thumb up.

He was finally handed a mirror. The lack of perfect symmetry was baffling but he grudgingly had to admit that he looked good, if more sophisticated than he intended. With a slight purse of his lips, he thought that, for once, Lucius had managed to impose his tastes.

He met Hermione's eyes in the mirror. Her appreciative smile instantly reconciled him with his new haircut.

She profusely thanked the hairdresser before seeing her to the door, and there was something in the look the women shared that instantly made Snape suspect that it was not Lucius but Hermione who was responsible for the change of style – the sly little minx!

They had decided against Obliviating the hair dresser. A few simple charms, commonly used with muggles and approved by the Ministry, ensured that she would not memorize their names or faces, the road they took or the length of the journey.

She left in a happy daze, escorted by Mark Belfoy and Neville Longbottom. They had apparently become as thick as thieves, and Mark had become a regular whenever Neville had a boys’ night out with Dean and Seamus. Snape was grateful for their help, but rather irritated by the way they played the conspirators or showed off to each other, even if the muggle would not remember.

Before leaving, Mark even pointed two fingers at him, pretending it was a gun. His lips mimed a bang, before he blew dramatically on his fingers. "We left your birthday presents with your thugs," he said with a wink at Ron and Harry. "See you, Don Corleone." Snape huffed, more for show than anything else. Neville snickered, proof that he understood the reference to the Godfather as well, but Ron and Harry looked baffled.

"I'll explain another time," Belfoy assured them. "Duty calls, it would not do to keep the lady waiting."

§§§

After a nice little meal sent by Narcissa with all his favourites, Snape found himself presented with a huge cake in the unmistakable style of Molly Weasley: garish icing colours, letters noisily chasing each other around the top of the cake until he touched it and they rearranged themselves in a glowing 'Happy Birthday Severus’, plus forty candles sparkling in all the colours of the rainbow.

And there are people who still wonder where the Weasley twins got the inspiration for their ludicrous products. Even Albus knew better than to inflict that kind of monstrosity on me.

Fortunately, he knew that, just as one should not judge a book by the cover, you must not judge Molly Weasley's delicious confections by their appearance.

Ron was obviously very pleased with himself and his mother for the 'surprise'. Harry looked as delighted as if it was his own birthday.
Hermione was biting her lip, obviously trying not to burst out laughing at Snape's bemused, almost frightened look when he eyed the cake.

He remembered to thank Weasley properly for the intention, after Hermione kicked him discreetly under the table, and asked him to convey his thanks to his mother. He looked at the expectant faces around and remembered not to Occlude. He half-heartedly took an inspiration and blew.

The candles flickered, changed colour and began to sing "Happy Birthday to you" with the Trio joining in. Snape clutched his fists under the table. He stared at the cake as if it was as dangerous as Nagini, wondering when this nightmare would end.

"The candles blow out only after the third time," Hermione kindly explained.

"Yes," Ron said with surprising enthusiasm, "It's a family tradition. No Weasley birthday without Mum's special candles. I'm sure now that you've tested them, you'll never want any others."

"Just like her Christmas jumpers!" Harry added just as enthusiastically.

Remembering the double, shining silver S in the form of the Slytherin emblem on the green jumper he had received, Snape hoped he did not pale too obviously at being treated as another honorary Weasley.

"Blow!" he heard Hermione command with laughter in her voice.

He closed his eyes and blew.

After they finally ate the cake, Snape announced that he needed to exert himself to help digestion and hastened to the kitchen with the dirty dishes. Ron and Harry happily zapped their way through all the channels for something that would appeal to everyone.

Snape leaned against the sink and exhaled loudly several times.

"It was not so bad."

Only years of discipline in front of the Death Eaters prevented him to start. He had not heard Hermione enter.

"And it was kindly meant," she added.

"I know." It was difficult to sound more gloomily resigned.

She teased him gently. "The look on your face when the candles began to sing!"

His dark stare made her laugh impishly. "I wonder why you can't take things as they come and just enjoy yourself. I was a nice Birthday dinner, no?"

She did not really expect an answer. She got one though, the almost wistful expression on his face proving that he was more serious than his light tone implied. "Too much exposure to Gryffindor temperament generally leaves me with the emotional equivalent of a sunburn."

"The sun can burn," she agreed, "but most of the time, it warms, and it brings light." She impulsively put her hand on his arm. "I wish you will soon find all the light and the warmth you need. You deserve it, you know."

Am I deluding myself? He thought, feeling the warmth of her hand on his arm radiating in his chest. She did not seem ready to withdraw it, and she even smiled that soft smile that seemed to blossom
only for him. *I am doomed*, he thought, feeling the beginning of an embarrassingly straight answer in his trousers.

"*I wouldn't say no to a little light and warmth...*" he said silkily, watching how she was going to react.

He could always pretend he meant it literally if she cringed.

She blushed, but did not look away nor stopped touching him. If anything, her hold on his arm tightened, he watched her pupils dilate and hope flared up, almost blazing.

He imperceptibly began to lean towards her lips.

"*I thought you had more ambition than asking for just a little of something, *" she heard herself say… Before blinking several times at her own boldness, and the strange emotion on his face.

She took a step backward, her hand falling back at her side awkwardly.

Snape felt like he had been suddenly doused in icy water.

She bit her lip, fleetingly recognising her reaction for the bad case of cold feet that it was. Her gut twisting with as much fear as self-loathing, she decided that she had not seen something beautiful die and fade out in Severus's eyes.

It was the right thing to do.

Being attracted to a patient was one thing, acting on it was totally unethical, and whatever she felt, Severus Snape was her patient.

The ache in Severus's chest reminded him only too well of Lily and Minerva – of other beautiful Gryffindor women who smiled and shined, and ensnared him, but always expected better in the end than what he had to offer. At least, Hermione had realised it instantly, before he could burn himself like a moth to a flame.

*Story of my life.*

He smiled ruefully, the way she always found so sad and so enticing at the same time.

"*Bah! People will often promise more than they can really give, no use asking for more than they have to offer...*" He said in a light tone that sounded painfully like a reproach in her guilty conscience. "*I can speak. Severus Snape... Forty years old, ex-Death Eater and bastard extraordinaire.*"

"*Severus!"* she chided gently, wishing things were different – that she was different, and could throw her arms round his neck and prove him how gladly whatever he had to offer would be received… But she just could not. "*You haven't drunk enough to get this maudlin, even if it's your birthday.*"

"*Yes, Witch. Remind me how old I am.*" The corners of his mouth twitched upwards but it did not reach his eyes.

Resolutely, she ignored the persistent little voice telling her that Severus deserved better from her. That she deserved better, too, and that she was wasting a chance of happiness for the both of them.

They heard Harry calling, "*Hey! You must come watch this!*" before he burst out laughing, as did Ron at some funny sketch.
"Coming!" Hermione called. She flashed Snape a last, contrite smile and all but fled the kitchen.

He did not move.

To think he had very nearly made a fool of himself by kissing her for good this time! He had only himself to blame for seeing more than kindness and empathy in her behaviour, and it was not the first time either.

With a snort, he began to wash the dishes – the muggle way, to buy himself enough time to recover his composure.

$$\text{§§§}$$

10th January 2000 – D-7

"Rita Skeeter has accepted Madam Yaxley's invitation and Kingsley finally endorsed it," Ron announced. "But he said to tell you that you're playing with fire."

Snape dismissed the Minister's warning with a flick of the hand.

"The meeting will begin at 15:00, under Auror supervision..."  

"You mean our supervision, I hope?" Harry asked.

"Of course. Skeeter accepted, although she doesn't know yet that it is you and me," he added with a smirk.

Harry smiled nastily, too. He still had scores to settle with the journalist, and he was very much looking forward to watch the odious woman's reaction when she recognised them. It was not his style, but just for her, he felt capable of a little abuse of authority.

$$\text{§§§}$$

It was a rather smug Rita Skeeter who entered Alexia Yaxley's office at 14:55 precisely. Everything in her stance, the shine of her bejewelled glasses or her deceptively simple clothes exuded confidence.

Since Snape was under heavy protection at a secret location, no actual meeting would take place but an interview via Madam Yaxley's Floo had been proposed and eagerly accepted. The Aurors responsible of Snape's personal safety would be present. Alexia whispered that they may even authorise a privacy spell if it was cast by Professor Snape.

The Prophet's star journalist was a seasoned veteran of all kind of verbal, social and political warfare and she did not lack courage.

So, Rita Skeeter looked serene while Alexia Yaxley asked someone unseen for clearance—obviously an Auror, judging by what she could see of formal robes, even when an arm waved a threatening wand at her for detection spells.

She did not react when she was told, not very politely, to put her wand on Alexia's desk and step ahead with "no foolish moves."

She did not react when her Dicta-quill was sent flying against the wall and fell piteously on the floor with a curt "unauthorised item" for sole warning.

She did not react when soot suddenly fell from the chimney as she was leaning inside. It was an old
trick, and the repelling charms on her hair and clothes activated before she was hit.

She did not react when she realised who the Aurors attending Snape. She allowed herself to dismiss Potter and Weasley entirely by treating them as beneath-notice underlings – though she could have sworn the soot was a gift from the redhead, considering his brothers’ propensity for stupid, underbred (though profitable) jokes.

She did not react when she saw that the pretentious little mudblood stood in a corner, her lips pressed in clear disapproval and showing off in her St Mungo’s green robes.

She did not betray her surprise either at Snape's shorter, strangely mesmerizing haircut despite the clearly muggle inspiration, or when she realised that the myriad of little lines that criss crossed the left side of his face were not small wrinkles – **he's not that old!** She reminded herself– but scars.

Rita Skeeter just smiled seraphically and saluted Snape with a cheerful, "**Hello, Professor! Nice to see you again.**"

The answer was as short and glacial as expected before he sat in a chair in front of the fireplace. "**Miss Skeeter.**"

She never stopped smiling and even exaggerated the fake sweetness in her voice, turning it in an insinuating, practically insulting tone. "**I'm thrilled that you seem ready at last to offer your point of view to the public. You can rest assured that I will not publish anything before the 'official proceedings' are closed... But you know people ask only for the truth – all the truth. My readers want to know everything about you: your work as a spy... Your relationship with famous Death Eaters... And glorious defendants of the Light.**"

Her voice dropped coldly, almost threateningly. "**I am certainly eager to hear all about it myself.**"

His face was as unreadable as ever as he drawled, "**You're too modest. You were a close friend of Bellatrix Black yourself, to name only one. You possibly have more information about what she was in private than I do.**"

Rita Skeeter merely sneered when she heard the Trio's gasps of surprise.

To learn that Rita Skeeter had been close to Voldemort's unhinged lover sent cold shivers down the spine, but the journalist answered without batting an eyelid, "**We just happened to be the same age and to be sorted together. I don't see why the hazards of my Hogwarts education would impugn on my work ethics. Or are you prejudiced against Slytherins, Professor Snape?**"

"**I don't speak of Hogwarts, Miss Skeeter,**" he chided. "**I have just to call on my very sought after memories, and I happen to remember meeting you at countless private receptions in notorious Death Eater circles.**"

Skeeter brushed off Snape's words without the least hint of uneasiness. "**It may have happened for the sake of old school friendship but I do not think you're one who has interest to dwell too much on connexions with the Death Eaters, Professor.**"

"**Oh, but you are much mistaken, Miss Skeeter,**" he countered just as easily, almost with a smile. "**The Ministry is still very keen to learn about the people who gravitated around the Death Eaters.**"

"**For your information, Professor, many have tried to blackmail or threaten me in the past,**" she said crisply. "**Nobody's ever succeeded because there's just nothing to blackmail me with.**" She ignored the little snort that came from Granger's side. "**I can't believe a man of your intelligence tried to lure...**"
me into an interview to browbeat me into submission."

Snape smirked, which turned her own smile to nasty. "I never supposed one could browbeat you, as you phrase it."

Skeeter summoned whatever self-righteousness she could to assert, "I just make sure information reaches the public."

"Yes, you do make the information, I'll give you that," drawled Snape. "Well, you might be interested in informing your readers that I plan to return to Potions brewing and research as soon as possible."

"No coming back to Hogwarts, then?"

"No."

"I've no doubt many parents will be relieved to hear this. Harry Potter, here, has claimed that you always acted to protect him and the other students, but there have been quite a few questions asked about how very closely you approached the matter of... protection," she insinuated. She smirked when Harry positively growled, before asking, almost genuinely, "I heard Headmistress McGonagall offered you whatever teaching position you wish, Potions or DADA, but maybe it is too difficult to step down to teacher again when you've been Headmaster?"

"Teaching never was my true vocation."

Ron could hardly restrain himself from guffawing at the cool understatement. He instantly managed to look contrite but ruined the effect by trying to catch Harry’s eye. His friend was stubbornly looking ahead, though a tell-tale twitch of his mouth proved he felt just the same.

Rita Skeeter briefly glanced at the Aurors. "And what is your true vocation, Professor?"

"Research. There are entire fields of potions that are totally neglected." In a dangerously low voice, he declared, "you may be interested to learn that the previous government asked me to develop a draught that would be deadly on certain kinds of flying insects, while having no obnoxious effects on the rest of the environment. It is licensed but certain... events have prevented my delivering it until now."

The journalist uttered some non committal sound that could pass for interested as Snape carried on quite pedantically, "Beetles, for example, carry such harmful irritants that it had been judged wise by Corban Yaxley, when he headed the DMLE, to prevent their entering restricted areas of the Ministry. He never had time to implement it, but you must see that this product could interest a lot of people."

"How wonderful!" the journalist said, through slightly clenched teeth that still tried to pass for a smile. "But rather mundane. One would think you would create more prestigious brews."

"I don't do prestigious, Miss Seeker, only useful. I just wanted to warn you against the very pernicious effects of coming into contact with flying beetles."

"How solemn you are, for a mere insecticide. You sound practically threatening, Professor."

"Threatening, me?" he tut-tutted. "In front of two Aurors," he inclined his head towards Harry and Ron who were just grinning wickedly, and gestured in Hermione's direction, "And a neutral witness? How could I ever hope to get away with it?"
They stared at each other for quite some time, while the younger ones grew increasingly restless at the silence and total absence of action.

Snape suddenly turned to Potter and Weasley, and Granger stepped up to take part in the discussion. Rita watched Snape whisper urgently and the Aurors look outraged and clearly denying him what he wanted. It looked like the mudblood was taking Snape's side, though, and the two Aurors, obviously with the utmost reluctance, seemed to make a concession.

Snape turned again towards the journalist.

"I wish to discuss more privately and comfortably with you, but my minders refuse to let me out of their sight. Orders, you understand. Would you accept to come through if I cast a silencing spell around the two of us?"

She looked from Snape to each member of the trio, pondering her options. Very quickly, she said, pointing at Hermione, "I will if she leaves. The presence of Aurors, I can understand but I don't see what the little Miss Perfect does here."

"It's all right with me," volunteered Hermione, before simply walking to the kitchen.

Ron marched to the Floo. "All right, Skeeter, but no messing about," he warned.

"My, my," she sneered, sotto voce. "Aren't we fancying ourselves!"

She came across the Floo almost regally. If she read the situation correctly – and she generally did – it was Severus who ordered his former students around, not the opposite.

Things were looking up at last.

§§§

"So, what did you see in her mind?" asked Hermione, entering the sitting room as soon as she heard the soft "woosh" signalling that Rita Skeeter had Flooed back to Madam Yaxley's. "It must have been favourable if you invited her to come through for so long."

Ron looked at Snape in awe. "You used Legilimency on Rita Skeeter? You gave no sign... Wow!"

Snape shrugged. "It was brief, and I saw only what she wanted me to see. Not that I was surprised, she just wanted to make a point."

"She's an Occlumens too?" asked Harry, rather disgusted. Occlumency was a touchy subject with him, one he really had trouble mastering as an Auror, despite regular training. He was easily the least proficient at it in the new batch of Aurors – in the whole Aurory if truth be told, and his inability was in a fair way to become one of the recurring jokes of the Department, like the Head's susceptibility to Confundus.

"The lady is indeed quite resourceful and she at least applies herself," said Snape with a thin, slightly mocking smile. Harry had to remind himself that it is bad form to hex the people you are supposed to protect, even if you have developed a tentative friendship with them.

"So?" insisted Hermione.

"An old friend of mine."

"Yaxley?"
"Another one… Someone who's dead. And she has no idea Yaxley might be involved."

"Won't you tell us who it is? I think we have the right, to be able to help properly?!" Hermione had never been able to stand being left in the dark, and Snape's clam habits were a constant irritation. She almost tapped her foot in frustration but managed to hold back her temper – not realising that her hair was not so easily tamed and once again giving her away.

Potter and Weasley instantly froze. Snape, as always, admired the way her ringlets bristled. It made him feel again like the naughty boy who enjoyed pulling Lily's plaits, even when it earned him a well-placed hex.

Outwardly, he was at his most forbidding, when he answered, "In the present case, it would only be an infringement on Miss Skeeter's private life."

Harry and Hermione snorted while Ron guffawed, "That's rich! She doesn't respect anyone's private life and we should respect hers?"

Snape answered with asperity, "Believe me when I tell you I saw nothing I didn't already know."

Ron insisted, "You must tell us."

"No."

"It's not fair."

Snape's temper erupted. "No it isn't! Life is not fair! People are not fair! And the fact remains that I betrayed all my friends to get rid of the Dark Lord and to save people who despise me with all their heart and wish me dead!" He hissed almost directly in Ron's face, "So, let's leave my Death Eater friends what little dignity they have left and don't ask me to prattle about on their private life!"

Before any of the trio could answer, Snape stormed into the kitchen and the door crashed so violently behind him that the walls reverberated it. "Out!" they heard and a small 'pop!' told them Fuzzy must have Apparated away. Almost immediately, the sound of crashed cupboard doors confirmed that it was safer to let the Master of Spinner's End vent his temper by preparing the tea.

"Ouch!" Said Ron, with mock fright. "For those who had forgotten, Severus's name is still Snape." Both Hermione and Harry laughed, which considerably lightened the mood.

Muttering sounds went on and the brutal, shrill sound of metal grating on the tiling set everyone's teeth on edge. They winced painfully but Harry laughed. "As long as he's aiming at the chair, it's all right."

Hermione brightened. "He's still using the chair? Good."

"Eh?" asked Ron, feeling totally at sea.

"It's part of his therapy. It means he's taking it seriously."

"I didn't realise," said Harry, "but it makes sense. He's not exactly softer but he's not directed his anger at me for a very long time. He seems to use the chair as his punch bag, physically and verbally."

Ron coughed theatrically. "He's still got a temper I say."

"Bah!" Hermione shrugged. "As you say, he's still Snape. And the chair therapy is very helpful. It
enables you to voice your feelings even if the real culprit isn't physically present—instead of boiling inside."

Ron privately thought he preferred the Aurory counselor's method: he put him in front of a Muggle punching ball they had nicknamed Voldie, Bellatrix or whomever he had scores to settle with... A certain Potions master, for example... Which enabled him to now face Snape with equanimity.

Hermione added mischievously, "You can't imagine what I used to fling to your head during my own counselling sessions, when I imagined either of you in the chair."

Seeing their faces, she burst out laughing. A clear, warm belly laugh they had not heard for a long time. A little doubtful at first, they finally let themselves get infected by her merriment and soon joined her.

Snape chose this very moment to open the door and send a levitating tray to the coffee table. They tried to bottle back their laugh, as if they were still errant students.

Snape wrinkled his nose in disgust, helped himself and sat as far as possible from the infernal trio. Unable to look at the Professor, Ron looked to his left... Only to meet Harry's dancing eyes. It set the both of them again. Hermione was biting the inside of her cheek to stay calm.

"I thought you were... Interested in what transpired with Miss Skeeter. It seems I was mistaken."

"Sorry."

"Yes, yes, we want to know."

"Pray, tell us."

Snape stood, totally unimpressed by the chorus. "I'll come back in a while. Hopefully you'll act a little more... mature."

He pointed at his Foe-glass on the coffee table.

"I'll just let you consider one thing, for the time being. While Rita spoke with me, it never reacted."

§§§

Snape quietly stepped up to his room and automatically put a silencing spell, to hide the sound of his pacing.

The little heart to heart with Rita Skeeter had been enlightening but he felt once again on a razor's edge.

Here was yet another story he had not been ready to share. Even if it was bound to happen in the end, he did not relish the prospect of losing the very gratifying if totally undeserved respect his little band of self-appointed protectors had been showing him since he was back at Spinner's End.

There had to be a limit to what they would accept, and he was very much afraid this limit was Rita, who was a painful reminder that he had once truly been a Death Eater.

Chapter End Notes
Betas for this chapter: Tra8erse and JOdel. All remaining (or new) errors are solely mine.

Kudos if you catch the Alan Rickman's reference!

Sorry for the wait between chapters, I would solemnly swear it won't happen again, but… Really, thank you for your patience.

The War High Court and Plenary High Court are directly inspired by two French Special Courts. Ministerial misconduct must be judged by a Court composed of 12 Parliament members and three Justices. The President would theoretically be judged by a High Court composed of the entire Parliament. Both jurisdictions are highly contested as much too political, impractical and very costly to organise. They are supposed to be abolished soon.
Snape reluctantly left his room and returned to the sitting room as if he was already marching to his trial.

The Trio were eagerly waiting for him. What was left in the teapot had long grown cold but he could not care less. In spite of the heresy, he just cast a heating charm, poured himself a cup and stood sipping slowly, in a last attempt to delay the explanations.

He did not have to think long how to introduce the subject. As often happened, Hermione cut the ground from under his feet. "We've been thinking..."

"How unusual," he commented dryly, making Ron and Harry chuckle in spite of themselves.

She did not even dignify it with a glare. "During the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Rita Skeeter sought Draco out for information and she trusted him to keep her secret," she stated. "So, they must be family. The link between you must be one of the Lestranges. You were forever thrown in with them. Knowing you, I suppose you'd get closer to Rabastan to avoid speaking with Bellatrix and her husband. My bet is that your common friend was Rabastan."

Snape raised both eyebrows in appreciation but felt necessary to give them all a stern warning before going on. "What I will tell you must go no farther than this room, or she'll back-pedal. Understood?"

Reluctantly and with various expressions of disgust, they finally agreed.

Snape silently went to pick yesterday's Prophet in the magazine rack and looked for the photo showing him being friends with Rabastan Lestrange and Evan Rosier. He sat down as well with an inward sigh and put it on the coffee table, turned so that his three former students could look at it the right way.

"As you have at least partially guessed, Rita Skeeter is the pen name of Henrietta Lestrange, née Rosier. I knew her as my friend Evan's pesky sister before her marriage to Rabastan Lestrange. Add that they were cousins, since Narcissa's mother was a Rosier, that Bellatrix was Rita's bosom friend even before their first year at Hogwarts, and you can understand how often we have been thrown together since my students days." His mouth twisted into a disenchanted, almost apologetic smile as he met Harry's gaze. "I already told you that. I just omitted to explain that Henry was in fact Rita."

Harry pursed his lips. Hermione and Ron had helped him connect the missing dots but it hurt that Severus did not trust him enough to tell him the whole truth, although he supposed it was not so bad
to get Snape's gut-wrenching revelations only one at a time.

"So," he said with a resigned sigh, "What did she tell you?"

§§§

Once Rita Skeeter sat in front of him and he cast the Muffliato, Snape had been the first to speak. "The wizard whose life mirrors Tom Riddle's... You have been very busy on my behalf... Henry." He knew using the old pet name would rile her up.

Sure enough, the journalist hissed, "Don't you dare call me that! Not when I am only good enough to be 'Miss Skeeter' in front of your little friends and have to swallow your pitiful little threats."

"I didn't say anything that they could not find out by themselves," he said coldly, refusing to be baited. "Besides, imagine my surprise when they told me that you're an Animagus and I must be cautious about what I say near an open window or when I see a beetle flying around."

"Yes, I imagine you must have been laughing." Even as she was speaking, Rita Skeeter appeared focused on taking notes, careful to keep her lower face hidden.

Snape immediately took the hint. He brought his seat much closer and leaned in such a way that neither Harry nor Ron could read on their lips, although they certainly tried.

"I certainly did not feel like laughing," he answered seriously. "I know much too well that it is sheer madness to antagonize you."

She shrugged, although she was pleased by the appreciation and wielded her quill, but not so menacingly that Harry or Ron would interpose. "I will always have the last word, and the last laugh."

"Incidentally, tell me if your recent articles are your way of getting back at them, because I think I am the offended party here."

She remained unimpressed. "I would rather say that makes two of us."

"So, this is revenge for Voldemort's defeat?" She winced at the name. "For trying to destroy that madness?"

"That would be rather hypocritical coming from me."

Snape bit his lip, as he was growing impatient. They had not enough time for the Slytherin game of metaphorically circling each other and showing off for as long as possible, but Rita had always enjoyed it too much for her own good.

"The Order of the Phoenix has my back. For once," he declared. "Oh! Certainly not for my sake," he added, lying through his teeth as smoothly as when he was a spy, with barely an increase in his heartbeat – that he was confident would not even show on a muggle lie detector, another perk of being an Occlumens.

Rita nodded briefly. She knew how he had been treated in the past by Dumbledore's right-thinking supporters. It had been Snape's life insurance amongst the Death Eaters and their set to let them see in what little esteem the Slytherin turncoat was held by everyone in the Order – except by Dumbledore, of course, the only one who counted.

"Shacklebolt and a few others certainly can fear for themselves the consequences of these attacks
against my character."

"As they should," snickered Rita. Still pretending to take notes, she asked suavely, "You're not that confident about the outcome of your trial, then?"

"I've never been."

"One of us is certainly closer to Azkaban than the other," she stated without looking up. "And I don't believe it's me."

And yet, you sent as clear a call for help as I ever received from you. "Are you really that glad?"

"That it's not me? Definitely."

"Rita," he chided softly, shaking his head.

"Alright," she said with a small pout. "I'm not that glad, for all the good it will do you. I just don't have much of a choice. A lot of people obviously want your head, and Shacklebolt's, of course... Although they will be satisfied with sending him back to the Aurory to chase petty thieves, as long as you're with 'the others', as they say."

"With the others? Ad Patres, I would suppose?"

"A good Death Eater is a dead Death Eater," she confirmed, her true feelings on the matter only betrayed by her scribbling a little too hard on her notepad.

"I don't understand what's in this for you."

"Money."

It was clearly a bitter admission, coming from her, and Snape arched a curious eyebrow. "Rita Skeeter taking bribes? That's a novelty."

"I'm not yet reduced to that," she protested, before admitting resentfully, "But I'm not far. Thanks to your friends in the Ministry."

"Not all friends, Rita," he corrected. "Allies, I would call most of them, but that's good enough for me. And I have a hard time to believe that they are behind whatever you blame me or them for."

"If they didn't do it, it must at least be someone of their set."

"It is not unheard of lackeys to wilfully misunderstand orders to pursue their own ends." Seeing that she seemed inclined to harp on her grievances, Snape gestured in the direction of Potter and Weasley. "You seem to have your own history with these two, but..." He put a hand on his heart, rather melodramatically. "For the love of me," he drawled, "They would use their influence on your behalf."

"Little Potter, I can believe," the journalist snickered. "He's been all moist eyes and tremors in his voice when speaking about you, ever since the Battle of Hogwarts."

"Stockholm syndrome, maybe?" Snape commented drily.

She smiled, totally unrepentant. "I know it hurts, Severus, but they have me by the throat."

"That's what I deduced. I've had my doubts for some time, but the photograph you used on my birthday was certainly a dead give away."
"You know I would never use Evan, or even Stan, like that if I did not need to make a point."

He nodded. She took it for an encouragement.

"They have taken everything," she said, gauging his reaction, but there was none. "They've turned up at Gringott's and seized my personal vault... My dowry... My royalties... The last Rosier heirlooms," she enumerated with growing resentment. "'Pre-emptive seizure, pending investigation', they call it... Supposedly to determine if Stan didn't use me to launder stolen funds or to plan his own insolvency by putting money in my name."

"Mm-mmm," was Snape's only comment, although he pursed his lips in a thin, meditative line.

"I have always been very careful, so, the information could only come from someone with an intimate knowledge of the Inner Circle. Someone like you." There was no particular venom in her tone – no more than usual, that is.

"So, you actually thought that I had betrayed you?"

"There are not many survivors of the Inner Circle. It had to be you, or Lucius," she argued. "But it's not Lucius's style to kick someone who's down. At least, without warning."

"Meaning that it's my style?" He was almost amused, this time.

"Meaning that there's little you wouldn't do if you're convinced it's for... A greater good."

"I am not Dumbledore!" His answer sounded petulant, even to his own ears. You could give Rita this, that she was particularly talented when it came to finding the chink in the armour.

She smirked, glad to have scored a point. "I can't see what there would be in this for Lucius. It's obvious he's just dust under Shacklebolt's shoes and isn't likely to regain his influence any time soon. resorting to denouncement certainly wouldn't help with our so virtuous Minister."

"So? What's in it for me?" he asked, with as much irony as he could muster.

"On reflection, I don't understand why you would do it, either," she admitted, almost apologetically. "Except maybe to humour the Golden Trio or the Weasleys, but even that seems unlikely. They're certainly as clueless as ever. If they knew anything, they would have confronted me as soon as I turned up, if only to boast about my getting my just deserves."

She chuckled mirthlessly before mentioning, almost as an after-thought, "And there's a trace on my wand. Do you know that the DMLE arbitrarily decides which relative of a Death Eater will be traced like a common criminal or an under-age wizard?" She sounded almost accusing now. "Is it the world you dreamed of?"

"Wizarding Britain has never been the world I dreamed of," he corrected. "But anything will be better than what Voldemort had in store for us, no?"

"Well, this new world made me desperate enough that I didn't hesitate much when Fudge's envoy approached me."

"Fudge?"

"At least, that's what they pretend, and I did not look any further when they offered help... And very interesting, very confidential information about your coming trial."
He gave her a shrewd look. "But? There has to be a but, since you're here."

"There's something excessive in the way they insist on ruining you so thoroughly. I'd even call it fanatic. It's obviously much more personal than political or anything else."

Snape raised both eyebrows. For Rita to speak of fanaticism, her contact must be pretty vindictive.

"I know you can take whatever they will send your way." He inclined his head at the compliment. "What I don't like," she stated with hard steel both in her voice and in her glare, "is being manipulated and taken for a fool! And certainly not now that I'm free at last of everything and everyone that was even remotely connected to the Death Eaters."

Daughter, sister, wife, friend of Death Eaters... Rita had certainly fought hard to avoid getting embroiled and following any other path than her own.

"It would be so easy to just go along, you know," she insisted, "even if I have nothing specifically against you."

"So, I ask you again, what's the 'but'?"

"I don't trust them," she admitted. "There's something unsettling in their eyes when they think I'm not looking at them." She met his gaze squarely this time. "They have the eyes of Death Eaters."

"They look like me, then."

"Don't be a dolt, Severus. We both know neither you nor Evan really had your heart in it, even if you have a mark on your arm and those don't."

There was an unusual stretch of silence.

"A lot of people have scores to settle with me," he said, at last but without the least bit of bitterness, more like a scientific observation. "I did not make many friends over the years, but neither did you. The chances are, the people who are after me owe you a little pay back, too."

Once again, she glanced briefly from her notes, a sure proof that he had caught her attention, but he let her ask the question.

*Quid pro quo.*

"Any idea who we're dealing with?" she asked in a detached tone of voice.

*We.*

At last.

"What if I were to tell you that Corban Yaxley is not as 'missing' as the Ministry pretend?"

Her eyes widened briefly but she hid it promptly. "Corban..." she said, her voice trailing to end with a sudden note of glee. "Oh! But I could make a fortune with this. The scorned lover's revenge... And on whom? On Lily Potter's hopeless suitor! Really, Severus, you don't make things easy for me... Tempting me with your impossible love triangles!"

Snape merely looked bored. She abandoned riling him up and instantly turned deadly serious. "There must be others besides Corban. He may be pulling strings in the background, but he can't do everything alone."
"There are," he confirmed with a nod.

He briefly glimpsed fear on her face as she asked sharply, "Who? Fudge runs only for Fudge. He wouldn't help Death Eaters knowingly, no matter what's in it for him."

"Not sure yet. You understand I am a little... Tied down... These days, when it comes to looking for information."

"Do not look at me like that," she protested. "I am not a spy."

He raised an ironical eyebrow and produced a faint buzzing sound.

She grunted. "I refuse to risk my life."

"We have Gryffindors for that," he said, pointing his chin at Harry and Ron.

"Mmmph!" she said dismissively but she perked up a little. "In any case, Corban and Company know that I am an Animagus and I will certainly watch out."

"And he thought nothing about killing you if you tried anything on him," he reminded her. "The potion to kill Animagi in insect form was a command of his."

"Does he have some?"

"No. As I said, I never delivered the potion." With a glare, he added severely, "I would also like to think that you don't believe me capable of handing it to him without warning you."

An infinitesimal shrug was the only confirmation that she heard him.

"How long has this been going on for you?" he asked.

"October 20th."

Around the time the Wizengamot voted the date of his trial. Nice coincidence.

"Quite a long time to live without money," he acknowledged.

"If not for the Goblins," she declared, slightly defensive, "I would not have a Knut to my name. I can't even cash my monthly wages without having to petition at least four different departments at the Ministry, in triplicate form!"

Rita droned about the tangle of finances, legalities and administrative pettiness she had to deal with while Snape considered the implications.

The Goblins. Small surprise, he reflected, since adversity makes strange bedfellows, but, here, the consequences could be explosive.

As soon as Rita made a reputation for herself in the British media and her articles began to make the front page, the Goblins took to subscribing massively to the Prophet, thus keeping the newspaper afloat and even prosperous, in spite of more respectable competition. It was also a well-guarded secret of her publisher that Rita's books sold much better on the Goblin market than amongst wizards, and that she wrote chiefly for them.

In fact, everything that intelligent and respectable wizards found offensive in Rita's prose garnered instant admiration from the Goblins. They found her magnificent, epic, lyrical... There had been scandalised whispers at the Prophet, soon dealt with by the owners who recognised the potential for
profit, when Goblin booksellers first asked for translations – it seems that her most humiliating, disrespectful or abusive articles had an erotic appeal in Gobbledegook.

Snape remembered much too well Rabastan’s condescending amusement turning to sour suspicion after his escape from Azkaban, when Rita refused to return to the role of the complacent, pureblood trophy wife. She’d had to fend for herself after he was arrested and condemned for the attack on the Longbottoms, at a time when everyone turned their backs not only on the Lestranges but on the Rosiers as well, after the scandal of her brother Evan killing himself rather than being arrested, too.

She had managed very well on her own, thank you very much. She saw no reason to abandon her career, her new freeing identity and to spend more time at the Lestrange mansion than for the minimum outward show with a wizard who was physically and mentally destroyed by his prison years, and a mere shadow of the man she married.

Soon, the situation turned to regular fights in the Lestrange household. Why would a high ranking Gringott’s executive like Ragnok make it his personal business to help Rita make her money work for her? Why so many ‘business’ appointments, as she called them? Why would she agree to cover all Gringott’s functions, even abroad, and always with that odious Ragnok, if she was not somehow bewitched or beholden to him?

For the appreciation, she said. The Goblins paid her generously, offered her the best accommodations to cover their events and made a point of presenting her with their best investment opportunities. Why would she not enjoy being recognised?

A likely story! Rabastan not only resented her success, he could not admit that a pureblood witch from the sacred twenty-eight chose to spend time with inferior beings. They were all hypocritical, traitorous perverts, who sucked the money of wizards and pretended they were their equals. There had to be some strange, unnatural spell of theirs on his wife, or she was more depraved than he knew, that she preferred Ragnok’s company to his own.

He had proofs that she had disappeared for weeks on end in the summer of 1995 and even stopped collaborating with the Prophet until he was returned to her very reluctant affections. Where would she have been but with Ragnok?

Rita never explained that she had been kept in a glass cell, slowly starving on leaves suitable for a real beetle but not a grown witch, until she was broken enough to promise anything to get away.

She hated the little mudblood, who never considered that she was not really a beetle. She feared her, too, because of unconscious memories of her giant, all-powerful shape looming. She swore to herself that she would deal with Miss Perfect when she least expected it, but she would never, ever, ask help from a Death Eater, and certainly not her pathetic husband.

All the Death Eaters freed from Azkaban were, of course, in very poor shape. Unsurprisingly, Rabastan found himself unable to satisfy his wife… But, surely, it was entirely her fault. Certainly, another proof that she had not been faithful, while he languished in Azkaban and fantasized about her. (And about a few others, yes, but that was not the point, and she had no right to change the subject).

She did not respect him anymore. She did not want him anymore. She made it abundantly clear when he came to her bed. She closed her eyes, waited for him to finish and always made sure that he did not fall asleep in her bed. She forbade him to return when yet another medical exam proved that he was definitely sterile, thanks to the Aurors’s zeal in avenging the Longbottoms.

Yes, Henrietta had changed, and not for the better. Just wait. After the Dark Lord’s victory, the
Goblins would be put back in their place, and errant wives, too.

They dragged family and friends into their quarrel. Rodolphus, whose marriage arrangements made him despise females as a matter of principle, sided with his brother and treated her like a scarlet woman. Bellatrix championed Henry, more to annoy her husband than anything else and tried, once again, to convince her that she would do much better for herself by taking the Dark Mark, too. She would then be free to write and work for the glory of the Dark Lord, and never mind her useless and stupid husband!

Rita suggested that she would consider it, but also insinuated that she would not be satisfied with less than Bellatrix had. It effectively ended all discussions, since Bellatrix would never willingly share Voldemort's favours with anyone else, or introduce him to a potential rival.

The Malfoys prudently remained neutral, while Snape declined as many invitations at Rabastan's as he could. Without Evan, he could hardly stomach Rabastan's company any more. Azkaban had turned the shallow wizard he remembered into yet another radicalised bigot, even less able to think by himself than before. Besides, Snape refused to do anything that would turn Rita Skeeter against him. She was much too perceptive, much too dangerous, too, with a mere quill and he had already enough to deal with.

Things turned ugly when Rita published Harry Potter's interview in the Quibbler. It was discussed in the Inner Circle of Voldemort whether she should be punished, and Rabastan did not even try to defend his wife.

She had told the incensed Lestranges that Dumbledore's side had blackmailed her into writing that paper. The brothers refused to believe her. It just happened a little too conveniently not to be another means to hammer into Rabastan that he could take his jail-fed obsessions and fanaticism and put them somewhere the sun did not shine.

It got her a separation if not a divorce, but still too much attention from her husband's Lord.

Bellatrix, for friendship's sake, interceded with Voldemort. For once, she was only too glad to enroll Snape's help, and Lucius as a matter of course, into defending Henry.

Lucius declared that she had always obligingly written smear articles against Dumbledore when needed or on any people he brought to her attention, and that there was no sign, in spite of the drama of her marital strife, that her political sympathies had changed.

The Potions master could only deny any knowledge of the circumstances of Harry Potter's interview, but it sounded so typical of Dumbledore that Snape was actually convinced that the Headmaster had hatched the whole scheme. And after all, as the three of them together managed to persuade the Dark Lord, there was not much harm done. The Ministry and most people still refused to believe the Potter boy or Dumbledore, and the simple fact that they had chosen Lovegood's rubbish paper discredited the whole endeavour.

Rita played least in sight for a long time after this, until Severus offered her a very special project on a plate. It would help her find favour with the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters again and turn to be very, very profitable.

It was still their dirty little secret – but for how long? Snape wondered. He did not look forward to yet another uncomfortable explanation when his Gryffindor support team learned the truth. And he had not yet convinced Rita to collaborate.

"Think what you will of Kingsley Shacklebolt, Arthur or Percy Weasley," he insisted, while she
sniffed scornfully, "It's never been their way to abuse power. I'll rather believe that certain people staged the whole thing to get your help to destroy me."

