

A DIFFERENCE IN THE FAMILY
THE SNAPE CHRONICLES



RANNAO

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Based on the characters of

J. K. ROWLING

and her books:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Year One at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Year Two at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Year Three at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Year Four at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Year Five at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

Year Six at Hogwarts

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Year Seven at Hogwarts

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C H A P T E R F O R T Y - S E V E N

INTO THE FIRE

Snape hurried down to his dungeon office to change from Hogwarts robes into black Victorian trousers and frock coat, exactly what he had worn during his duel with Lockhart. Then, leaving the school, he was startled by the glittering stars. The last time he'd noticed the sky had been a month ago, on a moonless night at the end of May. Now it was a moonless night at the end of June, and Snape took one last moment of peace before the storm.

Walking to the edge of the cliff, he looked down at the lake, as studded with stars as the sky it reflected. He remembered then the two children, huddled over the dials and tripod of a telescope, red hair and black hair mingled together like the red and black of his patronus fox.

Where I am going, Lily, I dare not even think of you. So I will think of you now. Just for a moment. For the night will be a long one, and it is beyond my power to see if there will be a dawn. But whether this night is the end, or a new beginning, it is yours. I do this for you.

Then he turned, and with resolute steps walked down the hill to the Hogsmeade gate. It was open for him. Snape stepped through, closed down the last of the doors, focused on the summons, and disappeared.

* * *

Snape apparated into a dark and overgrown graveyard, one clearly intended for the private use of a single family and their dependents. He was facing a yew tree, and could make out the spectral silhouette of a small church just beyond. He could see nothing else, and dared not conjure a light.

Turning slowly, Snape realized he was standing not far from a small hill whose darker bulk blocked the stars. On the hillside near the summit rose a house. Snape could see the faintest of glimmers through the drawn drapes. *If the Dark Lord is still anywhere near, it will be in that house.*

Inching his way forward in the darkness, moving slowly and carefully lest he catch his foot on a hummock and fall, Snape approached the hill, then began to climb it. *Pity I can't see. There ought to be a drive leading up to the house. Maybe better I can't; gravel can be so noisy.*

There were two main scenarios at this moment, assuming the Dark Lord was in the house. The first was that he be allowed to enter, then apprehended and brought before the Dark Lord. The second was that the Death Eaters be sent to intercept him outside the house, then bring him to the Dark Lord. Snape had no illusions about being able to sneak in.

The answer came in a series of explosive pops on either side of him well before he'd gotten to the mansion. Snape stopped immediately and raised his hands, palms outward, to shoulder height. He stood unmoving as a circle of Death Eaters, robed in white and masked in hoods, apparated in a circle around him. *Now it begins.*

They crowded him, pushing ungently, and one reached into Snape's inner coat pocket to extract his wand. Snape didn't fight back, nor did he struggle when another stepped behind him and grasped his arms, twisting them down and behind him, where his wrists were bound with magical cords.

A new Death Eater stepped in and wrapped cords around his elbows, wrenching them together. Snape gasped at the pressure this put on his shoulder sockets, but he didn't have to endure this pain long, for a voice, a voice Snape recognized as Lucius Malfoy's spoke up.

"Leave it. You go beyond your commission."

A familiar but unrecognized voice replied, "Who cares? He's dead meat anyway. Why not have a little fun?"

"Never presume that you know what the Dark Lord wants. This one's not condemned yet."

"As good as . . . The Dark Lord won't object to our having some fun."

"Not if we punish where the Dark Lord intends to preserve. You have a lot to learn."

In the end they bound his wrists only, and dragged Snape, stumbling, the rest of the way up the hill.

He was forced into the house and up a staircase, then down a hall to a sitting room.

There the Dark Lord sat, in appearance almost as he had been when he'd vanished the first time. "Look who has joined us. Dumbledore's little lapdog. You would not come when we called, but you will come at your own will.

Why do you do this—to show how you are superior, in control? We will show that you are not.”

Snape was pushed into the center of a circle that focused on the Dark Lord, and forced to his knees. He was thinking very fast. “No, Lord. I come now because I could not come before, but I come always at your bidding, never at my own or another’s.”

“We shall see,” whispered the Dark Lord, “We shall see how well you obey us.”

And the world exploded into pain.

When reason returned, Snape was lying on the floor on his side, and knew he’d been twisting and kicking with the pain. Screaming perhaps, too, but that he couldn’t tell for sure. His shoulders ached abominably. A pair of Death Eaters entered the circle and pulled him back onto his knees facing the Dark Lord. The great red eyes didn’t try to engage his own, and Snape rested for a moment, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

The Dark Lord was speaking. “Our servant at Hogwarts has told us of you, of the long years of your servitude to Dumbledore, starting even before our departure, of your ambition and your treason. But most of all he has told us of your duplicity and cunning. Hear my Death Eaters! how this false traitor plots to deceive us. While the rest of you were lying low under the nearest rock you could find, this apostate, this defector, was studying how to dupe and mislead us. He intends to control us by controlling the information we receive, and he who was once open and trusting as a child with his father is now a false dissembler. For he has been practicing and perfecting the lying art of Occlumency.”

A murmur ran through the circle of Death Eaters, and Snape felt cold grip his heart. Barty Crouch had made the occlumency itself the threat to the Dark Lord, and now Snape had to think fast. He couldn’t deny that he was an occlumens—so bald-faced a lie would only earn the Dark Lord’s wrath—but perhaps he could minimize its effectiveness or claim it was involuntary. *Don’t talk. Don’t say anything. Be patient. Wait for permission to speak.*

The Dark Lord leaned nearer. “Is it true that you hide your thoughts from Dumbledore?”

“Yes,” Snape whispered, and waited.

“Is it true that you hid your thoughts from our servant?”

“Yes.” Pain was gathering in a knot around Snape’s stomach.

“If you had known he was our servant, would you have hidden your thoughts from him?”

"I don't know." The pain receded.

"Why do you not know?"

"I can't control it. It just happens."

"When did this start?"

"When I took up my assignment at Hogwarts. There were things I feared Dumbledore would see. But when he read me, they were covered up. He didn't know they were there. I don't know how I did it."

"And when he is not reading you, do you uncover them?"

Snape saw the trap. "I can't uncover them. I don't know how."

"If you have something you do not want us to see, do you cover it?"

Snape paused as if to search his mind. The pain in his shoulders was becoming excruciating, and he had no feeling in his hands. "The only things that are covered, are covered against Dumbledore."

"Show them to me."

Another trap. "I can't. I don't know how."

"We ourself shall find them. Macnair."

The Death Eater stepped behind the kneeling Snape and took his head, forcing it back so that he couldn't avoid the Dark Lord's eyes. The red eyes that now bored into his brain. The probe was like a claw, ripping through the tapestry of Snape's thoughts, and he tried to close his own eyes. The Dark Lord leaned forward and gripped Snape's face, and with his thumbs pried the lids open.

"Clean, clean, open and innocent. Are we weak like Dumbledore that we cannot see these covered places?" Then there was a pause and a gleam of triumph. "Ah, here is one, so cleverly hidden even we might have missed it. Open it. Uncover it for us."

The trap yawned wide. "I can't. I don't know how."