"I don't know any more what to believe," she admitted. "But so long as you can help me, I will return the favour."

"I will need at least a few days," he warned.

"I suppose it's unavoidable. For my part, I already have several other articles ready to be printed," Rita countered. "There's nothing I can do to stop them now." She certainly did not look as sorry as she implied.

"It's certainly not the time to raise any suspicion of an understanding between us," he said, with all the confidence and the lack of interest for his reputation that he did not feel but was used to present to the world. "The papers must obviously go on."

"I am glad we're in agreement," she said with a shark grin.

"You will have to work with them," he intimated with a discreet finger motion towards Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. Both Aurors were still trying to watch and looked properly frustrated if somewhat resigned that Snape would always stand in the way.

"I would work with the devil to end this nightmare."

"Many people would say you already do."

"A compliment, Severus? I see the rumours are true: you've turned soft."

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"I don't ask you to like her or to become friends with her," Snape rapped out, none too gently. "But she's our best hope to find out how far Yaxley's influence goes. She had no idea he's still around —"

"You told her?!" interrupted Harry, revolted.

Already on the defensive, Snape snarled back, "I have not survived twenty years as a spy without learning to take calculated risks. Everything with Rita must be quid pro quo. So, yes! I told her."

Ron snorted, "Quid Pro Quo? Some friend she is!"

"Be thankful we can give her what she wants." He looked them up and down with all the disgust Professor Snape ever could express. "At least, I hope you will. Unless you don't care about really turning her against us all."

"Don't ask me to do anything illegal for that bitch," Harry warned.

"Have no fear, Potter," spat Snape disdainfully. "No one would ever dream of asking you to sully your hands. You will be able to be the knight in shining armour, as usual."

Hermione interposed between them at once, before things could derail even more. "Alright!" she said forcefully, silencing them through sheer surprise, and the power of intimidation of her bristling hair that proved she really meant business.

She pointed Harry back to the sofa. "You don't even know what you would have to do. For now, you shut up and listen."
She turned to Severus with a ferocious glare. "We're not idiots," she declared.

He snorted, in a rather insulting manner, which prompted her to take a few steps further until she could jab a finger at his chest. "Oh! No, you don't, Severus Snape! You may not be proud of friends like Rita Skeeter, but there is no reason to regress to treating us like errant students. You owe us a real, good explanation, and do cut Harry some slack! She's an unregistered Animagus! It's still an Azkaban offense and he's an Auror!"

Snape stepped back against the fireplace, rather than batting her hand away as had been his first reflex. He crossed his arms defiantly, feeling at a loss for words. She was right that he felt guilty to have to defend Rita to them, and he always found it destabilizing that she could read him so easily.

Hermione exhaled loudly, deflating instantly as he backed out of her reach and she realised how aggressive she had just been. She looked around, trying to calm down.

When her eyes met Ron's, he held his hands up and cried comically, "I surrender!"

She put her hands on her hips indignantly but could not help smiling in the end and sat down beside him.

"To save you all from a guilty conscience," Snape sneered, still from his refuge by the fireplace, "I have to inform you that she is registered."

There was a chorus of "What?", "No!" and "Impossible!"

"Hardly. We have a wonderful Ministry, after all," he said, almost drolly. "If an Animagus petitions them and explains that they would endanger their personal safety, reputation or legitimate career interests by going public, they can have a special dispensation and have their name removed from the public registry."

"Special dispensation!" Hermione snorted. "I guess you mean bribes!"

Snape smiled. "Your confidence in our venerable institutions is touching. Of course, the petitioners must have convincing arguments. It just so happens that the Ministry officials always tend to find that generous people are the more convincing."

"How come we’ve never heard of this?" Harry groused. "We're Aurors! We should be able to check if someone's an Animagus or not."

Snape dismissed it with a wave of the hand. "I'm sure there is an accurate list somewhere, 'eyes only', to preserve the appearance of legality."

Ron shared a resigned shrug with his fellow Auror, but when he looked at Hermione, he instantly noticed that her mind was not really there. Something nagged at her and she finally cut in, perplexed, "But if Rita Skeeter didn't fear Azkaban, why did she comply when I blackmailed her into giving up writing for a whole year, and then into interviewing Harry for the Quibbler?"

"Several reasons. First, she wanted a way out of her marriage. Conservative purebloods do not divorce," he told her, seeing her look of incomprehension. "They consider it's just another perversion brought into the magical world by the muggleborn. The best she could hope for was a judicial separation, and the only way to get it was to create such a breach between Rabastan and herself that he would want to get rid of her. Harry's interview was the perfect opportunity."

Hermione made a face as she finally understood that she had been used, when she always believed to be the manipulator.
"And the other reasons?" Ron asked.

"She may not have been at risk of being sent to Azkaban, but a public revelation of her status would still have damaged her career... And her career was the only thing that allowed her to escape her brother's fate."

"Killing herself?" Harry asked, quite puzzled but remembering that Evan Rosier chose suicide to avoid being arrested.

Snape rolled his eyes, showing what he thought of this suggestion. "No. Taking the Dark Mark. You may have a hard time imagining that many people joined just because of the constant family and peer pressure but it was one of the most frequent reasons to join. Evan was the Heir, so their father mostly left Rita alone, but if her abilities had been made public knowledge, there was no way she could have escaped entering Voldemort's service, probably as another spy. And let's not forget dear Bellatrix, who always painted in glowing colours the glory of serving the Dark Lord and promised to take her under her wing to teach her everything there was to know."

"What else?" insisted Ron. "I understand the motivations for writing the interview, but why give up writing for so long, if it's so important for her?"

Snape shrugged, carefully avoiding to let his gaze drift to Hermione. "Who knows? I don't pretend to know everything about Rita Skeeter."

They all knew by now when he was evading a question.

Hermione could not help feeling that she should know. She tried to remember Rita Skeeter, when she tracked her to compel her to interview Harry. The woman did not look like her usual self, then. She had clearly been neglecting herself. At the time, she put it down to money troubles, but now, knowing what she knew about psychological traumas, and what she had lived herself...

She sat bolt upright, suddenly very pale. "It was me, wasn't it? I made her spend a whole summer in a glass jar..."

"Oi!" protested Ron instantly, always ready to side with his friends. "It's not as if she didn't deserve it."

Harry joined his voice to Ron's, although he sounded a little less convinced.

Snape reluctantly looked at Hermione, almost with pity she thought. "Constanz has that special program for former hostages and Azkaban prisoners."

"I know," she said, in a bland voice. "Do you mean that she was a patient of his?"

"I was never told." The tone implied that he did not need Rita or Constanz to tell him to know. "But it is obvious she found ways to cope that are more healthy than most people manage on their own or even within their family circle."

Hermione froze as she suddenly envisioned Rita Skeeter at her most vulnerable, when she finally freed her and the journalist just stood there, without a word or even a glance, before suddenly Apparating away. What would have happened if she had simply returned to her family and her circle of Death Eater friends and they took care of her?

She unconsciously began to rub the cursed scar on her arm.

Bellatrix hated Hermione on principle, for being a mudblood, but Rita Skeeter would have had
personal reasons to seek revenge against her… And a lot of people to help if she had so wished.

The young healer felt her hands get clammy. Snape, though concerned by her obvious distress, felt oddly satisfied that she realised, at last, what could have been the consequences of her ill-conceived attack on the journalist.

He knew Hermione would never have considered killing the beetle she trapped in a jar, as he would have done in her shoes, but it was not the place of a teenaged girl to deal on her own with dangerous foes. Just like Harry Potter, she believed she knew better than the adults.

He always thought Hermione was the most level-headed of the Trio, but what he had learned in the last few days proved that she had not been placed in Gryffindor by mistake.

He had enough memories of what could have happened to her to feed a lifetime of nightmares. Retrospective fright made him harsher than he meant. "You were never a real threat for Rita who could have held your life in her hands if she wanted," he railed. "What made you believe that she could be stupid enough to rely on Draco's discretion, or that of his stupid cronies, if she was unregistered? I told you that you were very, very lucky. She might have sent Rabastan after you! Or she could have denounced you to Voldemort as the instigator of Potter's interview to the Quibbler."

"Enough!" Ron put his arm around Hermione's shoulders as she shook helplessly. "You don't need to rub it in!" Hermione hid her face in Ron's shoulder and made sounds suspiciously like muffled sobs.

Snape frowned. Hermione was no weak damsel, ready to swoon for a harsh word. He had obviously triggered something.

"What's wrong?" he asked, but Ron just pinched his lips and ignored him, busy as he was to pat Hermione's back and whisper soothing words.

He turned to Harry, who watched helplessly and looked stricken. He leaned towards the young man and asked with a murmur, "Is it about Bellatrix and Malfoy Manor?"

Potter nodded but refused to meet his eyes, guilt written all over his face.

'Shit! Severus realised he had blundered big time. He instinctively took the few steps to squat on his haunches in front of Hermione.

There was a déjà vu feeling after Christmas, and even more awkwardness, since they had witnesses this time, but Hermione was more important than his dignity.

"Would it help if I called Alfred?" he asked softly.

Hermione lifted her face from Ron's sweater and made 'no' with both her head and her hand.

Severus could see that she was taking slow, deliberate breathes. He noted grimly that she looked accustomed to deal with panic attacks and deduced that it was not an isolated episode. He felt even more guilty.

At long last, her colour and breath returning back to normal, Hermione smiled, if rather ruefully. "I just over-reacted... But it's better now." She squeezed Ron's shoulder gratefully and sat straighter.

"For all it's worth, I'm sorry," Snape said, rather stiffly, because of their audience.

She dismissed his apology with a small shrug. "It's been a long time since I last had a panic attack, and it's nobody's fault, really. Everything's been so tense today with Skeeter coming here, it was
Severus stood, very much aware of his creaking knees, and sat on the edge of the couch.

Hermione nudged Ron to move sideways, so that Snape could better accommodate himself. He slid slightly closer to oblige but remained stiff, still feeling like a fiend, while she pondered on the fact that she may not have been so on edge in the first place if she had not also been wondering jealously what exactly his relationship with the hateful Rita Skeeter was.

He had cleared things about Lily but, yesterday, there was another insidious little voice in her mind, insinuating that they still did not know who his mysterious lover between the wars was.

And come to think of it, Severus never explained why Rita Skeeter was so eager to leave her husband. Apart from the fact that he was a weak fool turned into a torturer and a fanatic, of course.

Skeeter and Snape had obviously met often in the past, with the same circle of friends and acquaintances... And Rabastan Lestrange spent fourteen years in Azkaban, leaving his wife alone, and free to do as she pleased.

Just during the time frame Snape had that affair with a mysterious older witch, and the journalist was ten years older than him.

But Skeeter was never in the Order of the Phoenix, her reason objected.

Yes, but Minerva had only told Harry that Severus and his lover were "comrades in arms". It might just mean that they both tried to navigate their way amongst the Death Eaters together.

Snape cleared his throat, reminding her that he still had a lot of facts to share about Rita Skeeter.

He paused, though, taking the time to bend low enough for a few strands of hair to fall level to his eyes, so that he would be able to look at Hermione from below them. Old habits died hard, even with shorter hair, and there was still something suspicious and pained in Hermione's eyes that he found difficult to face squarely.

"Oh! For the love of God!" she said at last, a little exasperatedly. She slid closer, lightly smacking his thigh with her hand. "Do go on, I won't break."

Harry was still brooding but cheered up a little at the sight of Snape's look of alarm at being treated like one of the boys.

Snape was more chagrined by the fact that Hermione did not remove her hand. She was rather touchy-feely with the boys and obviously had no inkling about what this could do to a grown man who did not exactly feel like a friend.

Hermione was reflecting that someone like Rita Skeeter could not be good for Severus. A slight, nervous move made her realise that she was holding him quite possessively, unconsciously marking her territory.

She instantly removed her hand, she hoped not too awkwardly.

Snape had to swallow, discreetly, before being able to go on. "Since the date of my trial was announced, Rita's personal possessions have all been conveniently frozen by the Ministry, in a so-called investigation about Rabastan possibly trying to launder funds."

Ron frowned, "Didn't they have a marriage contract? All these old pureblood families used to. It
should be easy enough to check."

Snape cut him. "Of course, and even better, Rita, or rather Henrietta, and Rabastan had a judicial separation in 1996. Everything was clear cut between them, at least financially."

"Maybe there's a loophole —"

"Not with Alexia Yaxley."

"Oh! I guess not."

There was no other explanation than an abuse of authority, then.

Shacklebolt and Percy would have to intervene directly to stop the nonsense but it would still need to be investigated, as discreetly as possible since it was an inside job.

Everybody at the Ministry now knew that Ron and Seamus were currently working for Harry Potter and every move they made would make Corban Yaxley, and whatever accomplices he had in the Ministry, suspicious.

Of the ex-Dumbledore's Army members turned Auror, Terry Boot was the only one who had not been seen to help Harry's team at one time or another. He was generally teamed with Savage, who had his own cases and leads to deal with. Terry would be the most obvious choice, except that he could not just waltz in the taxation department and ask about Rita Skeeter.

Snape suggested, "I know of several former Slytherins who are tax officials. From your year, there is Daphne Greengrass. Draco should be able to convince her to assist."

"Do you know if Terry's seeing someone?" Hermione asked.

"Not that I have heard of," said Ron, a little puzzled.

"Daphne is single since she broke things off with Theodore Nott," she informed them, not that Harry or Ron cared about Draco's gossip about his Slytherin friends, but the corner of Snape's mouth lifted appreciatively, as he had already guessed what she was going to suggest.

"So what?" Ron asked. "Do you suggest that Terry seduces her? I'm not sure she's his type and that he would be willing."

She shook her head before explaining with a knowing smile, "Draco's been speaking of Astoria Greengrass a lot lately. There's no one left of his usual crowd at Hogwarts this year and he's been rather bored in his free time until they began reinforcing the Slytherin Dungeon. Astoria's been pretty eager to make suggestions, it seems." As Snape cocked his eye at her, she confirmed, "It may be serious. He even went so far as to take her to Madam Puddyfoot's."

Ron made a gagging sound, while Harry shuddered dramatically. A guy had to be crazy about a girl to let himself be dragged there, or desperate to bed her.

"I'm not interested in the ferr... In Draco's love life," Harry amended after a swift glance at Snape's warning frown. "But I suppose he could convince Daphne to help, if Astoria adds her mite?"

"Exactly," Hermione crowed. "Draco will discreetly arrange things with Daphne while you brief Terry about what we're looking for. Then, they can just pretend to date for a time, and he will have the perfect excuse to meet her and visit her office."
Harry shifted uneasily. "Daphne will have to take a wand oath, too."

Snape glared. "Do you believe that she may refuse, just because she was a Slytherin?"

Harry pursed his lips. "No. It's... Alright! I'm being a little ridiculous, but Kingsley told me to ask everyone involved to swear secrecy and I don't like that I will have to trust Draco to do it."

Snape smiled wryly. "Believe me, it can't be more painful than Dumbledore making me shake hands with your Godfather," he said with an unconscious purse of his lips at the still painful memory. "You'll handle this as you think best but I think Mr Boot and Miss Greengrass should be made aware of the full situation. They will be watched and must be very, very careful to appear genuine."

The trio approved, if with a few sighs. Like it or not, helping the hateful Rita Skeeter would actually be fighting Yaxley and his accomplices.

Snape was not satisfied until he also impressed upon them the need to keep Rita's secrets, not only about her past but also about her Goblin connection.

One careless word, he insisted, and her present arrangements could even be construed as a kind of treason. However much they wished they could pay Rita Skeeter back, the consequences would be far greater than yet another scandal.

Neither the politicians nor the general public would welcome the news that one of their major opinion makers had strong ties with the hated beings who held the fate of the reconstruction of Wizarding Britain in their not exactly benign hands.

Luckily, after their own dealings with the heads of Gringott's about the damages they caused to destroy Helga Hufflepuff's cup, the Trio understood that the country had not been closer to another open conflict with the Goblins in centuries and that they certainly could not afford it.

The question of their usurping Bellatrix's identity, of magically destroying the contents of the Lestrange vault and of stealing a dragon and damaging Gringott's building had only been resolved when Shacklebolt agreed to pay a suitable compensation on Ministry's funds, on the strict and mutual understanding that not a word would be published in either worlds about wizards breaking the security of the bank or about politically-sensitive issues like Horcruxes.

The Ministry trod very carefully with the Goblins these days, even if the wizard in the street resented being financially beholden to their old foes. Because of the on-going restrictions and the inflation still soaring, a lot of people said and repeated that the Goblins had never helped against Tom Riddle and his clique, and that they just enjoyed watching honest British wizards and witches struggle every day to make ends meet.

And unfortunately, it was perfectly true.

"You must also be aware that the Daily Prophet's editor has given Rita a free hand on how she deals with my coming trial."

Hermione frowned. "I don't see how that's a surprise. She's their star journalist."

"Yes, but contrary to what you believe, the Prophet has a very tight control on everything they publish. Scandal sells, but they have always been very careful not to cross the line of actual libel or to provoke the Ministry too openly."

"They must think they can get away with it," Harry said, "Or Yaxley has just rendered the Prophet's Editor blind to the consequences."
"He may be a powerful wizard," Ron interjected, "But nobody's capable of keeping that many people under Imperio at the same time. He must have a lot of accomplices." Harry nodded gravely. He was seriously worried that so many people seemed ready to welcome back the Death Eaters.

Snape glared before turning to Hermione. "Constanz hasn't explained?"

"He has," she sighed. "But obviously they haven't understood!"

"Or even listened," he added.

It was Harry and Ron's turn to be annoyed. "Eh! We're not idiots."

Snape satirically raised both eyebrows while Hermione groused, "But as usual, you remember only half the explanations. You can have only one person completely under Imperio at a time, like Yaxley did with Pius Thicknesse. It doesn't mean that you can't go on influencing a lot of others."

"A simple, modified Confundus can suffice," Snape added, "If you just strengthen an idea or a prejudice that is already well-ingrained in the mind of the person you want to influence."

"In other words," pursued Hermione, "Without Imperio, you can't make someone commit a crime if they are not already inclined to do it, but if they are, you can give them the nudge that makes them finally act."

"And believe me," concluded Snape, "I have heard and seen Corban Yaxley in action often enough."

Ron could not help being curious. "Did he ever try to influence you?"

Snape smirked. "Of course, and I let him think several times that I didn't notice and played along." His face darkened. "But it is enough, with most people, to reinforce an idea or opinion and it can change the balance of a vote."

They all turned sombre, thinking how Snape's trial could end if Yaxley was there in the shadows to influence court members.

"After all, it's how Voldemort managed to have the Wizengamot endorse the creation of the Muggleborn Registration Commission and give it a legal foundation." With an apologetic shrug at Hermione, Snape concluded, "There are enough people who are full of prejudices, but even notorious muggle haters might not have crossed the line of voting for actual persecution of the muggleborn without a little help."

He concluded by saying aloud what they all thought. "And there are a lot of people in the Wizengamot who never liked or trusted me to begin with."

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11th January 2000 – D-6

Snape, a paedophile?

The Prophet was not the only newspaper, this time, to finally address the question of sexual abuse on Muggleborn students. They all approached it cautiously and without using any of the most outrageous titles or accusations you could read in foreign tabloids.

Once this particular Pandora box was opened, though, there was no way to stop speculations and suspicions.
People believed Amycus and Alecto Carrow capable of anything, since they thought nothing about using torture and Cruciatus on the Hogwarts students. There had not been one word about their being child molesters during their respective trials, but now people wondered.

Rita Skeeter's previous articles had prepared the ground for all kinds of suppositions. She even had an interview with a conveniently anonymous expert on paedophiles who explained about impulses and recidivism.

Few people really wanted to believe that Snape did unspeakable things to his muggleborn students, but… What if it was true? Did he only prey on the muggleborn? Or was it worse than the worst of any caring parent's nightmares, and he had his hands on their children during all his years as a teacher?

More than one ex-student, even if they had long been adults, found themselves interrogated by their parents, anxious to make sure that they had not been too scared of Professor Snape to speak.

Seamus grimly reported in the following days that they had to investigate quite a few belated complaints. Most came from students who had to confess an unwanted pregnancy to their parents in the past and now broke under renewed familial pressure to make them admit that it had been Professor Snape, because he was the suspect at hand. There were also the usual mythomaniacs who fed their delusions with the media, but they were generally well-known either at the Aurory or in St Mungo's.

Nothing came of it in the end, but out of pure, retrospective fright, howlers were sent to Hogwarts, to the Ministry—even to St Mungo's for their having healed a possible pervert. The Prophet published pages of letters to the Editor, demanding that the Ministry bring back the Dementors; that they throw Snape at once in Azkaban and never mind a trial; that they just let the people know where he was hiding.

It was not just political polemic any longer, not even the latest scandal. It was public hysteria of the first order.

It sent Minerva McGonagall and the staff of Hogwarts on the war path – but in truth, they had long been preparing for this.

His fellow teachers had made their peace with Snape, first by letters passed through Minerva when she visited him and later via more or less regular owl correspondence – the regularity depending on Snape's health and moods, rather than on any lack of eagerness from his former colleagues.

They honestly tried to make him forget how they all tried to thwart him at every turn and make things as difficult as possible for him when he was Headmaster. He always answered that they should be proud of the way they had defended the students every inch of the way against the Death Eaters' hold on the school and their propaganda. He even could joke about this or that anecdote.

Forgiven, but not forgotten, as Rolanda Hooch summed it, when they shared Severus's latest missive – not that they were surprised. Three decades of acquaintance with him, first as a student and then as a co-worker, and they all knew that he was like an elephant: he never forgot an insult, an offence – or a kindness.

So, dialogue was certainly easier via letters than actual meetings, but they were all very satisfied with each other in the end, and never mind that Severus was not a Professor anymore – he was forever a part of Hogwarts.

Arriving to this kind of understanding had certainly not been an easy path.
Hogwarts, May 1998 – November 1999

Right after the battle, the surviving staff at Hogwarts had to deal with too many things. They should have been able to leave, go somewhere else to try and heal from months of oppression and constant stress, to rebuild their lives. Instead they had to rebuild the school. Life had to go on. Education had to go on. Or they would have fought for nothing.

By an unspoken agreement, they all met after dinner in the staff room, desperately trying to recreate pre-war normality. In the beginning, it was officially because it was temperature-controlled. The many charms and spells ensuring at least a modicum of comfort in such an old, huge and damp fortress had failed everywhere the walls and ceilings had been blasted.

And it did not bear thinking, for most of them, to stay and mope in their private chambers. It would have been too reminiscent of the Death Eaters Year.

With the Carrows making themselves at home there, taking the best seats, ordering everyone around and droning on and on for hours, just because they could, they had all avoided the staff room like the pest and taken refuge in their quarters. Not to speak of the Headmaster who made a point of arriving at 17:30 sharp, just like he did when he was a teacher, to take one cup of tea and leave as soon as he had drained it. Needless to say, the staff room was always empty at Snape's tea time, but for the Carrows.

Post-war, the staff room meetings turned into wild sessions of group therapy or anger management.

At first, they mourned the dead, loudly praised Harry Potter, Dumbledore's Army, and even Snape, although it was hard to digest that he had always been Dumbeldore's man and killed the man at his own request.

Soon, they were rehashing all the ways Severus had lied and made fools of them all.

How it rankled that he knew so masterfully how to play on their meanest feelings to make them hate him! He knew them so well, but they did not know him, apparently.

It was certainly his fault.

And Dumbledore's.

But mostly his.

Not that Albus had not been a mean, manipulative bastard in his own way.

The discussions went on and on.

Argus Filch used to read in a corner, as close to the fireplace as possible without actually roasting, although he looked like a wrinkled old chestnut. He never took part in the discussions, did not even look up when they raised their voices, just as the others hardly ever condescended to ask about the confiscated reading material he delighted in – magazines, schmaltzy novels or violent thrillers that made him cackle at random times.

One evening, though, after Irma Pince and Aurora Sinistra almost came to hexes over which of them Severus had actually been more odious to, he found that enough was enough.

He put aside *Quidditch Weekly*, pulled a well careworn book out of his pocket and slammed it loudly
on the nearest side table. Struck silence fell on the room, as he leafed through the pages until he found the passage he wanted and read aloud, "It is human nature to hate the man whom you have hurt."

Filius almost choked on his ginseng tea. "Tacitus? You read Tacitus?"

Argus sniffed disdainfully. "Christmas gift from Dumbledore, a long time ago... Not everyone thinks I'm a moron just because I'm a squib," he mumbled, before reading the citation again and turning on his colleagues with no little resentment. "That's what you've all been doing. Hating the Headmaster because you feel guilty for treating him like dirt, when he was only following Dumbledore's orders and trying to save Hogwarts."

He stood to leave, and they heard him grumbling again, "Not that it's news. Ungrateful, sodding—" The rest was lost as the door closed. Almost immediately, they only heard him cooing very loudly at Mrs Norris, who must have been lurking in the corridor, waiting for him. He could not have stated any clearer that the more he saw of wizards, the more he loved his cat.

Argus was the only one of them who still called Severus 'Headmaster'. It suddenly struck his colleagues that, until now, they had only thought that it proved Argus's servility, senility or both, when he obviously had been more cunning than they all thought and always trusted Severus.

They made faces but were very subdued for the rest of the evening. Soon enough, they all found an excuse to leave, because it is better to be alone for disagreeable introspection.

The rebuilding went on, though, school and people alike.

Soon, the students returned.

By that time, they hardly dared touch the subject of Severus's role again but were rather taking turns accusing each other – or themselves – of crass prejudices, stupidity and worthlessness during the previous, horrid year. That, or breaking down after a particularly difficult class – even the new DADA teacher, Gawain Robards. He had (barely) survived Azkaban and had been offered the post at Hogwarts as a sinecure, before he was fully capable to return to active Auror duty.

What luck, not! He soon claimed that he would go mad if he stayed longer than the one year teaching teenagers, and added his helpful mite to the collective guilt burden, by often wondering aloud how Snape had managed to preserve his cover for so long around such bunches of spoilt little dunderheads as their students, without hexing some.

He even made the dubious joke, when a little tipsy at the Christmas feast, that he would have ended up killing Dumbledore, too, if the man had kept him here teaching year after year, even as a spy cover.

Needless to say, Professor Robards was the least favourite teacher and colleague that year.

In truth, all returning students were tiresome, more than they had ever been. They were more everything. Whatever their moods or reactions, they were always excessive. Allowances were made, but it was exhausting.

Pomona and Septima even seriously considered resigning, to flee this hateful place and their own painful memories. They were not getting any younger and certainly did not feel up to the task of taking care of their youthful charges' traumas, on top of everything. Slughorn had already warned Minerva that he gave her another year to find a new Potions teacher but that it was his absolute limit.

Things eased a little after the Ministry endorsed the Board's decision to medicate all students with
mood enhancers in their food, and there was no further talking of resignation. Poppy never told, but her hand might have slipped over the staff table dishes, too.

From time to time, they even found their way back to Rosmerta’s.

Things were settling down.

Minerva had kept out of things as much as possible because she needed to let her staff vent freely out of her presence, and because she was not so good an actress that she would have been able to hold her tongue at the most resentful outbursts.

She went herself through a serious episode of discouragement and self-loathing, like when Ron Weasley disclosed that she had some responsibility in the death of little Melinda Martin, but she was not one to passively beat her breast. Besides, she took seriously her promise to never let Severus down again.

Under Oath of Secrecy, she informed her new Deputy, Filius Flitwick, Pomona Sprout, Horace Slughorn and Rolanda Hooch, the new Head of Gryffindor, of the false accusations against Severus. She asked for their help to prepare the official riposte of Hogwarts.

They were more than willing to help. They would be damned before they let anyone ruin their school’s reputation, or Snape’s professional achievements at Hogwarts. They owed him that much.
Indispensable Beta work by JOdel. If you spot any mistake, it is my sole responsibility for yet another last minute change.

And I won't die alone and be left there

(Mumford and Sons, After the Storm)

When the owls delivered the morning mail at Hogwarts, the Great Hall fell uncharacteristically silent as the Prophet, the Quibbler and the other newspapers circulated from hand to hand. Everyone but the youngest who had not known Professor Snape forgot breakfast, as they took in the latest accusations against him.

The students looked at each other, most being unable to find anything to say beyond expressions of horror or wondering if it could indeed be true. Very soon, all eyes turned to the staff table to watch how the teachers reacted.

The headmistress stood and went to her dais. As an added proof of the solemnity of the hour, the House Heads stood, too and placed themselves in circle around her. The rest of the staff stood as well but signalled to the students to remain seated.

Minerva McGonagall looked around. You could have heard a pin drop. She had their undivided attention – something that seldom happened, even in class.

"Professor Snape is a person who has affected us all, even if the youngest amongst you never had him as a teacher or as a Headmaster. I think you have the right, therefore, to know the unanimous opinion of your professors about him."

She paused to look at her colleagues, who solemnly nodded or gestured to show their assent and support.

"The Ministry of Magic may not wish us to tell you about Professor Snape before his trial. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified, too, that I have done so – probably because they think I should not tell you this, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is always preferable to lies, and that any attempt to hide it or pretend you are unable to understand the reality of war by yourself is an insult to your intelligence. Indeed, those of you who were here, at Hogwarts, while the Death Eaters ruled, often displayed more courage than the adults, whatever what you believed was right or wrong at the time."

She nodded at all the House tables, inwardly smiling as the Slytherin Prefects and senior students straightened proudly under her gaze, without the rancour or defiance they displayed last year. Yes, it had done them a great deal of good to have her publicly recognising that she had wronged them during the Battle of Hogwarts and that they did not act like cowards.

"Severus Snape is a hero;" she declared with absolute conviction. "I will even say that he is Hogwarts's particular hero, because he sacrificed more than anyone else in the war to keep our school standing and make sure you all have a future. Professor Dumbledore was gravely ill the last
"year he was Headmaster here. His condition was hopeless and he planned his own death to make it meaningful."

She paused dramatically to let the information sink.

"He asked Professor Snape to do two things for him. First, he asked him to put an end to his suffering as an act of friendship and caring. He also wanted his death to be as public and dramatic as possible to help Professor Snape to earn Tom Riddle's full trust, so that he would be appointed Headmaster in place of Amycus Carrow."

Many students recoiled in horror. Amycus Carrow, Headmaster?!

"Yes," confirmed the Headmistress, her disgust mirrored on the other teachers' solemn and sombre faces. "This is what we had in store if Professor Snape had not killed Albus Dumbledore. Riddle wanted to make you the next generation of Death Eaters, forcibly or willingly. He also meant to hold you all hostages to make your parents bow and obey him. He sent the Carrows to teach you the Dark Arts and whatever lies about blood status that they wanted, and without Professor Snape in authority over them, they would have sacked us all and appointed other Death Eaters to 'teach' you."

She paused again and let the students digest the unpalatable truth that nobody had yet told them aloud – or so crudely.

"I defy any student, past or present to stand up and say, 'Professor Snape physically harmed me, abused me or took advantage of me.' I do not say he may not have made you feel bad. He was a harsh teacher, who mercilessly drove you to his idea of excellence. He kept the strictest discipline in his classes, and we all know that is not what makes one a favourite teacher." She smiled, and there were a few awkward chuckles.

"While he was Headmaster, he made us all believe the very worst about him, because it was necessary. I can hardly imagine how painful it must have been. Most people would have refused or quit and walked away. Not Severus Snape. He never faltered in his mission. His mission was not to comfort you or make you feel good. It wasn't to oust the Carrows either. That would have been impossible. The best he could hope for, at the time, was to slow them down."

She watched the older students, those who had been there, shudder. Fearing her voice would falter under her own emotion, she took a deep breath.

"If there is one thing the staff of Hogwarts knows, it is that Professor Snape never did anything of what is printed in today's Prophet. I am sure you would never even have thought it possible, if some people had not decided to try and destroy him with the basest accusations... But here at Hogwarts, we know and will always maintain that Severus Snape is nothing but a hero, and our friend."

The staff applauded, and some students, as well, although most felt too stunned to know how to react. Minerva was satisfied to note that those who spontaneously joined were the youngest members of Dumbeldore's Army still at Hogwarts and the siblings of former members… As well as most of the Slytherin students, of course.

Someone raised a hand. Small surprise, it was a Gryffindor.

"But, Headmistress, what about the complaints?"

"Wait and see until the trial, Mr. Peakes. But I stand by what I said: whatever he had to do as Dumbeldore's spy, Professor Snape never harmed a student. If he had, I can tell you I would have
personally made sure he paid for it."

"And I would have helped," declared Professor Flitwick resolutely.

"Well said!" approved Rolanda Hooch, almost making him fall as she enthusiastically tapped him on the shoulder. Pomona Sprout energetically nodded her approval and Horace Slughorn smiled as genially as he could to convince that he would certainly have helped, too.

§§§

The reaction at Spinner's End was almost anti-climactic, in comparison. It was not as if they had not known what would be in Rita Skeeter's next papers, and no one dared offer Snape any kind of commiseration anyway.

Snape followed Healer Babbock's instructions to the letter, the only sign he was affected being the way he scrutinized the young man's face for any sign of disgust or embarrassment when he arrived for his physical therapy. But like Harry, Ron and Hermione, it was in behaving just as usual that the healer showed his support.

§§§

Hermione met Draco at one of his favourite haunts in London, a quaint place that was part tasteful antiques, part second hand book store, and a tea shop with the best scones ever. It catered to old-fashioned, people with discriminate tastes according to Draco and ecstatic tourists - *so English, you know!* It was also, in a corner full of shelving and ready-to-post packages, one of the major Internet retailers of Mangas and related paraphernalia in Europe. (Hermione was not even surprised when it turned out that the place was run by yet another Belfoy relation.)

Although he could not pinpoint why Hermione was slightly on edge, Draco was too relieved to finally be able to do something to help Severus to really focus on his friend.

In fact, it was Hermione who was doing the comforting, right now. "*You're too hard on yourself,*" she said. "*It's not just about Daphne. Without you, we would've had a hard time convincing Millicent Bulstrode, Blaise Zabini or Theodore Nott to come to court.*"

"*They would have come, no matter what. They do it for Severus, not for me.*"

"*Then, let me be grateful, if only for Harry and Ron's sake, that you smoothed things out.*"

Draco did not answer but hid a satisfied smirk behind his tea cup.

Hermione was right. He had not done so bad for Severus and for himself, after all.

Not only had he managed to convince quite a few Slytherins, reluctant to come to the limelight, to be character witnesses for their former Head of House, but it cemented his place with people like Potter, Weasley, Finnegan or Longbottom – those of his age group on the winning side. Those who would one day lead the country.

It also offered him a fresh opportunity to spend time with Astoria. Since he asked her help to convince Daphne that it would not be that bad to fake a budding relationship with Terry Boot to unmask corruption at the Ministry, she looked up to him as if he was now Uncle Severus's equal in stealth.

He was almost ready to tell his parents about her and have them approach the Greengrass family properly. His commitment to Hogwarts would end in march but he would not act before Astoria sat
her NEWTs, of course, and they would not make anything public, anyway, until at least next year...

But a summer garden party at the Manor would be the perfect opportunity to begin a proper wizarding courtship.

"Are you even listening to me?"

His pleasant daydream was abruptly interrupted, Hermione bringing him down to earth with a friendly kick in the shin.

He realised that, not only had Hermione finished her scones but she was eyeing him with slightly pursed lips. After all, he recognised the pattern. She had taken the time to help him sort out his feelings, boosted his self-esteem, and now it was her turn to get answers to her questions.

Ah! Well! The infamous lack of subtlety of the Gryffindors... He could live with it. He even had to admit there was something to say about knowing exactly where you stood with them – once they did not hate or despise you anymore, that is.

He tried to look at the same time innocent and clueless, which seemed to irritate her. Definitely not in the mood. He settled for an eagerly-expecting-any-pearl-of-your-wisdom face, which always made her laugh and she actually cackled.

"Humoring me, aren't you?"

"Always in my best interest," he admitted. "You just had your there-are-angry-canaries-in-your-near-future look and I shudder to think what would happen if you forget we're around muggles."

"I would never do anything so rash. I would wait until we returned to the magical world."

"But not a second longer, if I know you."

She shrugged impishly before asking abruptly, without the least lingering trace of humour,"And just how long have you known that Rita Skeeter is an Animagus?"

"Oh! That." Draco tried the innocent smile again, without any luck. "What if I tell you 'all my life'?" he said tentatively. "I've called her Aunt Henry for as long as I can remember. Her mother and my grand-mother Black were first cousins, you know. She spoilt me rotten when I was little, and Mother always said it was because she missed having a child of her own."

He ignored her scoffing. Hermione may have reasons to dislike Rita Skeeter, but he was a Malfoy and not about to renounce family and friends, even if some were nothing to be proud of.

"Whenever the adults had one of their boring discussions and I wandered around, instead of calling a house elf or use a charm to track me, Aunt Henry would Turn and find me. It was a sort of hide and seek ritual. Of course, what made it even funnier was that it was our own, big secret." He made a big "shush!" with his finger on his mouth. "The rest of the world was not supposed to know.."

As expected, Hermione was more fondly exasperated than judgemental now. "You Slytherins and your secrets! But you told Crabbe and Goyle, and I believe Nott, too."

Father is right, Draco thought, there is hardly a normal, sane woman (he shuddered as he remembered Aunt Bella or Dolores Umbridge) who will not soften when a man confides her childhood memories.

"And why would you have me going around and spilling family secrets?" he answered in kind. "I've been raised with the idea that what happened behind closed doors was never to be spoken about
He growled. "Do you imagine what might have happened if I had gone about speaking about my father's disability, Uncle Severus's Patronus or Aunt Henry being an Animagus? Besides," he said with a stern look, "It's not as if there weren't some hidden Animagi on your side, too. I don't see anyone in the Order of the Phoenix spouting the truth about Sirius Black or James Potter."

"How do you know?" she began, surprised. "I can't believe Severus would have told you."

"I've known since the summer after the Triwizard Tournament." The summer his father was still in favour and they had the very doubtful honour to house Voldemort, until he freed the imprisoned Death Eaters from Azkaban and he returned to living with Bellatrix and Rodolphus.

"I would not have thought you capable to keep such a secret, at the time. Excuse me, but you were… Err…" She pulled a funny face as she tried to find something not too much insulting.

"A prat. I know."

He did not sound exactly sorry and she played along, giggling, because they both knew turning their memories of that time into jokes was the only way to avoid drowning in them.

"Don't worry," she said cheerfully. "You're getting better with age. And if Severus told you, he must have trusted you, even then."

He made a face and Hermione instantly understood they had unwillingly toed beyond the line once again.

Draco took the time to finish the scone with his favourite strawberry jam before the way the discussion was turning totally cut his appetite. He seized his tea cup with both hands, a small gesture to anchor himself to the present.

"No," he said at last, with barely held loathing. "It wasn't him who told me. It was Pettigrew's idea of small talk at the dinner table."

Her mouth opened in a disgusted but silent "Oh!"

Draco raised his hand in a fatalistic gesture before letting it fall back on the table.

"It's just a memory," he said, trying for flippant and failing. He briefly squeezed his eyes shut, before muttering, as if only to himself, "Just another of these fucking memories."

He opened his eyes again to meet Hermione's, full of warm concern. As still happened sometimes, it superimposed in his mind with her writhing about and screaming under torture on the priceless Aubusson carpet his mother Reductoed to dust afterwards without a tinge of regret. He tried to take his cup but felt his fingers tingling and let go before he could spill his tea. He was sweating all of a sudden and feeling very faint. He shook his head several times, gasping for breath because of the painful squeeze in his chest.

From very far, he heard Hermione's voice. "Don't fight it, Draco! Draco?!" He realised she was squeezing his hand. With an enormous effort, he caught her gaze and tried to smile, but the worry in her face did not fade.