With a curse like a howl, the Dark Lord threw Snape from him, rose in menace and, wand pointed at his helpless prisoner, cried, "*Crucio!*"

The sea of pain washed over and through Snape, and he knew he was screaming and crying at the same time. The Dark Lord's voice penetrated the pain and said, "Uncover the thoughts and show them to us!"

"I don't know how!" Snape sobbed.

The pain stopped. The Dark Lord was seated again, calm again. "Then what you cannot give, we will take."

This time three Death Eaters stepped forward, one on either side of Snape to grasp his arms and hold him upright and steady, with Macnair again behind. *This can't be too easy. If it's too easy, he'll suspect.* The blood-red gaze

pierced Snape's mind and once more clawed its way down to the hidden, covered thoughts.

The Dark Lord spoke, and his words were soft, like a caress, "From a prisoner we rend what we want, but a servant should obey. Do you agree that we do this? Do you endure willingly what we must do?"

"I do," Snape replied. He felt the tendrils of the Dark Lords mind pry and probe at the locked door, testing it, analyzing it.

"It should not take much, not if properly applied. Macnair — start at the bottom of the backbone and move up quickly. On my word. Now!"

An agonizing spasm gripped the small of Snape's back and shot like a bolt of fire up his spine, to hurl itself against the base of his skull and burst inside his brain. At the same time, the Dark Lord's tendrils wrenched at the closed door so that with force before and pressure behind, it shattered, strewing forth a torrent of images: Granger with her enormous teeth, Longbottom cringing over a cauldron, Potter and Weasley screaming curses, and after them the images of fifteen years of students he'd shouted at and insulted, Fred and George Weasley prominent among them.

As the Dark Lord sifted through these thoughts, Snape's body jerked and twisted against the pain of Macnair's attack and the violation of his mind, but the two Death Eaters held him steady. After a while his struggles quieted.

The Dark Lord was almost chuckling. "We see why you did not wish Dumbledore to see this. Who is the boy with the cauldron?"

"Longbottom," Snape gasped.

"The auror's boy. Good. Let us see what else we can find."

Snape whimpered, but allowed the penetration of his brain without resistance. Another locked door was found, and another bolt of fire slammed into Snape's skull. Images of discord and dissension, of Dumbledore's angry face, of Igor Karkaroff and his mark poured forth through the breach.

The Dark Lord found a third door, and by this time Snape felt as if he would faint from the pain, yet still he managed to hold on, and release the thoughts at precisely the right moment. At the fourth door, he appeared to collapse, "Lord, no, please . . . I can't do this anymore. Please, help me . . ." but the Dark Lord was implacable, and pain shattered the last of his defenses, and he fainted.

It seemed hours later that Snape woke, but from the positions where the others were standing, it was more likely only a few minutes. He was still lying in the circle, but the bonds that tied his hands had been removed. Snape managed to pull himself to his hands and knees.

"Bring him to us," the Dark Lord ordered, and the two Death Eaters caught him by the arms and dragged him to face the Dark Lord again.

The search of Snape's brain was more thorough this time, an intrusion into every corner and crevice, a penetration of his very soul. When it was over, Snape was drained and exhausted, but the Dark Lord seemed pleased.

"Greet your newly-returned brother," he said to the others, "for he has proven himself our loyal servant, and kept nothing hidden but what would aid our enemies or demonstrate his loyalty to us. Comfort him and give him drink, and in a few minutes we will question him as to his service these last years of our exile."

The other Death Eaters surrounded Snape and brought him water. Most of them had removed their masks, and he recognized Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Avery, Macnair, and someone who could only be an adult Peter Pettigrew. He didn't talk to them, though. He felt as if he'd been beaten over his whole body, his shoulders and back throbbed with mind-numbing pain, and his head ached and spun dizzily.

The respite lasted barely ten minutes, when Snape again knelt before the Dark Lord. This time he was not bound, and there was no mind probe, but the residual pain from his previous torment had not abated, and he struggled to concentrate on his answers.

"All our Death Eaters have been put through interrogation — you should not see this as singling you out. You have not hidden as they have, and so you have more to answer for. You will respond openly and guilelessly. There is still punishment for those who hide from us what we require."

Snape nodded in understanding.

"Why did you not answer the summons?"

"I was in the stands at the Triwizard Tournament, one of the administrators. To have left at once would have cast suspicion on me and jeopardized my ability to serve you at Hogwarts."

"Why would you think we wanted you to stay at Hogwarts?"

"It was the last place you assigned me. I had no other orders. If you wished me elsewhere you would send me, and that would be easy to accomplish, but if you wished me to stay at Hogwarts it was best I not endanger the position. I chose the course that would cause the least damage."

"Does Dumbledore suspect you have come to us?"

"Dumbledore sent me."

The response brought a twisting, cramping pain in Snape's stomach and

abdomen, and he doubled up in agony. The Dark Lord spoke in a menacing tone, "So you come at Dumbledore's pleasure, not ours?"

"He chose the time of my coming, not the coming itself. Dumbledore thinks I spy for him. The Potter boy had come back, Diggory was dead, Karkaroff had run. It was already known you'd returned. He sent me, and I took advantage of his order. Now he still doesn't suspect me, but I am able to answer your call."

"How long have you known we would return?"

"Known? Since three years ago, when you controlled the body of Quirinus Quirrell, but I have suspected it and hoped for it for fourteen years."

"Really? Why?"

"When the Lestranges and Barty Crouch attacked the Longbottoms, it was in search of information regarding your whereabouts. It occurred to me at the time that they wouldn't have done this if they didn't have some solid reason for believing that a part of you at least was still alive. It was a small thing to go on, but it was all I had."

"What has happened to our servant?"

Snape sighed. "He blundered and was captured by Dumbledore. He was given Veritaserum and confessed everything. But when Cornelius Fudge was called into the room, the Minister chose to summon a dementor as a guard. Without warning, the dementor sprang on your servant and administered the kiss. He is lost to us."

"Useful things, dementors. Tell us, did you at any time shut down completely against our servant and prevent him from reading any part of your mind?"

Snape looked up at the Dark Lord with wide, open, trusting eyes. "No, Lord. I can't do that. I don't know how."

"Why then would he say you did?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think he was disloyal? Letting his hatred of you interfere with his duty to us?"

"I'm sure he was as loyal to you as he was able to be."

"Well spoken. Now you will tell us of Hogwarts and of Dumbledore."

For the next two hours, the Dark Lord questioned Snape about every aspect of life at Hogwarts and about everything there was to know of Dumbledore. For the most part, Snape simply told the truth. It was information known to every child of every Death Eater in any case. From time to time he claimed ignorance, which was more often true than not. Only a couple

of times did he find himself concocting an out-and-out lie. The spies' adage was true. Whenever possible, stick as close to the truth as possible. That way, you are less likely to be tripped up.

Then, finally, grueling as the experience was, it was over.

"You have done well, faithful servant. Return now to your post, keep your eyes and ears open, and await our instructions."

The Dark Lord was gone, and Snape was free to return to Hogwarts.

The other Death Eaters surrounded Snape, congratulating him on successfully passing through the Dark Lord's ordeal. It was then, listening to their voices, that Snape realized the one who'd wanted to have a little more 'fun' was Peter Pettigrew. He filed that information, but said nothing.