"Can you breathe with me?" She insisted. Of course he could breathe. What did she mean? He was

He obeyed, quite blindly. After some time, he blinked and it struck him that he had just had a panic attack.

Here, in muggle London with Hermione Granger.

His colour went straight from sickly pale to crimson with embarrassment.

"Don't," she whispered softly – sadly. "It was your turn this time, but I had one just yesterday."

He nodded painfully. They sat in silence, both trying to regain their composure and raking their brains to find something innocuous to say and dissipate the tension.

Draco uncharacteristically bit his lip. "It's getting worse as the date of the trial gets closer."

She sighed. "Same here."

"It's very selfish, but it's not just about Severus, you know," he said in a subdued, aggrieved voice.

"I know. Your testimony."

"Yes."

"I won't think any less of you because of what you will have to say," she said, reaching out and taking hold of one of his hand. "We're all in this together."

With a poor smile, Draco wrapped his other hand around hers, she did the same and they hold on to each other, drawing comfort from being on the same side – the side of the survivors.

§§§

January 12th, 2000 – D-5

At Hogwarts, the Headmistress, her Deputy Filius Flitwick and the other House Heads were very busy, so much so that their classes were suspended.

They were answering parents and people who expressed concern, which meant hundreds of letters. Thankfully, they had long written answer models and agreed upon the content. Flitwick had even perfected the duplication charm that was used to send eleven-year old children their Hogwarts letter.

They confined the Howlers in a distant dungeon so that they could open them all at once under a containment charm, before Vanishing the lot.

Then, they held a press conference where they all refuted "the totally false and slanderous accusations" thrown at the most courageous and dedicated protector of the students they had never known, Professor Severus Snape, that they were honoured to call a colleague and a friend.

Minerva McGonagall also announced an Open Day at Hogwarts, on Saturday. That was what had required the longest preparation, all the more since it had to be kept a secret almost until the last minute.

The venerable Charter of Hogwarts, signed by the Founders themselves, would be on display for the first time in over six hundred years, thus ensuring the widest publicity coverage for the event, even abroad. There would be tours of the school, with walks leading where the visitors would see how portraits, ghosts, house elves, magical wards and even the stairs ensured that everything was under
control. Even Peeves had been bribed into promising to behave, with the prospect of spending time with his idol, Luna Lovegood of the Quibbler and having his photograph appear in the newspaper.

The entire staff would be there to answer any kind of question about school organisation, security and ethics.

They encouraged students to be curious, to explore, to even believe they could get away with innocent transgression of the rules if they had a good, legitimate reason, but the headmistress wanted to prove that she had as tight a hold on the reins as her predecessors. So did the House Heads, too, and the rest of the teachers.

They all wanted their professionalism and dedication to be recognised and to make sure everyone knew that they did not take it kindly that anyone would try to discredit their school to score points against Severus Snape.

The entire purpose of the event was to make sure people would learn about the Wizard's Oath every Headmaster or Headmistress, Head of House or tenured teacher had to take, barely adapted since the time of the Founders:

'I will in the future be faithful to the laws and principles of the Founders,

'I will teach diligently, in good faith and without deceit all the rules of my art,

'I will not accept, seek or coerce money or costly gifts from the students, nor offer private training,

'I will protect the purity and virginity of my students, youths and maids alike, and will not approach them impurely or let others approach and corrupt them,

'I will not teach while drunk or publicly seek whores,

'I will provide a good example of virtue and continence,

'I will not cause harm or damage to the School nor to the students, whether out of malice, greed, for personal or family revenge, for any of my patrons, for my guild or for my associates,

'I will protect Hogwarts and the students against foes and evil-doers, whether magical, muggle, being or creature, dead or alive,

'This I swear with my own wand to the Headmaster, on condition that he will hold to me as I shall deserve it, and that he will perform everything as it was in our agreement when I submitted myself to the laws of Hogwarts and of the land."

The last part was even more drastic in the Headmaster's Oath:

This I swear with my own wand and on my magic to the shades of the Founders, on condition that they let Hogwarts obey and recognise me as its lord and master and hold to me as I shall deserve it, as it was in our agreement when I submitted myself to the laws of Hogwarts and of the land."

Every member of the Order of the Phoenix or of Dumbeldore's Army who did not work for the Ministry would be there as well, to show that they supported Severus Snape and did not believe one minute the accusations levelled against him.

Since neither Harry nor Ron could go to Hogwarts, it was Hermione who would represent the Golden Trio.
Snape just shrugged when he was told. He lightly grazed his finger on Puck's belly. The baby elf was in his lap, well-fed and seemingly fascinated by a crack in the ceiling paint. His parents were dead to the world, Snape having sent the haggard Fuzzy take a well-deserved nap with an equally exhausted Moppy. The gesture instantly set the baby to his usual purring.

Snape's slight smile could be solely attributed to his bond with the elf.

Nothing to do with the baffling fact that he really had friends and a surprising number of people willing to support him publicly.

§§§

January 13th, 2000—D-4

It had been a miserable day, both inside with a colicky Puck that even Snape could not calm down for more than a few minutes at a time, and outside with steady downpours and gusts of wind.

They were all fast discovering that, with a baby in the household, everything revolves around them and is not always smiles and cuteness.

Harry was the only one who had something to look for, since it was Thursday, and his usual free afternoon and evening with Ginny.

Hermione was stuck at St Mungo's with her periodic test cases and examinations. Constanz supervised, so it was Yann Babbock who came back in the afternoon for Snape's physical, but they had already seen him in the morning. He had nothing new to share and he was in a hurry anyway.

When Ron arrived to relieve Harry, he was knackered, sick and tired of all the drills and security meetings for Snape's trial. Assistant Prosecutor Fudge, feeling the thrill of power again, had insisted that they all go through the emergency procedures again, for his sole benefice.

Then, Terry Boot had cornered him in the Gents just before he left, to whine about what a bitch Daphne Greengrass was. She made him take her to the most expensive bar 'because it was what a proper date would do for such a sophisticated lady as she was'. She had not paid her share, although they did not really date, and he would end up broke before the end of the month because she had already set her sights on another snobbish, overpriced place for their next outing tonight, and could he please ask Harry to give him a budget for that? Of course, to top it all, it was Ron who had to remember to cast the Muffliato!

Puck could be heard howling upstairs. He had obviously weakened the silencing spells once again. Snape looked tired, and as grumpy as the baby elf sounded.

The young Auror wondered about the symbiotic link between wizard and elf and about who really influenced the moods of the other.

Snape handed Ron a pair of letters. "When you see Rita Skeeter in Gringott's tomorrow, would you please give her this?" The words were polite enough but the tone rather cold.

Ron eyed the two missives and could not help asking, "You mean the one with her name on it? This one's addressed to Healer Pye."

"I am not yet senile," Snape informed him in a clipped voice. "If I give you two letters and tell you to give them to Rita Skeeter, it's because I mean it."

"And if I ask you," Ron answered, his temper flaring instantly, "It's because anybody can make a
mistake and you would not want your medical secrets in the hands of just anybody, particularly your little pal from the Prophet! But then, you apparently don't mind that she makes you out to be a lecher and a child molester in every new edition now."

Ron regretted his outburst when he saw Snape involuntarily glance at the Prophet's front page.

_Hogwarts Chamber of Perverted Secrets_ was yet another hotchpotch of half-truths, unfounded hearsay and dirty innuendos about the former headmaster and his dungeon rooms.

They were all angry at Rita Skeeter for making a mock of Professor McGonagall's Open Day at Hogwarts while keeping up with her demolition of Snape's reputation and morals, but it was somewhat stupid for the two of them to take it out on each other.

Snape had obviously reached the same conclusion. The way he announced much more softly, "She also writes for Witch Weekly" was practically apologetic.

Ron smiled bashfully, his own way to apologize. "And that's supposed to excuse her how?" he asked more levelly.

Snape walked to the coffee table, folded up the Prophet and let it fall carelessly from his hand down in the paper rack with the older editions. "If you want to increase the probability of a particular woman seeing a certain piece of news, you'd better have it published in a magazine with a somewhat longer shelf life than a daily newspaper, that is discarded almost immediately."

Ron blinked, trying to decipher Snape's meaning.

"Rita can write well-documented articles when she wants to, and her one redeeming quality is that she will always make the front page."

"I'm not sure this is a redeeming quality, or even that Rita Skeeter has one."

"You may yet change your mind."

"Oh, really?"

"The letter to Pye gives her my formal authorisation to use for publication whatever material he will deem suitable for an article about cursed scars reduction and how it can help disfigured war victims."

"Lavender..." Ron breathed, suddenly feeling hope for the first time since he had discovered that she was alive.

Hermione had searched St Mungo's records for him, looking for evidence of a young female patient with werewolf symptoms or scars from a werewolf attack in the last two years, to no avail. Nobody fit the description, even if quite a few patients obviously used false names to preserve their anonymity.

Bill had approached the few private Potioneers who sold Wolfsbane potion and such brews as could alleviate some of his own symptoms outside St Mungo's. He made discreet inquiries in the werewolves network as well, but it did not lead to any result either.

Percy, happy to have an opportunity to do something that could ingrati ate him with his youngest brother, unfortunately found nothing in the files regarding pensions and compensations for the victims of Fenrir Greyback and his pack either.
Ron himself had visited Lavender's family. Her parents were worrying themselves sick about her. Jasmine, her elder sister, spent the whole time of his visit glaring daggers. They had heard of him, at great length even, and hated that Lav had been pining for months for a boy who, from their point of view, took her for a ride but obviously did not care for her. Ron's determination to find Lavender and make amends wore down the parents' wariness in the end, but they had not much to share beyond their own misgivings.

The day after the Battle of Hogwarts, she had sent them a hasty note telling them she was alive and had survived the blood shed. Then, there was a longer, reassuring letter telling them that they must not worry because she was alright but that she would not be able to come home soon, due to all the destruction at Hogwarts and the need to help with the reconstruction. She asked to be sent a lot of stuff she had never taken to school before: her entire wardrobe, all her knick-knacks and photographs, her collection of Charm-it-yourself books...

And then, nothing. Nothing beyond rare owls bringing only very short messages. She had found a job (no details). She shared a flat with a very pleasant girl (no address and no name). Her schedule would not permit her to visit any time soon. The last was a Season's Greetings card: "Love you all, very much. Lavender."

Ron knew her parents only told and showed him these because they desperately wanted to know where she was and hoped he would find her, being an Auror.

Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do with the messages. Lavender had visibly taken great care not to leave any clue or any trace of her magic.

Even more than Seamus's or Neville's tales of their last months at Hogwarts, this really proved how the war and the Carrows had taught them all caution and to think ahead.

Ron could hardly bear the thought of what Lavender must be suffering, morally and maybe physically, too, if she went to such lengths to try and make her family believe that all was well with her life.

Snape's voice brought him back to the present. "Of course, you understand that she may not read Witch Weekly anymore?"

Ron laughed, although it almost sounded to his own ears like he was crying… But maybe he did, because he was seeing Snape in a slight blur. "If there was only one thing that she could take with her on a desert island, apart from her wand, it would be Witch Weekly."

"And it would be Quidditch Weekly in your case, of course." Snape looked at him sideways, not unkindly. "You're both equally feather-brained and likely to starve or poison yourself carelessly on that desert island in a matter of days."

Ron pointed a finger at Snape and opened his mouth to answer in kind, before realising that his former teacher was just trying to distract him to hide the fact that he was giving him a huge help in his search for Lavender. Letting Skeeter write about his wounds and scars had to be a real sacrifice for such a private man.

He marched up to the older wizard and gripped his shoulders without warning. "You, git! I hope you're not doing this, thinking it doesn't matter that they publish photos of your scars because you will be in Azkaban and won't see them. Like this was some last will and testament thing. We will win, you know."

Snape flushed and jerked angrily out of reach. "Unlike some people," he said in a scathing tone, "I
"Good," said Ron with a sweeping gesture at the room. "I'd hate to dash Draco's hopes if you were to leave me this charming abode, with all the booby traps, like that drawer that tried to bite my fingers off on Monday."

"I told you the first drawer, not the third."

"But you didn't tell me to count from the bottom up. I never thought that you order everything like in an apothecary."

Snape shrugged, rather pleased with himself. "You're in a Master Potioneer's house. You should know better."

Ron could not help smiling. "Yes, I should know better, and I do thank you."

Snape dismissed it. "It was not such a great bite. It was easily settled."

"I'm talking about what you're doing for Lavender."

Snape looked away, decidedly uneasy. "It's not as if Pye has not already published a lot of things about the reconstruction of my face and throat."

"But only in medical reviews," insisted Ron.

"Have you nothing better to do than idle chat?" Snape barked. "I, for one, have a potion maturing." He turned with a dismissive gesture of the hand towards the sofa. "I'll let you pretend you're improving your Auror skills and what passes for a mind watching that insipid Baywatch, with the half-naked women who fascinate you so much."

"It is not insipid and Harry likes it, too."

"Talk about a film critic."

"I'll tell him."

"Be my guest."

"Thank you, Severus," Ron joked before adding, very seriously and carefully articulating for emphasis, "For everything."

Snape was already half-way down the stairs to his lab.

§§§

January 14th, 2000 – D-3

Today's front pages were about the tight, exceptional security measures at the Ministry for the first ever Plenary High Court.

All newspapers warned their readers that there would be a lot of competition to access the court room.

Court Room 7 had been selected, because it was by far the largest. It was seldom used, apart from state occasions. It had been expended to its largest capacity, and it was expected to be full to the brim. It could accommodate up to 500 visitors besides the full Wizengamot, the Prosecutors, the
defendant's lawyer and their respective attendants, plus a full contingent of Aurors for security.

The Ministry had already announced that two benches were reserved for the press and another three for VIPs - who would turn out to be diplomats, Aurors and observers from foreign countries who had to deal with their own terrorist or criminal organisations welcoming escaped Death Eaters. The witnesses who elected to stay after they gave their testimony would be invited to sit there, too.

Fuzzy was nowhere to be found, probably running errands for Snape at Malfoy Manor and Malfoy Industries, since all the piles of files and mail Snape had been feverishly working on and accumulating for several days had vanished.

Moppy was humming softly. She was tired but glowed with happiness, her baby sleeping, suckling or purring tied to her front while she busied herself in the house.

Harry had made his usual, perfunctory check of the lab before leaving Snape to whatever he brewed these days. Severus must be bored to death by now, and very frustrated, he reflected. Beyond restoratives and mild medicines like headache or stomach ache relievers, he had taken to brewing antiseptics, burn and cut pastes, anti-swelling solutions and even to distill his own essence of Dittany and Murtlap. If any of their acquaintances still had an outdated first aid kit at home, it would certainly not be Snape's fault.

He felt quite frustrated himself. Snape had clammed up since the meeting with Rita Skeeter and flat out refused to discuss anything personal.

He had been ignoring Harry completely since breakfast. He was now practically hiding behind The Prophet, for all the good it would do him to read one more time how he would be made a spectacle for all the wizarding world to see. It pained the Auror to feel so useless.

He wished he could do something. Like help Ron and Seamus try and locate Yaxley, but he was reduced to champing at the bit while waiting for them to find clues, uncover Yaxley's plans and, when they had time, finally report to him.

Coordinating a team was very fine and a good challenge, but Harry was not sure he would be happy for long confined to mostly desk work, and politics, don't forget politics, like the Head Auror was.

He knew Kingsley had that fate in mind for him sooner or later, but Harry prayed it would be as late as possible.

Anyway, in the long run, Ron would be a much better candidate for Head Auror, good strategist as he was. They both knew, though, that the youngest Weasley would never get the position over Harry, and certainly not before Harry made at least Head of the DMLE or took another top position at the Ministry.

It was bloody unjust for Ron and for all their much more seasoned colleagues, whose only fault was not to be the Boy Who Lived To Become the Ministry's Poster Boy.

He had fought Scrimgeour to escape this exact fate, to only fall straight into it without any means to escape now that he worked for the Ministry.

He should have stayed dead after Voldemort killed him.

Snape clearing his throat shook Harry out of these dismal considerations about the bright, shining future the Minister was building for him, just like Dumbledore had planned his life and death until the last confrontation with Voldemort.
"I think it is time we address your appalling lack of performance in the Occlumency field."

Harry not only landed back in the present, he felt like he did it flat on his back. "Occlumency? But-"

He blinked, suddenly noticing that The Prophet lay discarded on the coffee table and that Snape's eyes seemed to gleam dangerously. Harry could not tell how long his former teacher had been staring at him and felt foolish.

"I have been led to understand Aurors undergo some basic training?" Snape asked, in the odiously insinuating voice he used to put him down in class. "Something about not broadcasting your intentions and suspicions when a Legilimens happens to be around, and helping you to resist hard interrogation if you're captured... Unless I am mistaken?"

"No need to rub it in my face," said Harry sullenly. "You know I'm absolutely rubbish at it. Everyone in the Aurory knows it and jokes about it."

"And if everyone knows it," Snape remarked harshly, "Corban Yaxley knows it, too, and he will try something sooner or later when you return to the Ministry."

"I may not be an Occlumens," Harry protested, "I can resist Imperio."

Snape dismissed his assurance with a flick of the hand. "Everyone in the Inner Circle knew you can toss aside the Imperius. Indeed, I made it my business to remind them of the fact whenever somebody tried to ruin me in Voldemort's presence, for failing to bring you to him. It would be a very foolish Death Eater who tried that curse on you, and Corban Yaxley is certainly not a fool."

"Entering your unprepared mind without you noticing is more his style and well within his skills." Snape smirked. "After all, that is precisely what I have been doing in the last ten minutes, and you never felt anything when I fanned the flames of your self-pity."

"What?" Harry sat bolt upright.

"Surely, you don't usually feel that sorry for yourself? At least, I hope not."

Harry stiffened in anger. "How dare you!"

"I am merely making a point," Snape answered, coldly and without emotion. "It wouldn't have required much to suggest that you should send Shacklebolt packing and that you would be much happier if you resigned." He pursed his lips with faint disgust, no doubt at Harry's ineptitude. "You would never have suspected anything, since you actually thought about it more than once. It's not as if I was planting anything new in your mind."

With a gulp, Harry finally realised this was what Healer Constanz, Hermione and Snape had tried to tell him several times, but it was only now that he had experienced it, or rather failed to recognise it, that he finally understood the full potential for damage.

He shuddered, not so much at the prospect of any mental attack from Corban Yaxley as at the suddenly impending threat of having Snape submitting him to Occlumency lessons again.

"I'm very much afraid anything you're going to suggest would just be a waste of time," he spluttered. "Both the Unspeakables who instruct us say that I'm practically hopeless."

Snape's gaze met Harry's. "I suspect our ill-fated tutorials during your fifth year may have resulted in some sort of mental block, hence your failure at learning Occlumency."
No kidding.

"I do not say you will become as proficient an Occlumens as I am. Not many can," Snape declared, with simple pride. "But I am positive even you can learn the basics required from any decent Auror."

Harry glowered at the small bait but forced himself to ask, as calmly as he could, "What makes you believe that I can learn better from you now than I did back then, or with our instructors at the Ministry?"

"You don't hate me anymore to the point of rejecting everything I recommend."

"Not everything," Harry conceded, with much more cheek than he actually felt.

"More important to the task, I do not risk ending up dead if Voldemort sees in your mind that I am anything but ruthless and unhelpful with you. That prospect was not particularly motivating at the time."

Harry instantly felt guilty, although he suspected it was Snape's intention to make him feel this way, especially as he declared, "I find that I am now at a greater risk to end up dead or in Azkaban if I do not succeed in teaching you Occlumency. I don't know about you, but it works very well for me, as far as motivation goes."

Harry protested a last time, for form's sake. "I don't want to let you down, but I'm very much afraid that I simply won't be able to do it."

With more patience than Harry thought Snape ever possessed, the wizard explained, "Back then, I used the traditional method, the very same Abraxas used to teach me, but I soon realised that it had little chance to work with you, as you are unable to discipline your mind and master your emotions."

Harry pursed his lips as Snape's last words triggered even more hateful memories, but the older man did not seem to notice or to care. "I simply did not dare use something less orthodox than what is taught in books, for fear Voldemort began to wonder about the real extent of my own abilities."

"That's one thing I've always wondered about!" interjected Harry, genuinely interested this time. "If he knew that you can Occlude, how come he was not more suspicious of you?"

"How much more suspicious can you get?" Snape sniggered sarcastically. "But Slytherin tradition values the mental disciplines and pureblood families commonly teach at least a minimum to their offspring. Not everyone goes very far, since it is a rare mind that can really master them, but many Death Eaters knew at least how to block casual attempts against their mind, in the same way it is expected of Aurors."

"You make it all sound at once easy and almost useless," objected Harry. "I can tell you I would be grateful to be able to manage the basics!"

"It is far from useless," admitted Snape. "You need it in business dealings or any kind of negotiation, but a determined, unscrupulous mind rapist like Voldemort will always manage to break through such walls in the end," he said grimly. "The trick is to lure the Legilimens through enough false defences that they end up believing that they have found everything. Behind each supposedly broken defence, you present them with some supposedly shameful secret or embarrassing situation. The kind of things most people would not want others to know about them, all the while keeping your real secrets in random, uninteresting places that do not appear to be protected and that they will skip."
Harry was looking at Snape as if he was speaking a foreign language. "You can do that?!

Snape's half closed eyelids were answer enough. "I'm still alive, am I not? Voldemort felt quite smug to be able to taunt me with all the sordid details of my life that I did not want anyone to know: Spinner's End... Your father's and Black's bullying... How I resented Dumbledore guilting me all the time... And let's not forget my impotence! He was convinced that it was due to an overexposure to toxics while brewing wolfsbane on Dumbledore's order. With that, he did not question that I would want my revenge on the Headmaster and on Lupin."

"He really never suspected anything?" Harry asked eagerly.

"No, quite surprisingly I should say, considering how paranoid he was... But then, the feelings of deep shame I fed him with and a careful blend of mild resentment and gushing admiration for his power whenever he got through my shields was enough to put his mind at rest, and even to humour him."

"Sick bastard," muttered Harry.

"Obviously," Snape agreed. "But let's get back to the point. You need to learn to Occlude. I will teach you but we will do it differently this time."

"Oh?" Harry's discomfort was almost palpable.

"Yes, you will Legilimens me, and I will show you how it is done from the inside."

Thunderstruck, Harry could barely manage, "But I'm not a Legilimens!"

"Really? I perfectly remember one lesson when you managed to enter my mind."

Harry began to squirm in his chair. "But it was an accident! I was only trying to protect myself!"

Snape's face turned positively feral. "Exactly."

Before Harry had time to process Snape's meaning, the wizard had his wand in his face. "Defend your mind, Potter," he ordered with a cruel smile, "And throw me out!"

"What! But-"

"Legilimens!"

Harry felt the burning pressure of Snape entering his thoughts and seeing himself through Harry's eyes. Even through the shock of surprise, the Auror realised that the wizard lingered at the forefront of his mind without prying around.

"Defend your mind!" repeated Snape. Harry heard the command reverberating inside his head.

Instinctively, he pushed away the intrusion with all his power and felt himself fall back with Snape inside the man's mind. With an increasing feeling of vertigo, he watched his own frightened, owlish face and knew it was his turn to watch through Snape's eyes.

"It was not so difficult, now was it?" Snape's voice chortled sarcastically through his head as well as in his ears.

"How come I don't see your memories?" Harry wondered aloud.

Instantly, he found himself standing in a long, long corridor full of hidden passages and closed doors.
"They're all here," sneered Snape from afar.

"Behind the doors?"

"Why not find out for yourself?"

Resigned, Harry tried a random door and was not surprised to find it closed. He marched to another, finding it closed as well, and to another to the same result. Alohomora did not work but Reducto blasted the door open. As he marched through it, he found himself confronted by Professor Snape, a Professor Snape almost two heads taller than him, just like in his memories.

"How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter," Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting. "He too was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers … The resemblance between you is uncanny."

Harry did not stop to listen, although the Professor turned pretty vindictive.

"Your father was a swine!"

He entered a small enclosed court leading to a forbidding stone keep. There was no entrance at ground level, only an external wood stair leading to a small door with iron bars on the first story. He stepped onto the first stair, then the next, only to find it was worm-eaten and it cracked under his feet. Shards tore through his jeans and his calf's flesh. He narrowly escaped falling through, scraping his hands on the stone wall as he barely managed to clutch at a fissure between two hand cut stones.

"How… How do you do this in your mind?" He gasped. "It hurts as if it's real!"

"Why wouldn't it be real, even if it's in your mind?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "No matter. I just didn't expect you to channel Dumbledore right now."

He could feel Snape's surprise at his words, although the older wizard was nowhere in sight and did not ask what he meant.

Gingerly, Harry found another purchase in the wall and tried the next stair, staying as close to the wall as he could. Going at a snail's pace, he finally reached the door and immediately cast a Reducto.

It did not have the expected effect. There was an explosion of shards in his face, his hands and he felt quite a lot embedding themselves in his clothes like thorns. "Ouch!"

Somehow, he could feel that Snape was rather enjoying himself.

The wood of the door was cracked in several parts but still holding, thanks to the iron bars. Through the splits, he finally caught glimpses of memories.

*Lily Evans, running in a meadow and shrieking gleefully, with Snape hot on her heels, trying to catch her.*

*Dumbledore, cajoling a very reluctant Snape into pulling a Christmas cracker with him and then picking and handing him back the red and gold little hat that the Potions master had tried to crush under his foot.*

*Madam Hooch, in Hogsmeade, as she shouted angrily and ran to a group of people as they tried to set on Professor Snape.*
A surprisingly human Voldemort, raising a regal hand to silence an enthusiastic crowd, while Evan Rosier, still clapping in his hands, turned to a so, so young Snape and beamed happily.

A very focused Snape, with a brand new Master sigil on his robes, holding a beaker full of potion in a big, clear lab and frowning at the colour, while an assistant waited anxiously on his verdict.

Minerva McGonagall, smugly depositing the House Cup near her plate, before accepting a glass of champagne from a falsely sulking Snape.

Snape and Lucius Malfoy, standing alone in front of Abraxas's fresh grave as the night fell around them, hugging each other, their eyes still red from crying.

"Bombarda Maxima!" Harry shouted, determined to reach the visions.

This time, it blasted not only the door but a good part of its frame and of the wall. Harry had to step hastily aside to avoid being crushed under falling stones. Was it his imagination or did he really hear a faint, disapproving tut-tut?

He cautiously peered inside.

Eileen Snape was seated in the kitchen at Spinner's End, still in her dressing gown although the play of light told it was probably the middle of the afternoon. Her arms were wrapped around her lanky frame as she rocked slowly on herself, her face totally blank.

"Mum?" called softly Severus.

It was difficult to tell his age. Harry remembered from Mrs Hathaway's photographs how little and slowly he had grown before he was almost fourteen.

The boy reached a hand to brush his mother's shoulder and she stopped rocking. She did not open her eyes, though.

"What do you want?" she asked in a rather mono-chord voice.

"Can I go to Lily's?" he asked hopefully. "My homework's done."

She sat bolt upright, opened her eyes and automatically corrected him. "May I go," she said sternly.

The little reprimand seemed to immensely please Severus who smiled brightly at his mother and she slowly smiled back as if she only now realised her son was here.

"May I go to Lily's? Please?"

She sighed. "Yes, go. Leave me alone… Like your father."

"It's only for an hour or two!" the boy protested.

Eileen Snape closed her eyes again and leaned back tiredly. "I haven't much in the cupboards. If Mrs Evans asks you to dinner, you should accept. Otherwise, it'll be a can of soup."

Severus was already through the door. "Thanks, Mum!"

Harry walked in the kitchen only to find himself back in the keep, on the first stone step of a dramatic curving stair without a single door or window in sight.

"Oh! Not again!"
Abruptly, he found himself back in his own mind, his own body and facing a very smug Snape. "That's one of multiple ways to make a Legilimens go round in circles."

"You don't say!" There was no real cutting in Harry's words though.

"Of course, it will only buy you time, but this is the level expected of you as an Auror."

Harry sat silent for a while, with a faraway and then a slightly frowning look on his face. Snape found it promising and waited patiently.

"I think I get it," declared the young Auror at last. "But do you think it would work if I hid my thoughts in a Snitch and used rogue Bludgers instead of doors, rotten wood and stones like you? I believe I will feel more at ease and in control if I turn it into Quidditch."

"An intriguing solution," conceded Snape. "Crude and unsubtle, to be sure, but it should suit you."

Harry merely smiled at the almost affectionate barb. With calm determination this time, he said, "Let's try. It's my turn to give you a hard time."

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"… And with all our regrets for this unfortunate misunderstanding, Madam."

The lady swathed in Victorian widow's garb only acknowledged Percy Weasley's formal excuses with a regal gesture of the hand. It was impossible to see her face behind the thick, black veil.

Percy gave a solemn nod to the bailiff, who handed a pack of sealed parchments to the representative of Gringott's, that stately Ragnok that Bill assured them was a power who counted in the Goblin world.

The Goblin took an infuriatingly long time to open and scan every single page. Meanwhile, the Ministry representatives waited in stiff silence, standing or seated on admirably carved but very hard chairs more suited to a goblin's frame than a human's. The Goblin had only one comfortable, cushioned seat available and had offered it to the woman who was now only named in all official documents as 'Widow Lestrange' when pertaining to Rabastan's estate or their marriage and as 'Madam Rosier' when referring to her personal property.

Ron stood slightly out of the way. He was there officially as Senior Undersecretary Weasley's escort. Actually, Snape had cornered him into becoming the secret bodyguard of the woman who maligned his friends and his family at every opportunity. Snape brushed off any excuse he offered to send someone else to protect Skeeter, in the not impossible advent of someone wading into the widow of one of the most (in)famous Death Eaters, if word of her presence at Gringott's spread. Snape nagged and nagged until even Harry sided with him and Ron had to agree.

Several times, he stopped himself after beginning to sway from side to side or before yawning. He was bored to tears with all the legalities. Operation "Help Skeeter get her money back" was much more complicated than he had anticipated. It was a red tape nightmare and he had to admit the journalist had reasons to act paranoid.

They had been at it since eight sharp and he was counting the minutes now, because it would not be long before his stomach protested to remind him that lunch time was long past.

They had gone through the same tedium at every Ministry Department involved with any of the separate estates of Widow Lestrange and the late Rabastan Lestrange. The papers had to be handed from Law clerk to Treasury Clerk to Head clerk to Undersecretary to Senior Undersecretary.
Each of them had to go through the approving, initialing and stamping of every single page of every single document, file or whatever before it could be handed down to a human bailiff on oath with both Wizarding and Goblin Laws, who in his turn magically sealed them to ensure they were not tempered with between the Ministry and Gringott's.

Ron had to officiate as they all took Wand Oaths not to reveal anything, with a Geas forbidding them to even think about it that would hopefully, according to Snape and Shacklebolt, fool Corban Yaxley. The bailiff had then pompously led them to the bank, and now it was the turn of the Goblins to drag things out.

At long last, Ragnok sealed the documents, stood and turned towards the lady. With an unexpected flourish of his hand, he produced triumphantly a series of golden keys. Widow Lestrange extended her hand, palm up, without another word and Ragnok put the keys there.

To Ron's surprise, before pocketing them, she curtsied very low to the Goblin who answered with a surprisingly graceful bow.

Ragnok turned and shot a wicked smile to Percy. "It's done. You can go back to your Ministry."

The Senior Undersecretary pursed his lips, shot a glance at Ron who shook his head to say he was not coming, and gave the signal for leaving to his attendants.

As soon as the door closed on them, Rita Skeeter got rid of her hat and veil with a loud "Pffff! At last!" She turned to Ron. "I don't need your protection any longer," she said drily. "I'll Floo home directly."

Ron hesitated. "Snape said-"

"You can tell him I'm perfectly safe with Ragnok."

The Auror gave a dubious look to the Goblin, who smiled rather maliciously. "Fear not! Madam will Floo from this office."

Ron insisted, "Do you assure me no one will see you in Diagon Alley with these clothes?"

"As if I would. They're much too ugly."

The comment surprised him. He would not have expected Rita Skeeter to care much about what she looked like, since her usual attire, although of good quality and the dramatic nail varnish she favoured did nothing for her rather squat figure.

Ragnok moved impatiently between them, and Ron was suddenly struck by the thought that Skeeter's figure, although taller, looked a little like a Goblin with her square, rather masculine face and her thick, almost talon-like hands.

He blinked. Maybe, there was some hidden mixed blood along the proud Rosier line, after all, and would explain her affinities with the Goblins.

"Really, Weasley," she insisted, now eager to get rid of him, "Just go, I'll take care of myself, as I always do."

The young Auror did not need more convincing. "Snape gave me this for you," he said, handing her the two letters.

She received them gingerly but uttered a very undignified "Yes!" when she read Healer Pye's name
on the second envelope. She tore open her own message and scanned it avidly. "Ah!" she declared, more to Ragnok than to Ron, "Snape is a dear. He always knows how to put his friends back on the rails. Respectable work, at last!"

Ron felt compelled to dampen a little her enthusiasm. "If he is a friend, try to treat him a little better in your articles."

She sniffed audibly. "Don't worry. I know how to hold my end of a bargain. Severus never had any reason to complain about the last work he handed to me."

Of course, Ron had not the first idea of what she was speaking about.

With a nasty smile, she almost cooed, "Oh! You don't know? The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore… I couldn't have done it without him."

"That pack of lies!"

"I'll have you know that everything's true," she cackled gleefully. "Severus gave me all the appropriate clues: Ariana, Grindelwald, Bathilda Bagshot… It would have been impossible not to write the full, absolute truth. It was so much better than anything I could have imagined!"

Ron felt ready to throttle her. "How did you trick him?"

"Trick him? Trick Severus Snape?" She laughed out loud. "He all but ordered me to write the ruddy book, you Moron!"

Ron stood there, thunderstruck.

The other two had already turned their back on him, dismissing him in the rudest manner. Really not caring, Ron reached for the door, a little blindly.

As he was stepping out, he heard, "Will you need a ride… To your vaults, Madam?"

"If you please."

"I'll take you there." The tone was strangely forceful and made Ron slow down.

Rita Skeeter – Rita Skeeter! – simpered, "Ragnok!"

The last thing Ron heard was a ruffle of fabric and a stifled giggle before he found himself magically pushed on the other side of the door and it closed with a definite click.

He did not remember exiting the bank but when he found himself in Diagon Alley again, he felt like gagging with all he had just learned. Not really feeling the icy drizzle that slowly permeated his hair and his uniform, he stayed there a long time, leaning against a wall and delaying the moment to go back to Spinner's End and tell Harry.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

A great thank you to JOdel for helping to make this chapter fit to read.

I shamelessly inserted entire passages from POA, GOF, HBP and DH in the chapter but I remind you that I am not JKR and earn absolutely nothing, except maybe some reviews. All references to Star Trek or other fandoms are purely intentional, too.

Look into my eyes

It's where my demons hide

(Imagine Dragons, Demons)

"Not bad for a first time," declared Snape.

"Hmm, well..." Harry, nursing his aching head, did not sound particularly gratified. "Why didn't you warn me that you can play Beater?"

"You never asked... But if you want to draw a Legimems into an illusion of Quidditch, you must expect them to retaliate. Most wizards are quite fond of the game." Snape waved a warning finger in his face. "Let it be a lesson that you must never, ever, offer them an opportunity to hurt you. Think carefully before using knives, swords or any kind of weapon that could be turned against you."

Harry sighed resignedly. "I understand... But I was so sure it was a good idea to use Quidditch."

"Oh! But it is. Not many people are as good a Seeker as you are. You will certainly give them a run for their money. Just do not get over confident."

"Small risk, with you as a teacher."

"I aim to serve," dead-panned Snape even as the whoosh of the Floo announced that Ron was back.

"I'd like to be sure of it!" interrupted an aggrieved voice.

Snape raised both eyebrows even as he was pushed back against the seat of his armchair by a very wet and wild-looking Ron Weasley, who all but growled in his face.

"Ron?!" Harry was trying to restrain his friend who angrily shook out of his hold. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded.

Snape, in appearance so phlegmatic as to appear indifferent, wondered the same. Or rather he wondered what kind of 'revelation' Rita had seen fit to make, this time.

"With me?" Ron cried, pointing an accusing finger in Snape's face. "Ask him about the book he made Skeeter write!"
Comprehension dawned on Snape's face as Harry frowned and asked in a puzzled voice, "Which book?"

"This one," Snape said, a simple Accio calling The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore from one of the over-crammed bookshelves right into his palm.

"What?" faltered Harry. Ron felt slightly comforted that his friend looked as gob-smacked as he had been when the Prophet's star viper told him.

Snape's shoulders sagged almost imperceptibly. "I'd prefer to explain when Healer Granger will join us. No use repeating tedious explanations several times."

Observing Ron's angrily pursed lips, he felt obliged to add, "Just know that I did not go behind Dumbledore's back. He told me himself what information to give Rita Skeeter."

The two Aurors looked at each other in dismay and groaned in unison. Oh! No! Another woolly scheme of Dumbledore's!

§§§

Hermione's reaction was not what either of the men expected. She barely glanced at Skeeter's book, only pursing her lips at the old Headmaster's face on the cover.

"So, was this another way he tried to atone, by destroying his own reputation? Or maybe an attempt to buy your forgiveness?" she ranted, not really asking for an answer. "A sort of Quid Pro Quo? Like, I hand you my most shameful and guarded secrets, to show you that I make sacrifices, too, so kill me without grumbling..."

Snape tried not to show any surprise that she immediately guessed what was at least part of Dumbledore's motives. "Yes, but that was the bonus part."

"Some bonus!" she scoffed.

"Hence all the scenarii where I would either kill you or Voldemort would," Harry cut in. The matter was still as sore as when he first learned that the old Headmaster considered that using Harry's hate against Severus would have been the most satisfying option to get him full mastery of the Elder Wand.

"I wonder why he did not just simply break it, like Harry did after the Battle of Hogwarts," Ron said pensively. "It would have solved the problem and saved both of you a lot of pain and grief."

"Oh! But it would have been too easy," said Hermione scathingly. "A simple, straightforward solution when he could have all of us dance to his mad tunes? Bah!"

"Dumbledore felt that it would be like committing sacrilege to destroy the Elder Wand," Snape explained, barely refraining from sighing at Harry's suddenly guilty face. "I can only approve of your getting rid of that... Thing," he said, locking eyes with the young man. "It cannot produce anything good to deal with what so obviously belongs to Death."

Harry perked up a little. As usual, Snape felt that it was a little pathetic that the Auror always needed some measure of approval from him these days, and that he was himself only too eager to oblige. Thankfully, neither Ron nor Hermione said anything, even if they shared a knowing, approving look that vaguely annoyed him.

He chose to ignore them. "He had been fascinated by the Deathly Hallows for so long... He
searched for them for years... There was Grindelwald and his wand, but there was also your father's Invisibility Cloak... "Snape turned once again to Harry. "In hindsight, the way he gave it back to you and let you use it without any control denoted a feeling of guilt, don't you think? After all, he had used his moral ascendency to borrow and not return it to your father at his greatest time of need."

They contemplated bitterly for a few moments what James Potter might have been able to do, if only the Cloak had been in his possession when Voldemort attacked. Even Snape could not imagine that he would have tried to save himself. He would probably have used it to send Lily and Harry to safety, or at least to hide until Voldemort left.

Ron prudently remarked that they had no proof that things would have turned differently in the end, because of the Prophecy.

Hermione did not say one word. She regretted Dumbledore's interference for Harry's sake, but she had to admit to herself that she could not wish for Lily Potter to have survived and turn to Severus for protection and consolation.

The probability of his surviving an open defection would have been practically nil. Not to speak of the green monster that raised its head at the mere thought of the beautiful Lily Potter appealing to his guilt and his nobility, and his feelings for her.