Lucius Malfoy returned Snape's wand. "I'm glad you made it. It was sticky there for a while. He really wanted you dead."

"I think it was Barty Crouch who wanted me dead. He hated you, too, you know."

"Whatever for?"

"You never suffered. You got away free. He wanted to punish all of us."

"How many others in Azkaban feel the same? It makes you stop and think."

"It does indeed. Good night, Lucius."

"You take care."

Snape started down the hill, but as he walked through the overgrown grass he began to feel the full effects of the night. The adrenaline that had helped carry him through was now draining out of his body, and he was exhausted. His shoulders ached wretchedly. His back seemed to be on fire, and it made walking difficult. In fact, he was beginning to stumble and stagger. And above all, there was the pain in his head, so fierce that he saw little flashes of light in the predawn, and it made him nauseous.

A little way from the house, Snape drew out his wand, concentrated, and apparated to Hogsmeade.

The physical strain of apparating was almost too much. There, under the trees on the outskirts of the village, Snape's legs buckled under him, and he dropped to the ground and began to retch uncontrollably, though since he hadn't eaten anything for hours, it had little effect except to bring up bile and give him stomach cramps.

When the spasms abated, he picked up the wand that had fallen beside him and pointed it at Hogwarts castle. Immediately, a misty form spurted

from the end of the wand and shot upwards towards Dumbledore's tower. Then Snape staggered to his feet and began to walk through Hogsmeade.

It was like wading through thick, viscous mud. Every step was an effort. He found he had to lean against the houses to stay upright. The sky was lightening toward dawn, but the Hogwarts gate still seemed an infinite distance away. Then . . .

"Severus?" It was Dumbledore's quiet voice, carrying easily through the silence of the sleeping town. "Severus, are you there?"

"Here, Headmaster," Snape answered, and suddenly Dumbledore and Hagrid were with him, supporting him, helping him stand.

"Shh . . . shh . . . It is all right. You are home. We are here to care for you."

Hagrid took off his coat and wrapped it around Snape. The warmth was soothing, and Snape was grateful for it. Then Hagrid bent down and lifted Snape in his arms, as if he were carrying a child. "I'll get him up to the hospital, Professor," he said.

"No, no. The fewer people who see him, the better. Take him up to my office. I shall fetch Madam Pomfrey. Go quickly, and try to make him comfortable. The password is 'licorice.'"

Hagrid lumbered quickly up the hill, Dumbledore right behind him, then up to the headmaster's tower. Snape was vaguely aware of going up the stairs, and of meeting no one. In just a few minutes, they were in Dumbledore's office. Hagrid laid Snape, still wrapped in the coat, on a large sofa next to the fireplace and lit the fire. He found some pillows and slipped them under Snape's head. The movement caused Snape to moan slightly, but the warmth was comforting, and when Hagrid held a glass of mead to his mouth, Snape accepted it gratefully.

Dumbledore was there a few minutes later with Madam Pomfrey.

"Well," she said matter-of-factly. "It looks like you've had quite a night. Here, drink this first. It should help clear your head." The bitter, burning liquid did, in fact, help. Snape opened his eyes and was alert again. "Now, tell me where it hurts."

"Mostly my head and my back."

"What did they do?"

"Mind probe, and some nonverbal spell that sent fire from the base of my spine up into my skull."

"That sounds like Ignispina, but it shouldn't have such a powerful effect. How many times?"

"Four."

"Heavens! Hagrid, get his coat and shirt off. I need to examine the damage."

Snape balked at removing his shirt for Pomfrey, but she just laughed. "That thing on your arm, child! And the marks on your back! I've known about them for nearly fourteen years. Who do you think took care of you while you were sedated, that time you tried to walk off the top of the Astronomy tower? You have very few secrets that are hidden from me, Master Snape."

There was no point whatsoever in arguing against that, and Snape was soon lying on his side while Pomfrey examined him. She was far more interested in the point where the spinal column entered the skull than the rest of his back.

"That's where there could be serious damage, especially after four hits. You-Know-Who certainly fails as a personnel manager, treating valuable staff like this. I'm going to fit you with a neck brace, Severus, to help relieve some of the pressure there. The damage done by the legilimency probe is something Albus will have to handle. The injury to the shoulders is purely physical. I have a draught that will reattach the cartilage and reduce the inflammation. And I think the best thing for the rest of the backbone is a little old-fashioned chanting."

Taking out the wand she seldom used, Pomfrey began to rotate it along Snape's spine, crooning a low song all the while, very much like Snape's grandmother had done in her healing practice. It was a form of treatment that Snape knew well and could do himself. After several minutes his back felt remarkably better.

They made him stay lying down while Pomfrey went for the draught and the brace, but after she returned and fitted the stiff white collar around his neck, Snape was able to sit up again. He was still in pain, but it was a much reduced and more manageable pain.

Dumbledore sent to the kitchens for breakfast, which he, Snape, and Hagrid shared there in the headmaster's office.

"Now," Dumbledore said when they were finished, "let us see what happened. If you do not object, of course."

"I'm not really looking forward to this. Legilimency has become one of my least favorite experiences."

"If you feel strongly about it, I will not do it."

"It's all right. Go ahead."

Dumbledore sat opposite Snape, where he rested on the sofa, and they

locked gazes. After the torment of the night before, Dumbledore's probe was gentle and diffident. From the look on Dumbledore's face when he was finished, it had been a far more disturbing experience for him than for Snape.

"I did not realize I was asking you to do so much."

"You see now why it was necessary to use the Cruciatus curse. I had to be ready."

"Yes, you were right about that. Where is the house?"

"Yorkshire. Outside a village called Little Hangleton. I could pinpoint it for you easily, though I doubt he will ever go back there."

"I agree. He probably will not. What are you to do now?"

"Wait. He'll summon me again to give me specifics. Probably spy on you. He may want me to go back to my old job."

"Ah, yes. Teaching defensive tactics." Dumbledore meditated for a moment. "Tell me about Pettigrew."

Snape hesitated. "He was there. He's alive. There's something wrong with his right hand, but he's alive." Then he said what Dumbledore wanted him to say. "Black didn't kill him. He went to Azkaban for something he didn't do." After a pause, he added, "He did other things he should have gone to Azkaban for, but that wasn't one of them."

Dumbledore sighed. "Can you not leave the past behind?"

Snape shook his head. "Tell me this. Who gave Lily to the Dark Lord?"

"Peter Pettigrew, if I understand correctly."

"And why was Pettigrew the Secret-Keeper?"

Dumbledore didn't answer the question.

"There. It has to do with Black. Until I know what happened back then, until I know why she died, I can't trust him. For all I know, he told Potter to make Pettigrew the Secret-Keeper. If that's true, he caused her death. Can you assure me that's not true?"

* * *

There were only a couple of days left before the students returned to King's Cross Station. During that time, they continued to attend classes, even though they'd finished their exams. The two classes that were not held were Defense Against the Dark Arts, since the real Alastor Moody had not been the teacher for the year and was in any case receiving medical treatment, and Potions—the whereabouts of the Potions Master was unexplained.