"You're right," Snape said in the definite tone of someone who knows the price of dwelling for too long on foolish, unattainable dreams, bringing them all back to the present. "No use moaning over a spilt brew."

"Yes," sighed Harry regretfully. "We don't know it wouldn't have turned out even worse in the end." Obviously, he had no more illusions than Hermione about Snape's chances of survival with Lily at his side and big 'traitor' and 'mudblood lover' targets on his back.

Snape cleared his throat. "Nothing good ever came from coveting Death's possessions. When Dumbledore finally found the Resurrection Stone, far from making him the Master of Death, it only provided him with the prospect of a very slow and painful demise, and at a time he was sorely needed."

His gaze turned haunted, as he remembered his frantic and in the end useless attempts to cure Albus. "He came to see it as his punishment," he said sadly and with all the bitterness of a man who had let himself be convinced, too. "He reconciled himself with his fate by treating Harry as his worthy successor in the quest for the Deathly Hallows."

"Blimey!" muttered Ron, who still had a hard time believing that they had fought a war where both leaders equally obsessed over death, each in his own way.

"And why me and not you?" Harry asked, almost affronted for Severus's sake.

The older wizard laughed in his face. "Because you're a much more plausible Galahad than I ever could be! Besides, you're the legitimate owner of the one true Invisibility Cloak. I understand now that Dumbledore thought he was giving you a chance to escape death at Voldemort's hands." With a pointed look at Hermione, he added cynically, "Failing that, he hoped to at least pass the torch to someone who would recognise the importance of the Deathly Hallows and of keeping the Elder Wand out of Voldemort's hands."

"And the best way was to have Rita Skeeter write about his life?" she asked with biting irony.

"Why not? A biography of Dumbledore written by Rita was bound to become a best-seller,
particularly if it was the very first book published after his death. Sooner or later, you would have found it, read it, and made the connection with the Tales of Beedle the Bard."

Hermione had to agree, as Ron and Harry laughingly patted her shoulders. "That's exactly what you did!"

"Dumbledore certainly did not relish the prospect of witnessing anyone's reaction when they learned the truth about his real life story," Snape went on, bitterly. "The book was the best way to explain without having to actually speak to people."

"But he told you at least broadly what Rita Skeeter would have to investigate and where to find the information. Obviously, he didn't mind your knowing," Ron suggested cautiously.

They were all very curious, but it was obvious Snape would never have disclosed that he made it possible for Skeeter to write her book if she had not spilled the beans herself. It was never a good sign when the Professor was reticent about something, although it still only proved so far that Dumbledore trusted him more than he had ever trusted anyone else.

"What did it matter that I knew?" Snape laughed harshly. "You can't imagine that I would have the front to judge The Great Albus Dumbledore?" The capitals were obvious in his tone.

When he saw that none of his former students felt like laughing but rather looked stricken, he stopped at once. He did not want their pity.

He could not stop himself from mumbling, though, so quietly that they hardly heard him. "And if I did, it was of no consequence. I am nobody's idea of a moral compass."

"You are mine!" declared Harry firmly.

"If you do, you're a fool!" Snape countered instantly.

"I'm sure it mattered very much to Dumbeldore... Whatever he pretended," Hermione exclaimed, quite incensed as she was every time there was another proof of the psychological damage Dumbledore had caused to either of her friends. "It is highly probable that he chose Rita Skeeter in the hope that a lot of people would believe she exaggerated."

"Whatever his motives, we'll never know, Healer Granger," Snape said coldly.

Hermione almost gasped at his reverting to address her so formally. Harry and Ron were surprised as well, but Snape refused stubbornly to meet anyone's eyes or to take any part in the trio's ensuing speculations about Dumbledore's intent.

In fact, he turned even more distant, if it was possible, clearly signifying that the subject was closed as far as he was concerned. He called Fuzzy and asked him to bring him Puck for another exchange of magical energy.

It was more important to make good use of what little time they had left before his trial and make up for the days he would be separated from his elves.

He looked down at the baby in his lap and decided that, whatever happened, he would at least make sure that this child had someone to take care of his needs and that of his parents.

§§§

January 15th, 2000 – D-2
Harry and Ron made the most of a bright interval and spent some time exercising in the garden. It was not that they were so fond of sunny if chilly winter mornings, but they tactfully chose to let Snape 'discuss' with Healer Babbock how much he could or could not exert his barely healed limbs. They could hear the shouts coming from the house. It was obviously a heated debate.

Soon enough, Babbock called them back, announcing that this was his last session with Snape.

"The last before the trial, I mean. Remember that you need to take things easy for the rest of the day and tomorrow, Professor, or you may lose again all the improvement we have finally achieved," he said, trying to sound stern. With a pointed stare at Harry, he silently conveyed that he would hold him responsible for any overexertion.

The Auror nodded, although he was not sure how he would be able to curb Snape's constant need to get out and about.

The healer had already turned back to his patient. "Anyway," he added, quite sadistically in Snape's opinion, "Healer Granger will watch over you."

Snape nodded crisply before looking daggers at both Aurors, forbidding them to comment or even smile – as if they would dare.

"I will see you in two weeks time in St Mungo's," Babbock said more jovially, before throwing a handful of Floo powder in the fireplace, calling out, "St Mungo's, Healer Constanz's office!" and stepping in.

While Ron turned the mat back into the coffee table and Harry put the rest of the furniture in its usual place, Snape called Fuzzy. The elf brought and lowered carefully the Pensieve that he had brought from Malfoy Manor.

Ron sat expectantly next to Harry, who made a small, encouraging gesture to urge him to talk.

Snape raised an eyebrow, crossed his arms and smirked nastily, like he used to do in his classroom when he asked them questions and they had to shamefully admit, lazy dunderheads that they were, that they had not done the required advance reading.

Ron cleared his throat and took the plunge. "Err... Harry told me that he's finally managed to Occlude with your help and... Err... It's great! Really! What with Yaxley on the run... It's a good thing. So, I thought... I'm good enough with basics but... Since you're the greatest Occlumens in Britain... That is, if you don't think it's an imposition..."

Snape pursed his lips at the disjointed speech.

Ron cleared his throat again. "I think I need your help, too. Please."

"There," Snape said, in a surprisingly mild tone. "It was not so difficult."

Ron sputtered indignantly, "You knew what I was going to ask and you just let me make a fool of myself?"

"You certainly do not need my help for that."

Harry burst out laughing, although he instantly shut up as Snape frowned at him before stating, this time deadly serious, "I don't think you need more "classic" Occlumency training from me, although we'll test that, too. What you both need, with someone like Yaxley, is to recognise when they're trying to influence you mentally and how you can mislead them."
"Did you just manipulate me mentally?" Ron asked, rather awed. "You made me lose the thread of my thoughts."

"No. I merely acted like when you were a student. As I expected, you had a reflex, ingrained response all by yourself. Just to show you that people can always be manipulated, even without resorting to mental tricks. It's the basis of relationships, after all."

"But what about the mental tricks?" Ron insisted, quickly becoming frustrated. "I really want to learn how it feels like."

Harry added, just as eagerly, "When can we begin?"

"Right now, since you're so eager."

The two young men were ready to plunge in the Pensieve but Snape stopped them. "I hope you realise that you won't always be able to recognise mental manipulation from the outside." He turned to Ron. "As I already explained Potter, we will use memories of mine. First, we will watch them as it happened, without any personal input from me. Then, you will Legilimens me and see what actually happened from my point of view."

"Yes, sir." It was an automatic answer, a little doubtful but the two Junior Aurors could recognise an order. Legilimens Severus Snape? Right. The prospect would have been as terrifying as it was impossible, not so long ago.

Now, it was only terrifying.

They did not have time to worry, though. Snape gave the signal, they all leaned over the swirling Pensieve content and were sucked down inside.

The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane. For a second they stood quite still, wands directed at each other's chests; then, recognizing each other, they stowed their wands beneath their cloaks and started walking briskly in the same direction.

The scene of Snape's arrival at Malfoy Manor with Yaxley and the Death Eater subsequent meeting unfolded before their eyes.

"The Order's got one thing right, then, eh?" said a squat man sitting a short distance from Yaxley; he gave a wheezy giggle that was echoed here and there along the table.

Obviously, there was more to the meeting, but Snape quite abruptly interrupted it here. With nothing more to see, they all pulled out of the Pensieve.

"Yurk!" Ron said, feeling for Snape. "To think you had to do that for years!"

"This was just after Dumbledore's death," Harry said, guiltily. "That you had the strength, without anyone's help."

Snape cut him, almost ferociously. "I hope you took in as many details as possible?"

Both Aurors nodded, not daring to make another comment.

"Then, I will show you how it happened from my point of view. Potter, we have already done this, you're first," Snape ordered.

Nervously, Harry took out his wand and breathed "Legilimens!" with as much intent as he could
Nobody could have been more surprised than he was that it worked. Mentally, he glowed with pride.

The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane.

For a second they stood quite still, wands directed at each other's chests; then, recognizing each other, they stowed their wands beneath their cloaks, Snape with inward resignation, Yaxley with a smug smile. He knew Severus was always just in time and had recently taken to timing his own Apparition so that they would always meet on the way.

They started walking briskly in the same direction.

"News?" Corban asked, trying to sound casual.

"The best," replied Severus, fully aware that it was a matter of seconds before his supposed friend tried to pry into his thoughts.

"Thought I might be late," said Yaxley, his blunt features sliding in and out of sight as the branches of overhanging tress broke the moonlight. "It was a little trickier than I expected. But I hope he will be satisfied. You sound confident that your reception will be good?"

Snape nodded, but did not elaborate. It would only prompt Yaxley to pry and engage Severus in conversation. The high hedge curved with them, running off into the distance beyond the pair of impressive wrought-iron gates barring the men's way. Neither of them broke step: in silence both raised their left arms in a kind of salute and passed straight through as though the dark metal were smoke. Their Mark barely tingled against the wards.

Without even slowing down, Yaxley lowered his arm and drew one finger down Snape's sleeve to end in a caress on the inside of his wrist, in so swift a gesture that an outside observer would have missed it. Repelled, Snape clenched his fist, fighting the urge to plant it in the man's face.

Corban cares for me, came the thought, unbidden. (Ha!) He knows that our Master is hard to satisfy, and how often I incurred His displeasure, until I finally killed Dumbledore.

A ridiculous puff of pride tried to cheer him up and to convince him that he had proved his worth to everyone now – when what he really felt was guilt, sorrow for all his losses and fear of his inadequacy to carry out his mission.

Then, a buff of fear. It tasted quite different from the cold and permanent anguish, buried in the depths of his Occluded mind, that this time would see his duplicity exposed.

This was a rougher, blunter kind of fear, centred on the possibility of Cruciatus if the Dark Lord was in a foul mood tonight.

As if that was the worst that could happen to him. (Happy Corban, who does not fear more than the occasional bout of Cruciatus.)

The feeling of fear was followed by a fragile hope. Corban would be there to help and comfort him, if need be. The hope turned to relief. (He had to give points to Yaxley. He knew not to hammer the same idea and to make feelings come and go swiftly enough to feel natural.)

The voice went on. He would not be alone. He would be cared for – cherished even, if he would just let Corban prove him how much he valued him.
Now, there was a feeling of yearning and all wrapped up together lust, reluctant fascination and admiration for the wizard at his side, and some kind of fondness.

Snape inclined his head on the side as if he was not aware the feelings and thoughts were not his, and he was admitting their truth to himself.

He glanced briefly at Yaxley, as if he could not help himself and watched a small, smug smile tugging up the other man's mouth. In the sanctum sanctorum of his mind, he rolled his eyes.

(Corban may be mentally skilled, but he had no psychology, no subtlety. He proved at every turn that he did not know Severus at all.)

There was a rustle somewhere to their right; Yaxley drew his wand again, pointing it over his companion's head, but the source of the noise proved to be nothing more than a pure-white peacock, strutting majestically along the top of the hedge. "He always did himself well, Lucius. Peacocks..."

Yaxley thrust his wand back under his cloak with a snort.

Lucius is just like his peacocks, the little voice murmured in Snape's mind, trying to sound as if Snape had the idea all by himself.

(As if you're not one to strut around all the time, even when you pretend to be friendly and to respect my knowledge of muggles.)

But Corban will always have your back, the voice insisted as if Snape had not been thinking just the opposite. See how he was ready to protect you? Lucius can't even protect himself these days, he can't serve any useful purpose anymore.

Gravel crackled beneath their feet as Snape and Yaxley sped toward the front door, which swung inward at their approach, recognising Snape's blood signature, though nobody had visibly opened it.

It costs Lucius nothing to include you in his wards, the voice insinuated. It's just a small token to keep you complacent. What you need is love. Ever wondered what it truly feels like? What you could have? What Corban can offer you, it insisted.

The eyes of the pale-faced portraits on the walls followed Snape and Yaxley as they strode past. Snape was grateful for their presence. Hopefully, the ruckus they raised the last time should dissuade Yaxley to try to proposition him again, particularly as they were verging on late and the Dark Lord would definitely not appreciate it.

The two men halted at a heavy wooden door leading into the next room, hesitated for the space of a heartbeat, then Snape turned the bronze handle before his courage failed him.

"Yaxley, Snape," said a high, clear voice from the head of the table. "You are very nearly late."

(There was a small hint of amusement in the Dark Lord's voice, and too many knowing looks for Severus's taste, particularly with Yaxley preening himself at his side.)

"Severus, here," said Voldemort, indicating the seat on his immediate right.

(Still basking in His approval, then.)

"Yaxley—beside Dolohov."

(Thanks for small mercies.)
The two men took their allotted places. Most of the eyes around the table followed Snape, and it was to him that Voldemort spoke first. "So?"

"My Lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, at nightfall." The interest around the table sharpened palpably; Some stiffened, others fidgeted, all gazing at Snape and Voldemort.

"Saturday... at nightfall," repeated Voldemort.

His red eyes fastened upon Snape's black ones with such intensity that some of the watchers looked away, apparently fearful that they themselves would be scorched by the ferocity of the gaze.

Voldemort penetrated Snape's mind like a hurricane, making all the doors the spy shielded himself behind blow off their hinges. He entered like someone who knows the place like the back of his hand and ran up the dungeon stairs two at a time towards the iron barred door. He taped it imperiously. "Open up, or else..."

Snape, however, looked calmly back into Voldemort's face.

The door was already swinging open, somehow conveying a feeling of awe.

After a moment or two, Voldemort's lipless mouth curved into something like a smile.

"Good. Very good. And this information comes—"

Inside, Mundungus Fletcher raised his eyes from his tankard with a sullen look.

"—from the source we discussed," said Snape, allowing his Master to see how he manipulated the pathetic little thief.

"My Lord." Yaxley had leaned forward to look down the long table at Voldemort and Snape. All faces turned to him. "My Lord, I have heard differently," Yaxley waited but Voldemort did not speak, so he went on, "Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved until the thirtieth, the night before the boy turns seventeen."

Snape was smiling. "My source told me that there are plans to lay a false trail; this must be it. No doubt a Confundus Charm has been placed upon Dawlish. It would not be the first time; he is known to be susceptible."

"I assure you, my Lord, Dawlish seemed quite certain," said Yaxley, staring at Snape with clear warning, as if to tell him to desist and not anger their Master.

"(Follow your own advice, you fool.)

(Or rather, don't.)

"If he has been Confunded, naturally he is certain," said Snape, confident that Moody and Tonks had no met any difficulty in planting false information in their colleague's mind, fully knowing that Dawlish was a walking target for the likes of Yaxley.

"I assure you, Yaxley, the Auror Office will play no further part in the protection of Harry Potter. The Order believes that we have infiltrated the Ministry."

"The Order's got one thing right, then, eh?" said Crabbe, sitting a short distance from Yaxley; he gave a wheezy giggle that was echoed here and there along the table.
Snape disengaged himself from Harry and the memory stopped as abruptly as the first time, since Snape did not want either him or Ron to see anything of Charity Burbage's last moments.

He turned to Ron. "Your turn."

"Are you sure..." hesitated Ron but an imperative glare from the Professor made him claim, "Legilimens!"

Ron felt himself fall or rather being aspirated inside Snape's mind. He briefly wondered who was Legilimensing the other.

"Very good, Weasley." he heard, coming from everywhere and nowhere. He just knew it was Snape. It felt like him, even if he could not explain where the knowledge came from. "Most people don't realise that it can go both ways, if the parties are equally skilled. Even the best Legilimens or mental manipulator can be tricked into believing he is the aggressor when, in reality, he is the prey."

Ron had no time to consider all the implications of what Snape said, as the same scene Harry had just watched began to unfold before his eyes.

When Snape pushed him out of his mind, just as easily as he did with Harry, Ron sat for a while, with the same look on his face as when they were playing chess.

"If you can purge a memory of your real thoughts and feelings," he said at last, with a puzzled frown, "what's the worth of a memory in court?"

"Are you questioning the validity of my memories?" demanded Snape, instantly offended. "The private memories I gave Harry, and that he has seen fit to share with the whole Wizengamot, without my knowledge or my permission, I might add."

"No! No! Just wondering aloud," Ron hastened to say. "In fact, come to think of it, I suppose it's even better if a memory isn't tainted with feelings and private thoughts. It's more objective to just have the facts and not to be influenced by the point of view of the witness."

"Indeed, but only someone fully trained in Occlumency can sort their feelings and put them on the side."

"Yes, we've been told that's the reason why the Wizengamot will always choose to watch seasoned Aurors' memories when there are several witnesses, but it's the first time I really understood why."

"How comes I could feel your emotions in the memories you gave me in the Shrieking Shack, if you can put them aside, as you say?" Harry asked, just to be sure.

"Even I can blunder while I am dying."

Ron blurted without thinking, "Thankfully, it was the good kind of dead." He flushed crimson. "Err... You know," he said tentatively, "The kind of dead you come back from."

Harry guffawed and promptly pursed his lips in an attempt to shut up, although Snape looked more amused that annoyed—but it was hard to tell with him.

"Had you only found the memories I left you in the Pensieve on my desk at Hogwarts," Snape said with his classroom voice, "You would not have felt much. I was careful to screen my feelings then. As it turned out, they must have blended with those you collected in the Shrieking Shack and some emotion was bound to bleed through."
Then, it was Ron's turn to have his Occlumency skills tested. Harry watched Snape lock eyes with Ron, until he lowered his wand and declared, "Fireworks and tricks... Rather creative."

"You were not even surprised with the Whizz-bangs! You tore them open instantly and did not even set them off." Ron sulked a little. "It's my best parade, according to our Ministry instructors."

Snape merely smiled. "I had a lot of practice at Hogwarts with all the products from your brothers' shop that the students will smuggle in, despite their being forbidden to."

"You said earlier that, when two persons are equally skilled, the Legilimens can be tricked into believing they have the upper hand."

"Yes."

"Please, explain."

"It's easier to show you, but I think I will begin with Potter, who's been fidgeting for too long."

Ron shook his head at Snape's words and looked skywards with a sigh. "Yes, best indulge the children first."

"Hey!" protested Harry. "I resent that."

Ron merely grinned and he grinned back.

"Shut up, Potter!" ordered Snape in a light tone that removed all sting from his words. "Prepare yourself."

Harry had found the last time that he fared better when he actually did not prepare, so he immediately cast "Legilimens!" and gasped as he fell in the dark until he suddenly found himself gazing in his own face once again.

"Pay attention!" Snape sternly warned. "You will now see how you can manipulate a Legilimens and fight a mental intrusion while making your aggressor believe you're powerless."

**Harry/Snape**

Harry/Snape was on his back on a hard, muddy soil, pebbles painfully entering the raw wounds on his back but it was the least of his concerns. There was a piercing, unrelenting sear inside his brain, although it was almost nothing to the overwhelming pain still diffusing through all his nerves while his entire body shook helplessly.

The warm, more pronounced wetness in his lower body barely registered but he already knew that all the sphincter muscles of his body had loosened under the unbearable pain since even the dim light hurt his eyes – a sure sign that his pupils had been affected, too. He was nauseous and felt himself drooling. He hoped he would not end up choking on his own vomit, as he had seen happen often enough.

Something warm was running down his nose, blood most probably, mixed with tears and snot.

Aftermath of prolonged Cruciatus, Harry realised, and there must be open wounds on Snape's back. Snape's disapproval made itself felt and the Auror meekly put his thoughts aside.

**Harry/Snape**

Harry/Snape painfully rolled on the side, inwardly focusing his energy on his breath.

In. I am in control.

It was almost laughable in his position but he knew it was vital not to give in to the pain due to his
overloaded nerve endings and the sudden, massive influx of lactic acid in all his muscles. His breathing sounded more like a desperate gasp for air than anything else and it made Voldemort snort.

Out. I control from within, he thought even as he began to vomit, too.

In. I am the master of my thoughts.

Out. My thoughts are only my own. My mind is my fortress.

In. It was as if a thick fog lifted. Harry/Snape visualised his brain like a well-known map, tracing paths, rebuilding defensive moats, dungeons and keeps in the familiar territory.

Out. He checked all corridors at once and the doors that hid trapped rooms, full of carefully selected glimpses of memories that seemed to tell a story.

In. Around the military defences lied intricate mazes full of trivialities, stacks of endless household and school lists, rows and rows of shelves with compartmentalised academic knowledge. All this was piled up to the brim, thrown seemingly at random and so much crammed that it made it as impenetrable as a Gringott's vault and as boring and uninviting as the Ledgers Archives at the Ministry. It looked totally worthless to an outsider to try to cut a path there when the fortifications so obviously sheltered what was worth to defend.

Harry/Snape was brutally grabbed by the hair and his head forced backwards. He barely managed to hold back the acid in his stomach and the brutal influx of saliva. He could only follow the movement and ended up on his knees, wizzing, Voldemort's enraged face dancing in front of his eyes.

In. The little cocoons holding his secrets and private thoughts, hidden in every available void and space in the mazes vanished even from Harry/Snape's view. Nobody, even himself, could see them now.

Relieved, Harry/Snape breathed out again although it came out as a moan.

With great effort – it hurt everywhere and the temptation was to coil his magic inside – he poured some of his last remaining energy in a centrifugal wave and tested the invisible strands of magic that spread all around his mind on the exact model of a spider's web, even as he felt the intruder sending shock waves as he crossed them on his careless, brutal way straight to his defences, like a corrosive blade.

"What curse did Dumbledore use on me?" the madman asked.

"I don't know!" Harry/Snape heard himself whimper painfully.

"Don't play the ignorant with me, Severus. You must know that I won't let you die before you tell me how he bested me."

"I don't know, My Lord!" he pleaded desperately. "Even Dumbledore didn't understand what happened to you."

"You have to know something!" Voldemort roared and Harry/Snape was lost to everything but the pain once again, the fact that he was screaming himself hoarse not even registering.

Abruptly, it stopped and the spider strands vibrated as Voldemort moved ahead and tore several doors open at once.
"Inside the first room, Memory Severus was trying to curl in a foetal position on the floor of the interrogation room as the Aurors alternatively Cursed him and kicked him viciously.

"I tell you I work for Dumbledore," he wailed. "Ask him! Please, ask him!"

"As if we'd waste the Headmaster's time for scum like you!"

Voldemort shrugged and marched in the next room.

There, mild curiosity made him stop to watch why Rufus Scrimgeour ordered Snape to be Bound spread-eagled. A big Auror, at the signal, methodically began to crush the bones of his hands under his heels.

The Head Auror asked casually, as if Snape could do anything but howl, "It hurts, doesn't it?"

After they revived him but left him Bound as he was, Scrimgeour tut-tutted, as if he was reprimanding a child. "It's your fault. I told you I would do it if you refused to be more reasonable."

He stood and made to the door. "If you don't confess your role amongst the Death Eaters before sundown, it will be too late to heal your hands."

Snape was left alone and crying helplessly, even more out of the fear and despair of being crippled forever than from the pain. He knew they would never waste the time to heal him properly, whatever Scrimgeour said.

"If it's any consolation," Voldemort declared icily, "I'll remember to try this on dear Rufus one day."

The arrival of a very sour Alastor Moody bearing the news that Dumbledore had appealed to Barty Crouch for an immediate hearing of Snape's case and that they needed to prepare him at once, did not seem to interest the Dark Lord, even when the old Auror resentfully cast a global Brackium Emendo on Snape's hands and ribs that had him crying out loud at the sheer brutality of it and made him faint again.

Without warning, Voldemort exited Harry/Snape's brain, leaving him reeling in vertigo and instantly returned to interrogation mood.

"How did Dumbledore ambush me?"

"It wasn't an ambush," Harry/Snape sobbed. "Dumbledore believes... He believes it was Lily's sacrifice that protected her son... The Power of Love, he calls it."

"Fool!" cursed Voldemort before casting another Crucio.

An eternity of pain later, Harry/Snape was trying to catch his breath even as he felt once again the acid burning of Voldemort's mind entering his, probably frying synapses all the way. The mental spider web shook wildly, as if trampled by an elephant and some strands snapped.

Voldemort arrived in front of a fractured door that barely held by one hinge. He laughed and tore it completely out while murmuring something under his breath.

Harry/Snape could not recognise the Curse, but it felt like the madman was actually tearing one of his arms before throwing the door carelessly on the side. Its fall resonated so painfully with a great shock wave that Harry/Snape could not help wondering if his eardrums were actually perforated, although he knew, intellectually, that everything was happening on the mental plane.
The Dark Lord stepped regally in the room, taking the pose of a conqueror.

Harry/Snape was whimpering, tightened into a ball on his chair, with Dumbledore hovering around him like an annoying insect.

Voldemort perked up at the sight, like an aroused voyeur and slowly circled around them.

Harry/Snape silently pulled on the feeling of repulsion he felt looking at the monstrous, only vaguely human face of the Dark Lord and projected it back with the image of Dumbledore harassing him.

Voldemort sneered. "Not such a benevolent new master after all, the dear Albus... Eh, Severus?"

Harry/Snape cried, "He's not my master!"

"Shut up!"

Harry/Snape was only too glad to obey and let the memory roll out, hoping the madman would swallow the bait.

"I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe..."

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person," said Dumbledore. "Rather like you, Severus. Weren't you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?"

Harry/Snape's breathing was shallow and he looked frozen, but Voldemort could feel him trying to shut his mind up on the old fogy's rubbish.

"Her boy survives," said Dumbledore.

With a tiny jerk of the head, Harry/Snape seemed to flick off an irksome fly, thinking 'What do I care! I'd kill the both of you if I could have my Master back'.

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"

"DON'T!" bellowed Snape. He curled up on himself once again, projecting anger and anguish. Lily could rot, for all he cared, because of the much greater loss of his Lord. "Gone...dead..." he could not help whimpering.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

Taking his grief for Lily, Harry/Snape turned it on Voldemort. A great wave of despair and self-loathing. 'Master!' he cried, 'Why have you forsaken me?'

It was so powerful that Voldemort stopped sneering to consider him with curiosity and the beginning of doubt.

"I wish... I wish I were dead..."

"And what use would that be to anyone?" said Dumbledore coldly. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

Harry/Snape seemed to peer through a haze of pain, and Dumbledore's words appeared to take a long time to reach him.

"What – what do you mean?"
Why pretend he suddenly cares? Harry/Snape oozed suspicion and defiance but Dumbledore did not notice, or he did not care, but Voldemort was very interested.

"You know how and why she died."

For nothing, the idiot! Harry/Snape projected resentfully. When she could have lived, and serviced me.

(Somewhere in a hidden bubble, Harry/Snape's heart was bleeding with renewed guilt.)

Dumbledore was still droning on.

"Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."

He thinks it's not the end?

There was a long pause. Then, under Voldemort's eyes, Harry/Snape slowly regained control of himself. It was as if he had found a light at the end of a dark tunnel.

"He does not need protection. The Dark Lord has gone –" The words choke in his past self's throat and Harry/Snape once again seized the opportunity to amplify the spectacle of his breakdown with heightened feelings of loss and despair.

My Lord! He cried again in his mind, with as much anguish as was humanly possible.

Voldemort did not smile but he straightened a little and sighed, like someone who has just received an unexpected piece of good news.

"The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."

He's not dead?

Voldemort watched as Harry/Snape thought his most greedy thought so far.

There is still hope, then, if Dumbledore believes He will return.

Harry/Snape projected a feeling of secret exultation and Voldemort absorbed it like a heady aroma.

He will return!

At last Harry/Snape said, "Very well. Very well. But never – never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear… especially Potter's son… I want your word!"

It's disgusting enough to pretend to help you, Harry/Snape projected around. I don't want to have anything to do with your followers.

Voldemort snickered. "Tsk-Tsk! Severus. I hope you've managed to ingratiate yourself to them."

Harry/Snape mentally managed to hang his head in shame. "I'm afraid not, Master. Only Dumbledore."

Alastor Moody's loathing face floated briefly between them before vanishing like vaporised water and they were back in the memory of Dumbledore's office.

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore sighed, looking down into Snape's ferocious, anguished face. "If you insist…"
Voldemort suddenly withdrew and there was a contemplative look on his face as he stopped to consider Harry/Snape.

"So, you did not betray me, after all?"

"No, Master. I just needed Dumbledore's help to stay out of Azkaban."

Voldemort pursed his lips. "All my Death Eaters have been a little too eager to believe I could be vanquished so easily and 'just' tried to save their hide without looking further. I expected better of you, Severus. Crucio!"

Harry/Snape screamed and screamed, and once again lost all sense of time.

Desperately, he repeated his mantras. I control from within. I am the master of my thoughts. The thief enters, the wicked enters, but they will see only what I will let them see. I am in control...

He regained consciousness of his surroundings while laying face down in the grass. He hardly had time to spit out the sick before the Dark Lord brutally seized his face with both hands like a vice and wrung it upward, making a point as he entered his mind again of hurting him as much as he could to prove how suspicious he still was... How tenuous was the good will that kept Harry/Snape alive for the time being.

"How come Dumbledore knew that I would come back?"

Harry/Snape's mind seemed to bleed without control visions of Moppy wringing her hands near his bed while Madam Pompfrey tried to stop his seizure and ordered, "Call the Headmaster!" and of Dumbledore carefully scanning and testing Snape's Dark Mark, the young man laying catatonic, eyes blank, his face almost as pale as the bedsheets and his hospital gown.

"I passed out when you... When I thought... I felt you die... But Dumbledore confirmed that my Dark Mark was only dormant. He deduced that you were not dead."

Voldemort threw Harry/Snape on the ground, severing the link between them as if he was ripping a tightly stretched elastic. Of course, he made sure to send the backlash to Harry/Snape.

Harry/Snape nearly keeled over, panting in the trampled grass still wet and reeking with his vomit. He stayed there, panting and waiting for another round of punishment. When it did not come, he cautiously peered into Voldemort's face.

"Humm!" commented the madman. "And still, you did not return when I Summoned my faithful."

"I could not, my Lord," pleaded Harry/Snape, prostrating himself at Voldemort's feet and desperately trying to catch his breath. "I tried to find and save Barty... but there was no getting close to him... until it was too late. Dumbledore saddled me with Moody, supposedly because he needed to be taken care of and there was no one who could do it better than me," he snorted.

Voldemort grasped Harry/Snape's chin, forcing him to raise to his knees, but it was gentler now. He plunged his eyes in his spy's.

Harry/Snape's memory of a weakened but hostile Mad-Eye Moody walking by his side to the way of the infirmary floated by. "Course Dumbledore trusts you," growled Moody. "He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me—I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape."

"Then, I had to wait on Dumbledore's pleasure... He first sent me to fetch the Minister, and then he tried to impress more loyalty into me... Before consenting to send me back at last... To spy on you."
With an overwhelming feeling of resentment, Snape's memory of Dumbledore forcing him and Black to shake hands bled in.

Voldemort laughed. "Impressing loyalty... I always liked your sense of humour, Severus. Ha! Ha! Ha! That was a good one. Did it really elicit any greater feeling of loyalty, I wonder?"

"Even if there had been any doubt about where my loyalty lies, my Lord... This would have been enough to send me straight back to your side."

Voldemort was still chuckling. "That I can believe."

Harry/Snape still did not dare to raise himself up. He did not think he could without fainting. Instead, he tried to brace his hands on the soil, although it made his back lance again.

Anyway, it would be foolish to try to stand without the Dark Lord's permission. He still had a lot of anger to vent.

Another round of Cruciatus was probable.

Harry/Snape waited.

And waited.

In silence.

He could only hear Lucius's robe rustling somewhere in the background. It was probably as hard for him as for Severus, to be obliged to watch and keep his mouth shut. Another kind of punishment.

As nothing happened, Harry/Snape dared open his mouth. "Fortunately, I was able to make sure that the Minister would not believe Harry Potter's little tale."

Voldemort pierced him with his gaze again, without touching him this time.

Fudge and Snape were walking quickly along the corridor at the foot of the staircase.

"Shocking business... shocking..." the Minister repeated. "Never heard the like... Croutch's work, I suppose?"

"He had bewitched them, Minister, I saw it immediately. A Confundus Charm, to judge by their behaviour. They seemed to think there was a possibility You-Know-Who had returned."

"No!"

"It's no one's fault but Potter's," said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. "And of course Potter has always been allowed an extraordinary amount of license by the headmaster— He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here—"

"Thanks to this little discussion," Harry/Snape commented, "and to our friend Rita Skeeter's articles, Fudge is convinced that Potter was Confunded and that Dumbledore only wants to become Minister in his place. It was a very sad falling out of friends."

Voldemort eagerly seeked Snape's next memory, a very edited version of the confrontation between Fudge, Dumbledore and Harry Potter in the Infirmary, leaving out Snape's but also Minerva McGonagall's contributions.

Voldemort's jubilation was palpable. "My devious spy!" he chuckled, sounding almost affectionate.
now. "I would have missed you if I had been obliged to kill you."

Harry/Snape managed not to close his eyes in relief.

Voldemort must have noticed some sign of tension release, though, because without warning, he gripped him again and plunged instantly back into his mind, trying to catch him unawares, looking for any sign that would contradict his tale.

All Harry/Snape had time to project was a mixture of abject fear of further punishment, relief to still be alive and admiration for his master's power and deviousness. The fear and the relief were genuine.

Voldemort let go just as suddenly and Harry/Snape fell face down in the grass again, the brutality of it sending fresh waves of dizziness and pain through his entire body and reopening his wounds.

"See that you don't disappoint me, or you'll regret it."

Harry/Snape managed to raise his head a few inches and to kiss the madman's nearest foot, before collapsing again, fervently hoping it was over, because he was not sure he could hold out for another round right now.

"Lucius," he barely heard before losing consciousness, "You can have him."

§§§

Harry blinked several times, unable to understand if he was coming out of a trance or out of Snape's coma. He was surprised to find Ron's worried face only a few inches from his own and Snape's, who was still seated right in front of him.

"Are you alright?" asked the redhead breathlessly, his eyes darting between the two men. "I very nearly called Hermione. You were moaning and crying as if in pain-"

"Some kind of emotional transference is unavoidable," declared Snape, who would have passed for totally unaffected if he had not been so pale himself.

Harry made a sound that was between a sob and a laugh. He launched himself at the older man and hugged him fiercely.

Snape let himself be hugged without returning the embrace. In the end, he awkwardly patted Harry's back, with a pained expression that would have made Ron laugh if he had not been dreading so much what would happen when his turn came.

Snape tried to chide, "You must learn to distance yourself, Harry. I hope you concentrated on the facts and-"

"Yeah," cried Harry. "On the fact that you endured so many things for me."

"For the cause," Snape corrected, sitting back and forcing Harry to let go of him. "I was not so noble or so crazy that I would have done all this only for the brat you were then."

He stood a little stiffly, poured himself a modest quantity of strong alcohol and proposed some to Harry.

The young man declined, preferring to gulp down a full glass of icy water before helping himself to another, that he forced himself to drink more slowly this time. He still looked a little dizzy, while
trying to order and make sense of all that he had seen.

Very much aware that they must have visited some very intense and probably violent memory, Ron's anticipation turned to anxiety.

Severus took very small sips before putting his glass down, still half-full.

"Your turn, Weasley. Try to keep your head, and focus on Voldemort, not on me or on yourself," he added with a pointed look at Harry, who stared back, refusing to feel ashamed of his feelings.

"Voldemort?" Ron asked in dismay.

"Of course, Voldemort," Snape said impatiently. "He may have been more talented than most, but he was the typical sort of Legilimens you may have to face when dealing with Dark wizards. Brutal... Paranoid... But vain and unable to believe that he could be mistaken, that anyone somehow could hoodwink him. Fool the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished Legilimens the world had ever seen?" he mocked, briefly swelling with pride. "Impossible!"

Ron's eyes widened and he swallowed painfully, his stress level going up even further.

Snape barked, "Some time this year, Weasley!"


§§§

Hermione looked around, scanning the corridor to see if there was anyone around. Minerva had cautioned her against speaking the password too loud, with all the visitors and students roaming free in the castle.

She was almost certain to be alone but she still barely whispered to the Gargoyle guarding the entrance of the Head's office, "Bannockburn."

The gargoyle stepped aside and Hermione cautiously ascended the stairs.

So far, her day at Hogwarts was a resounding success.

People had flocked to the school from all over Britain and even abroad, as much to revisit their youthful memories as to form their own opinion about the scandal and the accusations against Severus Snape.

As Minerva expected, most acted sentimental or nostalgic and predisposed not to be hostile while at Hogwarts. Back in the place where they had learned to become adults, presented with all the work behind the scenes to ensure the students' safety and comfort, many realised that the 'freedom' they had enjoyed in their own days was mostly appearance and more carefully controlled by the staff than they would have ever believed.

Most of the people she had discussed it with admitted that they had never truly believed that anyone could get away with abusing students at Hogwarts.

It must be said that the staff took every opportunity to repeat tales of Snape's academic achievements and cunning, and how he duped the Carrows and protected them and the students during his year at the helm.

And, of course, there was the Charter of Hogwarts. It was the first thing she had gone to study on
arriving at the school, although it was six in the morning.

Now, people queued patiently to see it. Most of them did not even know it still existed until Professor McGonagall’s announcement in the press. There was a gaggle of foreign visitors, too, who came only for the chance of viewing this treasure of the magical world. Even without the vivid illuminations and the mesmerizing golden ink and dried blood it was written with, it was still worth the wait. From ten feet away, the ancient parchment still exuded power, ever since the time of the Founders and everyone who approached could feel it and understand that it would be a very foolish or presumptuous professor who would try to betray their Oath to the school.

The sceptics or those who regretted the Death Eaters’ defeat wisely kept a very low profile, so the press would be able to report the unanimous satisfaction of the parents present at Hogwarts, glowing appreciations from the scholars who enjoyed the rare display of the Charter, and declarations from a host of war celebrities in support of Professor Snape.

Interestingly, Rita Skeeter was nowhere to be seen. Hermione learned later that the Prophet had delegated Betty Braithwaite to cover the event.

It was not all roses, though. Poppy Pomfrey had been on the alert all day with Alfred Constanz. Returning to the scene of the greatest battle of the war was bound to trigger unpleasant memories. Poppy helped a lot of people to calm down after panic attacks or various kinds of unpleasant faintness, emotional release or hysteria. She had people relax and freshen up in the Infirmary, had the elves offer soothing herbal teas and toast, and distributed mild soothing draughts herself when needed. Constanz listened, advised when needed and, more often than not, incited them to consult with St Mungo’s psychological unit.

He shooed Hermione away, though, when she offered her help. "You’ll have enough appointments in the coming weeks, never fear. Right now, I’m sure you have better things to do."

The pleasant or very useful things, she had already done:

Arrive early and study the Charter of Hogwarts without interference: check.

Breakfast in the Great Hall with Minerva and gossip cheerfully with her former teachers: check.

Speak with the Order and Dumbledore’s Army members present but only reminisce over pleasant or positive things: check.

Follow Draco around Slytherin dungeon and let him explain all the repairs and improvements he has been able to implement. Watch him preen and bask in the adoring admiration of the surprisingly pleasant and even more surprisingly not blond Astoria Greengrass: check.

Share fond, amused glances with Daphne Greengrass and her fake boyfriend Terry Boot and roll her eyes at the incredible, almost syrupy cuteness of Draco and Astoria acting so pureblood correct, and yet so obviously besotted with each other: check.

Wonder if they are such good actors or if there is definitely something between Terry and Daphne as well, because Terry cannot stop telling Hermione what a great place they have been to last night, thanks to Daphne’s unerring good taste, and all the interesting things they plan to do, while the usually cold and very poised Miss Greengrass blushes adorably in anticipation: check.

(Wallow in jealousy and self-pity for a few seconds because she won’t ever feel anything like that and Severus is off limits for her: ch...– No, forget it.)

Engage Septima Vector in a passionate and exciting discussion about selecting the basic premises for
a very difficult Arithmancy equation: check.

Admire Neville's growing assortment of rare exotic plants in the new Greenhouse 6 and listen to Pomona Sprout's fond praise of their mutual friend: check.

Accompany her on pilgrimage to Hagrid's hut and share tears over the renovated building and well-tended garden, while Pomona expands about his health progress and how he expects to come back sooner than expected to Hogwarts: check.

Bump into Luna and tour the lake arm in arm with her, with a surprisingly jovial Peeves following them like a dog: check.

Let herself agree to answer other journalists with at least the appearance of cordiality accompanied by Luna, Neville and Peeves: check.

Sign countless autographs, with a smile: check.

Dodge Gawain Robarts's questions about Harry and Ron's enquiry for Snape's trial while still managing to find common ground for discussion about the Aurory, the reforms that should be done there and Shacklebolt's coming reform of judicial procedures: check.

So, she had done her duty as a public figure and a supporter of Severus Snape and had a generally pleasant time, all in all, while doing it.

There was one last thing she had to do and she could not put it off any longer, now that Constanz had sent her on her way.

She metaphorically girded up her loins and went in search of Albus Dumbeldore's portrait.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

...Where the title of the story finally begins to make sense...

Chapter Notes

All my thanks to JOdel for her helpful corrections.

Um coï brevis ver Raïdos Aïlerod
Lon desalien tender Hioman *

(Luc Arbogast, Nausicaa)

* Prisoner of his solitary campaigns,

he lets the flame of his humanity extinguish

Finally all keyed up, Hermione came sweeping into the Headmistress' office but very nearly faltered when she found herself the focus of great attention. She realised only now how many other portraits would witness her discussion with Dumbledore, as she had only focused on what she wanted and what she was going to tell him.

Granted, more than half of the frames were empty because their owners were entertaining visitors elsewhere in the castle, or they were sleeping, even snoring, but her arrival aroused enough curiosity to make her hesitate a little before she reminded herself that she was on a mission, and this was certainly not the time to be self-conscious.

"Phineas, look who's come to visit!" exclaimed Dilys Derwent. The sight of the beaming witch, and of Phineas Black, waking up with a start in his frame because she was insistently banging on something that sounded like a wooden door, instantly cheered Hermione.

"I was beginning to think that you had forgotten us!" her painted friend went on. "You look good!"

Hermione smoothed her russet robes out, taking the time to enjoy the feel of the soft, woolen fabric as it helped her regain her confidence. (It was Ginny who had insisted she buy them and the fetching leather hat, too, the last time they managed a girls outing, which inevitably turned into a shopping expedition when the redhead whined, "It's been such a long time. I haven't been to Diagon Alley for anything other than visiting George and Angelina.")

"I sincerely hope so," she answered with a pleased smile. "For once, I am not required to wear green!"

"You are absolutely charming in autumn shades," Dilys declared. "Isn't she, Phineas?"
Phineas Black looked trapped, like most men when they are to offer an opinion about female fashions. "Yes, dear," he said, without much conviction and only realised how it sounded when it elicited a round of sniggers. "She is always charming, of course," he added in a clumsy and belated attempt at courtesy.

Dilys laughed affectionately. "Don't mind him. He's a typical man. Wouldn't see the difference between good robes and a sack." She stage-whispered, "Except when it comes to taking them off," and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Dilys!" the Slytherin hissed, scandalised.

The witch tried to look contrite but the way her eyes twinkled proved she was totally unrepentant. "Yes, yes, of course. Sorry. Decorum and all that kind of thing…"

Black half-heartedly glowered at her, offended to have his human foibles discussed in public and, yet, a little flattered by the oblique reference to his virility but Dilys ignored him and turned back to their visitor. "But how are you, Hermione? Last time I visited and asked about you, Severus was evasive. I know he's worrying about his trial, of course, but-"

"Actually," Hermione interrupted her resolutely, "I came to speak with Professor Dumbledore. About the trial."

All eyes turned towards Dumbledore, who was dozing or faking dozing in his frame. Uncharitably, Hermione inclined for faking.

After all, she had it on Dilys's authority, that a portrayed person only appeared sleeping when otherwise occupied in another portrait of theirs. She was pretty sure no one was speaking to his Chief Warlock portrait at the Ministry right now, since it had been taken down and stored away to avoid his being influenced by the debates until the time he would be brought in the courtroom to give his own testimony. Faking sleep was a common affectation with portraits, which enabled them to listen discreetly while pretending they were still very much sought after and had important things to do.

"Ho! Dumbledore!" a tall fellow in Cavalier garb called out in a stentorian voice. "A fair lass's come to visit you. Wake up, old man!"

Albus Dumbledore slowly opened his eyes. He looked wonderingly at Hermione's short curls for a brief instant before exclaiming in recognition, "Miss Granger!"

"Healer Granger, actually, Professor. Healer in training, that is."

"Yes, indeed. I've heard that you are Alfred Constanz's apprentice," he said with an appreciative smile that somewhat dimmed as his expression turned to compassion. "He doesn't accept just any volunteer. Only people who have suffered enough themselves to understand what it takes to ease the suffering of others."

There was an uncomfortable pause before he added, "It needs a lot of empathy and dedication."

She shrugged, dismissing the compliment. "There was the war. I'm sure I don't need to tell you about it," she said tartly. "When the dust of what people at the top ordered finally settles, somebody has to deal with the collateral damages and the survivors."

A crone on her left made the sound of a Curse zinging past. There were cackles and what little could be seen of Dumbledore's cheeks underneath the beard turned slightly pink.

Hermione noted with interest that it was not just Dilys and Phineas who did not like or support
She could not stop her eyes from drifting to the empty space near Dumbledore's frame – the empty space where the portrait of the next deceased Head would hang one day. Her mouth set in a hard line.

Dumbledore spoke softly. "I confess I never expected him to survive but I'm glad to think that Severus Snape won't be here on this wall for a very long time."

"You're glad?!" she said in scathing tones, her gaze obstinately fixed on the wood panel where Severus's portrait would now be hanging, if things had turned the way the old man had planned. "Not only did you frame him to die but you pushed him in so many ways beyond his limits that he didn't even sit for his own portrait out of self-hatred. If he had actually died, as you expected, what would be left of him?" she asked, looking around for a sign that Severus had indeed lived and worked here for several months.

The only thing that could be his, and that she was sure Minerva had kept there only for the sentimental value, was a worn Slytherin scarf on a rack in the corner and she pointed dismissively at it. "Only this to remember him by?"

Without much emotion, or so restrained that it was undetectable, Dumbledore declared, "I regret that he refused to sit for the Ministry painter."

Hermione instantly swivelled round to face him. "Do you know, Voldemort, too, said that he regretted it, before he set Nagini on Professor Snape and then again when he left him bleeding to death in the Shrieking Shack."

In the tone of appeasement, Dumbledore asked, "Healer Granger, why have you come today? If you only meant to throw into my face the error of my ways, there is no need. I am very much aware that what I asked of Severus Snape, and of your friend Harry for that matter, was much beyond the call of duty. It unfortunately had to be done."

"It is not the reason of my visit."

She did not say more. After all, it was only fair to use the same destabilizing tactic he had himself used countless times on others, since silence is the ultimate weapon of power… Although Dumbledore's piercing gaze made her feel rather transparent.

Suddenly suspicious, she raised her mental shields. The portrait did not seem to notice any difference, but it proved nothing. He could be using Legilimens and she would not know. After all, she was still a novice and knew only its medical use with consenting patients.

He said, not really asking, "Then, it is about Severus's trial?"

"Yes."

"You are very much involved in his case, I've heard," Dumbledore said with a glance towards Dilys Derwent.

"Someone has to be."

"You don't know how thankful, I am. Not that I ever doubted it, because once the truth was known, honourable people were bound to support Severus."

"Honourable people..." Her voice trailed quizzically. "What about you?"
Dumbledore produced a box of sherbet lemons and carefully considered them, taking one, then another, although they all looked identical. Hermione tried not to lose patience, very much aware that it was nothing but an artifice. He finally selected one that he put in his mouth.

"Miss Granger… I mean Healer Granger, I am called to offer my testimony to the Plenary High Court. It was a master stroke that, by the way," he commented genially while wiping his fingers out of habit in the length of his beard under Hermione's slightly disgusted gaze. "I must congratulate Shacklebolt when I next see him. He managed to expand the court, manoeuvre Fudge and the opposition so that they will be under the eyes of the entire international community and acknowledge Severus's crucial position in the war, all in one move."

Hermione was listening with a dangerous gleam in her eyes – a clear proof that the unconditional obedience and respect she displayed as a student were clearly things of the past, and that there were limits to her patience.

"For my part," Dumbledore went on, as affable as ever, "I will tell all that happened and all the services Severus rendered to me and to the Order. Nobody will stay in doubt about his loyalty and the fact that he acted on my orders in everything."

"How long ago was your portrait painted?" she asked, eyeing him with suspicion.

"When I first became headmaster, of course."

She pouted, clearly showing that she knew a little more about portraits than the average person. Not surprising from the over-achieving Miss Granger.

"I had the painting re-infused with fresh blood regularly over the years, as prescribed," Dumbledore said, answering her question by anticipation. "And you can see that I appear to you as I was not long before I died. I added fresh blood almost daily between the time my hand was cursed until my death. On Severus's insistence, I must say. He warned me that if I wanted him to follow my instructions post-mortem, my memories would have to be fresh and up to date."

Hermione could not help smirking a little. You could not claim that Severus Snape ever went passively to his fate.

Dumbledore was still speaking. "I stand before you with my memories intact until just moments before I left Hogwarts with Harry Potter to hunt down Slytherin locket."

"So, you don't actually remember how you died."

"Just like any other portrait. I believe it is considered a mercy not to remember one's own death."

Hermione's face hardened. She knew Harry remembered much too well all that happened after Voldemort hit him with the Killing Curse, and Severus still had nightmares about being trapped in Nagini's cage and unable to move even as her fangs and venom destroyed his throat.

"A mercy, certainly," she said coldly. "A pity, though, as far as your evidence is concerned, since you won't be able to explain what happened between you and Professor Snape on the Astronomy Tower."

"It was unavoidable," Dumbledore answered, not looking at her as he was conveniently picking another lemon drop. "But I am confident there will be enough evidence with Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy giving their eye-witness testimony."

Hermione ignored Dumbledore's answer, turning back to the contemplation of the rows of portraits.
Occasionally, she would nod politely when her eyes met someone else's. She sounded very meditative when she said, "If he goes to Azkaban or into exile, he will never sit his Hogwarts portrait."

"Never is a strong word," Dumbledore said, his voice a little muffled by the fact he was now sucking on two sweets at the same time. "It sounds so exceedingly final. Severus is still much too young for you to consider he will never have his portrait here. He has a long future in front of him and plenty of time to remedy this, even if there are inevitable bumps in the road to expect."

"Oh? Because a stint in Azkaban is just a bump in the road, to you?"

With a small, reproachful sigh, the old wizard answered, "Do not presume to make me say what I did not. I just meant that Severus is a pessimist and he will not easily admit that he has a future, even if he were not to be immediately and totally exonerated."

She forced herself not to react. Deploring Severus's pessimism when it was Dumbeldore's personal handling of him since his student's days which was one of the most profound roots of his lack of illusions about the world! It was not even mere hypocrisy, she could tell, more like willful self-deception and it would be much harder to break.

"But do you believe that he will be 'immediately and totally exonerated'?" she insisted.

Most of the portraits leaned forward, showing their interest in the back and forth discussion and particularly in Dumbledore's answer about Snape's probable fate.

Unruffled, the old headmaster declared with his usual courtesy, "It is impossible to predict the exact outcome of a trial, whatever our wishes."

"Even with you speaking in his favour?" she asked, crossing her arms to show that she expected a better answer.

"I promise you I will do my best," he answered without losing any of his good humour, although he discarded his sweets on the nearby table, with a sad head shake, as if he did not fancy them anymore. "Unfortunately, during my time as Chief Warlock, I learned that misadventures and unexpected shifts in the judges' opinion are always possible in a courtroom, particularly when strong feelings and unscrupulous people who carry grudges are involved. It never hurts to be prepared for every eventuality."

"This is not very comforting," she said with cutting irony, "Coming from someone who thought nothing of throwing his right-hand man to the dogs, without any plan to ensure his survival or, at the very least, his vindication."

"I never meant for Severus to die," he said regretfully, "But the odds in his favour were very, very low to begin with."

"I find this pretty hypocritical, when it was you who dealt his cards." Hermione did not mind, for once, that her dratted hair was probably making its usual interpretation of Medusa, considering the way Dumbeldore was trying not to stare. It was a good thing if she could distract him a little and get some genuine reaction.

Still, his vivid blue eyes never blinked when he countered, "I don't know if this is Severus's perception of the situation, but we should not forget that he handed half the hand to Voldemort to begin with, and he always rallied to my plans in the end."

"I'd rather say that he never had the option not to obey you!"
"Healer Granger," Dumbledore chided gently, "You won't make me believe that Severus Snape could have changed so much that he denies responsibility for his own acts. He is certainly no one's puppet. He swore allegiance to me at one time, but so did he to Tom. If he had not trusted me, he would have found a way to leave the Order, just like he turned from the Death Eaters."

"He may not have been a brainless puppet, but you manipulated him emotionally as thoroughly as you manipulated Harry," she answered disdainfully. "Harry was too young and innocent to challenge anything you said, but I heard that whenever Professor Snape wanted you to consider another option or another plan, you never listened. They may have acted the way you suggested, but with you more or less covertly twisting their arm."

Blatantly ignoring her last words, Dumbledore looked longingly at his lemon drops, although he did not pick them back. "Every alternative he proposed, I had already considered."

"Rejected, more like, and without any discussion or explanation."

Dumbledore's gaze turn cold. "And why would I have discussed them?"

Before an indignant Hermione could tell him what she thought of tin-plated Headmasters with delusions of godhood, he went on quietly, "There is an old Chinese saying, that if several people all want to pilot a boat, it will end up sinking. Severus knew and accepted that leading an army cannot be an exercise in democracy. Besides," he insisted, seeing that she was going to object, "I never asked him to obey mindlessly. He would generally be screaming and kicking all the way when he did not like what I proposed." He shook his head in fond reminiscence, while playing one more time with his sweets. (Hermione idly wondered if painted sweets would be as sticky as real ones when manipulated so often.) "But in the end, he did what needed to be done, by his own choice."

"But you can't deny that the cost he paid was much higher than what you asked from anyone else," she instantly protested, "Except maybe Harry."

"If I asked more from Severus than from any other Order member," he acknowledged, prudently leaving Harry Potter out of the discussion, "It was because he was in a unique position. He was also the only one with the fortitude to kill me when I asked it and to be able to turn it to our advantage."

"It did not hurt that he was a Slytherin, I suppose?" She asked before she could stop herself. She just hoped it did not sound too cynical. "After all, being able to turn even a murder into something useful is not given to everyone."

"I would not have put it like that, but it certainly helped that Severus had a reputation. Nobody, even amongst the Death Eaters, would have dared question his motivations."

Hermione had to call on all her professional training to keep her feelings inside and sound (almost) neutral. "Yes, everyone learned that at Hogwarts. Can there be any good thing come out of Slytherin?"

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at her peculiar turn of phrase but he obviously missed the reference. "The very worst come out of Slytherin but great and good wizards, too. Severus faced many challenges on my request but only because no one else could have done it. If anything, I trusted him more than anyone else, not less."

"Yet not to the point of telling him the full truth about Voldemort's horcruxes."

"That was not a matter of trust."

"Oh?" She asked, in the tone of disbelief. "A matter of what, then?"
"Of helping him focus on what he had to do, not on all that needed to be done." Stroking his beard pensively, he added, "He would not have been able to just stand and watch if he had known the details of Harry's mission, and it would have endangered his cover."

"It may have saved us time and some of the people who died under the Death Eaters's rule might be still alive today. There would have certainly been a lot fewer victims." Like me. Her resentment soared even more from not saying it aloud.

"Speculation cannot change history."

Dumbledore seemed totally oblivious of how close he was to being sprayed with solvent.

"You say nothing of regrets."

"Severus could tell you that it does not do to dwell on regrets and forget to act."

"I can see that you certainly take your own advice," she observed with just a bit of sarcasm. "No regrets and no remorse."

The Headmaster's portrait did not answer.

Hermione realised things were not turning as she had hoped. She was too resentful, despite her good intentions when she came to Hogwarts and Albus Dumbledore had a lifelong experience in bluffing his way out of any type of emotional inveiglement.

She had to try again, though. "Whatever you pretend, the simplest explanation is that you didn't tell all the truth to Professor Snape because you could not help doubting him."

He shook his head sadly. "I do not know how to convince you that I trusted him, but it does not make it any less true."

"Considering all he managed to hide from Voldemort, I don't think it would have made a difference if you had told him."

"The more he knew, the greater the risk for the Order."

"If he betrayed you?"

"If he was caught," Dumbledore enunciated chillingly, finally showing some semblance of impatience. "I believe you spend enough time with Constanz in the Janus Thickey Ward? With incurables like the Longbottoms as a living proof, I do not have to tell you that there are limits to what a human being can endure. I would hardly call it betrayal if someone were to break under torture, so it was better for Severus and for everyone else not to burden him with too many secrets to hide and too many missions at the same time."

She grew pale at the mere thought of Severus... But, no, she refused to go that way. "If he had been caught, we would have lost anyway."

"I admit the odds would have been staggeringly low."

He sounded just as cool as ever, which infuriated her. "So, what the heck!" she cried, "He could have helped us find the Horcruxes!"

"I repeat that he could not have done so without blowing his cover."

"Professor Snape did not blow his cover when he passed us the Sword of Gryffindor," she
"But there is a difference between being cornered in a hopeless situation and deliberately courting disaster," he explained as if she was particularly obtuse. "In the long run, it would have necessitated that several people knew the truth about my death for his help to be accepted. The greater the number of people who share a secret, the higher the probability that something will inadvertently be repeated or written down and that the information will end up in the hands of the enemy. It was not safe to share the bigger picture."

Hermione considered him with a contemptuous, mocking little smile. "What you are telling me, in fact, is that you would have had to share your plans with a potential successor."

"At the risk of sounding pretentious, who do you think would have been able to do it?" he asked coldly. "Maybe Harry Potter, but in ten years time, and at the cost of too many of his ideals. What little I told him, he was not ready to hear."

Dumbledore certainly had a point, but she would never admit it. "Maybe not one single person, then, but a small team, like in any successful organisation. People like Moody, Shacklebolt, Remus, Minerva, Arthur Weasley... I can go on."

"You do realise that the days of the Order of the Phoenix were numbered once the Ministry fell, don't you?" he asked for form's sake. "What would have been the use, then, of a leading team whose members would be hunted down for their inside knowledge?"

"I admire the confidence you have in all the people who followed you or gave their life for the cause," she said drily. It elicited a few approving snickers, which made Dumbledore curl his fingers, if ever so slightly. He is not as unflappable as he wants us to believe, she noted.

"I have great regard for every single one of them. It does not make it any less true that very few people make good leaders and that even fewer are able to work together without losing a lot of time in deliberations."

"You're unbelievable!" she declared, throwing her hands in the air. "The very purpose of an organisation like the Order should have been to go on fighting, even without you... But, of course, you would have had to share information and power."

Dumbledore remained silent for some time, although her healer training enabled Hermione to note signs of uneasiness. The now steepled fingers that reposed in his lap, the willfully unfocused gaze that refused to meet hers proved that he was on the defensive.

He sighed, so softly that she would have missed it if she had not been watching carefully, and admitted almost apologetically, "You are right, but by the time I should have been passing on my knowledge, I was unable to do so." He raised a hand in a fatalistic gesture and let it fall back on the armrest. "The only excuse I can give is that the Peverell ring probably affected me much more profoundly than I realised. With the benefit of hindsight, I see that it magnified my need for secrecy and for control."

"I know." She rubbed her temples, almost tempted to give up on this stubborn old man, who did not want to admit that he had been consumed by his own hubris long before he was cursed. "Professor Snape berates himself for not realising it sooner."

The portrait had the grace to look contrite. "Honestly, Healer Granger, I am not sure it would have made much of a difference. I do not think I would have been able to listen...-"
Of course not, you NEVER listened.

"… And I do not see what Severus could have done, apart from consigning me to the devil and walking away."

"He would never do that."

"Indeed, I do not believe he would ever have done it. His sense of duty always made him act for the greater good, even when he admitted he did not understand my plans but followed them simply because he trusted me."

He briefly hung his head and shook it with something close to awe. "He trusted me, Healer Granger. Not for what I represented or what he believed I was, because he never could see me as the infallible Headmaster or the 'bulwark against Darkness' everyone else believed me to be after I beat Grindelwald. I will even admit that he had very little reason to respect me, but he trusted me nonetheless." The corners of his mouth sagged sadly. "It was a heady feeling. Probably too heady for someone like me."

Hermione almost felt sorry for Dumbledore in that instant, because he was finally reaching the critical point where he needed to speak, even if only to try to justify himself, but she could not and did not want to bear that additional burden. He would have to find someone else.

"It was all for the Greater Good," she said, careful to sound as neutral as possible. It was the most she was disposed to do for him.

"For the Greater Good, yes," he said. For a brief instant, he seemed to shrink and looked as old as he really was. "Serving the Greater Good is not as comforting as it is supposed to be. I was unfortunately no more able to prevent people from suffering than all the other delusional leaders who claimed it before me. I cannot speak for them, but I always found it was a very small comfort when confronted with the results of some of my decisions."

Yes, the Headmaster was certainly reaching some breaking point if he was sounding so self-pitying and maudlin.

Once again, she hardened herself against her own, always ready to sympathise heart, and tried to sound merely understanding.

"Don't you think that the 'Greater Good', these days, requires Professor Snape to be exonerated, for everyone's closure, as much as his own?"

It was as close as she could get to say that Dumbeldore needed to see Severus vindicated, for his own self-esteem. "The public need to know that people who are willing to risk their life, their reputation and everything they hold dear will be recognized in the end, not punished for their courage." She could not help adding, "The Order need it, too. They are very confused, and we have a lot of heated discussions about the true motives behind your decisions."

She immediately realised she had made a mistake.

Dumbledore's face had been displaying conflicted feelings for a brief moment but she could see the exact second he blinked out of his self-indulgence and returned to his usual self.

Unable to backtrack now, she raised a beseeching hand. "Tell me, what example to the next generations would it be, when the day comes to fight injustice or evil again, if Professor Snape is not exonerated?"
"I find this discussion a very good training before the trial," the Headmaster said, resolutely closing the door on introspection. "But what does Severus think of your intervention today?"

"Nothing, since he doesn't know," she said, raising her chin defiantly. "And before you begin to drone again about his being so loyal that he followed you with such complete trust, let me tell you that he is only expecting the very worst of this trial, in spite of all our efforts... Because he doesn't expect anything good from you!"

Dumbledore looked genuinely surprised. "Surely, he knows that I will defend him to the best of my abilities."

She snorted contemptuously. At this point, she would not handle him with kid gloves. "Even with the limitations of your being only a portrait these days, he does not put it beyond you to ruin him definitely if it suits you... And he does not see why it would not suit you."

"Healer Granger!" the portrait protested in a wounded tone, "I may have had to give Severus hard, merciless tasks, I never wished him ill."

"Then, why doesn't he know that?" she jeered. "He believes that you will let him down, like every time it counted."

Dumbledore blinked. "Severus says that?"

"His exact words and quite bitter, too. I can sympathise," she said in a deceptively sweet voice. "After all, it is not just anyone who will spend the seven years he stayed at Hogwarts convincing an abused boy that he will always be a second class person, protecting and rewarding his bullies as you did." Her voice grew colder and a little shrill. "Or destroying the career and ambitions of a potions genius, one whose work may have changed the world, just to keep him at your beck and call, even when it was obvious Voldemort would not return for years to come."

"Healer Granger-"

"It is not just anyone," she cut again angrily, "Who would ask him to kill them and make sure he would be in everyone's eyes the most contemptuous, ungrateful and cowardly turncoat ever?" She was practically shouting now.

"Healer Granger!" Dumbledore was angry, too, by now. "It is not just anyone either who will believe a Death Eater, when they come to you supposedly on behalf of a former girlfriend they have all the reasons to hate, and give them a second chance. And it is not everyone either who will move heaven and earth to get them out of Azkaban and exonerated. I did it once, I will do it again and things are never as simplistic as you make them sound."

She eyed him scornfully. "You pretend you care for him?"

"I do not pretend," he denied tiredly. "I do care for Severus. I know I wronged him when he was younger because..." It was the first time she saw him hesitating to find the proper words, and she knew, both as a healer and from personal experience that there was something very strong and significant there. "...Because of personal failings of mine," he finally admitted in his own convoluted way, "And ill-judgement. Severus had a lot to atone for as well, but we put a lot of things behind us after Lily Potter's death, when he agreed to stay at Hogwarts and to go on spying."

When you took advantage of his grief, she wanted to say and had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep the words in. "You say you care, but you still prefer to play God rather than put Severus's mind at rest," she claimed, abandoning the pretence that he was just Professor Snape for her. Dumbledore
did not seem surprised. "Your pride and reputation are still more important to you than knowing he has been waiting for months for yet another stab in the back from you, because he did not dare hope for something else."

Dumbledore stood up, an impressive if impassive figure. "I do not pretend to understand you, Healer Granger."

"No?" she asked with a little derisive laugh. "Severus doesn't need a grand gesture at his trial that will make you look good when he is at his lowest." She shook her head angrily. "He needs to know that he is more than just a means to an end for you, and I should not have to tell you that he must have it before you give your testimony."

Dumbledore made to open his mouth, but she beat him, now speaking in a low, urgent voice. "No! Let me speak. You do not know it, but it will not be just the trial next week... There is a whole conspiracy afoot, with escaped Death Eaters behind it. I fear..." She swallowed painfully. "They want him dead."

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "Of course, they want him dead."

"So," she pleaded, "If he ever meant anything to you, he needs to know it now! Not when you say it in front of an audience, with too many other things happening at the same time." She straightened, her expression turning forbidding once again. "Either you do it now, or he will never believe that you are not using him again for your own ends and he will never forgive you. Neither will Harry, I warn you, and more people than you would believe."

There was a growing rumble from the other portraits, more hostile than anything else. Dumbledore ignored it as usual, but Hermione looked around before saying, "I think you already had a taste of how it feels to be ostracised... I hoped it would have helped you understand a very little what Severus had to endure for years, but I suppose it was too much to expect that you would be willing to end his suffering before it suited your own agenda."

Dumbledore sat back rigidly. She almost pitied him for being so unable to admit his own failings or his contradictory feelings, and she was sure it was because of the audience. She briefly regretted she had not the authority to send the other portraits away.

She looked imploringly at Phineas Black, who nodded and managed to click his tongue loudly enough to catch the eyes of all his fellow portraits while Hermione attempted to distract Dumbledore by walking menacingly to him until she could have touched his frame, although she still had to look up to him.

Black glared meaningfully towards Hermione and Dumbledore and then back at his colleagues before putting an imperious finger to his lips and closing his eyes in fake sleep. Almost immediately, his eyelids shot up and he watched on as, reluctantly, the other portraits left their frame or went to faked sleep.

The corner of his mouth lifted as Dilys and a few ladies gifted with the same accessory hid their face behind their fan that suddenly occupied the entire canvas.

He almost missed Hermione's next words to Dumbledore. "I know you told Severus you left nothing to help clear him of murder, for security reasons. He took it as just another proof that you never cared for him as a person."

Dumbledore rubbed a finger on his lower lip but said nothing.
Hermione held his gaze. "I have another theory."

"You find me most curious, Healer Granger."

"With or without the Elder Wand, there was always the possibility that Harry and Severus would find themselves face to face at one time or another. We both know Severus would have tried to spare Harry as much as possible. I would not have thought it possible, but I have learned since that Harry had come to hate Severus so much, he would have had no reservation to harm and possibly to kill him."

"Then, we must be thankful they were both too busy for that."

"Are you telling me that is the reason why you sent Harry far from Hogwarts while Severus was stuck there?"

"No, but if what you tell me is true, I am thankful I did."

"I guess you have forgotten how to stop acting all the time," she said, shaking her head again, with pity this time. "It must be tiring."

Dumbledore said nothing.

"Even Severus has learned to lower his defences and allowed us to know the real him."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up. "An impressive feat, if it is your doing."

"Praise Healer Constanz. It took weeks of therapy for Severus to accept he is a human being and not some kind of monster... As he had been made to believe by those who used him with so little consideration for his feelings."

The old man reached for his sweets box. His hand stilled over the lemon drop, long enough for him to say, "I am happy for him," before putting it in his mouth.

She brushed the comment aside with an irritated wisp of her hand. "I did not finish telling you about my theory. Had Harry managed to kill Severus, he would have been consumed with guilt when he learned the truth. Severus revealed that your intention was to reveal nothing, to spare Harry the remorse... Which did nothing for Harry's peace of mind, I can tell you. He has come to resent you as much as he used to hate Severus back then."

Dumbledore's expression turned blank again but not before he could hide the hurt in his blue eyes.

She waited a few seconds before adding, "What I believe, is that you meant to keep the secret only as long as Harry was alive."

If she had not been watching him like an eagle its prey, she may not have noticed the small beads of sweat on Dumbledore's brow.

They carefully seized each other up again, in painful, expecting silence

At last, Dumbledore asked prudently, "What would you have me do, exactly, Healer Granger?"

"What you should have long done, since neither of them died and Harry knows the truth." she said. "I want your proofs, and I want them now."

There was a collective gasp of surprise from the supposedly empty frames or sleeping portraits all around but they both ignored it.
"If you don't do it for Severus's peace of mind, at least do it for Harry's. He's worrying himself sick about Severus."

Dumbledore cocked his head.

"My compliments, Healer Granger," he said with obvious sincerity. "I have been insulted and berated by a lot of people lately, who felt necessary to give me their opinion about my callousness for the way I treated Severus, and to express how contemptible it makes me, but nobody actually took the time until today to tell me that I am still hurting him, and Harry, too... Although I do not want you to believe that I do it more for Harry than for Severus's sake."

The blue eyes suddenly seemed much brighter and the old man blinked several times. "It seems I am always doing the wrong thing when Severus is concerned, when it could not be farther from my intention."

"Then," Hermione said softly, "It is time to do something right."

The Headmaster nodded. "One thing is certain, he could not have found a better advocate."

"No," said the young woman with a smile. "He could not have. Alexia Yaxley certainly knows what she is doing."

"I was not speaking of Alexia, even if I agree she is enchantingly ruthless and can wield arguments with the power of an axe."

Once again, she brushed aside the compliment. "The proofs, please. I do not want Severus to fret any longer than necessary."

"Then I will ask you to sit at Minerva's desk, and you will need your wand."

Hermione did as she was told without the slightest hesitation at using the headmistress's seat without her permission.

The desk was an incredible piece of craftwork and she could not help admiring it once more, even as she waited for Dumbledore's instructions. It had been a present from Beauxbatons on the occasion of a Tri Wizard Tournament, more than three centuries ago.

It was an eight-legged Mazarin desk in the Boulle style. The central drawer was inlaid with the school motto in the typical brass and tortoise shell ground. The school crest and the symbol of each of the four houses adorned the smaller surrounding drawers.

She instinctively reached for the Slytherin drawer but a small chuckle stopped her. "I hope I am not that predictable."

Dumbledore recited in a dreamy voice, "Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus." Her gaze instantly settled on the school motto. "Place the tip of your wand successively on each 'S' and then say Titillando."

"Titillando?" She could roll her eyes at the absurdity, but it was Dumbledore, wasn't it?

"Titillando," he confirmed, with a smile.

Two 'S' for Severus Snape, she thought while caressing the letters with the tip of her wand.

"Titillando!"

"Of course, I could not hide anything in this office," he told her with a bright smile. "Too many witnesses."

"So?" She was rapidly getting tired of Dumbledore's little riddles.

"Under the third step of the staircase, counting from the top. Tap it again with your wand and repeat 'Titillando' twice."

"That will be three times?"

"Third time's a charm, as the muggles say."

"I hope it's not another of your fool's errands," warned Phineas Black as Hermione walked out, leaving the door open.

They could see the young healer kneeling on the fifth step to reach more easily the third one with her wand and calling out twice, "Titillando."

There was a faint hiss, like released vacuum and a collective sigh echoed, coming from the portraits.

"Ha!" Hermione announced triumphantly, before reappearing some time later with a plain, old shoe box, whose very oddity plainly designated the owner as well as the faded label, 'ladies purple and gold embroidered slippers size 11'.

She put it on Minerva's desk, opened it and eagerly unrolled the parchment that laid at the top.

She read aloud, "I, Albus Wulfric Perceval Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, declare being as sound in body and mind as possible, which some may say does not amount to much, this day the eighteenth of August 1996. Today, I asked Severus Tobias Snape to do me the great favour to kill me and grant me a merciful and meaningful death at such time Tom Marvolo Riddle, who styles himself as Lord Voldemort, orders it."

Dilys Derwent face-palmed with a relieved sob and several portraits looked approvingly at Dumbledore. Phineas Black scrutinized his face through narrowed eyes but did not comment.

Hermione rapidly scanned the rest of the parchment. Cursed hand… Blah, blah, blah… Confirmed diagnosis that he would be dead before the end of next summer… Medical certificate by Healer Alfred Constanz of St Mungo's as an attachment… The Ministry still refusing to take seriously the threat of Voldemort… Blah, blah, blah… Order of the Phoenix intelligence and Arithmancy equations confirming that the Ministry and Hogwarts would fall within the year… Blah, blah, blah… Need to secure Severus Snape's position with Voldemort… Only hope to protect Hogwarts and the students… Blah, blah, blah… Personal memories of his interactions with Severus Snape enclosed… Ha!

She put her hand back in the box to search for the vial. She raised a quizzical eyebrow as she extricated not one but several vials and another box, in rot-proof acacia wood.

She put them on the top of the desk. All seven vials were the same size and labelled with the name of an event and a date between 1980 and 1997: Encounter on a hilltop. Wizard's oath. Tom's initial displeasure. Containing the curse on my hand. Consent. There were two vials with the same 'Debriefing' tag but one dated from the first war and the other right after the Battle of the Ministry.
She reached for the wooden box, after a swift glance at Dumbledore, who sat trying to look impassive but nodded in assent.

She discarded several balls of paper stuffing to unearth first a heavy bag of galleons, then a business card from Capuletto Padre e Figli, with an address in Roma, and the single word: *Ritrattisti*. A swift translation spell later and she now knew that they were portrait painters.

There was an extension charm on the box, because she now pulled out a file much thicker than the box. It contained an extensive correspondence between Dumbledore and the Capuletto covering every single detail of a long-term commission for a wakeful portrait, with top confidentiality and no deadline. Half the price had been paid in advance, to seal the deal. Hermione did not count them but surmised that the bag of galleons represented the rest of the sum.

There were samples of framework and several sketches, full-length or head-and-shoulders, all featuring Snape. It turned out that they had been drawn from a batch of accompanying magical photographs.

Hermione could not help wondering how Dumbledore had ever managed to obtain them, because they were not the official kind. Even at work in his lab or on Hogwarts grounds, the Potions master looked more relaxed and approachable than she could ever have imagined him as a student.

When he looked up from the copy he was correcting, he smiled without restraint and such open affection that her heart leaped. She was sure that he could not have been looking at Dumbledore.

Suddenly remembering how fond Rita Skeeter seemed to be of photographing her family and friends, she put the photo down as if she had been burned.

The blood vial was carefully wrapped in some kind of professional cloth padding she had never seen but was obviously imbued, by the feel of it, with magical properties – for preservation, she guessed.

It was opaque brown like all hospital unbreakable standard issue, but the throb of magic when she brushed against the cork told her that the vial was protected with the same strong spells as Dumbeldore's memories. It was only labelled *SS 1995 – 06 – 24*.

The last day of the Triwizard Tournament, she realised with a pang. The day Cedric Diggory died and Voldemort returned.

The day Severus went back to spying.

So, Dumbledore had expected and even probably planned Severus' s death at least from that date, but he had been prepared to pay for his portrait himself.

She turned to the Headmaster again, full of questions.

He pointed to the vial of blood. "*It was almost spur of the moment inspiration.*" He lightly rubbed his beard, before admitting, in a low, subdued voice, "*I was not sure he would make it out of that first confrontation with Voldemort alive.*"

Hermione put a hand on her chest in a vain attempt to control her own emotion. Even in her youthful ignorance, she had known that Professor Snape was going to do something much more difficult than 'alert the old crowd' like Sirius Black when he left Hogwarts on Dumbledore's orders.

Even after remembering how strangely unsettled and subdued the Headmaster had been after the Potions master had left, she would never have imagined that Dumbledore had been worrying that much about him. But then, she never imagined either that Severus entertained very small hopes not to
be tortured or killed on sight when he presented himself to his dark master.

"I sent him to Poppy under the fallacious excuse to help Alastor Moody to get there-"

She blurted, "They hated each other!"

"Yes, but it was the only way I managed to get Severus to the Infirmary. He did not dare refuse Poppy in front of Alastor when she took some blood from him, supposedly for a routine update of his medical file."

"Poppy was in on the secret?"

"Not exactly," he said, and she instantly translated it as 'definitely not'. "But she knew that Severus went regularly on dangerous missions for me, since she sometimes had to help patch him up. I just hinted that it would be a good thing to have some more blood at hand, just in case, you know."

"Why did you not have the portrait painted?"

"Because he lived on."

She snorted. "That's the weakest excuse I ever heard, particularly when it is so obvious you spent days planning all this," she said, pointing at the contract, vial and money.

"I assure you, I could not find the right moment. What would I have done with Severus's portrait while he was alive? Where to hide it?" He smiled unapologetically.

"I see. You didn't want to explain the living Severus that you had his portrait painted without his knowledge or permission."

Dumbledore chuckled briefly. "The real trouble would have been to discuss why I did not want him to infuse new blood in the portrait." He turned thoughtful, almost regretful, as he took his box and automatically put a lemon drop in his mouth. "I was sure that he would not survive the war. The least I could do was to find a small way for him to stay with us without retaining memories of what he had to do to bring Voldemort down."

"He was bound to learn the truth, even as portrait."

"Second hand knowledge is not the same. He deserved as clean a slate as possible, and this blood sample would have given him a sort of compensation, if you want. He would have been unable to remember the horrors he had to witness or to commit himself while retaining at least the memory of his one successful relationship."

"With Rita Skeeter?" Hermione blurted.

Dumbledore looked nonplussed while there were several gasps and guffaws from the other portraits.

"Rita Skeeter?" he asked incredulously, with barely held mirth. "Why would you want Severus to…."

He stopped at the sight of Hermione's obvious mortification, all the more since Dilys Derwent was gesturing wildly behind the healer's back to catch his attention. She was glowering and passing a finger across her throat to make him understand that the question was particularly loaded.