Snape was in Dumbledore's tower with the neck brace, that being the principal reason why Dumbledore didn't want the students to see him. Madam Pomfrey visited him several times each day and, on the afternoon of the Leaving Feast, told him that the brace could safely be removed to allow him to attend.

The Great Hall was somber that evening as Snape entered ahead of most of the students. It was draped in black, in memory of Cedric Diggory. Snape's place this evening was next to McGonagall, and as he made his way to the dais, he heard someone behind him gruffly clear his throat.

"You're looking reasonably well under the circumstances."

Snape turned to face Moody, and all his barriers went up immediately. Several months of trusting neither the face nor the eye could not be overcome in a moment.

Moody just laughed. "That's a formidable defense system you have there, boyo. I'd hate to have the job of interrogating you."

"Does that mean you're renting out my room to someone else?"

"I hear you took a different vacation package that makes Azkaban look like a kiddie amusement park."

"It had its moments."

Moody raised a hand and patted Snape on the shoulder. "You take care of yourself out there, laddie," he said, and went to take his own place at the high table.

Snape eased into the seat next to McGonagall. To his great surprise, she laid her hand on his for a moment with a positively maternal look in her eyes. "I'm glad you're all right," she whispered, and beyond her Snape saw Flitwick give him a 'thumbs up' sign. Everyone else seemed perfectly normal.

The students filed in, subdued by the gravity of the occasion. Snape found himself watching Potter, wondering about the connection between the boy and the Dark Lord, then realized Potter was watching him. He turned away, but was aware that the boy continued to observe him for some time.

At the end of an unusually quiet feast, Dumbledore rose to speak. "The end of another year. There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight, but I must first acknowledge the loss of a very fine person, who should be sitting here enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Cedric Diggory."

They did, staff and students raising their goblets and saying together, "Cedric Diggory."

“Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort,” continued Dumbledore as murmurs of panic swept through the Hall. “The Ministry of Magic does not wish me to tell you this . . .”

As Dumbledore went on, Snape looked around the hall. Grief and horror at the Hufflepuff table, shock at Ravenclaw, anger and defiance at Gryffindor. And Slytherin . . . what about Slytherin? Malfoy was whispering to Crabbe and Goyle. *Do you know your fathers helped the Dark Lord torture me?* There were others — sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews of Death Eaters. They would not support Dumbledore. And when Dumbledore proposed a toast to Harry Potter, many of the Slytherin students stayed in their seats.

Snape did not remain seated. With the rest of the Hall, he rose to drink to Potter. Malfoy looked surprised and disgusted, but Snape wasn’t worried. The Dark Lord would not be angry.

Dumbledore spoke for a brief while longer. “. . . Lord Voldemort’s gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust . . . we are all facing dark and difficult times . . . if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened . . . Remember Cedric Diggory.”

The next morning the students left on the train for King’s Cross Station. The teachers would stay at Hogwarts a few days longer, clearing the classrooms, ordering supplies, locking everything down.

Dumbledore visited Snape in the dungeon classroom. “Anything yet?”

“No, he hasn’t called. He may be waiting until I’m home again, to avoid suspicion.”

“As for that, I too shall be sending for you at your home. I suggest you have reasons prepared why you would have to make a few trips to London, just in case you are asked.”

“London? What’s in London?”

“There are a few people I want you to meet.”

Three days later, Snape was home in Spinner’s End. While he busied himself cleaning and straightening the house, and catching up on some reading, he waited for the summons from the Dark Lord and from Dumbledore.

He didn’t have long to wait.

The summons was in the form of a misty silver phoenix that seeped in through the edge of the window and hovered near Snape, who was reading a murder mystery about change ringing and death in a church bell tower. Dumbledore’s voice entered Snape’s head.

‘Could you make a trip down to London this morning? Meet me at King’s Cross Station by the clock tower. Say, eleven o’clock? No need to reply if you are coming.’

Wonderful. I’m supposed to apparate into a busy central London train station in the middle of the day, but not let anyone see me do it. Where does he come up with these things?

Assuming that Dumbledore would look like the typical pureblood wizard trying to blend into a muggle world, Snape thought carefully about what he would wear. With the long hair, it should be casual — only George Harrison could get away with long hair and a three-piece suit with a bowler hat. He ended up with dark trousers, a blue shirt, and a denim jacket. At ten thirty, he apparated into the men’s restroom next to the social hall of St. Pancras church, reasoning that on a Wednesday morning it was unlikely to be occupied.

He was wrong, of course, since St. Pancras ministered to the homeless of the area. Luckily the only person who saw Snape arrive was himself recovering from the effects of a half gallon of wine the night before and chose to regard Snape as part of the total experience. Murmuring ‘Excuse me,’ Snape slipped out of the restroom, out of the church, and onto Euston Road. From there it was a short walk to the underground, which he used to cross beneath Euston Road and approach King’s Cross Station. All in all, it reminded him of his childhood.

Dumbledore looked fairly normal, except that he was wearing a poncho. Together the two walked in a roughly northerly direction for about twenty minutes until they reached a small square surrounded by dilapidated houses, some with broken windows and all with peeling paint.

“Now,” said Dumbledore, “the decision is yours. Our destination is protected by a Fidelius Charm, and I am the Secret-Keeper. If you do not wish to be part of this, if it might endanger your position with Riddle, we go no further. If you wish to continue with me, you need to read this note. You have total control of the outcome.”

Snape took the folded piece of paper that Dumbledore held out to him. He considered for a few minutes how he would explain to the Dark Lord that there was something he couldn’t reveal. Satisfied that it was feasible, he opened the note and read:

The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.

Dumbledore immediately took the piece of paper and burned it. In front

of them the row of houses was changing, and one that Snape hadn't noticed before suddenly appeared. It looked just as run-down as the others, with chipped paint and dirty, gaping, empty windows. It was to the battered door of this house that Dumbledore led Snape.

The door of the house opened, and Snape found himself staring into the eyes of Remus Lupin. "Good," Lupin said, "you're here." He stood aside to let them pass into an entry hall lined with portraits. It smelled of mildew and rot. Almost at once a voice began screaming, "Blood traitors and squibs! Mongrels and mudbloods! How dare you bring this trash into my house!" Dumbledore quickly seized Snape's arm and pushed him into a parlor to the right.

"We do not really need to listen to her right now," said Dumbledore apologetically.

Inside the parlor a group of people was gathered. They turned to stare as he and Dumbledore walked in, followed by Lupin. Snape had the feeling that this was not exactly the most friendly group he'd ever met.

"Well," said Dumbledore calmly. "Here he is. Severus, you already know Lupin, Black, Moody, and Hagrid, of course. This is Dedalus Diggle, Emmeline Vance, Sturgis Podmore, and Elphias Dope. My brother Aberforth was supposed to be here, too, but you can never get him to show up on time for anything. This is what remains of the original Order of the Phoenix. Lady and gentlemen, this is Severus Snape."

The welcome was less than warm. It seemed obvious that all present were aware of Snape's past as a Death Eater, but were less than convinced of his conversion to the anti-Voldemort side. Black was openly sneering. "What do we need him for? He's not going to help us."