"Oh… Oh! Severus and Rita Skeeter were certainly never lovers. Frankly, I cannot imagine that he would ever have been tempted by such a woman. He had a much better match with…" He was interrupted by a violent coughing spell and nearly chocked on his lemon drop that he managed to
swallow, very painfully if his purpled face was any indication. He closed his eyes, trying to catch his breath.

"With whom?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"I do not think it is anyone's business but their own," Dumbledore managed to say, his voice still rough. He cast Aguamenti, not caring to Accio a goblet and drank directly from the flow to soothe and clear his throat with fresh water.

Hermione, frustrated not to get her answer looked around. The subtle or not so subtle body language of the other portraits indicated that they knew the identity of Severus's lover, just like Dumbledore. She could tell that some positively itched to tell her. Considering how outspoken they could be, it was obvious they were bound to silence.

She wondered how the fact that Severus was still alive, even if he was not Headmaster anymore, still had the power to bind them. She could not remember having read that it was possible when the fealty oath has been legally transferred to someone else.

Indeed, now that she thought about it, Dilys and Phineas only answered to Minerva now. Did she know, too?

Her gaze fell on Severus's scarf.

A fantastic idea suddenly struck her. She stood transfixed for a while, her eyes widening as she thought about the very improbable couple Severus would make with…

A witch significantly older, and not by a paltry ten years like Rita Skeeter, but as old as his mother, A witch who could not have lived far from Hogwarts, or Severus would have had a hard time, with all his responsibilities, to be carrying on with her.

Except on part of the week-end and on holidays.

Although it was common knowledge that his Friday nights and most of his holidays were spent with a fellow oenophile and academic of this very school, writing brilliant papers together… And maybe doing more… Maybe…

She fixed her gaze on Dilys and discreetly shifted her gaze to Minerva's seat then to Snape's scarf and back, conveying without words her question.

The former headmistress remained sedate in her own frame, an unusual enough situation, until she was sure the other portraits were otherwise occupied: complaining to each other under their breath that they could not share such a juicy piece of gossip, studiously wiping their glasses to avoid Hermione's gaze like Phineas or, in the case of Dumbledore, still busy recovering.

She swiftly glanced from Hermione to Minerva's seat, then to Severus's scarf on the rack and back to the Headmistress's seat. She tried to wink but had to blink several times instead, as her eyes went all red and swollen. She closed her eyes in intense concentration and it passed in another blink.

She had not been as discreet as she thought, or it was Hermione's reaction that alerted him because Phineas Black whispered with exasperation, "Dilys!"

"What?" she asked, sounding totally innocent.

"I think it is time to say goodbye," he said loudly. "We would not want Severus to wait any longer
now that Healer Granger has such good news." His half-smile was affable enough but his gaze was stern and Dilys squirmed slightly under it.

"In fact," Black added in a tone indicating she had better not contradict him, "I suggest we visit my other portrait immediately, since she will not be able to extricate herself from all the hugging and kissing old friends anytime soon. Severus deserves a little warning before hearing such life-changing information."

"What a good idea!" exclaimed Dilys, as if she relished the prospect, but Hermione knew her well enough by now to hear the slight edge in her voice. "See you soon," she told Hermione with the same faked enthusiasm, tempered by an apologetic smile.

Phineas was already at his lover's side, proffering his arm for her to lean her hand on and whisking her away. He only turned long enough to convey through his glare that Hermione had better hold her tongue or the both of them would have a serious discussion soon, just like he was going to have with Dilys.

Before Hermione thought of a way to reassure him without saying it aloud, there was a swirl in each painting. Dilys's frame turned empty and Phineas's chin fell on his chest, as he looked fast asleep.

Hermione stood, a strange, heavy feeling in her stomach.

Severus and Professor McGonagall.

Severus and Minerva.

Minerva who had welcomed her with such obvious affection this morning and who had helped her so patiently during her therapy and healing.

Minerva who was so aggressively protective whenever someone discussed Professor Snape.

Minerva who had been the first and only person to rush to visit him in St Mungo's and who was the only person Severus trusted absolutely, apart from Lucius Malfoy.

With a sinking heart and slightly trembling hands, the young healer undertook to carefully stow back everything in the shoe box while regaining her composure.

Until now, she had repeated to herself that a relationship with Severus Snape was not possible, because of her own failings that made it impossible for him to love her as much as she loved him, but without absolute conviction. More like a desperate attempt to protect her heart and her self-esteem against her fears and the risk of rejection.

Hope is a hard thing to kill, though and there was always that little part of her mind which stubbornly refused to give up and persisted in whispering that one day, maybe…

This changed everything.

Minerva and Severus had been a couple long before little, bucktoothed Hermione Granger learned she was a witch. They had been separated by the war and Dumbledore's machinations to ensure Severus's credibility with the Death Eaters, but even the old wizard called it a 'successful relationship'.

Whatever bad feelings there might have been between the two lovers during his time as Headmaster was obviously behind them. After the trial, nothing would be able to stop them to get back together, and certainly not her.
She admired and loved the both of them much too deeply to even dream to ever come between them.

She glanced up at Dumbledore and found him considering her with a compassionate look on his face. She raised her chin. "Thank you, Professor," she said courteously. "I am sure that S… Professor Snape will be most grateful. I have no doubt that Harry will be, too."

"It is I who must thank you, Healer Granger," he said gently.

She was still firmly on Severus’s and Harry’s side, but she could afford to relent with the old wizard now and to be kinder, since she understood now that Minerva was even more involved in protecting Severus than she had thought.

She suspected that Dumbledore had a hard time at Hogwarts, not only with the other portraits but with Minerva as well. Hermione could not imagine that the Headmistress would easily forgive him for what he had inflicted on Severus. In Minerva’s shoes, she would do the same, but somehow, it felt that she had no right to interfere anymore.

"You can call me Hermione, Professor." There was a great deal of pity in her offer, but it was hard to tell if it was more for Dumbledore than for herself.

"Then, thank you, Hermione. I have been trapped in my own schemes for too long and did not know how to come clean about Severus, except in the Courtroom." With a sad smile, he added, "It is not as if he could or would wish to visit me."

She thought it better not to answer, since there was only one possible answer and it was a resounding "No!"

She hesitated, her hand poised on the wooden box from the portrait painters. "Do you think I should give this to Professor McGonagall?"

He shook his head. "I think Severus deserves the choice, at last."

Hermione squared her shoulders. "You're right, as usual, and you must know how painful it is for me to admit it." She disillusioned the box and tucked it safely under her arm. "It is good bye, then."

Dumbledore smiled, almost impishly she thought. "Good luck, Hermione."

The door closed on Hermione and a slender tabby cat emerged from behind the brocaded curtains. She swiftly transformed back.

"Minerva!" Armando Dipett saluted her paternally from his frame, undaunted by her resolute, pinched lips. "How long have you been here?"

She managed a brief, polite smile but nothing more than a cursory glance to the man who had been Headmaster when she was herself a student and that she still had the habit to respect more than all others. "Long enough," she answered curtly.

She took a few steps to the more sombre corner of her office, but turned around before she unwisely indulged herself by reaching for Severus's scarf in front of an audience. Keeping it here had been foolish indulgence enough.

Only in cat form could she still perceive remnants of his particular body scent and there was no way that she would offer anyone, even portraits, an occasion to ponder over her own feelings – and certainly not after Dily's Derwent's unsubtle little pantomime. She was glad Phineas Black took her away, but she would still give the interfering old biddy a piece of her mind as soon as possible.
She looked around and commanded, "Everyone, out! Dumbledore, you stay."

Most portraits were not surprised, considering how Dumbledore had foolishly forgotten the bidding, but they took their time to arrange things around in their frame before leaving, commenting to each other as they did so that someone was obviously like a bear with a sore head and that some other people obviously had it coming – just to drive home that they were not to be ordered around so callously but were willing, for once, to indulge Minerva who was not generally so rude.

Professor McGonagall waited patiently, ordering a tea tray and then busying herself with pouring a cup and flavouring it with her favourite pure malt. She turned her armchair so that it faced Dumbeldore's portrait, sat comfortably and began to sip with the contended sigh of someone who had a hard day and can finally relax.

As soon as the last portrait had left, though, she put her cup down on the tray and asked, "You are proud of yourself, aren't you?"

Albus was genuinely surprised. "Why do you say that?"

"Severus will finally get that much needed confirmation that you cared for him, and he, Harry and all their friends will look up to you again and like you."

"It may seem a little late," he said prudently. "But I hope it is the right time. I admit I am profoundly relieved the truth is finally out."

"At least, what you have persuaded yourself to be the truth."

He almost pouted. "Now, that is not very kind, Minerva."

There was a lengthy pause, while she served herself another cup of 'tea'.

"Do you know?" she finally said between sips, "I have been tempted to change and rip your face off this canvas often enough, but as Severus would put it... You are not worth the paperwork with the Ministry."
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Will you be surprised if I tell you that this chapter was vastly improved by Jodel's corrections and suggestions? Of course not.

The wasted years, the wasted youth,
The pretty lies, the ugly truth

(Marina and the Diamonds, Teen Idle)

Ron's reaction, when freed from experiencing first hand the joys of Snape being reunited with Voldemort, was to rush to the bathroom and empty his stomach into the toilet.

When his heaves stopped and he tried to straighten up, he found that his back and all his limbs were stiff and hurt like hell. It took him some time to be able to simply stand up and he painfully made his way back to the sitting room, dragging himself to the sofa with Harry's help when he caught sight of his friend's trembling frame clutching at the furniture.

He was considering asking for Hermione, when Snape fished a vial out of his pocket, measured two stoppers worth in a little water and handed it silently to him.

It tasted so bitter, Ron thought for an alarming second or two that he was going to throw up again, right on the Professor's shoes, but it passed and he started shivering uncontrollably from a feeling of intense cold. He was grateful for the blankets Snape had piled up on the edge of the sofa before the session without telling them why. As soon as he felt that he was finally getting a little warmer, the sensation abruptly turned to an almost unbearable heat and he could not get rid himself of all his wraps and top clothes soon enough, as he was now pouring with sweat.

He did not know it, but he had also turned from an almost deathly pallor to a bright beetroot red. This time, Harry drew his wand to send a Patronus to Hermione but Snape stopped him with a brief gesture and handed Ron one of the terry towels that he had Summoned at the same time as the blankets. It was the only thing that comforted Harry, that Snape knew what to expect.

After several minutes, the sweat stopped, too and, to his considerable surprise, Ron felt not only much better but also totally relaxed.

"Wow! What did you put in that?" he asked, totally mystified. "I'm sure George would love a milder version for the shop!" He took the vial back in his hand to read the label, but it only bore a cryptic 'n° 5'.

Snape smirked. "Just some basic ingredients, since those are all that I am restricted to. Still efficient enough, I think?"

"Yes." Ron exhaled loudly and stretched contentedly, like a cat. "A little drastic, but I won't complain, I have hardly felt better in a long time. Thanks!"
He reached for the jug of cold water Snape had recommended 'for beginners' rather than the hot tea he really longed for or anything stronger.

"What went wrong?" Harry asked, still worrying. It was his fault if Ron had been so eager to try Occlumency with Snape.

"Nothing," Snape assured. "Some people will share not only emotional but some physical transference as well. Auror Weasley is more sensitive to mental encounters than most, it seems."

Ron cried in dismay, "Do you mean that I am like Dawlish with the Confundus? That Yaxley or anyone can break into my mind?"

Snape shook his head. "No, you're one of the few lucky people – or unlucky depending upon one's point of view – who can detect, with very little training, any kind of mental intrusion as soon as it happens." With a quizzical smile, he added, "At least, that is how it worked for me." And waited for the light to strike.

Ron blinked several time before asking, "Are you telling me that I can become as good an Occlumens as you are?" The tone was doubtful, but there was more than just a hint of hope in it, too.

Snape snickered. "Dream, Weasley. Dream..."

Ron turned instantly crestfallen.

"Unless you would be willing to transfer to the Unspeakables?" the older wizard taunted, but the young Auror made a disgusted face and shook his head.

"Then I very much doubt you will ever get as many opportunities to practice as I had between Dumbeldore and Voldemort." Snape's lips twisted in an unpleasant smile. "But I wouldn't wish that kind of training on my worst enemy."

"I guess not," shuddered Ron, remembering Snape's memories.

Snape rose from his seat and went to lean against the mantel, a familiar gesture that gave him the same feeling of control as when he lectured his classes. It enabled him to stand and distance himself while the others looked up to him, and to effectively cut off any kind of commiseration or sentimentality. "I want you to tell me why I chose those particular memories."

It was Ron, again, who answered. The thought that he could actually be gifted in Occlumency was boosting his self-assurance. "To prove that, even at our most helpless, we can always find a way to turn the situation in our favour?"

"Good. And how can you do this?"

"You have to understand your foe better than they understand you."

Snape nodded in approval and, ever the teacher, turned to Harry for the next question.

"What was the difference between the memory with Yaxley and the memory with Voldemort?"

Harry blinked owlishly for a second, as he always did when suddenly challenged. "You did not try to change Voldemort's thoughts, like Yaxley tried to do with you."

"I used the same kind of mental projection as Yaxley," Snape objected. "What was the difference?"
Harry wrinkled his nose. "You could feel Yaxley coming a mile off, with his ridiculous ideas."

"And yet, people have ridiculous ideas or seemingly blinding revelations all the time, without being under influence. Just because something ludicrous comes to mind doesn't mean a Legilimens is on the prowl to get you."

"You were expecting Yaxley's attack."

Snape looked heavenward. "Of course, I was," he said sarcastically. "I expected Voldemort's, too, in case you didn't notice."

This made Ron laugh into his sleeve.

Harry grinned sheepishly. "All right, that was pretty lame... But really, I don't see much difference between them. They both acted like brutes and went straight to what they wanted. It was no surprise with Voldemort, but Corban Yaxley was supposed to care about you."

"I'm not surprised," Ron cut in. "Remember the stats Proudfoot showed us? There have been more complaints and enquiries about mental manipulation in the family and private sphere than in business over the last fifteen years."

"Because it is much easier to manipulate people who trust you," Snape commented cynically. "Still, a lot of people have used that as an excuse, along with real or supposed attempts at Imperio when accused of collaborating with the Death Eaters."

"Yeah, like bloody Lucius Malfoy!" Ron blurted. He had always heard his father scoff when speaking of Malfoy, who could corrupt the whole Wizengamot whenever he wanted to... But as soon as the words left his mouth, he remembered that he was not home amongst other like-minded Weasleys and found himself pinned under one of Snape's furious glares.

"In Lucius's shoes you would have been glad to find any excuse to escape Azkaban and the 'special' care of Mad-Eye Moody."

Ron stood up, indignant. "Don't say anything against Moody! He at least fought on the right side!"

Snape stepped up until they were almost nose to nose. The fact that Ron was almost a head taller, much healthier, with broad athletic shoulders did not make the Professor look any less threatening.

"Oh! But we are indebted to him," Snape whispered dangerously, "Since he was also the means of Lucius's exoneration."

Ron blinked, confused.

Harry, who had meant to interpose between the two wizards, waited with a sinking feeling. Thanks to Kingsley Shacklambolt, he knew more than he wished, and than Ron had ever heard, about the darker days of the Aurory.

Snape's aggressive bark surprised them both, even if he was still looking fixedly at Ron. "A medical expert can detect it if someone fakes the after-effects of Imperio, right?"

Ron, who had taken two steps to the side while trying not to look like he was backing down, nodded crisply.

"No less than three St Mungo's Healers certified, after examining Lucius in 1982, that he had been Imperioed and Crucioed several times." Snape paused, looking daggers at both Aurors. "You know
as well as I do that Lucius was not Imperioed into becoming a Death Eater. I can also attest that he was never in a situation, during the first war, to bring unto himself Voldemort's or any of his Death Eaters's wrath." He let it sink, before asking, almost suavely, to a troubled Ron, "So when and how do you think he was subjected to Unforgivables?"

The youngest Weasley faltered out, "Are you implying that Moody-"

"I am implying nothing. I claim it." Snape turned round unexpectedly, and went back to the mantel, idly taking the clock in his hands and examining it as if it particularly offended him.

Ron exhaled loudly and sat back down, his knees trembling at the revelation. He caught Harry's eyes. His friend made a face at his mute question and nodded unhappily.

Aggrieved, the redhead grabbed a cushion and held it in his lap, as some kind of protection. He stared at his shoes, unable to face Snape and cursing his own gullibility.

Of course, he had heard rumours, but the official position of the Aurory about the treatment of opponents and suspects under Barty Crouch's rule was a firm and constant denial of anything other than "regrettable but isolated incidents".

He had been willing to believe it, because he did not want to think that people he knew or admired could have been part of it. For God's sake, Harry's father, Sirius, and Neville's parents had been Aurors! And many people he liked very much, like Tonks and Kingsley, and the other Aurors in the Order... If some unknown and unnamed colleagues had ever blundered, they certainly had excuses when dealing with evil, murderous Death Eaters.

But he had just watched Head Auror Scrimgeour himself supervising Snape's torture session. It was distressing enough, coming from the top, but they had never trusted nor even liked the ambitious wizard, and he had not been an Order member.

Moody on the other hand... He had de facto become the new head of the Order of the Phoenix after Dumbledore's death. The idea that he was... That he could... It didn't bear thinking of!

Unbidden, another memory surfaced. Snape repeating, back when he was still trying to convince Harry that he was not worth their efforts to save him, that they should desist or his trial would dig up unexpected dirt and that a lot of people would be hurt by the rippling effects, themselves included.

Well, they'd certainly got there.

How naive he had been when he had cockily supported Harry, certainly not for Snape's sake at the time, but to show him that they were up to anything, including having him cleared.

Snape setting the clock back with a little too much force made him jump. "Moody never deigned interrogate me himself when I was arrested, probably in order to be able to tell Dumbledore that his hands were clean where I was concerned," he said sharply, "But he transferred all of the attention he was unable to pay me to Lucius... With Scrimgeour's benediction!"

It was clear his anger was not solely directed at Alastor Moody or Rufus Scrimgeour. The glint in his eyes looked suspiciously like guilt.

Ron felt guilty himself that he had once again forgotten how close Snape was to Lucius Malfoy and made light of his feelings when he railed the blond wizard.

Circumspectly, he began, "Look, I'm sorry! I didn't mean-"
Snape cut him off coldly. "Water under the bridge, Weasley. We have more pressing matters to consider. We were speaking of Corban Yaxley's strategy. Potter, how would you analyse it?"

"He acted according to what he thought you were," Harry said, almost standing at attention and careful not to say anything wrong. "Not on what you actually are."

"He's clever but blinded by prejudice and pride," Ron added, just as anxious as Harry to take Snape's mind – and his own – from the darker days of the Ministry.

The Professor nodded approvingly. "I wanted you to see that, even when he finally decided to follow his supposed feelings for me, he could only try to control and dominate. You saw how he always needed to be right, even at the cost of contradicting me in front of Voldemort."

"I don't wish the Crucius on anyone," Ron said with disgust, "But I couldn't help hoping Voldemort would bring him down a peg or two."

Snape snickered viciously. "It happened."

"Good."

"But remember that his tactic was very effective," Snape insisted. "Of course, at the Ministry he dealt with a lot of people who were pretty shallow or single-minded about their careers. They were easy prey and, somehow, spoilt him. He had a hard time figuring out that it is much more difficult with people who have strong convictions or personalities and he generally lost patience."

He made a derisive gesture. "That's Corban for you. To go straight to what he wants you to feel or believe and turn violent if it doesn't work." He snorted. "Just consider; he worked with Pius Thicknesse for months before he was ordered to make a move. He could have taken the time to discuss policies with Pius, try to befriend him… Sound him out… Find subtle ways to influence him when the time was right, but no! When he saw that he got nowhere with his usual tactic, he just decided to Imperio him."

"Still, it was no mean feat."

"But what a waste of time and magical energy! If the Ministry had not fallen so soon after, Corban could never have been able to carry it off in the long run."

The last words were said in a disgusted tone attesting that Snape was still unable to understand how anyone could be so brilliant and so thick at the same time – but then, it was a good description of most high ranking Death Eaters and of their Lord, wasn't it?

"It's a chance for us, isn't it?" Ron asked.

"Undoubtedly." Snape pointed derisively at the Pensieve. "After all, dealing with a ruthless Legilimens is very much like the poorer sort of sexual relationship, and requires more good timing and cleverness than actual skills."

Harry, who had been innocently sipping water, sprayed it all over his clothes in shock. "What? I didn't see or feel anything of the sort!" he protested, heat colouring his cheeks.

Ron coughed, not faring much better. "Neither did I."

Snape's lips drew back in a snarl. "What are you," he snapped, "Aurors or blushing teens who take everything literally? What did your Occlumency instructors teach you?!"
Harry caught Ron's eye. They shared the same dubious grimace and shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what to say.

Snape's upper lip curled unpleasantly. "On reflection, don't tell me. Considering how they failed with you," he told Harry before turning and pointing his chin at Ron, "And didn't spot your potential, I prefer not to know. Once again, it falls to me to spell things out to you."

He took a few sips of his forgotten glass of whiskey, with little pleasure the way he grimaced, but it may also have been at the thought of the Ministry's ineptitude.

"It's no secret that Voldemort despised women and considered them both weaker and naturally inferior," he said, looking intently from Harry to Ron. "Even Bellatrix Lestrange, who was possibly the only person who ever aroused any feelings in him, could rarely hope that he would value her wishes and opinions."

He paused, prompting them with his chin to tell if they were following him. They nodded sheepishly.

Harry said tentatively, "Dumbledore showed me his first meeting with Tom at the orphanage. He was convinced his mother could not have been a witch since she died and left him alone there. That might explain it."

"Possibly, but in spite of all his fine words, he also despised the rest of the world in general, magical or not, including his so-called 'beloved' Death Eaters."

He made another pause and glared until they nodded again.

"Everything had to be an act of domination or a demonstration of power with him. I don't think you missed that part in both memories?"

"He was clearly enjoying the brutality," agreed Ron with the same grimace of repulsion as Harry.

"Not so much the violence as the domination. Hence the reference to sex. Like many men, he considered that a male is made to dominate and a female to be dominated." Once again, he searched their face for proof of their (blushing) understanding before going on. "What did I do to gain his trust back?"

"Errr…" The young wizards traded helpless looks, unable to remember anything in the way Snape acted that looked even remotely sexy to them, either with Voldemort or with Yaxley.

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and let loose another exasperated sigh, before straightening up in a familiar teaching stance. "Do you think that I acted differently with each of them?"

"No," Ron said emphatically.

"You let them both believe they had won," Harry added.

Snape immediately pointed at Harry, "So, try again and define Yaxley's style of Legilimency."

"He… Err… He tried to make you see him as someone sweet and likeable."

"But was he actually 'sweet'?"

Harry made a face. "He used suggestion instead of torture, but I don't see much difference from Voldemort."

"Because there wasn't," Snape confirmed. "Corban is an aggressor. He is able to influence people
because he generally catches them unawares. He is clever enough, or lucky enough, to guess the weakness, the prejudice that makes most people tick. It doesn't work with people who are too complex for him to understand. Since I only allowed him to see what I wanted him to see, he did not know me as he thought he did. That's the reason why there was always something off about his suggestions and you could spot them easily."

"Yeah..." Ron said pensively. "But do you think we'll be up to detecting his attacks?"

"You will if you pay attention. He will hit when you are tired or overexcited, because your feelings will be easier to read on your face and because you are more likely to have preconceived ideas coming to your mind. Idle and angry thoughts can be quickly twisted into something unreasonable. Beware of them."

"Constant vigilance!" blurted Ron.

He reddened when he realised it may not be a good idea to quote Mad-Eye Moody so soon after Snape's revelations, but the man approved heartily. "Exactly!"

"Still, I'm relieved we'll be able to use a little liquid luck, because I think I'll need all the help I can get."

Harry, who had felt left out with Ron so surprisingly taken up with mind magic, perked up at the mention of Felix Felicis, even if they would have to take turns drinking it to avoid the rapid addiction and turn-about effects.

"Our one true piece of luck," Snape told them sternly, with the disdain of one who had always counted on his own wits rather than on magical recipes, "Is that Corban Yaxley doesn't seem to have changed a bit, as proved by his Christmas present. The whole scheme is probably more to score points against me than any serious attempt to regain power."

"Kingsley is positive that, in the long run, it can only be a last-ditch struggle," Harry added. "Even the most hardened supporters of Pureblood supremacy are relieved to be rid of the Death Eaters."

"Relieved to be rid of Voldemort, I can believe," Snape countered cynically. "But the network and influence of the Brotherhood reached very far and touched a lot of families. Family loyalty must never be underestimated."

"Yes, but helping a fugitive Death Eater is taking a really big risk. The families of Death Eaters know they are under watch."

"Under watch..." Snape's voice trailed cynically. "Yes, I heard wand Traces have been liberally and very democratically bestowed by the Ministry."

"For just that kind of emergency," Harry said rather defiantly.

"I am familiar with the concept," the older wizard sneered. "'You can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.' What I am afraid of, is the Ministry's propensity to break eggs without making anything."

Harry grinned a painful grin, that told just what Snape thought. The wand Traces had not lead to much so far, although Seamus was still discreetly investigating the order to put one on Rita Skeeter.

"Many influential people are still trying to restore their good name and would be wary of helping even family members," Ron said pensively, his fingers slipping over the coffee table as he spoke, an unconscious gesture he generally made when considering strategies on the chess board. "Yaxley
cannot move overtly, even if he has a little band of Death Eaters to help. The need for caution means that there must be many loose ends in their planning."

"But desperate people will do desperate things," Snape warned, always distrustful of optimism. "As will fanatics, and any runaway Death Eater will be both. If Corban's goal is merely to get his revenge on me, it should not be that difficult to achieve."

"At least, we know that if we suddenly have weird ideas or impulses, we must check around," Harry said, with more outward confidence than he really felt, but he was decided not to give Severus any reason to worry that there were flaws in the security, or to doubt that they would go to any length to see him vindicated. "The tricky part," he conceded, "is that we will have our hands full with the public and all the media. I don't mind using everything we have, and Felix is a decided advantage."

Ron wrinkled his brow. "I understand that, when we spot Yaxley's manipulations, we must play along and lure him into believing he has succeeded, but what if he worms his way in our mind while we're busy and we notice it too late? If he controls us?"

Harry stopped to breathe. Ron had just said aloud what he had been thinking.

Snape leaned forward, piercing each one in turn with his stern gaze. "Short of the Imperius, that he could not use very long, you will do what I did with Voldemort. This is why I showed you the other memory."

"Errr…"

"What do you mean, exactly?"

Snape briefly closed his eyes and pursed his lips in a thin line just as they expected, in the familiar gesture he used in class and which meant "Give me strength with these dunderheads!", but they could not help it. It was much too different from what they had done with their Ministry instructors.

"If you face a sadist who wants to break your mind and manages to overpower or surprise you, you choose the moment to break. " It sounded more like a command than a piece of advice.

"Pretend to put up a fight," he went on, getting warmed up, "Because they will expect it. Present them with big but flawed defences. It will make them feel powerful and more clever than you are. Drag things out if you can, because it will be more plausible and then… Break!" he ordered, thumping his fist on the armrest for good measure. "Break with as much drama as possible. Give them what they seek," he insisted even more harshly. "Act like you cannot resist anymore... Like a woman faking an orgasm... They will not question their victory if it doesn't look easy."

Harry paled. "Women can do that?" he breathed, horrified.

Snape covered his eyes with a hand even as he growled in frustration. "Is that the only thing that grabs your attention?!"

Harry went from pale to crimson, as surely as if he had been fed some n°5 potion. "Of course not, but… Can they really... You know?" he asked, clearly upset.

Snape noted that Weasley looked like he was very interested with the answer, too, even if he tried not to be so obvious.

Snape sighed inwardly. He had no time to deal with that now, even if he had done it often enough when he was Head of House.
"Yes," he answered with a pitying look. "They can do that. When you're clumsy or selfish in bed, or because they are too tired, or not in the mood and want it to end quickly... It doesn't mean that they don't love you, but the idea is to make you feel good to get rid of you as soon as possible," he explained kindly before instantly returning to the matter at hand with a warning glare that said not to tax his patience again. "And that's what you do with a Legilimens who will act like a rapist, hence the analogy. Present them with enough resistance to be credible, lure them into believing they control the situation and then, allow them to see just what you want them to see."

"But how can you tell that she's faking-"

"That's a discussion for another time, Potter!" Snape snapped, more harshly than he had meant.

(Lucius's words when he persuaded him to give 'The Talk' to Draco came to his mind, unbidden and unwelcome. "You'll see it's much more difficult when it is your own child.")

(Bloody hell! He was not Harry's father.)

He was grateful to see Ronald put a hand on his friend's shoulder to stop him from making a fool of himself.

"Harry," Ron whispered through clenched teeth, "Later."

Unfortunately, Harry did not seem willing to listen to either of them, after such a life-changing revelation, but kept opening and closing his mouth, just as unable to voice his fear as to let go.

Ron added savagely, before realising what he was saying, "Just ask Ginny!"

Harry cringed and practically shrunk before their eyes.

Ron shuddered, wishing that he could Obliviate himself and stop wondering about his little sister's possible use of unfair feminine wiles and about her sex life with his best friend.

Snape was muttering under his breath.

Ron could make out a few furious words, 'Kingsley', 'piece of my mind', 'recruiting kids' and 'the facts of life!'

He was rather upset by Snape's apparent estimation of their maturity. He did not dare protest, though, because he was not so sure, after another surreptitious glance at Harry who had closed up like a clam and seemed to be in a sad world of his own, that the Professor was wrong where his friend was concerned.

Snape was going on, as if he had not been interrupted, but his narrowed eyes watched them closely to make sure they were actually listening. "It is like most skills," he insisted, modulating his voice in ways, he knew from experience, would catch a wandering mind. "It comes very easily to some gifted individuals, who will excel easily, but most people can perform decently if they only deign to apply themselves. Except they usually don't, out of ignorance and laziness." The ex-spy pursed his lips in clear disapproval before conceding, "If you were hopeless, I would not waste my time trying to teach you."

"And we do thank you, sir," Ron hastened to say, to placate him. At the same time, he was giving Harry a dig in the ribs to prod him into saying something.

Harry vaguely nodded and it fell to Ron to ask, "What about you? You're under Healer's order not to Occlude. Will you be able to protect yourself properly, if Yaxley is at the Ministry?"
This had at least the effect of making Harry pull himself together and make him worry about Snape once again, and not about his own insecurities and fear that he could never be enough for Ginny.

(Not that he really believed it, of course, because they loved each other, but... But.)

"Brush against my mind and the defences raise up instantly, in sheer reflex," Snape admitted. "All Constanz asks is for me not to Occlude pre-emptively. Beyond that..." He made a fatalistic gesture. "Any more question?"

Harry forced himself to answer. "None that I can think about, right now."

"Same here," answered Ron. "But I'm sure I'll have some later."

"Take the time to think it over, that's all I ask. Just remember that the day after tomorrow, I won't be able to help you anymore." With these words, Snape sat down, or rather let himself fall, into his armchair. The magical drain and worry were finally catching up.

Both Aurors made unhappy faces. Hermione had been very vocal about not allowing Snape to over-tire himself but he managed every time to bluff them into believing he was all right when he chose to.

The wizard himself pulled out the same vial of potion he had administered to Ron, measured the content of one stopper in a glass of water. He drank it, wrapped himself in one of the blankets and closed his eyes. As the Aurors stood and tip-toed to the kitchen to give him privacy, Snape's voice stopped them.

"Healer Granger already knows most of this through her work with Constanz," he said in a tone that brooked no contradiction. "There is no need to burden her with-" He bit his lip, possibly because of the shivers. "I forbid you to tell her anything, beyond my giving you tricks to deal with Corban Yaxley."

They hastened to say they would keep everything between them, not only because Snape wanted it, but because they did not want to remind Hermione in any way of her own physical ordeals by mentioning his.

While they were helping themselves in the kitchen, careful not to speak about anything but food and Quidditch – the safest topics, Moppy and Fuzzy popped in together in front of Snape, obviously upset.

"The portrait of Headmaster Black woke up, and Headmistress Derwent is with him," Moppy explained nervously. "He's ordered Moppy to call Master at once, but-" She turned to her mate, who was fidgeting beside her.

"The Headmistress is telling Fuzzy not now!" he cried.

"And Headmaster Black is shouting to Moppy that Master must be told about that sorry mess immediately."

"But the Headmistress is telling No! No! to Fuzzy and stomping her foot, and they is quarrelling."

"We is not knowing what to do," they concluded together, their unusual relapse into Elven English vernacular proving the extent of their distress.

"What have they done now?" Snape groused, even as he was towelling his neck and chest to get rid of the sweat and making his way to the bathroom for a change of clothes. "Moppy, tell them I am busy and will go up in a few minutes, but don't waste time listening to their rubbish."
Minerva gave up all pretence of amiability. She discarded her teacup and braced her hands on her armrests, leaning forward with threatening intent. Confined within his frame, Dumbledore's eyes followed each move carefully, but he otherwise remained stoic.

"You know as well as I do that you were nothing but a manipulative, moral coward, who made others fight his battles whenever possible."

His usual cheerfulness much toned down, Dumbledore managed a self-deprecating smile. "I see that between you and Hermione Granger, I have little chance to keep a shred of my self-esteem today."

She scoffed. "Don't worry. I am sure that by tomorrow you will have convinced yourself once again that you only acted for the greater good and have nothing to feel guilty about."

"I would not go that far, even if you write me down as a hypocrite."

"Hypocrite? No." She snickered unpleasantly. "A self-deceiver, more like. You've always been very skilful when it comes to bending your own ethics and finding perfectly good reasons why it doesn't compromise your integrity."

"I will admit some cowardice when it comes to facing my own feelings," he said softly, with a cheering smile, as if he was speaking to soothe a wild, unpredictable animal – but his eyes bore into her, as shrewd as ever. "Particularly with Severus… This is all about Severus, isn't it? You step up to defend him as fervently as ever."

"Someone needs to do it."

"Healer Granger told me the same thing." He paused infinitesimally as if to gauge her reaction – there was none – before going on with a widening smile, "He doesn't lack supporters, it seems. Not that I am surprised."

Her eyes hardened as she took in the return to his congenial persona. "No thanks to you. I have followed you and obeyed you in all things, even in the face of my own misgivings, because I believed that you knew what you were doing… Even where Harry was concerned, may the Lord forgive me for that."

"I know."

She snorted. "What do you know?"

"That you had great misgivings about leaving him with his relatives," he sighed, "And that you never called me Albus again afterwards."

"I didn't think that you would ever notice," she said with all the bitterness of accumulated rancour. "You were a great leader, Dumbledore, but a heart of stone."

"It was the best solution, Minerva."

"Excuse me for believing that there must be better solutions than abandoning children to their fate with people who do not care for them, cross your fingers and hope for the best," she said tartly. "Riddle, Severus, Harry… Do you still believe that what they endured was worth the result?"

"Do not put Tom Riddle's deviancy and fascination for the Dark at my feet, please. I may be responsible for not seeing through him sooner, although I don't think he would have had much of a
chance of becoming Voldemort if we had not first dealt with Grindelwald."

"I maintain there must have been something that could have been done to help," she said with chilling disapprobation. "I never could trust you fully about the morality of what you asked Severus to do and I was proved right more often than I wished to be, but I wanted to believe that you saw the whole picture. I let you both fool me into believing he was a murderer... And I know that was all your doing, so not a word about Severus's responsibility!" she said, swaying her wand in a careless, rather alarming way, considering the little sparks randomly spurting from the tip.

"I would not dare," Dumbledore said, pretty cool for someone who watched her moves as if he was readying to duck any time. "It was indeed all my doing, but it was crucial that nobody could suspect he was not what he pretended to be."

She crossed her arms and glared. "Not to me, Dumbledore."

"What can you mean, Minerva?" he asked affably.

"That you can't hoax me anymore into believing that tripe about absolute secrecy... You made it needlessly hard for him and this time, I will know the reason why!"

"I already told you several times," he said patiently. "I discussed it with Severus, who is the party concerned. He accepted my arguments and agreed to do what I asked him. You may not accept our reasons, but it does not concern you."

"Yes! It does! I loved him! How could you do that to us?"

"But this is touching, Minerva. After all the times you told him it was not love, have you changed your mind?"

"Who told you that?!" she breathed, troubled that he would know about the way she always pretended that things were not as serious as they were with Severus, because she could not believe it was going to last. There was only one person she had discussed it with, and it was...

"Severus," he said without looking her in the face, as he was apparently very busy, once again, selecting a sherbet lemon. "I remember very well that it was somewhat of a mantra with him in the end. That what little misguided 'affection' you might still feel for him was bound to quickly die down and that, at least, he would not carry the added burden of leaving anyone behind who would regret him, apart from his house elf."

Minerva trembled with fury and grief and the knuckles on her wand hand whitened and curled even tighter, but he still conveniently did not see it, as he finally helped himself to one of his sweets.

"He doesn't even have the decency to try another tactic, she thought before exploding, "He was attempting to convince himself, and I am absolutely sure that it was only because you nagged and nagged until he consented. Playing him like that! You are absolutely contemptible! I may still decide to sharpen my claws on you."

He sucked his sweet once or twice with furrowed eyebrows, as if he was disappointed with the taste. "Minerva, we already had this discussion. Countless times."

"And you never told me half of what you've just told Hermione Granger!" she shouted before lashing her wand wordlessly. "You have worn my patience out!"

His portrait began to pitch dangerously from side to side, propelling the Headmaster out of his seat and head first against the frame. He managed to clung to a painted bookshelf as the frame acted like a
ship dancing on top of high waves.

"Minerva!" he called out, when the bookshelf threatened to topple on him.

Another wand move and the frame stopped moving, although it was now hanging sideways.

"Oooh!" lamented Dumbledore. With grim satisfaction, Minerva watched him go down on all fours to pick up his scattered sweets and put them back in their box. He blew several times over the surface, in an attempt to clean them and picked another one.

"The last weeks before your death," she said in a low but clear, accusing voice, "You spent nearly all your time clapped up in your office, seeing practically no one except Harry and Severus."

He could not decently avoid to looking at her anymore. He did not smile this time.

Her voice rose, as she listed all her grievances. "You foisted all the running of the school onto me. Which was hardly new, of course, but never for so long and with so little help or information. That just demonstrates how little you trusted me, or the rest of the Order with anything beyond the mundane. Harry was permanently on edge, distracted, aggressive..." she went on. "I had been hopeful at first, when you told me that he would have special sessions with you, that you were at last trying to mentor and help him, but he came back each time even more single-minded and disinterested in his classes, and ready to drop everything at your command! The only thing he can be grateful for, when you died, is that it at least spared him failing most of his exams." She glared so ferociously when he opened his mouth to answer that he deemed more prudent not to say anything.

He could not help seeing that she was tougher than Hermione Granger, although he had no doubt the young healer would soon grow to be just as formidable.

"As if that was not cruel enough, you made him watch Severus kill you!" Her eyes flooded with tears but she went on with the same icy determination, "And Severus... He carried on as usual in public, but behind closed doors... Oh! He would not tell me what was going on, of course... But he seldom ate or slept anymore. I was worrying myself sick about him, and about Harry... And YOU DID NOT CARE!" she shouted, before inclining her head and breathing hard to try to calm down.

"Things were hard on everyone," Dumbledore said softly, in an apologetic tone of voice. "Time was slipping through my fingers. Too much to do, too little time. There was no room to coddle anyone."

"Coddle? CODDLE?! YOU MISERABLE EXCUSE FOR A WIZARD!" she shouted. "You were grooming a teenager for martyrdom, for God's sake! And killing any hope in Severus! You destroyed him as surely and much more painfully than he killed you! When I think that I grieved for you!" She screamed, "I GRIEVED FOR YOU! AND YOU DIDN'T DESERVE IT!"