Dumbledore didn't hide his impatience. "Severus has already done more for our cause this year than any other person in this room. If you cannot accept that, then we are doomed before we begin."

Hagrid chimed in. "I had personal charge of Professor Snape after he got back from You-Know-Who, and I can personally vouch that he's given up a lot for us. And he didn't even know us then."

Moody, too, stepped over to Dumbledore's side with a gruff, "I'm for him," while Lupin tried to persuade Black, "If you'd just take the time to hear what they have to say..." The other members of the Order preferred to wait for more information.

"Very well," Dumbledore sighed. "Severus, show them the mark."

Snape reluctantly removed his jacket and rolled up the left sleeve of his shirt. The dark mark curled there, powerful and ugly.

Emmeline Vance reached out to touch it — almost. “Is it a tattoo?” she asked.

“More of a brand,” Snape answered. “It’s burned in.”

That sparked the interest of Diggle and Podmore, who both now moved in for a closer look. “What exactly,” said Podmore, “is the function of the mark?”

“Identification. Two Death Eaters could recognize each other from the mark. One of its main purposes is that it allows the Dark Lord to summon us. He touches the mark of one, and all are summoned.”

“What do you feel when you’re summoned?” asked Vance.

“It burns. The mark becomes black, and it burns. You don’t always know where you’re going. You just concentrate on the mark and apparate. It’s a security measure. Then, you can be punished through the mark.”

“How does that work?” Podmore asked.

“It’s quite drastic. It’s a total breakdown of bodily functions and can be inflicted at a distance. The Dark Lord seldom uses it, and then only when other methods are considered insufficient.”

Lupin looked at Snape in sudden comprehension. “You mean if he found out you were betraying him, he could kill even while you were here with us?”

In the silence, they all looked at him. “Yes,” Snape replied simply, and left it at that.

There was a period when none of them spoke. Then Dumbledore made the next move.

“I should like Severus Snape to be admitted into the Order of the Phoenix. He has already fought the first skirmish of this war by going into Voldemort’s inner circle and being accepted back as a loyal Death Eater. He is now in a position to provide us with valuable information, and is willing to do so.”

Lupin turned to Snape. “Is that true? Are you willing to be a spy?”

“I haven’t actually been asked, though I suppose it was implicit in everything we were doing this year.”

Dumbledore snorted. “Very well, Severus. Will you spy for me again as you did fourteen years ago?”

Before Snape could answer, several voices interrupted.

“Fourteen years ago . . . ?”

“What do you mean, again?”

"He's spied for us already?"

Dumbledore held up a hand, and the room became still. "I am sorry," he said. "I thought that was understood. Fourteen, almost fifteen years ago, Severus deserted Lord Voldemort and came over to our side. His reasons were personal, and I was convinced they were sincere. At great personal risk, the greatest that any of us could ever face, he returned to his former master to spy out information for me. It was Severus who told us that Lord Voldemort was seeking James and Lily Potter, and it was Severus who suggested they be hidden by the Fidelius Charm."

The effect of this information was to soften the attitude of every member of the Order. Even Sirius Black slipped into a corner and was suddenly silent. In that silence, Dumbledore again said, "I should like Severus Snape to be admitted into the Order of the Phoenix."

This time there was general assent. Most of the other members came forward to shake Snape's hand and wish him well. After a few minutes, Dumbledore spoke again.

"And now we must settle on our priorities for the coming weeks."

A heated debate ensued, in which Snape took no part. It was decided that the ranks of the Order needed to be replenished, and candidates were suggested, starting with McGonagall, Flitwick, and the Weasleys, all of whom were already acquainted with the Order's work. Members were assigned to recruit newcomers to the ranks, and an initial system of intelligence gathering from muggle sources was outlined, with Lupin and Moody in charge.

"And of course," added Dumbledore, "Severus will be providing us with inside information."

All eyes again on him, Snape demurred. "That depends on the Dark Lord," he said. "If he calls me, I can get information. If he doesn't, I can't."

It was Elphias Doge who asked the question. "Why do you still call him 'Dark Lord' when you're with us?"

Snape regarded him calmly. "It's another function of the mark," he said. "Hearing the Dark Lord's name brings pain. Every time you say his name, the mark burns. Why else do you think we started to convince everyone to say 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,' or 'You-Know-Who'? Pure self protection."

Business now apparently concluded, Black stepped forward again. "I'd be honored if you'd all stay for lunch. It'll be served immediately in the dining room." He glanced around the room as he said this, but managed to avoid looking directly at Snape.

As the group began to file into the dining room, Snape turned quizzically to Dumbledore. "Why is he . . . ?"

"I must have forgotten to mention, Severus. This is Black's home. That rather noisy portrait in the entry is his mother. It has been closed and boarded up for some time, but he is trying to restore it to its former condition."

Snape gazed out the window for a moment. "I really need to be off," he said finally. "I have a lot to do, and I ate before I came. I'll just make my excuses to the host . . ."

Dumbledore moved in front of Snape, angry and speaking in a low, almost harsh voice. "You will go into that dining room now, and you will be polite, and you will eat his food. Before our absence becomes noticeable."

"Yes, Headmaster," said Snape, yet Dumbledore nonetheless waited for Snape to go first, practically herding him into the room where the others were seating themselves. Snape took a seat in the middle of the table, equidistant from Black and Dumbledore, between Vance and Diggle, and opposite Lupin.

When they were all seated, platters of food appeared on the table, indicating the presence of a house-elf, and the group helped themselves just as if they were back in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Snape tried to convince Vance that he really wasn't hungry, but she insisted on serving him at the same time that she filled her own plate.

In the general and highly animated conversation that ensued, Snape found that he was able to push the food around on his plate while apparently listening raptly to what Diggle had to say, or pause with a bite halfway to his mouth, then put the fork down as he made a comment in return, and generally appear to be eating without actually eating. The others refilled their plates a few times, and he reached for the platters as well, so that only someone paying careful attention would realize that he'd taken no bite of food nor any sip of drink.

Dumbledore was paying attention. So, it seemed, were Black and Lupin. Dumbledore was clearly seething under his mild demeanor, while Black was having a harder time concealing his anger, and Lupin merely looked disappointed. It was Black who decided to press the issue.

Rising from his chair, he rang a small bell, and goblets of wine appeared in front of the guests. "Lady and gentlemen," Black said as he picked up his goblet, "I'd like to propose . . ."

Snape suddenly gasped, clutched his left arm, and pushed away from the table. As he stood, he doubled over in pain. The others jumped to their feet

in shock as Snape began to stammer, "I have to go . . . I have to go now . . . He's calling . . ."

A furious Dumbledore pushed his way to Snape's side and grabbed his arm, unbuttoning the shirt cuff and pushing the sleeve up to the elbow. The dark mark, which had earlier had the appearance of a greenish tattoo, was now black, and the skin around it had developed small blisters. The snake protruding from the skull's mouth seemed to undulate slightly, and there was the faint smell of burned flesh.

"I have to go . . ." Snape gasped as Dumbledore's expression changed from anger to concern. "Last time I had an excuse for being late. I don't have an excuse now. If I don't go . . . go now . . ."

"You have an excuse," said Dumbledore. "You were with us. Is that not part of your job?"