Alarming growling noises came from her throat and her hands lashed out in front of her, as if her Animagus was trying to take over as the Headmaster's portrait clucked several times soothingly, "There, there, Minerva!"

When she could speak again, she snarled, "Don't 'Minerva' me!".

So, he just sat there, stiff as a board, but his eyes... His eyes!

After what seemed an interminable silence, he said in a low, beseeching voice, "We were losing the war. You know we were."

They gazed at each other without a word, because she unfortunately had to admit he was right on the facts, if not on the method.
He made the mistake of letting his jaw slightly relax and realised at once his error. Her face clouded over as she instantly was reminded how often he had played her until she relented.

"When Harry told me you were dead," she said with awful calm, taking turns in the room, "And that it was Severus who killed you, I was stunned but immediately thought that it was grief and his dislike of Severus speaking... That there had to be a mistake or a logical explanation. At first, I thought that your corpse was a fake, some elaborate ruse between you two. Poppy assured me that it could not be. So, I began to wait. I waited for Severus or an envoy of yours to tell me what was truly happening, to give me a letter... A sign... Something to understand and know how to go on. I waited, and waited and when nothing came, I waited again, this time for your portrait to wake up."

She chuckled bitterly at her own naivety. "I should have wondered when you so conveniently woke up as soon as Severus took possession of this office. You never made a move to visit, so I came to believe that he even kept you prisoner in your frame. By then, I hated him for what he had done to you and to everything we believed in. For your sake," she persisted almost hysterically, "I hated him. Him!"

"Minerva," Dumbledore said in a pained voice, "You did not hate him. You hated what he did and what he pretended to represent, but you did not hate him."

"You're wrong, Dumbledore. I did hate him. Have you never heard? I tried to kill him."

"Minerva... Why do you do this to yourself?" he said softly.

"I tried to kill him," she repeated louder, pinning him with eyes so full of burning hurt, the unflappable wizard felt the need to look down.

"I don't think I will ever be able to forgive you for that," she added.

"I daresay I deserve it, even if you are probably as angry with yourself as you are with me. I am truly sorry, Minerva," he said, but she huffed and turned her back to him, before remembering that she was the Head now and he no more than a painting.

Dumbledore went on, "You know, if you are honest with yourself that, had Severus shared the truth with you, you would have been his weak point."

"I would also have been the comfort and the support he desperately needed," she insisted.

"He could not afford to have you on his side," he countered firmly. "He could not afford to tell anyone who was not as good an Occlumens as he is, and you know as well as I do that you're certainly not one. It is very much to your credit, but you are not even capable of lying properly. With the Carrows roaming all over the school and spying on everything Severus did, sooner or later, you would have been the death of him, literally!"

"We were together for years," she reminded him. "Nobody knew, apart you, and you only found out because you took to monitoring the Floos in the few months before Harry Potter attended Hogwarts. We could have kept it a secret!"

He shook his head with regret. "I am very much afraid that quite a lot of people knew, Minerva."

"Who?" she asked, unconvinced.

"The portrait of Maximus Malfoy in Severus's chambers discussed the two of you with Abraxas and Phineas. In all fairness, I must say that they kept it between themselves until I discovered the truth of the matter, but after that, Abraxas thought it did not matter if he told the great Lilian. Phineas told
Dilys, and between these two, I don't think there is a single portrait at Hogwarts who failed to hear about it. You should be grateful that I forbade them all to spread the news to any living person or to any other portrait outside the school. There was also the Bloody Baron and Nearly-Headless Nick, that you yourselves let in on your secret so that they could summon either of you when you were in the other's chambers."

"Portraits and ghosts, who are bound to obey the Headmaster."

"Argus Filch," countered Dumbledore.

"Argus?" she asked, quite dismayed. "He knew?"

"Argus drew his own conclusions after meeting you a little too often in deserted corridors. Besides, portraits and ghosts treat him as one of them. He's up to most of the secrets of this school. He found you two a little scandalous, but you know he has a soft spot for Severus..."

"Yes," she said bitterly, "Fellow feelings between people who know what it is to be bullied and despised."

Dumbledore closed his mouth rather abruptly – he did not want to go that road with Minerva if he could avoid it, particularly when he was consigned in this frame and she was still mad enough to hex it.

He cleared his throat before going on, almost apologetically, "There is also Hagrid."

"Hagrid!" This time, she clutched her chest in belated fright. Hagrid-I-Should-Not-Have-Told-You-That. Oh! Lord!

"Yes," he said, nodding several times as her rounded eyes betrayed her dismay. "I fear you were not as discreet as you thought when you walked to the Forbidden Forest to be alone together... You can be thankful that our Rubeus is such a sentimental fellow and would cut his own tongue before betraying a pair of lovers and causing them grief."

He diplomatically spent even more time than usual fiddling with his box of sweets. "So, I am very much afraid there was no other choice than to let you believe the worst of Severus. He hesitated for a long time, but was the first to recognise that he could not have you risk his mission and everything we sacrificed for..."

Minerva interrupted. "I understand it may not have seemed to you the wisest choice, but I am still convinced we all would have fared better with a little more hope to cling to. Besides, I was entitled to know, and to choose, even if it meant Obliviating me afterwards. It would have been more respectful and humane than what you made us suffer."

"And how can you be so sure that you have not been Obliviated?" Dumbledore asked.

"What?"

"Yes, how would you know, since you cannot remember?"

"I..." she hesitated briefly, before taking a deep breath and saying firmly, "You did not."

"No?"

"No."
"Indeed, we did not. You are right."

"There is no occasion for you to be so cheerful," she said sharply, making his smile fade. "Knowing Severus, when Hermione Granger shows him the blood vial and portrait order, he will immediately understand that you wanted to keep him under your thumb. He has always been your greatest temptation."

"What temptation do you speak about?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

She smiled – an unpleasant, predatory smile. "Why, the temptation of Pygmalion, of course."

"This is ridiculous."

"Is it?" Her expression hardened. "We both know parents who are very possessive and want to control their children's life. They need to mould them according to their own wishes and expectations. You say you care, but certainly not for his own sake."

"I had Severus best interest at heart."

"I didn't know that becoming a portrait came with such a bad case of selective memory," she said coldly. "I have certainly never seen you accept Severus for what he is. When he was our student, you treated him with, at best, total indifference and more often than not with a suspicion bordering on hostility. There has always been something in Severus that made you treat him differently."

Dumbledore only gave her a disappointed look, which in her experience proved she had hit home. "You, on the other hand, always took an inordinate interest in him."

"Because you did nothing but pretend that things were all right or that everything was his fault."

"Now! Minerva! I never said that."

"You said it with your actions."

He sighed. "I regret that that was the impression I may have created."

She smiled sourly. "When you first recruited him, that did not go so well either, in spite of all your smiles and assurances that he was the perfect choice… When I remember you had the nerve to foist the task of bringing him up to scratch onto Filius, Pomona, and me! It was so obvious that he was not teaching material and much too young. I can't say I liked him very much, at the time," she said wistfully, before adding honestly, "He was so curt, you had to drag every bit of information out of him, and he was quite pretentious at times."

"Are you sure he has changed?" Dumbledore asked with an amused smile.

He surprised a cackle out of her. "You're right… But don't think you can change the subject… Because it's what made me realise that things were not as they appeared to be."

"Because he was curt and closed-mouthed?"

"Because you always overlooked his insolence and the way he overtly defied you. You have never let anyone else get away with one tenth of that kind of provocation, and certainly not him when he was a student."

"Minerva," the old wizard chuckled with fond indulgence, "You have not had yet the opportunity to hire a former student. I guarantee you will find that the relationship will be entirely different."
"When he was arrested," she went on as if she had not heard, "You abandoned everything to besiege the Ministry in his favour."

"I hope you did not think me so callous that I would not speak up for someone who risked his life for us," he said, looking and sounding quite offended.

"But you never lifted a finger for Sirius Black, and yet, he used to be a favourite of yours."

"Do not compare, please," he said curtly. "We all thought Sirius had betrayed the Potters, and everything, until he escaped from Azkaban to find Peter Pettigrew, pointed clearly to his being a remorseless killer. Besides, I don't understand why you seem to call me to task for saving Severus, when it was the right thing to do."

"It was the right thing to do, but I have seldom seen you so vehement or to involve yourself so actively and personally."

"I should resent that, Minerva. Must I really remind you that I actually died to save the Wizarding world?"

"I know that you spared no sacrifice for great causes and principles, yes, but not for flesh and blood people. You even had Barty Crouch's head on a plate for the torture at the Ministry, just for Severus's sake."

"If I did, why should I be ashamed?" he asked, with the usual enigmatic little smile playing on his lips that exasperated her so much. "You did not take it any better when you saw how they treated him," he reminded her.

"I am certainly not blaming you, I just say that I knew then that you had a change of heart about Severus."

The little smile did not falter. In that instant, she wanted nothing so much than wipe it out.

"Since the end of the war," she informed him in a sharp voice, "I've tried to understand how you could plan so coldly and thoroughly to ask him to sacrifice everything, without offering him even one small grain of hope... And now I learn that you have been plotting all along to have his portrait painted without him even knowing it."

"If you heard my discussion with Hermione Granger, you know that I meant it as a compensation."

"Not to me, Dumbledore. The instant I saw that blood vial, I knew that you meant to keep Severus at your beck and call beyond the grave." She leaned forward. "Waiting until Harry Potter was dead, indeed!" She snorted. "What you were waiting for was for the time when all those who fought in the war would be dead, too," she added bitterly. "You would have had his portrait painted when nobody remembered anything about Severus, except that he had been a traitor and a murderer. Without any memory, he would have been forced to rely on you for everything. How happy you would have been!"

Dumbledore looked a little sideways, like a wise old owl. "Aren't you forgetting something, Minerva?"

"What?"

"He would have remembered you, too."

"Oh!" she cried, throwing up her arms. "You... You zany! Ah! Yes, I would have been sooo
welcoming and helpful… After living decades believing the worst of him!"

"You have such a loving heart," he informed her, disarmingly sincere. "And you always had a soft spot for Severus, even when he was our student – a not very engaging student, I might add, which just proves my point. I am sure that, in the end, you would have been happy to be reunited with him and maybe resume..."

"Incredible!" She cut in the raptures, levelling her arms before letting them fall dramatically and shaking her head in disbelief. "The greatest wizard of our time, and not a grain of common sense or understanding for the feelings of others!" She turned very serious and asked, "It never occurred to you that I would meet someone else, enter another relationship and have no wish to 'resume things' as you say?"

Dumbledore blinked. "At your age?"

"What about my age?" she asked, lifting her chin.

"Nothing, Minerva!" he hastened to say. "Nothing. I just remember you telling me that you were too old to marry again."

"Fifteen years ago," she said defiantly, "When I was just widowed and still traumatized! I've had ample time, and opportunity, to change my mind."

"Of course," he approved, as heartily as he could.

"But can you imagine the effect on Severus?" she breathed, her skin crawling at the thought. "To wake up as a portrait, learn that he has been dead and hated by the entire wizarding world for decades and for things he can't even remember, and to find out, on top of everything, that I, who, from his point of view, he has just left at the school, have hated him, too, all that time... And replaced him!"

Dumbledore flushed with embarrassment. "I confess you have me at a loss there, but I hope that, by that time, I would have thought of something. There are always solutions."

She noticed, with little satisfaction, that he had as good as confessed that she was right. She sighed, "I hope you don't have another hair-brained plan up your sleeve, like re-uniting him with Lily Evans with some other hidden vial of her blood?"

It was her turn to blink, at Dumbledore's brief recoil in disgust, that he immediately hid behind a polite smile. "I have no hidden vial left," he said. "And I would certainly not promote a relationship based on obsession."

"You encouraged it very well when it suited you."

"I had no need to feed any obsession of Severus's," he countered, all dignity again. "He did it easily enough all by himself, even as a teenager."

She shrugged. "He was a rather passionate youth, and you should have nurtured it towards the right path. Instead..." She pinched her lips. "You know my opinion. I still cannot understand why you always refused to exert yourself in his favour back then."

A bitter snort from above made her start. She was surprised to find Phineas Black watching them with a cynical sneer etched on his lips. "What are you doing here?" she asked sharply. "I ordered everyone away!"
Black stuck his nose in the air. "You cannot know how glad I am that I did not turn up to watch something untoward yet again. I had probably left before you gave the order and you should remember this for another time," he explained. "And may I remind you that I was not the only one?"

He looked around, spotting several fellow portraits whose twitching lips proved that they were faking sleep but were having a great time listening.

"Never mind," Minerva sighed. "What have you done with Dilys?"

"Left her apologizing to Severus."

"I see," Dumbledore said, a knowing look on his face. "I was sure Hermione Granger had managed to piece together the truth about you and Severus, and I wondered how, but if she had Dilys Agripina's help..."

"Do not presume to shed blame on Dilys," Black instantly objected. "At least, she means well. You cannot say the same."

Dumbledore straightened. "You may not like me but you must recognise that I did not betray Severus as you always claimed." He took a sweet and put it in his mouth with a pout.

"Not this time, that's true," Black drawled. "But when he was a student, it was another matter."

Minerva interposed eagerly, "What do you know, Phineas?"

"I know a lot of things about our... How did you call him? Ah! Yes, 'the greatest wizard of our time'," he declaimed insultingly.

Minerva tapped her foot impatiently. "Stop beating about the bush! If you really know something, just say it."

"Do you remember rumors of a certain incident, back at the beginning of Severus's sixth year, mere weeks after the end of your sabbatical?"

Dumbledore made a strangled, coughing sound. "Such a long time," he began but Minerva cut him. "Yes! I always suspected something very fishy, but," she pointed at Dumbledore, "He told me not to worry, as usual. Poppy was quite incensed, too, because Severus was obviously traumatized, but we never could get a word out of him, or out of anyone for that matter."

"Severus would have been hard pressed to tell you anything," Black sneered. "Our great, so ethical and righteous Headmaster here had extracted a Vow of Silence from him, while he was still in shock."

"WHAT?!" roared Minerva, turning to Dumbledore again.

"It was for the best, Minerva," he hastened to say, almost imploringly. "Poor Remus Lupin was but another victim. He would have been driven away from the school, cast away with the likes of Greyback. I just took on myself to-"

"To ignore a murder attempt to cover your own faults. Nothing much... Just letting a werewolf attend school clandestinely or support bullies," interrupted Black, with awfully restrained anger. "After all, the victim was just a Slytherin, and the perpetrator one of your precious Gryffindors!"

"Sirius!" Minerva exclaimed. She had always suspected he had done something awful. Dumbledore had heaped all possible punishments over his head at the time, short of sending him down, in spite of
his usual spiel about the need to encourage at least one of the Blacks against aligning with Voldemort.

"Indeed. My little-lamented great-great-grandson found it funny at the time to trick Severus into meeting the future Professor Lupin in werewolf form."

"Merlin!" She suddenly understood Snape's almost irrational dislike of Remus Lupin and why he persisted in rejecting the poor man's attempts to apologize and befriend him.

"As you say. When James Potter heard, he at least had the sense to realise the possible consequences. It certainly would not have been pretty. A hidden werewolf, clandestinely accepted at Hogwarts... A band of illegal Animagi who would of course be interrogated by the Ministry since he was their friend... The high probability that a weak boy like Peter Pettigrew would break at one time or another and confess everything... Not to speak of the blot on our great wizard's reputation."

"It was damage control!" Dumbledore interrupted angrily. "They were all underage, too young to have their lives destroyed by thoughtfulness. I admit I miscalculated the level of pressure it put on young Severus but I meant well."

"You tricked a boy in emotional shock into believing he owed a life debt to his bully and you call that 'miscalculating'?!" Phineas Black was trembling with fury, for all the years he had been compelled to keep Dumbledore's secrets.

"How do you know that, Phineas?" Minerva asked. She did not doubt the cunning wizard, but there was no portrait in the secure part of the Infirmary that he could have visited, precisely for confidentiality.

"The Bloody Baron," he said with a smug glance at Dumbledore who stiffened even more. "Since Dumbledore would do nothing for the Slytherins and Slughorn took his duties as a joke, we tried to keep an eye on our students, Severus in particular. And were we right to do so!"

Minerva stared icily at Dumbledore. "How could you?!"

He licked his lips and said, quite lamely in Phineas's opinion, "At the time, I really thought it was for the best."

It did not take long for Minerva to blow up. "For the best? Poppy was so worried, she wanted to send Severus to Constanz. No wonder you refused! Your friend would have spotted at once that he was coerced into silence, when the only thing that could have helped him was to speak of what happened!"

Only too happy to add fuel to the Headmistress's ire, Black said in a tone full of hidden meaning, "As if it was not awful enough, he shamelessly rewarded James Potter with the Head Boy position that he clearly did not deserve for supposed bravery in saving another student."

Dumbledore did not dignify this with an answer, but Minerva frowned unhappily before confessing, "At the time, I was much too happy that it was one of my Gryffindors to question it, even if I admit I was a little surprised. James was popular, but he was certainly not Head Boy material."

"But our dear colleague here knew very well what he was doing, even if it is not the place of a Headmaster to throw students together and play matchmaker." Black snickered unpleasantly. "Why! I cannot remember another time when a Headmaster assigned so many things to do together to the Head Boy and Head Girl."

Minerva sat bolt upright. "That's it! That's the missing piece. It was all about Lily! It's always been
"James and Lily were very happy together," Dumbledore said, underplaying it. "If I was somehow the means to make them realise they were a very good match, it is more a reason to rejoice than anything."

"I'm pretty sure you did not give a damn if they were happy," Black said contemptuously. "As long as Lily Evans and Severus Snape were not together anymore!"

Minerva looked from one portrait to the other. "A lot of people did not accept their closeness, but I never realised you were one of them, Dumbledore."

The wizard began to protest but she warned him sternly. "I've had enough. I understand now that your always reminding Severus of his role in Lily's death was a way to make him pay. Now, you will tell me what exactly he had to pay for, or I swear I will banish you from this frame and from the school. And don't tell me it is because he was a Slytherin, because, unlike Phineas here, I never thought you were that prejudiced."

"Humph!" Black snorted.

Professor McGonagall ignored him, being much too busy tapping her hand on the arm of her seat to show that she had indeed reached the limits of her patience.

Phineas Black wisely decided that his role was finished and closed his eyes. He knew that Minerva, having found the right track, would not be satisfied before she extracted the pound of flesh he judged necessary to avenge Severus.

Dumbledore's shoulders slumped. "It was not because he was a Slytherin," he said wistfully. "And I never condoned bullying but... Some children are bound to be victimized. Whatever our efforts, there is something in them that just calls up the mean or sadistic streak in their mates. You cannot deny that, most unfortunately, Severus was one of them."

Minerva sighed, which was her way to admit that he was right. In his first years, Severus was not only poor, scrawny, without any physical grace or redeeming social features, he also stubbornly clung to his scandalous friendship with a muggleborn from the rival house, which irked both his House mates and hers.

"I really believed we had things relatively under control because his results were surprisingly brilliant," Dumbledore went on. "It certainly suited you to pretend that." The Headmistress frowned at Phineas Black for the interruption – unless it was for saying first what she thought but it would take more than that to fluster the former Chief Warlock.

"Once Poppy took things into her hands, his health also improved significantly," he said. "He grew into his adult size in a matter of months. It was so unexpected, it was quite unsettling."

It must have been, because Dumbledore suddenly looked disturbingly flustered.

"Dumbledore!" she exclaimed, scandalised. "Don't tell me that you... You noticed him."

His face contorted in disgust and outrage. "Certainly not in the way you are suggesting, Minerva! Never! A student?!

"But you noticed something that disturbed you," she insisted. "Enough to look the other way when
he needed help. I had to enlist Nearly-Headless Nick's help to discover what the Marauders did to him, when you must have known all along with all the portraits." *

Phineas Black could not help adding his helpful mite. "Without the crown of martyrdom, I do not think you would find many former students who remember James Potter with fondness. You were certainly the only one who always played down their nastiness and the emotional impact of their 'boyish pranks' as you called them."

Minerva glared at Black for interrupting again. He obligingly closed his eyes again.

"So, Dumbledore," she declared. "We have established that you went to some length to throw James Potter and Lily Evans together and to crush Severus's hopes. What was it to you, that Severus and Lily would be together?"

The old wizard looked away before finally confessing, "He was corrupting her."

"What!" she said, unable to make sense of what she heard.

"You were her Head of House, and you did not notice! You may gloat about Horace's neglecting his duties but you did just the same."

She spluttered in outrage, "How can you say that?!"

"Because, when I told you to keep an eye on them, you just laughed and said they were too young for anything serious... But as soon as they came back from the spring vacation, I saw it. It was repugnant, but had I intervened, her reputation would have been tarnished beyond repair, because the prejudice would have been against the muggleborn... And she such a brilliant witch!"

"You saw what?"

"That he could not keep his hands from her, and they were barely fourteen! He would have ruined both their lives and dragged her back to that filthy muggle place they came from. The muggles have lots of studies about such neighbourhoods and what it does to the young people there. Teenaged pregnancies... Aborted education... Wasted potential..." His face contorted in disgust. "He may have been a half-blood, but he lived with them and like them. He was one of the worst sort of muggles!"

As she blinked several times, trying to make sense of what Dumbeldore said, Phineas Black spoke, as if it explained everything. "He means the sort of muggles who attacked his sister."

"Ariana, she breathed.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and shook his head as if trying to get rid of a hideous vision. "They were crass, ignorant boys, only eager to destroy all that made her a marvellous, luminous, innocent little girl!"

"I see." She wanted to sneer but it was much too sad. "The type of muggles your friend Grindelwald wanted to control and, at the time, you listened because you wanted revenge for an event that destroyed your family."

Not surprisingly, he did not answer.

"So, you had no qualms about making Severus your personal scapegoat to compensate for your own wrecked youth, because he reminded you of the boys who attacked your sister, 'the worst sort of muggles' as you put it."
He tried to explain, but clearly half-heartedly. "When he came to Hogwarts, if you remember properly, there was nothing even remotely likeable about him. Lily Evans on the other hand..." He blinked as if dazzled. "She shone. She was so pure... So eager to learn about magic... And Severus wanted to keep her back with him. He would have dragged her with him on a path of self-destruction, for the sake of the basest passions."

"Lily reminded you of Ariana."

"Not physically, but I know that Ariana would have grown to be just like her. I simply could not stand and watch Lily Evans waste her life." He shuddered. "You have never seen that place where they came from."

Minerva could not believe her ears. "So, instead of trying to save the both of them from that place, you sacrificed Severus." He winced at the comment. "Just like you sacrificed Lily's baby, when it suited your plans to abandon him with that same worst sort of muggles. Well done," she said with sarcasm. "Very well done. You can be proud of yourself."

They stood in uncomfortable silence for a considerable time.

"I might have been able to forgive you, in time," Minerva finally said, "But I see you're incorrigible! I can't even pity you for being so stupid and so blind."

She marched to the portrait, and even if it was held much higher than her, she switched her wand even as she spit on it. It landed right on Dumbledore's face.

He could not feel it, of course, but he remained frozen, unable to believe what she had done.

"Zimpsy!" she called.

Her personal elf appeared, all smiles. "What can Zimpsy do for the Headmistress?"

Minerva pointed at Dumbledore's portrait and the elf cried, "Oh! Zimpsy will have the Headmaster's portrait cleaned at once!"

"No, Zimpsy!" Minerva ordered. "I called you to forbid you and all Hogwarts elves to clean this before I expressly tell you to do it."

The elf bowed, unable to refuse the Headmistress but wringing her hands in distress as she glanced at Dumbledore's portrait with its long run-out of already drying spit.

Such untidiness at Hogwarts!

"And no punishing yourself for what he brought on himself either," Minerva added, more kindly.

"Oooh!" the elf whimpered before hiding her face in her hands, nodding frantically to her mistress before Disapparating.

Professor McGonagall turned back to Dumbledore, an icy glint in her eyes. "I may let them clean it when Severus is acquitted. You can pray that he is, and meditate in the meantime about what he had to suffer on your orders. After all" she said pointing at the spit, "You made me go out with him to stop just that kind of thing."

The door slammed shut behind her.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

He deals the cards as a meditation
And those he plays never suspect

(Sting, The shape of my heart)

"Dilys," Severus repeated tiredly, as he sat on his bed. "I do not think it really matters what Hermione Granger understands or misunderstands about my relationship with Minerva. I trust her not to spread it around, and in a week's time, maybe ten days, all this will be behind me if I am still alive. Either way, I will probably never see her again."

"It matters very much. She loves you, silly! She is just devastated because she thinks you are bound to take up with Minerva again."

"Then, let her believe it."

"Oh!" The former Headmistress stomped her foot. "I can't believe how stubborn you are. Think a little about her."

"I do!" he said defensively. "If what you say is true, not that I believe it, it is much kinder to nip any misguided feelings in the bud."

Especially mine.

"Severus Snape! I refuse to believe that even you can be so thick that you did not notice she's more than just a little attracted to you."

"It is nothing more than a crush," he protested, even if something in him hoped he was wrong. "I am obliged to live in close quarters with former students who used to hate me as much as I despised them. It is a totally artificial situation, worthy of a study on lab rats. For the sake of our sanity, we just have to deal with it," he said, trying to convince himself as much as Dilys. "This incredible set of circumstances makes all of us a little vulnerable and naturally inclined to rely on each other."

"So, you admit you are feeling something, too?" Dilys asked, with the kind of devilish little smile he thought most unsettling in a Hufflepuff.

"Potter and Weasley are not as thick as I used to think they were, and determined to please – at least for the time being."

"I was not speaking of the boys."

"They are hardly boys anymore."

"Severus!" she chided, in a tone that warned him not to trifle with her temper.

Conceding defeat, he said gruffly, "I am not dead yet and she is the only woman around."
"Thank you so much," she said, pretending to be offended and smoothing her shining ringlets with a little pout. "But you know, I immediately knew you were made for each other."

He rolled his eyes. Hufflepuff, definitely. Even the Sorting Hat must have noticed the lack of subtlety and the fierce need to help those she loved at any cost.

Time to appeal to her sense of loyalty and her good heart, then, and to change the subject. "If you don't mind, I would prefer we return to the real matter at hand."

"Happiness always matters!" she protested.

"And help me check if I have everything ready," he finished as if he had not heard her comment. "Dumbledore's written endorsement or not, I have not changed my mind. His murder is but a minor part of the charges."

She turned instantly gloomy. "All right," she sighed, "But I still say this is incredibly foolish and that it would be much safer to ask Hermione. She would not betray you. It is still possible to ask her-"

"But she would risk Azkaban or, at the very least, her career. It is out of the question!"

"You're risking your life!" she cried. "Severus, please!" she implored, joining her hands in supplication. "If I could do more than simply give advice, you know I would. You can't be sure you will be able to carry it out. So many things could go wrong. Your hand may slip..."

"Thanks to Healer Babbock, my hands are steady."

"An haemorrhage..."

"That's what dittany and murtlap are used for."

"Ooohhh!" she wailed quite hysterically. "Stubborn! Stubborn! You'll be the death of me."

He tried to be flippant. "You're already dead."

"DON'T YOU DARE!" she shouted, this time with considerable anguish. "I already lost you once!" She hid her face in her hands and began to cry.

Severus instantly deflated. "I'm sorry, Dilys. I..." He nervously massaged the back of his head. "It is very difficult for me, too."

The old lady looked up and bravely tried to smile, although it merely ended in her biting her lip and blinking furiously to try to stop her tears.

"I just can't afford to slack off now," he went on, almost pleading. "You know I can't. Moppy's help will have to be enough."

Dilys took a deep, resolute breath, extracted a handkerchief from her ample cleavage like a muggle magician and blew furiously. "I am sorry, too," she said when she could. "I meant to be supportive and I only managed to distress the both of us." She Banished the handkerchief, crossed her arms and leaned forward. "There, it is over. Show me now... Before Hermione arrives, if you don't want her to guess."

§§§

Hermione could not find another reason to linger at Grimmauld Place before Flooing to Spinner's End.
She had put her new robe away, feeling very much like Cinderella returning to her shabby self after the ball. She was once again the same plain, uninteresting Hermione Granger she had always been and wondered how she could ever have believed that Severus would feel more than the affectionate friendship of a mentor for her.

_He was going to kiss you._

She banished the memory. It only proved how stupid and delusional she could be. That, or he was desperate for a little comfort and he thought it would mean no more for her than for himself.

But why did he suddenly return to call her "Healer Granger", as coldly as in the early days? Did he decide that she was not even worth kissing?

Or that she was a tease, stepping back after flirting with him?

Or had he actually been tempted but changed his mind, because even a comfort kiss would be disloyal towards Minerva?

She did not know what to think or what to believe anymore.

Before she drove herself to distraction, she decided that, whatever her feelings for him, whatever the reason for his mercurial attitude, there was no reason to make Sev… – _No! – he's Professor Snape_ – wait to see for himself the proofs of Dumbledore's actual regard for him.

She took Dumbeldore's shoe box, with his testimony and all that concerned the contract for the wakeful portrait.

When she stepped out of the fireplace in Spinner's End, there was no one in sight. She put the Disillusioned box in the middle of the coffee table, within easy reach of Snape's armchair. Voices in the kitchen led her to Harry and Ron happily gorging themselves – with unhealthy snacks and just before dinner, she noted with disapprobation.

"Minnie!" Ron called cheerfully.

"How did it go at Hogwarts?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Very well, if I say so myself. Everything was perfectly orchestrated, it was a huge success and I think the press will be very good."

"Thank Merlin for that." Harry smiled in relief.

"Rita Skeeter wasn't there," she added with a satisfied grin. "They sent someone else."

"Alleluia!" Ron raised his palms to the heavens.

"And you, how did it go with the Occlumency?"

"Great," Harry said, feeling like he was lying through his teeth but Hermione did not seem to notice. "Just great. Snape gave us useful tricks to fight off Yaxley if he dares to enter our mind."

"Tricks?" she asked, feeling that he was leaving something off.

"And he said that I have the makings of a good Occlumens," Ron cut in, rather proudly. "That is, with the proper training… But I would have to transfer to the Unspeakables for that."

Hermione bit her lip. She did not like when Ron's enthusiasm flared up so suddenly, because he was
bound to lose heart and feel defeated just as easily when he would realise the amount of work entailed.

She did not want to say it, but she was sure that becoming an Unspeakable was not the right path for him. Even if he were qualified, the need for constant secrecy and the isolation it brought to their members outside their very little community would destroy him.

She resigned herself to wait until he deflated, which might take days and would come harder the longer it would take, but Ron added, "It is a heady feeling but, frankly, I am not interested. From what I have learned today, the cost of that kind of power is much higher than what I am prepared to pay. At least, not at this point in my life."

With almost maternal pride, Hermione beamed at him. For as long as she had known him, Ron had constantly displayed some kind of insecurity or another and an inferiority complex that led him to act rashly and callously much too often, and made her act like a shrew in reaction. Call it the weight of habit, familiarity breeding contempt or whatever, the fact remained that Ron would not have been able to grow so much if they were still together, she recognised with sudden guilt.

He would still be alternately pushing himself too hard to reach what he thought was her intellectual level and giving up dejectedly when he realised he was not up to it, rather than accepting that his strengths were entirely different… And she would perpetually be on the defensive, waiting for the other shoe to drop and harping on the wrong way to get through to him.

Oh! Yes! They were definitely better off as best friends!

For the first time, she really understood what Snape had tried to explain about his relationship with Lily. She had been relieved to learn that he was over his first, tortured love but she had not really internalized why.

Now, she was experiencing first hand that childhood love may sound very romantic, but seldom allows either party room to really grow unless they finally grow apart, because everyone needs their own, independent experiences.

She drew a long breath and straightened up. She still had to announce her discoveries and see how to deal with the results.

Resolutely putting her regrets at the back of her mind, she could not help feeling rather satisfied with herself when she announced, "Something tremendous happened when I visited Dumbeldore's portrait."

"Dumbledore?" Harry and Ron spouted in unison.

She produced the vials with the memories and aligned them on the kitchen table. Then, she triumphantly presented Harry with a roll of parchment on both hands, like a herald.

The Auror opened it at once, Ron eagerly leaning to read over his shoulder. They both gasped as they read the first words of Dumbledore's testimony, before hastily pushing the plates on the side to put the scroll on the table to read more comfortably.

Hermione shook her head and cast Scourgify before they managed to get grease stains on the precious document that was bound to be presented to the Court. They barely noticed, too busy to read it to the end.

"Phew!" Ron whistled in relief when he got through, before looking up at Hermione with admiration. "How did you convince the old fox to give you this?"
"Yes, how?" Harry asked, shaking his head in wonder. "I was so sure Dumbledore had not left anything to help. He told us nothing when we took his testimony."

Hermione grinned rather unpleasantly. "Power of persuasion."

Harry reached and squeezed her hand meaningfully in thanks, before standing up and making for the stairs with the roll. "I must tell Severus at once."

"Harry! Wait!" Hermione hurried out of the kitchen to stop him, Ron in tow.

He was already half up and turned reluctantly. "He already knows," she said anxiously. "Dilys and Phineas left before me, but I have other things for him... That he may not appreciate so much. At least, I am not sure how he will take them."

Harry hesitated just a second. "He needs to come down, anyway."

"Yes, I would very much see for myself to what extent exactly Dumbledore condescended to exert himself for me." They looked up and Snape was there, standing on the landing and looking more suspicious and angry than anything else.

"I don't know what other surprise Dumbledore had up his sleeve," Harry said, handing Snape the parchment, "But this is great. We finally have a written proof that you acted in accordance with Dumbledore's orders."

Snape walked down and sat in his armchair before allowing himself to scan the scroll. It took him no more than a minute to read it twice, his impassive face giving nothing away. "I see," he merely said, handing the document back to Harry.

Ron presented him the vials, one by one so that he could read the dates, which he did with pursed lips and in silence.

They all knew Snape would not like to have people watching any of his memories again, even if it was unavoidable, and in this case, Dumbledore's memories happened to be his, too.

"I know you don't like this," Harry said in a placating tone, "But, now, there can't be any dispute about the truthfulness of your own memories."

"I guess Alexia will be satisfied," Snape admitted, not entirely managing to fake indifference, before turning to Hermione. "I was made to understand there was something else... Something more personal?" His hands on the armrests imperceptibly tensed as if he was bracing himself for impact.

"Yes." Hermione took her wand and cancelled the Disillusion spell that hid the shoebox. "Dumbledore said it's yours now."

They watched in silence as Snape meticulously removed the lid. He gingerly extracted the wooden box containing the information from the painters. "I hope this is not one of his elaborate games of Russian dolls," he commented with the long-suffering look of someone used to the old Headmaster's antics.

"Thankfully not, although the boxes were hidden with a ridiculous little ritual."

He did not answer with more than a commiserating little smile, as he was busy sorting between the contract and all the letters.

"It's in Italian," Hermione said apologetically.
"I can read it," he informed her curtly and proceeded to do just that, ignoring the whispering as Hermione explained to Ron and Harry what it was all about.

When he finished reading, Snape filed the documents carefully again in the folder and pulled out the rest of the content of the box. The galleons, he ignored. He startled at the photographs that had been used for models, pinching his lips in obvious anger at several – the most private, the most unguarded.

He briefly wondered if Minerva had been going behind his back with Dumbledore but promptly dismissed the thought. He could not imagine that she would have parted with memories of their life together more willingly than he would, and certainly not for Albus Dumbledore.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts had the means, if he was unscrupulous enough, to spy on his staff, steal, or duplicate anything from their quarters.

Severus should know, he had done the same in his time with the Carrows.

He leafed through the different sketches, his scowl becoming more and more pronounced. He could not fault Albus's taste but he would have liked to have a say in the matter, and not just be brought back to painted consciousness when and how it suited the old man.

Harry and Ron were contorting themselves, trying to have a better look while attempting to remain discreet, while Hermione was watching Severus with growing worry. The fact that he did not take exception to their pseudo-stealth proved how upset he must be.

Finally, Snape took the blood vial in his hand as if he was weighing it up. His knuckles whitened, his hand tightening so hard that Hermione irrationally worried that he would manage to break the unbreakable vial. He certainly tried, shaking with fury, until she called softly, "Severus."

He gave a mirthless laugh and waved the vial at her. "He knew me so well." His voice was barely a whisper. "He played me so well."

Ron opened his mouth to say something but closed it again. The Professor seemed to be looking at something or someone far, far away and it did not seem right to interrupt.

At last, Snape blinked, remembering he was not alone. He licked his lips as if he wanted to speak but could not find the words.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked softly.

Snape's eyes seemed to focus at last. "Not so long ago, I would have sold my soul for just this." He raised the vial for emphasis. There was even a small smile tugging at his lips as he enunciated almost longingly, "Oblivion."

There was a painful silence.

Harry coughed. "And now?" he asked almost timidly.

Snape put the vial down in the box before looking in the young man's eyes, "I'll be damned if I give anyone ever again the opportunity to call me a coward."

"You're not a coward!"

Snape rolled his eyes and put the lid back on the shoebox with an irate flick of his wand. Harry
flushed, unable to find a proper reply on the spot

"That's two wakeful portraits you're due now," Ron said, stepping in before either wizard could say something he would regret. "Most people never even get the chance for one." He crossed his arms in clear challenge, daring Snape to turn down his chance again.

Snape's eyes narrowed with almost a malicious gleam. "I'll tell you what, Ronald Weasley," he answered just as challengingly. "If, by the High Court's magnanimity, I walk free at the end of my trial, I will sit both my portraits." He leaned and pointed at the redhead. "If I don't, I relinquish my rights on this one, so you can get your own. My only regret will be not to see how you deal with yourself."

"Done!" Ron said in the same tone before offering his hand.

Snape took it.

"I warn you, you'd better fight like the snake you are during the trial, or you will end up on my mantelpiece, only remembering how much you loathed having me in your class."

Snape grasped harder with a thin smile. "I see that a little deviousness is finally rubbing off on a Weasley. Maybe, the next generation will see Weasleys in Slytherin."

Ron let go hastily of Snape's hand and rubbed his conscientiously on his robes as if he feared contamination.

Harry crowed in delight but Hermione was shaking her head. "Men!" she said, fuming because she could never tell what was a pissing contest and what was fraternisation between those two.

It did not help that they heard and looked at her with the same odious little smirk – and Harry, too! - which proclaimed that this was a male thing that she had no hope to understand and that they found it all the more funny.

Snape managed to hide his amusement so swiftly that it seemed only the boys had been affected, but she knew better. She glared at him, even as he came to sit beside her.

"Healer Granger," he began, rather solemnly, waiting until she relented and he had her full attention to go on. "There is one last issue I would like to settle. I know it may go against some of your convictions but, if anything goes wrong in the next few days-"

"Things cannot go wrong!" she asserted. "We won't let it happen."

"Anyway," he said patiently, "Just in case, and for my peace of mind... I would be honoured if you consented to let me draw you into my bond with Puck."

As she looked at him, dumbfounded, he cleared his throat. "It is not fair that he should suffer because of my mistakes. He is still so tiny, he needs to have someone's magic at hand in the next few days, and if the worst comes to pass, for some years as well. If I can't, will you do it?"

After maybe half a minute, she realised that she was probably making a very unattractive impersonation of a fish and snapped her mouth shut. She swallowed. "Of course!" she finally managed to say. "But... I... Why me? Why not Draco? He already knows Moppy, and Fuzzy was a Malfoy elf."

Because your intelligence and your magic shine like a beacon in the dark, he wanted to tell her but it sounded so mushy, he could not bring himself to say such words, and certainly not in front of others.
Instead, he explained carefully, "The Malfoys already have too many elves to deal with, being the last free or living members of several Pureblood lines. I cannot foist Puck on them when they were already grateful Fuzzy wanted to join Moppy. I also believe contact with female magic would be helpful for Puck right now. You have been in this house every day since his birth and have examined him several times. He is bound to find your magic more familiar and soothing than any other when I am not around."

As they gazed into each other's eyes, he realised in a flash that she reminded him of one of the unicorns he once caught in a strong Lumos.

(He had been flying, scanning the Forbidden Forest on Dumbledore's orders back when Voldemort was a parasite upon that poor idiot, Quirrel and hunted those pure creatures for their blood. He had been drawn by the noise, afraid to run into another attack, only to find a group of foals gambolling around, carefully protected by the adults. He had retreated as soon as he had asserted they were alright and before he frightened them too much, but not before noticing and marvelling that, contrary to his preconceptions and previous sighting, all unicorns were not uniformly snow white but that the coats in that particular herd were as varied as human skin tones and hair colour.)

Tears shimmered in Hermione's soft brown eyes, not to the point of falling, though, and she was smiling at the same time. He did not need for her to voice her acceptance.

"Moppy!" he called out.

His elf Apparated instantly, the baby in her arms and her mate at her side. She was beaming happily and so did Fuzzy.

"The mistress is willing, yes?" she asked eagerly.

Hermione smiled warmly to the elves. "It is a great honour and a pleasure, Moppy, but it is also a great responsibility. I have been so wrong about elves before, I will depend on you to tell me what I must do and what I must not do."

"No knitted hats!" Moppy stated, with her customary cheek.

Everyone laughed, even Hermione. Well, Snape snickered once.

He then turned to face the young witch more fully and extended his hands, palms up. She tried not to blush as she met his eyes again and put her hands in his without hesitation, palms up, too.

Heat spread in his chest. He fought not to curl his much longer fingers around hers. He wanted to memorise their softness but knew he must not. He drew a breath.

Silently, Hermione did the same as she felt the warmth of Severus's hands diffuse in her own body.

Moppy put Puck in the cradle of their joined hands. The baby stared wide-eyed, feeling something different, a strange but thankfully not totally foreign magic, vibrating around his bond with his master. Still, he had craved for familiar comfort and the novelty disturbed him. He hesitated on the verge of crying but Snape called his name softly and made small shushing noises. Puck looked up to him, still very much short-sighted but it did not matter, he cooed as soon as he spotted the familiar dark eyes that radiated power, comfort and security.

"This is Hermione," the voice of his beloved caretaker said and the baby elf sensed that he meant the soft, hallowed little figure near him. "She will take care of you when I cannot." There was a hidden fear and sorrow in his wizard, stronger than usual. It made Puck squirm unhappily but then he felt that the vibrations of the foreign magic soothed the burden on his master's side of the bond.
With the blind faith of innocence and unconditional love, and the full power of instinct, Puck closed his eyes. He tasted the new magic and found it good, very good, for him and for his master. He purred, absorbing the new link before sending back waves of his own elf magic. It was like a tide that rolled to and fro between him, the one called Hermione and the master. He purred, and purred, until Hermione's hair was standing on end and crackling with static. Snape's did the same, if less dramatically and without sparks.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Fuzzy exulted. "A new mistress! And one so kind and powerful! Oh! Puck is being so lucky!"

As if his father's words had turned loose something, Puck felt suddenly very tired. He whimpered, turned in the joined hands that still cradled him, his cheek on Hermione's left palm and went to sleep.

Weeping with joy, Hermione raised her hands reverently, taking all the baby's weigh (it was really not very much) and handed him to his waiting mother, to whisk him to bed.

Snape closed his eyes, trying very hard not to whimper like Puck just a moment ago at the sudden, unexpected loss. It had never been so hard to part from his little elf, particularly when he could actually feel Hermione's magic, not only under his palms and fingertips but through all his nerve endings.

Hermione leaned back in the sofa, staring at the ceiling as she was coming down from that strange high that she could only describe, if anyone asked her, as a sort of mystical union – with very curious and rather enjoyable physical side effects. "Wow!" was all she could managed.

Harry looked with a frown between the dishevelled Snape and Hermione, who looked disturbingly glowing and exhausted. He searched Ron's eyes, but the redhead was obviously finding it very funny and trying hard to hide it. He turned back to the pair of … Of what exactly? Co-owners? Co-carers? Co-coaches? Connub… He sat bolt upright. "Eh! You're not something like married, are you?"

Hermione choke. Before she could say anything, Snape stood in a huff, never sparing her a glance. "What moronic idea did you get in what passes for a brain, now?" he spat angrily.

Ron brayed a laugh and Harry felt a rush of heat to his face.

Snape was ranting, "Do you really imagine that every kind of vow or bond equates to marriage? That I would suggest something inappropriate to Healer Granger? I suggest you revise your Bonds and Contracts handbook before you accuse me of taking advantage of your friend."

He turned and angrily ascended the stairs several steps at a time – so fast, they hardly had time to react.

"Severus!" Hermione stood up and called desperately, "Nobody accuses you of anything!"

But only the slamming of his bedroom's door answered her.

*The git doth protest too much,* Ron thought cheekily before remembering that Snape was being accused precisely of taking advantage of his students. Feeling suddenly sick, he turned to Hermione, whose hair was twitching again, angrily this time, as she narrowed her eyes at Harry.

"*Harry James Potter!"* she hissed.

"I'm sorry!" the interested cried, raising beseeching hands before she reached for her wand. "*I didn't mean it like that.*"
"And how did you mean it?" she asked, her hands on her hips.

"I… Err… I really don't know. It was just a silly idea because you looked… You looked… Err…"

"I looked like someone who just had the most intense spiritual experience of my entire life!"

Is it how the mystics call it? Ron thought, enviously re-evaluating all his previous beliefs about ascetics.

"And you just had to ruin it with your big mouth!" Hermione stomped her foot.

"I already said I am sorry! It just came out of my mouth but I did not mean anything by it. And don't tell me Severus did not over-react!"

"Over-react?!" she protested. "With all the accusations of abuse that will be heaped on his head in the Courtroom, don't you think he is actually entitled to take it badly? All he ever did was ask me to become some sort of godmother to Puck!"

Harry hung his head. "I guess I should go to him and apologize."

"You'd better," Ron confirmed with a glance towards the stairs.

Harry looked almost imploringly at his friend, but the redhead shook his head. "Oh! No! You're on your own on that one."

Hermione did not say a word but watched Harry walk up the stairs like he was mounting to the scaffold and knock tentatively.

The door half-opened brutally. "What is it you want, now?" Snape's voice asked, none too gently. Harry's voice was muffled and she soon did not hear anything at all after Harry managed to gain entrance. Hermione was oddly comforted that Snape still did not "welcome" her friend like he did her, lift the Leprechaun spell and let Harry see what his room really looked like.

(Snape had justified it, right from the beginning, by explaining he could not, in good conscience, put another burden of secret on her Auror friends. It was logical, but it still made her feel special.)

Ron coughed to get her attention back. Genuinely curious, he asked, "That bonding… It really looked like it was pretty intense. So, tell me… How does it feel to suddenly become a fairy godmother?"

Only a brief draught alerted them that Fuzzy had just left, too, before his elation could betray him. Moppy would be angry with him if he embarrassed the Master or the Mistress in front of their friends.

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After all, elves need keep a few secrets of their own, but he could see as clearly as Moppy the three strands of magic bound together in a strong rope, since their own family bond acted like a relay. Master was right: it was not a mating bond, but it was a healthy bond, born of real magical affinity and a step in the right direction for the Master and the Mistress.

He embraced his mate, who was contemplating Puck sleeping. She turned to put her arms around his neck and they laughed happily, both filled with the same visions of Elfin Heaven on earth – a strong bond with a true wizard family.

§§§
Phineas Nigellus Black rapped once again on what portraits called the 'door' - the inside part of a frame which magically connects with other frames like a Floo and is similar to a theatre's wings.

When painted, each portrait choose how to fit that space out according to their taste and personality. The 'door' in front of Phineas was an exuberant rococo décor copying the main entrance of the Chinese House in Sanssouci, complete with the gilded palms and fairy tale figures but magically animated and actually drinking fragrant tea. It was on the closest palm tree that he was rapping, and it sounded exactly like the unpretentious and highly practical door he himself used.

Show off, he thought.

He noticed a small movement above and a phoenix's head peered cautiously through the palms before withdrawing.

There was the faintest rush of air inside, but no move to come or open the door.

"I know you're here," Black called.

The phoenix appeared once more. "I know that you know," it said with Dumbledore's voice, "But it does not mean that I will let you in. I think I have had enough for one day, without you coming to gloat."

"Heaven forbid that anyone would prevent you from brooding and wallowing in self-pity!"

There was the sound of footsteps, the décor slid a few inches and the point of Dumbledore's beard appeared. "I tried my best with Severus, whatever you think. I have nothing to add."

Black sneaked his foot in to stop the other wizard from closing the passage. "At one time, you claimed that Severus Snape had all the makings of a Dark wizard."

Reluctantly, the décor slid and the door opened wide enough for Dumbledore's entire figure to appear. As expected, he wore his stately Chief Warlock robes, since this was his Ministry portrait. They made him look even taller. "You want me to tell you that I was wrong? Had circumstances been different, I stand by what I said. Severus has power, talent, the ambition to match and even you cannot deny that he is, at the very least, very shady."

"So very much like you, eh?" Black asked, prodding his way into the place.

Reluctantly, Dumbledore let him in but, if the place was richly adorned, it was rather cramped, what with the frame obviously turned against a wall that limited the vision and with the two of them standing face to face near a huge, throne-like seat of justice occupying most of the available space. A glance sufficed to Black to know that one would need several strong cushioning charms to turn it into something a least a little comfortable. He sneered, "Is that all the Ministry has to offer for good and loyal service?"

"My dear Phineas, I never imagined I would entertain you here. You find me thoroughly unprepared, but the Ministry's resources are not as paltry as you seem to believe."

A door appeared in the wood panels behind the seat and Dumbledore led him in a comfortable sitting room where a lavish German Christmas tea awaited them.

"We are only in January, and I so love Christmas treats," he said, as if some explanation was necessary from the sugar-addicted wizard whose teeth would be hopelessly rotten if he was a muggle, and probably diabetic and obese as well, without magic heightening his metabolism.
As they sat, Black refrained from commenting on the very dubious taste of the decoration, since he had no doubt his host was the sole culprit, not the Ministry.

If the door had not already given him away, it would be obvious by now Dumbledore enjoyed the most exuberant Rococo. The room looked like the best parts of several Bavarian and Austrian churches of the period, all lumped together in much too small a space. Or like a giant, golden, oppressive meringue.

Dilys would have remarked again that the Germanic theme probably reminded Dumbledore, however unconsciously, of happier times with Gellert Grindelwald.

Not for the first time, Phineas shuddered at the mere thought of two of the most powerful and warped magical minds of all times together, drunk on their own brand of Sturm und Drang: unpractised and impractical political visions fuelled by juvenile emotions, and the need to reject and rebel against social constraints that made misfits of them both...

For a flamboyant wizard like Dumbledore, once he had decided to reject everything that made him think of Gellert and his tendency for the Goth, it was not really surprising he would lean towards the opposite, with theatrical styles full of scrolling curves, counter curves, trompe-l'oeil, intertwined vines and leaves, and gilding all over. Not to speak of his fashion sense – or lack of.

"Not that I do not appreciate visitors," Dumbledore said obliviously, as he handed him a cup of hot chocolate and a Meissner porcelain plate with an assortment of lebkuchen, marzipan and Christstollen, "But it seems everybody needs to tell me something disagreeable the closer we come to Severus's trial."

"You were an abysmal choice for a Headmaster."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up quite comically. "Really, Phineas, you have always been rather vocal about my real or supposed shortcomings. I do not see why you bother telling me now."

Black gave him a devilish smile. "Why, for Severus, of course."

Dumbledore sighed resignedly. "Say what you have to say, then."

"No."

"I do not understand."

Dumbledore, for all the composure he had cultivated in his long life could not help growing uneasy, and even a little afraid if he was honest with himself.

The situation felt a little too much like a scene from one of the muggle thrillers Argus Filch enjoyed confiscating and that he insisted on lending him when he was alive. A supposed ally, visiting the victim when they were alone. There were always ambiguous situations and sentences, just before some very violent confrontation that always ended badly. He liked the thrill of it, until Voldemort's return. After that, of course, it hit a little too close to home.

Phineas Nigellus Black was not a serial killer but he was clearly a wizard with a grudge and, even if none of them could die again, very unpleasant things could still happen.

Albus so hated when he was not the one dealing the cards.

Black's next words did nothing to appease his mind. "It's you who will speak this time, to tell the entire and unvarnished truth."
"I still do not understand," he answered. To his considerable annoyance, his voice sounded rather defensive.

"It may be your last chance, Dumbledore."

"Of what?" he asked, trying hard not to show his irritation.

Black rolled his eyes before explaining slowly, as if speaking to a moron, "Of making your peace with Severus."

"Between Hermione Granger, Minerva and you, I have been compelled to say virtually everything today."

Black tutted but said nothing more for a while as he bit in one of his kuchen and munched it appreciatively. "Very good," he admitted. "Dilys is very fond of a French pastry they call a mille-feuille. It is made of crisp, melting puff pastry sheets with a sort of custard cream filling and topped with fondant or some icing sugar lightly caramelised. Have you ever tasted it?"

"Of course! It is such a perfectly satisfying blend of contrasting textures and flavours. Mmmm! The buttery, flaky pastry sheets... The rich vanilla cream... The sweet fondant with a funny cocoa spider web design..." Dumbledore waxed lyrical, as usual when sweets were concerned. "I remember a luncheon on the grass with Olympe Maxime..."

Black interrupted him. "You are used to present yourself to the world as a mille-feuille," he said with contempt. "You show only one layer of the truth at a time, hiding the rest under a lot of bluff. Nobody knows who you are anymore, probably not even yourself... This time, you must prepare to explain the whole picture. No more half-truths."

"I think I am adequately prepared for the trial, but I do not think it will be the proper venue for the whole picture, as you call it."

"We certainly do not want to frighten the population or shatter their illusions," Phineas agreed sarcastically. "But I do not speak of the trial. You are going to meet Severus."

"Severus?" Dumbledore asked, his mouth suddenly dry. "He wants to see me?"

"I don't think so, no, but Dilys has decided that it is necessary that you speak together and that you ask for his forgiveness." He bent over and smiled like a shark. "For once, I agree with her."

"What good will it do?" Dumbledore tried to hide his trouble. He still did not know himself if he wanted to face Snape or not. "I have made too many mistakes with Severus. He probably hates me."

"He does. However, much as it pains me to say it," Black said drily, "The personal and political stakes involved with his trial means that we all agree that Severus actually needs closure where you are concerned."

"Hermione Granger spoke of a Death Eater conspiracy and threats of murder," Dumbledore said, more like a question than an affirmation.

"Absolutely. That's why hearing from your own mouth why you let him down so constantly when he was a student..." Black did not miss Dumbledore's gesture of protest. "... But also that you regret it and that you have finally grown to care for him is vital for Severus's peace of mind and his will to fight for himself." In a clipped, reproachful voice, he added, "I regret to say it is not such as we would wish."
"I have it on Minerva's authority that all my motives are selfish," Dumbledore said with a hint of rancour but he looked more worried than resentful, which comforted his fellow portrait.

"No excuse."

"It is not an excuse, but Severus will sooner listen to her than to me."

"Minerva has her own regrets to live with, where Severus is concerned and we both know she tends to be harsher because of it, but she has not communicated with him since he left St Mungo's. She cannot influence him right now. This is where you must be grateful he is a Slytherin," Black said with all the relish expected of someone who finally has an occasion of pay back for all the affront on his House he had to swallow over the years. "He will be much more inclined to understand human foibles than our esteemed Headmistress, who is the epitome of Gryffindor righteousness. He will listen to you... At least, if you manage to be completely straightforward with him for once in your life."

"Truth is a beautiful but terrible thing," Dumbledore said carefully. "I have often found it necessary to treat it with great caution."

Phineas tutted again, conveying disgusted disappointment with his colleague's thickness in a way that reminded Albus so much of Severus, that he had to close his eyes. "Some things are best left unsaid, but not this time. Not when it is just another excuse to avoid your responsibilities."

Dumbledore straightened up at once, as formidable as ever. "I never avoided my responsibilities."

Black was not impressed. "No, you just foisted them on others."

They looked defiantly at each other.

Finally, Dumbledore asked, "How do you propose to engineer that meeting?"

Black set his plate aside and stood, leaving no choice to Dumbledore but to do the same. "Element of surprise, as always with Dily. Let's go!"

Dumbledore hesitated. "In these robes? Do you think that Severus will appreciate seeing me in full Wizengamot garb just before his trial?"

Black gave him a once-over and scowled. "You have a point. We will pass through Hogwarts."

Fuzzy found him in his lab, where he was busy cleaning after Vanishing everything that would be incriminating if a professional brewer was sent to comb the place – and he had to admit there were some pretty good ones amongst the Unspeakables. Even if in all modesty - none were to his level.

Come Monday, he would leave for the Ministry and stay in the Aurory Infirmary for the duration of his trial. There was very little likelihood he would ever return to Spinner's End and he did not want to leave anything back that could cast even more suspicion on Harry and Ronald, or lead to a disciplinary action against them for not fulfilling their duty properly.

"Master is to come to his room now, Headmistress Dily says," Fuzzy trumpeted a little too loud, making his master jump and turn around, wand at the ready. "For something very, very important!" he added contritely.

Snape made a face and pocketed his wand with a grumbling noise. He already had more than his fair
share of burdens and surprises for one day and he desperately needed to rest in preparation of what he had to do tomorrow.

He went up the stairs, worried. He barely spared a glance and a nod at Hermione, who was busy studying as she always did after dinner but smiled when she saw him, or at Ronald, hooked in front of the telly for a change. Harry was nowhere to be seen. He was probably in Grimmauld Place since they had been running a little late and he had had not time to go before dinner. Snape doubted that he could already be abed.

Dilys was fanning herself quite nervously when he entered and it made him fear the worst. He decided to take the news sitting and Accioed his armchair right in front of the frame. He looked expectantly at the silver-haired witch.

"I have discussed this with Phineas and we both agree," she said solemnly.

Snape did not say a word but reflected that what she had to say must indeed be pretty awful, if she felt the need to invoke Phineas Black's approval after their earlier row.

And what could be even more painful than her revelations about Dumbledore releasing to another (even if it was Hermione) the proofs of his loyalty that he had always pretended he did not have? Or her confirming to the woman he longed for his affair with Minerva?

"What Dumbledore told Hermione is only one thing," the Headmistress's portrait went on. "While I was here with you, Phineas happened on Minerva rowing with the old idiot. Other revelations came out and we think you need to know."

"I am listening," he said, growing impatient.

"It is not for me to tell."

"So, were is Phineas?" he asked, trying very hard not to shout in impatience.

"I am here," the old wizard said, stepping in from the side of his own frame. "I agree with Dilys that you are entitled to the whole, unadorned truth."

Snape raked a tired hand through his hair. "I have a feeling that I will not like that whole, unadorned truth any more than your previous information," he said sarcastically. "In fact, I very much feel that I'd better dispense with it."

"Not if you end up fleeing the country never to return," Black said severely. "If you insist on carrying out that exceedingly radical plan, you may not be able to find closure if you cannot understand why everything happened the way it did."

Snape really felt guilty for leaving his friends behind. Without these two portraits, he would probably have gone mad when he returned to Hogwarts as Headmaster. It could not be helped, though. "Well, then. Do your worst."

"It is not a story for me to tell, either."

Snape tapped his fingers on the armrest with growing frustration. "Who, then?"

"Me," Albus Dumbledore said, stepping in cautiously.

"No!" Snape leaped out of his seat, furious. He refused to look at Dumbledore, but pointed in his direction while shouting angrily at Dilys and Phineas. "I don't want him in my house! You have no
right! Take him away!" He was shaking with fury.

"Severus... Please..." Dumbledore implored, trying to make himself heard.

Snape froze and turned to him, his face a mask of icy loathing. "Oh! No! Not this time, old man."

Dilys caught Phineas's eyes and pointed her chin meaningfully at Severus, before stepping right in front of Dumbeldore. She was easily two heads smaller, but she managed to grab his beard and tug hard and mercilessly enough to make him lean to her eye level.

"Listen, you fool!" she said, in a fit of almighty rage. "If you waste this opportunity to beg for his forgiveness, I will make sure you will beg about moving into hell with the rest of your soul!".

"But I am willing!" Dumbledore practically whined. Everything seemed to slip out of his control lately, but very few people could make Albus feel like a naughty boy like Dilys Derwent.

"Oh! Because reminding him of your last words on the Astronomy Tower is supposed to help?" she said, giving a new tug with each syllable.

"I would have supposed that you... Of all people..." Dumbledore vainly tried to extricate his beard from her surprisingly strong grip. "... Would know that I do not remember how I died."

"You have heard the tale often enough!"

"Be fair! It is not the same as actually remembering and the words just came out of my mouth."

"He remembers, and that is enough!"

Meanwhile, Phineas Black was chastising Severus. "Will you spend the rest of your life hiding from that manipulator?"

Severus's nostrils flared angrily. "I am not hiding!"

Black's eyebrows raised satirically. "You could have fooled me."

"Fine! I will listen to what he has to say, but do not expect me to do more than that."

"No one could ask for more."

Snape barked sharply, "Dumbledore!"

Both Dilys and Dumbledore turned like one, the witch finally relinquishing her hold on the wizard's beard.

As Albus straightened up, Black passed between them, grabbed Dilys's hand and whisked her away before she could say more than, "But do you think it's safe to-

They were gone before she had time to finish her sentence.

Snape sat back, a contemptuous smile on his lips. "I am told you have things to explain. Try to get to the point, for once. I have important things to do and no time to waste," he said icily.

Dumbledore ignored the tone, busy as he was to contemplate Severus with moist eyes. The shorter hair and muggle attire was what first drew his eyes but he now had a full view of the criss-crossed web of thin scars, almost like a tone on tone tattoo on the younger man's left side of the face, or like he was deeply wrinkled but only on one side. It went from just below his eye down to the neck and
obviously lower, under his collar.

Snape, noticing the direction of his gaze, bared his teeth in a totally faked and aggressive smile but obligingly turned his face to offer a better view. ”You should have seen me before Healer Pye took me as a guinea pig. It was pretty repulsive from the photographs I have been shown.”

”Severus-”

”Don't worry,” Snape went on in conversational tones, as if he had not heard. ”You will have a chance to see them. Rita Skeeter is writing right now for Witch Weekly about St Mungo's advances with nuggle-inspired plastic reconstruction for cursed wounds.”

Dumbledore shook his head, in a familiar, half-fond and half-exasperated fashion, that made Severus's heart flutter in a very unwelcome manner for someone who meant to stay cool, and aloof, and decided to rebuke all the man's overtures.

”Oh! Severus… Always hiding the best of yourself under sarcasm... Because I have no doubt you gave her the task, probably as an inspiration for other victims, even after all those slanderous articles Minerva rants about.”

Snape pursed his lips. He did not want Dumbledore's understanding or endorsement. He did not want, or need, anything from the wizard.

It was too late.

”I am certainly no fit inspiration for anyone,” he said in clipped tones. ”But Alexia Yaxley thinks it will be good for me if the public sympathies at least a little with my plight. I have never been very popular, but the part of your plan to make me an object of loathing worked well beyond our wildest expectations,” he sneered.

”Indeed, I have much to atone for, when you are concerned, my boy.”

”Yadda, yadda, yadda…” Snape muttered irritably before ordering louder, ”To the point!”

”It is the point.” Dumbledore sounded reproachful but he was more ill-at-ease than Severus could ever remember, a sight that did bring him no pleasure. ”Hermione Granger told me that you have been convinced all along that I would betray you in the Courtroom.” He paused, obviously hoping for some kind of protestation or re-assurance that did not came.

Well, he never expected it would be easy. He had just hoped it would not be this hard.

”I know I asked monstrous things of you but where did you get the idea-”

”Ah! They're monstrous, now?” Snape interrupted with fake surprise. ”You always made it sound as if it was all in a day's work for me. After all, there had to be perks to your keeping a Death Eater at your beck and call. He could at least make himself useful!”

”I would thank you to stop provoking me by referring to yourself as a Death Eater.”

”You wouldn't have dared ask someone who was not a Death Eater with a tarnished soul to kill you like that!”

This was the Severus he knew – the bitter, vulnerable man who could not help brooding on and on and reproaching him in the hope of reassurance. ”I asked the only person who was courageous enough and who cared enough to do it,”Dumbledore said, feeling his usual composure returning.
"Yes, I suppose it will ring well in the courtroom, but how long have you been rehearsing this? After all, only Draco's soul seemed of import at the time."

"I only brought Draco into the equation because I knew you would do it for him if not for me. And if you are so keen to getting to the point, you should not interrupt me at every turn with your caustic remarks." It was said with the touch of humour that used to oil the wheels when they were at Hogwarts.

Snape instantly bristled but made a grand, sweeping gesture. "Be my guest, then." The tone was not really inviting.

Dumbledore smiled with the indulgent affection of a fond grandfather for a pouting child but toned it down when he saw Severus purse his lips until they turned white.

He was not even close to being forgiven, he must remember that.

And there was little likelihood that he would be, not with all he had to tell in order to pierce all the festering abscesses that had poisoned their relationship from the first. Or maybe not for a very, very long time.

One had to cultivate optimism, after all.

Dumbledore released a long breath.

"There are a number of things I once thought best not to tell you about Lily Evans."

§§§

Minerva McGonagall returned to her quarters after making sure all the visitors had left and that the elves, under Flitwick's supervision, were dealing as efficiently as ever with all the mess a crowd can leave behind, in spite of a good organisation.

Even after going through her evening routine and changing her robes for her favourite lounge dress, she found herself angrily fidgeting and stalking in turns around her office, fully aware that she was still too high-strung to go to bed. She finally sat at her writing desk and selected one of the creamy parchment she reserved for her personal correspondence.

With a smile, she reached for her favourite quill and began to write.

My dear Pius,

Once again, you will be able to tell me 'I told you so', but I do not think you will derive much gratification from teasing me this time.

In a nutshell, Dumbledore and Dilys Derwent have both outdone themselves in brutally outing a whole new range of secrets. Even if some will prove very useful for the trial, like a letter explaining how and why Dumbledore asked Severus to end his sufferings so publicly, others reveal new manipulations and betrayals.

Severus certainly does not deserve the additional heartache and drama just two days before his trial!

I know I am rambling and not really telling you anything, and that it will be safer to discuss it face to face tomorrow but I need to confide in someone right now.

I find myself so impatient to see you again, not only because your razor-sharp mind will immediately
see what can be done, but because I long to be with you.

I tell myself it is only a matter of hours and that we will have almost the entire day for ourselves before the circus at the Ministry begins, but I find that counting the hours does not help at all.

She paused, relieved to feel her anger and anxiety slowly ebb away as she thought of the clever, thoughtful and surprisingly sensitive wizard who had wormed himself into her life through a steady correspondence that she initiated just to relieve her guilt for misjudging him, too.

Writing to Pius had become her greatest comfort in the last weeks. Being the Headmistress, she could not confide so freely to any of her colleagues. Most, she would call friends but she had never been so close to any of them as to suddenly trade confidences about Severus, except maybe Poppy, even if the matron still did not know the full extent of her relationship with Severus. Besides, Poppy still felt so guilty about the young Headmaster that it always turned into a painful or awkward experience to bring him up in a discussion.

The only other person who had ever known her well was Molly Weasley, but Molly was busy making plans for the opening of her daycare centre in the spring and Minerva did not have the heart to speak of her fears and regrets when they met, since every reminder of the war was still bound to re-awaken the heartache of Fred's loss. That Molly had volunteered to speak in Severus's favour at the trial filled her with gratitude but not to the point of feeling obliged to always bring it up for discussion, particularly when she knew it would certainly not help her friend being better.

Which left only Pius then.

She laughed at herself, there. Only Pius. As if the former Minister could ever be only something.

He was not a flamboyant wizard like most of his predecessors, because it had never been his ambition to be in the limelights but he was brilliant and had been highly respected before that fiend, Corban Yaxley, Imperioed him and brought him into the Death Eaters clique.

He was so very much like Severus, in fact, that it was small wonder both wizards had become friends in St Mungo's, once they found themselves in the mental ward of the hospital and had only each other to speak on equal ground, about the war and all they both lost.

Since Severus left St Mungo's for Spinner's End, she had found a kindred spirit in Pius herself, as he slowly became her greatest support in her crusade to help the prickly Slytherin they both cared for.

Being a jurist, it was he who first suggested that making the Professor's and Head's oaths public knowledge could help restore Snape's reputation.

Add more and more frequent Floo calls in the evenings, as she wanted his direct input about her plans and they had grown so comfortable together that she did not mind being simply herself with him.

He had long forgotten his own starchiness in her presence as well.

She had been boasting a little to Dumbledore, but she knew that there was much more than friendship to her relationship with Pius. They were thankfully the same generation if not exactly the same age and none of the restrictions that used to poison her relationship with Severus applied. Or she was more free and mature herself. Anyway, she could not care less for what her family would say.

They had both been anticipating his trip back to Britain, with the untold understanding that they would take the next step in their relationship then.
"So," Snape said with surprising calm. "You're finally admitting that you have deliberately sabotaged my relationship with Lily and written me down as a potential Dark Lord at age fourteen. All this because-" He began counting on his fingers, "We were sleeping together; you did not like the look of me, as I did not like the look of you; I reminded you of the kind of lout who attacked your sister and destroyed your family; I also reminded you, at the same time, of Tom Riddle because I did not let conventions stop me; I always fought back and did not respect your judgement." His gaze searched Dumbledore's again and he asked sarcastically, "Did I forget anything that would make your actively looking the other way when I was in danger worth your while? Like my poor table manners or worn-out underwear?"

Dumbledore drew in a long breath. "I found myself regretting it more and more when I finally had the opportunity to know you."

Snape did not say anything for some time but held the nail of his thumb against his lower lip, slowly massaging it as he was looking speculatively at Dumbledore.

"I have always suspected," he said at last. "And now, I can tell you: you did it all for nothing."

Dumbledore blinked. "I am afraid I do not understand."

"Even without your meddling, my parents' example and the constant peer pressure from both our Houses was enough to convince me that Lily and I could not have a future together." Severus shrugged. "There was no comparison between what the Malfoys offered me, and what little I could achieve by myself with only Lily by my side. My choice was made before Lily's." He paused, enjoying Dumbledore's confusion. "She clung to the idea that we should try for some time, but more out of stubbornness than real conviction."

"It was not love?" Dumbledore asked, truly disappointed. "But... Your Patronus!"

"We loved each other," Snape affirmed, "But certainly not to the point of sacrificing our prospects and our future." He eyed his former mentor speculatively, before adding cynically, "I knew before her that Potter would be her ticket to the Wizarding world... But I won't deny it was a very bitter pill. Knowing and accepting are entirely different things, so, do not think that I can forget easily that you helped."

"But did you actually love Lily when you came begging for help?" The old Headmaster asked in an urgent voice.

"Of course, I did," Snape answered with some irritation, as if he could not understand why Dumbledore was so obtuse. "And I will always love her, but it's been such a long time since she ceased being the centre of the universe for me."

As Dumbledore seemed ready to pout like a thwarted child, Snape bared his teeth in a mocking grin. "Ah! The easy sentimentality of people who are unable to care profoundly for anything or anyone... You would appreciate muggle TV. There is always plenty of mushy sentimentality for people like you, who need to shed a few easy tears to think they are paragons of sensitivity."
"Do not lie to me," Dumbledore said chidingly. "I saw your Patronus!"

"Lie about what?" Snape almost laughed in his face. "You assumed all by yourself that my Patronus must have changed because of Lily." He paused for effect before drawling, "The doe was always mine, from age thirteen."

He derived considerable satisfaction from watching Dumbledore almost reel back in stupefaction and added smugly. "Yes, like your precious Harry. And like his mother... But since Lily's doe actually appeared after mine, why not suppose it was hers that mimicked mine, and that she was obsessed with me?!"

Dumbledore muttered, "No! No! It's not possible."

"That Lily was obsessed with me?" Severus asked sadistically. "I already told you we loved each other. Going separate ways could not change it."

"She would never have been unfaithful!"

Snape shot up out of his seat and drew himself up to his full height, so that his eyes were almost level with the portrait's. "She certainly never had the opportunity... Thanks to your so weak attempts to protect her."

Dumbledore answered coldly, "But who reported the prophecy that made it necessary to protect her to begin with?"

"And who let me leave the Hog's Head without the least attempt to have me arrested or Obliviated?" countered Snape angrily. "Do not think I have not spotted that hole in the plot. Why, even Harry Potter has!" He smirked. "Yes, the boy has quite grown up since the end of the war. In fact, we have all changed, now that there is no Albus Dumbledore to constantly pressure and guilt us to do his bidding and that we have the time to think for ourselves."

Dumbledore's jaw dropped. He was really not used to that kind of discussion, when he had no actual threat to the world to lean on, no authority and he was on the same level as the person he was speaking to – and even lower, considering he was only a portrait.

"If you had not been so keen to frighten Voldemort, you could have stopped me," Snape insisted.

Dumbledore's shoulders slumped infinitesimally. "Indeed, I did not think it would go that far."

"Why have I the feeling this is the sort of excuse I will keep hearing from you?" Snape made a face and went to leave. "This entire discussion is pointless," he said, his hand already on the handle. "I do not care what you will tell at my trial. Do your worst, if you want. I do not need anything from you, because I have long given up on you. If anything, you disgust me."

"Severus! No!" Dumbledore cried.

Snape opened the door without another glance at his former master.

"Give me a chance!" Dumbledore called, almost frantic. "Severus! I am sorry! I am sorry!"

The younger wizard turned back, shocked surprise all over his face.

Dumbledore winced as it almost instantly turned to renewed suspicion. I deserve it, he thought even as he acknowledged to himself how much it hurt.
At least, Severus had closed the door again but he had crossed his arms on his chest in a not very inviting manner.

"Let's not beat about the bush," he said. "What I really cannot forgive is that you knew that you would never hold up your end of our bargain."

"Even you did not know that Voldemort held sway over Peter Pettigrew."

Snape's lips curled up unpleasantly. "Please. What I want to speak about," he insisted, "Is your deliberately hiding that it was Lily who vanquished Voldemort the first time with her research on blood protection, and then not telling me that Harry was to die."

"Harry, it is now?"

"Yes." It was cold and definite enough to discourage any comment. Severus was almost disappointed, because neither his glares nor his curtness would have stopped the Headmaster when he was alive.

What was it with him? He should be glad. After all, this is why he did not leave – for the chance to see Dumbledore finally humbled – but he knew he was lying to himself. He would have found an excuse not to leave. He could not let go, where Albus was concerned. "You never trusted me," he accused, after returning to his armchair but sitting stiff and as forbidding looking as he could.

"I could not tell you, but Harry is not dead!"

"Oh! I see. It was out of the goodness of your heart, no doubt for a good surprise? And you had to top your kindness towards me by making me the one to tell him he had to sacrifice himself, without the least inkling to either of us that there was hope."

Dumbledore's shoulders slumped. "I could not bring myself to tell Harry. I am not proud of it."

"Bah! It was so easy to foist the dirty work to an underling, preferably me."

"You are entitled to be bitter."

Snape's lips curled up in a snarl. "You sound like Constanz – with the significant difference that he cares."

"I care, Severus," Dumbledore said.

"You don't say!"

"I may not have always done so, but from the moment you had the courage to come to me and plead for Lily's life… I learned to consider you with new eyes. I could not but admire you, even when I resented you. I can safely say that very few people ever had the power to change my vision of the world, which I admit is a sad reflection on my life, and you certainly were one of them."

Snape's stance slightly relaxed, which was as good as most people's warmest endorsement. "I imagine killing you had the power to change your life," he said.

Dumbledore could not help chuckling. "It certainly did!"

Snape had forgotten Dumbledore's ready sense of humour would always turn up in any discussion and how funny it often was to argue with him – at least, until Voldemort's return.

That thought instantly sobered him and reminded him that he would be damned if he let that pain in
the neck get off easily for all the times he put him through hoops.

"Then," he said with a glint in his eyes. "There is the little matter of my so-called life debt to James Potter."

Dumbledore straightened up. "Severus, I heartily admit I wronged you and I have a lot to atone for, but here, you are just harping on about the same old grievances."

"Maybe, I would not harp on those, as you say, if you had actually apologized… But then, who ever heard Albus Dumbledore apologize for anything? He always had ready excuses for everything that went wrong, but actually apologize? You said you are sorry two minutes ago but I am still waiting for more."

"I never knew you for what you really are, Severus, and it was my loss."

"And it sums you up as a leader," Snape said, without as much rancour as he would have expressed just one hour earlier to this old, deflated balloon. (Constanz, and Hermione, would be proud of him, he thought.) "You managed for years to make me believe that you knew best, not because you did, but because I was so used to looking up to you that I always ended up second-guessing myself."

"And you often made me reconsider and change my mind. Not many could, you know," Dumbledore admitted.

Snape snorted. "I never noticed."

"There were decisions I could not change, about Harry Potter and yourself, but we were a great team, Severus."

"A team?" Snape shook his head several times in disbelief. "You do not know what that is. Or if you do, it is only from the point of view of the coach driver. You're delusional, old man." He sneered. "You always put yourself on a pedestal to precisely avoid getting involved on any personal level. It was much easier to be able to wash your hands of anything that went wrong, and it certainly spared you from heartache and from dirtying your hands."

Dumbledore looked at Snape as if he was seeing him for the first time. "You sound so… You sound like Alfred Constanz."

"I'll take this as a compliment."

"It is."

Snape waved his hand dismissively to show how little he cared for Dumbledore's approbation.

"I envy you," the portrait said wistfully. "You have learned to put words on your feelings and transcend them. I fear I am too old and too set in my ways to do it. I can speak rather brilliantly, even if I say so myself, but never about what is stuck here," he said, pressing a fist to his chest.

"Everybody can do it – although it was not my choice." The ex-spy grimaced. "The Ministry, in their infinite wisdom, ordered it to ensure I would not go berserk before they could judge me. Had it been anyone else but Constanz, I am convinced it would have been useless, but in retrospect, I must admit they had a point."

"I am truly sorry, Severus. I used you and always refused to acknowledge the pressure I put on you. When you protested, I could only joke about it or get cross. It was easier to see you as the guilty party."
Dumbledore looked away before adding in a very subdued voice, "My damn pride! It was only when you were not around anymore that I realised how much I miss you. I tried to ignore it by telling myself that, one day, I would have you return as a portrait, and that we would have a fresh start." He closed his eyes even as the younger wizard snorted soundly. "It is only today, when Minerva spit on me." Snape's eyebrows climbed to his hairline, when hearing this. "...that I finally understood that it could not work!"

Albus Dumbledore's voice broke and he could not manage to say another word, now that he was choking on a lifetime's worth of bottled up feelings and guilt.

As he had always feared, now that he had acknowledged his failings, everything rushed in all at once. He was overpowered with feelings, something he had spent his entire life avoiding.

It was not a nice sight, an old man crying silently on all the lives he had wasted, his own to begin with, and Severus's, and Harry's, and countless others, and trying to muffle the sounds – until he buried his face in his hands and sobbed hopelessly for a long, long time.

Snape had left silently. The irony was not lost on him, that the one moral value he had learned as a child, and purely in reaction to his father, was that you do not kick somebody when they are down. Except on Dumbledore's orders.

Chapter End Notes

I promise this is the last chapter of Dumbledore bashing, but it was for his own good - and to give him a taste of his own medicine.

Beta work by? JOdel, of course.

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