Snape nodded in understanding. "I can't go from here, though. I think he can trace it. I have to make another stop." He was getting the pain under control. Around him the members of the Order looked worried, even frightened. None of them had ever before seen the mark function.

"Hagrid," said Dumbledore, "take him out into the yard. You can apparate from there, Severus. I leave it up to you how you handle the destination."

The rest parted as Hagrid steered Snape toward the rear of the house and the door that led into the yard in the back. Letting Hagrid's bulk shield him from possible spectators in the other houses, Snape took out his wand, concentrated on Pendle Hill, and apparated.

For just a moment Snape stood on the side of Pendle Hill, looking around at the open heath and the scattered villages below, a breeze drying the perspiration on his brow. Then he took a deep breath, concentrated on the mark itself, and apparated again.

This time he was outside an old warehouse in Southwark, across the Thames from the Tower of London. The building was surrounded by a high wooden fence and appeared from the outside to be derelict or about to undergo restoration, as had already happened with many of the old factories and warehouses in the area.

Other Death Eaters were also there, and more were arriving. The little group nodded to each other and entered the building. Its interior had not been magically reformed, so clearly this was a place for one meeting only, thereafter to be abandoned. As the group gathered in the center of the large, open floor, the Dark Lord appeared among them.

Snape took his place in the circle, all in all a remarkably egalitarian group.

Most of the highest echelon of the Death Eaters was currently in Azkaban prison, and had been there for over thirteen years. Of those that gathered, only Lucius Malfoy and Walden Macnair were really top level.

When the Dark Lord began to speak, Snape had a most remarkable sense of déjà vu, for he talked of recruiting more members and gathering intelligence. *I just came from this meeting.* One by one, the group gathered there approached, knelt to the Dark Lord, and gave a report. One thing that struck Snape was the sense that they were trying not to attract attention, a most unDeath-Eaterlike attitude.

It's a little like flying below the radar. The Ministry doesn't want to notice us, so if we're discreet, the Ministry won't notice us. That way we build our strength in the shadows until we're strong enough to fight. How will Fudge react, I wonder, when he finds out how much comfort he's given to the enemy?

Then the Dark Lord said, "Now we shall hear from our brother Severus."

Startled out of his reverie, Snape advanced into the center of the circle, knelt before his Lord, and established eye contact. This would be, however, no brutal invasion of his mind, but a gentle surface reading. He calmly awaited the questions.

"You came in today from Pendle."

"Yes, Lord."

"But that was not where you received our summons."

"No, Lord."

"Where did you receive our summons?"

"In London, north of King's Cross Station."

"Be more specific."

"Lord, I cannot."

There was an intake of breath all around, and the Dark Lord rose from his seat. "Why can you not tell us? Explain." he said, and there was death in his tone.

"Lord, I was invited this morning by Dumbledore to a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. They are your great enemies, and will move Heaven and Earth to destroy you. I was told on arrival that the place was under a Fidelius Charm, and I was given the choice to become part of the secret or to be banished from it forever. Having no other instructions, I chose the way that would bring you more information."

"Who is the Secret-Keeper?"

"Albus Dumbledore."

"Then you attended this meeting."

"Yes, Lord."

"Tell us."

"There are only a few of the order left. They are Albus Dumbledore, Alastor Moody, Dumbledore's brother Aberforth, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Doge, Rubeus Hagrid, Sturgis Podmore and Emmeline Vance." Out of the corner of his eye, Snape saw Pettigrew confirming the tally on his fingers. "They are bound to your destruction."

"What did they discuss at their meeting?"

"The same thing that we are discussing here. They wish to recruit more members, and they wish to gather more intelligence. They are angry that the Ministry doesn't publicly acknowledge your return, Lord, since they believe that public outcry against you would help their cause."

"Did they name potential new members?"

"No, Lord."

"Why did you come from Pendle?"

"I feared they would track my destination, so I put a stop in between. That way they couldn't discover the place of our meeting."

"You have answered well. Join your fellows and listen further."

Snape apparated back to Pendle Hill near evening, and paused for a moment. London or Scotland? Maybe it didn't matter as long as he was thinking of the right person. Pointing his wand north, he concentrated on Dumbledore and the message 'No contact of any kind for seventy-two hours. Watch Potter.' Immediately the misty little fox streamed out of the end of the wand, circled, and headed south to London. *It knows where he is. That's good information to have.*

A moment later Snape was inside his own kitchen at Spinner's End making a cup of tea and thinking of what to fix for supper. He was very hungry, having had nothing to eat all day. Not five minutes after his arrival, there was a distinctive 'pop' outside the house. Snape ignored it. *If they want to come in, they can knock.*

In fact, nobody knocked. Not the least surprised, Snape busied himself with a dish of lamb curry. One of the advantages of being both muggle-raised and a Potions Master was that cooking was relatively easy. Snape knew, as a matter of professional expertise, the qualities of every herb and spice there was, and enjoyed combining them in different types of food. He never used magic, as he never used it when mixing potions. He rather despised wizards who were helpless without a wand in their hands.

Snape ate in the kitchen, then went into the front room for a glass of

wine and a book. He didn't close the curtains, as he had not in the kitchen either, since this evening he wanted to be seen relaxing at home. Anyone outside would know that no magic had been performed in or near the house for hours, and he wanted it to stay that way.

The surveillance went on for more than two days. Neither Pettigrew nor the Carrows were expert at this kind of thing, apparating and disapparating too near the house to remain undetected. Others were more subtle. Snape had a little fun leading them out onto the heath while he gathered herbs — watching a wizard trying to hide behind gorse can be highly amusing — but by the third day he was tired of their company.

Luckily, by the third day it seemed they were tired of him.

After going all morning without any trace of someone following him, Snape finally decided that the testing period, at least this one, was over. Late that afternoon he apparated to the rear of St. Nicholas church in Liverpool, not wanting to make Pendle Hill a too regular stop, and from there to an alley he'd noticed while he was with Dumbledore in London, about a five-minute walk from Grimmauld Place. He hadn't sent a patronus ahead for fear that someone might still be watching.

Arriving in Grimmauld Place, Snape cautiously approached number twelve, which appeared on the outside to be just as deserted as it had three days earlier. Climbing the steps, he paused, then knocked quietly at the door.

It was opened by Sirius Black.

Snape backed away a step, but Black opened the door wider. "Get in off the street," he said quickly. "Dumbledore's inside. Be quiet and don't wake Mother."

As Snape slipped into the house, he said, "Any word from our friends at Azkaban?" At Black's low growl, he realized his mistake. "No, really. Has anything happened at Azkaban?"

Black stared at him for a moment, then seized Snape's arm and pulled him into the parlor. The little group gathered there looked up in surprise. "He says something's supposed to happen at Azkaban," Black told them.

Snape was ushered to an empty chair at once. "We were a bit worried when we got your message," said Dumbledore as the group pulled their chairs into a tighter circle. "We were afraid he was getting suspicious."

"He's always suspicious. There was a round-the-clock watch on me for nearly sixty hours. They seem to have decided I'm not going to bolt and run."

“What news?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you. He wants the Potter boy. He’s furious that Potter escaped last month, and he’s been worried that the Ministry would start hunting him again before the organization was complete. The fact that the Ministry’s been doing nothing is a godsend for him. But he still wants Potter. He’d prefer to kidnap the boy, but barring that he’ll be content to kill him. That’s why I told you to watch him.”

“Any idea how they intend to do it?”

“Not really. I’m not in the inner circle. I do know that he’s trying to breach security at Azkaban and draw out some of the dementors. That’s why I asked about news from there.” That sentence was addressed to Black. “If Azkaban is normal, then he hasn’t succeeded yet.”

“Assuming the Ministry would make the news public,” said Dumbledore grimly. “Well, as long as we have you, I presume there’s more to report . . .”

Tea appeared, and as the others helped themselves to sandwiches and sweets, Dumbledore placed a cup on a small table next to Snape. “Sandwiches?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” replied Snape. “I already had something. The tea smells good, though.”

“Now,” continued Dumbledore, “tell us what’s happening with Vol . . . with the other side.”

“The organization seems to be in disarray. I wasn’t the only one who answered the first summons late. He had panicky Death Eaters showing up for days after his reappearance, especially in the lower ranks. The ones in real trouble are the ones who simply ran. I’m afraid Karkaroff has definitely been counted as one of them.”

A knock at the front door interrupted him, and Snape waited while several more people, among them Molly Weasley and her son Charlie, entered the room. Snape was introduced to Mundungus Fletcher, Arabella Figg, and Nymphadora Tonks, whom he remembered as one of his students. After they were seated, he resumed.

“He was concerned at the beginning, when Potter escaped, that the Ministry would start a sweep of the country trying to round up everyone who was ever connected with the Death Eaters. That the Ministry has done nothing is a source of great pleasure to the Dark Lord and the upper circle. I’m not sure what Fudge thinks is happening, but he wouldn’t be at all happy to hear how he was talked about at that last meeting.

“There are several things that have priority. The first is to lie low while

we . . . they organize. He's planning to restart the branches in Norwich, Lincoln, Cardiff, York, and Glasgow. Lieutenants haven't been assigned yet. One of the biggest obstacles is that so many of his top people are in Azkaban.

"So another priority is getting our . . . his people out of Azkaban. For those who just arrived, there was some talk about siphoning off a few of the dementors to use as bodyguards or agents, which is why I asked if there was any news from Azkaban. But assuming Fudge knew he'd lost a couple, would he make it public?"

"Good points," commented Dumbledore. "It seems we have to keep an eye open for activity all over Britain, and it will probably be low-key, hard to pinpoint. And we have to keep our ears open at the Ministry. Molly, Arthur will be very useful there."

Molly Weasley nodded, and Charlie looked very determined and proud.

"There's something that bothers me, though," said Doge. "Why do keep saying 'we' when you talk about them? You're supposed to be . . ."

"Stow it, Elphias," growled Moody. "Leave him be. Better to automatically say 'we' and 'us.' Here it's a small slip that can be corrected. He slips with them and we lose a source of information."

Snape nodded his thanks to Moody and continued. "As I said before, another thing, more personal and therefore more immediate, is that he wants Potter. He was furious when Potter escaped, and he's determined to get him back. I believe he'll try several attempts to lay his hands on the boy before he gives the order that it's permissible to kill him, but I have no idea how much time that will take.

"Several of you need to know that I gave the Dark Lord your names, those of you I met here three days ago. One of the people prominent around the Dark Lord, though he seems to have no real hierarchical standing, is Peter Pettigrew. While I was giving my report, he was keeping track, and I felt I had no choice. As I named you, he kept count. I was afraid that if I omitted anyone, I would be placed in danger. I understood that he had once been a member of the Order, and would know your names in any case. Those were the only names I mentioned."

"It was wisely done," Lupin said. "Peter was in on everything we did from the beginning. He'd know all of us and probably gave our names to . . . him long ago."

"May I ask what your job is?" It was the first time Black had spoken since they entered the parlor.

"The same as it was before, fifteen years ago. I have three major duties.

First, I'm in charge of the potions. We don't have a permanent headquarters yet, but when we do I'll have a laboratory that needs to be stocked with supplies. I've started collecting things, and I'm drawing up a list of materials. The organization is short of funds, but Lucius Malfoy isn't, and I'll be able to call on him to buy the things I can't gather myself.

"My second job is curses. If the Organization needs a curse for a special job, and the curse doesn't exist, I have to try to invent it. The first two I did were a way to sneak past dogs, and a way to walk silently on leaves."

"That was you!" cried Vance. "I always wondered how they got past those dogs."

"That was while I still actually worked for him. My third job is combat training. Self-defensive techniques."

Lupin laughed heartily. "I can vouch from long experience that you were always good at that."

The report now finished, the members of the Order began to chat, and to look forward to supper. Snape rose from his chair.

"If you will excuse me, I should be leaving. I need to visit Diagon Alley, which will be my justification in case the Dark Lord asks why I came to London, and I have a tremendous amount of work to do to prepare the potions laboratory."

They wished him well, though no one seemed particularly sorry that he was going, and Snape quietly left the house.

The tea on the table next to his chair remained untouched.

* * *

When next Snape was summoned to the Dark Lord, it was to an older area of Croydon, south of London, where he was met by Macnair, who handed him a folded piece of paper.

"Don't tell me. Let me guess. A Fidelius Charm?"

Macnair chortled. "You put a bee in his bonnet, I'm thinking. Read it, then walk down that street. It'll be on the left."

'It' was an old brick building still grimed with streaks of London soot from decades of air pollution. Snape's parents had remembered the famous 'pea soup' fogs of London from their rare visits to the capital in their youth, but by the time Snape was born, strict controls had cleaned both air and water, though traces still remained on the walls of buildings. Snape took a deep breath and went to the door.

The meeting was short. Each Death Eater was assigned a part of the new headquarters to prepare for the long battle ahead. Snape soon found himself in the long rectangular room that was to be his new laboratory. One wall was a row of large, dirty windows with a view of train tracks. *Not bad. Lots of light, even if a little noisy.* Sections of the windows could be opened, providing good ventilation.

The first thing Snape checked out was the electric wiring. Nothing electronic could function at Hogwarts because of the heavy magical protection surrounding the Castle and grounds, but no such powerful charms were in place here. To his great delight, Snape found that the room had a large number of outlets, and a quick check of the boxes showed that it was wired for high wattage and amps.

The second thing was a gas line, but there he was disappointed. *An easy problem to resolve, though. I'll just fuel the Bunsen burners with propane tanks.*

The third thing was water, and there he was not disappointed, for several areas of the room had plumbing and the taps were already installed. *I wonder what this room used to be used for?*

Snape immediately requested that magic be banned from the laboratory. When questioned, he got technical. "There's going to be a lot of delicate equipment in there. Not to mention tanks of combustible gases and liquids that could explode if their containers are compromised. Besides, have you ever seen what a simple Lumos charm can do to the cathodes and anodes when you're performing electrolysis? It isn't pretty."

Since the Dark Lord had no idea what cathodes, anodes, or electrolysis were, he agreed to Snape's request.

Safe now in his own domain, protected from magical interference by order of the Dark Lord himself, Snape began to set things up, his first order to Malfoy being rows of counters fitted with long drawers and sinks, cabinets for equipment, stools, a half dozen Bunsen burners, three fire extinguishers (which made several of the Death Eaters decidedly nervous), and cases of test tubes, beakers, pipettes, glass rods, jars, vials, flasks, and even some cauldrons. There were, after all, a few potions that could only be made in an iron cauldron. *And I am going to go out and get lab coats!*

* * *

Dumbledore was forbidden to send patronuses to Snape. "All I need is for a silver phoenix to be hovering around Croydon. For the next couple of

weeks I need to spend most of my time setting up the lab. My first assignment is to stock a medical area for those injured in the line of duty. After that, I'll have more free time."

Dumbledore peered over the top of his glasses. They were sitting in a pub at the bottom of Ludgate Hill, far more private than the house at Grimmauld Place. "Should I be concerned that you seem to be enjoying this far too much?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been going on in exquisite detail about every facet of this laboratory of yours. I seem to remember that it is an old, and at one time deeply cherished dream. Might not this siren be seducing you away from us?"

"Don't worry, Professor. Even in his presence, it's impossible to forget who and what he is and what he's done. Using his own resources to destroy him is just part of the poetry of the whole situation."

"I do hope that is true."

At the Croydon headquarters, Snape ran into Pettigrew from time to time. They even began to chat.

"I hear you did great service for the Dark Lord in the past, giving him information. Is it true you were Secret-Keeper for the Potters?"

Pettigrew grinned. "The crowning point of my career so far. The Dark Lord was very pleased with that tidbit."

"How did you get to be Secret-Keeper?"

"Pure luck, actually. It was going to be Sirius, but at the last moment he convinced James that it should be me. He was afraid that he was too obvious a choice and worried that he could be forced to talk."

"So in a way, Black decided that you should be Secret-Keeper. Interesting." Snape stored the information, to be retrieved and used later.

It took the last two weeks of July to set up the laboratory, primarily because Snape wouldn't allow magic. First there was the job of cleaning and painting. It was hard work, but a ladder, a bucket, a mop and a variety of sponges soon had the windows gleaming and the floor and walls spotless. It was then that Snape discovered that somewhere in the intervening twenty years paint had been developed that took far less time to dry. He was enthralled by muggle ingenuity.

Some of the stronger, lower level Death Eaters were called in to position the counters and cabinets, which took two days. Snape had even purchased do-it-yourself books on electrical wiring and plumbing. Fortunately for the borough of Croydon, the wiring was in good shape, and hooking the sinks

up to the existing plumbing was fairly simple, as was figuring out how to use a propane tank.

One thing that created quite a stir was testing one of the fire extinguishers in the basement. Nothing could have convinced the other Death Eaters of the strictness of the magic prohibition like Snape's determination to learn how to put out a fire with foam shot from a red cylinder. The laboratory was beginning to develop an almost legendary mystique before it even went into operation.

At last Snape was able to don his new immaculate white lab coat and begin unpacking and arranging his books and equipment. Many of the books were from his youth when he'd believed becoming a scientist was more than a pipe dream. Others were recently purchased, including pharmaceutical texts from the University of London bookstore.

The Dark Lord himself visited the newly set up laboratory, and while it was clear he didn't quite place potions making above magic, he was pleased to have an establishment in the forefront of development in the wizarding world.

Snape did not return home to Spinner's End in all this time. Instead, one corner of the lab was set up with privacy curtains like a hospital, and had a cot, a night stand, a lamp, and a small bookcase with some light reading.

At the end of July, while up late at night tending the first batch of a bone-setting potion, Snape found himself making a list. It was a list of names:

Tom Riddle
Peter Pettigrew
Severus Snape
Sirius Black
James Potter, deceased
Albus Dumbledore
Sibyll Trelawney
Harry Potter (?)

After studying the list for a while, still occasionally stirring the potion, he folded it carefully, wrote 'People responsible for the death of Lily Evans' on the outside, and slipped it behind the books he kept in his sleeping area.

From that moment Snape began to feel the presence of Lily strongly in the laboratory. He did not, however, talk to her. This was partly because he

didn't want to reveal his secret to anyone who might happen to come in, and partly because he thought she would probably not approve of his list.

The next day was July 31. Snape requested a meeting with the Dark Lord.

"Tell us your wish, Potions Master."

"It's customary for the teachers at Hogwarts to arrive at the school on the first of August each year to review the coming year and to prepare their work areas. It would look odd if I weren't there. Normally, too, I live at the school from that point. I would be able to return here for a few hours each day, but in order to maintain my cover, I should be at Hogwarts most of the time."

"Will your work here suffer?"

"It will go slowly. Since we are keeping a low profile for the time being, however, I don't think it will affect day-to-day operations in any way."

"Very well. You have our permission to go to Hogwarts."

The next morning Snape packed his usual Gladstone bag. Leaving the Croydon offices, he went to the railway station and entered the men's room. It was empty, so Snape had no trouble concentrating on the outskirts of Hogsmeade and apparating.

C H A P T E R F O R T Y - E I G H T

SHADOWS RISING

TUESDAY, AUGUST 1, 1995 (THREE DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

Professor Severus Snape apparated into the outskirts of Hogsmeade, as he did at the beginning of every August, carrying his Gladstone bag and ready to start a new school year. The fact that this year he was coming in from Croydon, south of London, rather than from Lancashire was irrelevant. There was a curious quality about Snape's mind that allowed it to disconnect from one thing and connect to another so flawlessly that the two areas of his life were completely compartmentalized, separated totally from each other unless he willed otherwise.

"Nine o'clock," said a gruff voice nearby. "I don't think you've ever missed a day."

"Good morning, Moody. Has my status changed, or is this for purely sentimental reasons?"

"Hard to break an old habit is all." Both men were silent for a moment.

"Odd how if you don't have Azkaban to talk about, you have nothing to say," commented Snape when the silence had become too noticeable.

Moody laughed. "Then I'll just wish you a good year teaching. It isn't like we won't have more chances to talk as the year wears on. About less pleasant things."

"True. I suppose I'll be seeing you in London soon. And thank you for the good wishes."

"My pleasure, boyo. Try to stay out of trouble." And with a resounding 'pop!' Moody was gone.

"Severus!"

Snape turned and waited as McGonagall caught up to him by the Hogwarts gate. "Morning, Filch," they both said to the caretaker who opened it for them, then walked up the hill side by side.

"Before anything else," McGonagall stated flatly, "I have something I've been wanting to say for a month, and I'm going to say it now. So don't try to stop me."

This sounded foreboding, but Snape just nodded.

"I treated you abominably in June, about Fudge and that dementor. I said unfair, hurtful things, and now when I think what you were about to go off and do that very evening . . . Well, all I can say is — I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgiven and forgotten long ago. Not to be mentioned again. When did you find out?"

"Last week. I'm in the Order now, too."

"I rather wish you hadn't told me that. Something else to conceal."

"You'd have found out about it soon enough."

Things at Hogwarts seemed perfectly normal. Snape and Flitwick played cribbage after lunch. The inventory of supplies went smoothly. Even the fact that no Defense Against the Dark Arts professor had yet been appointed seemed routine. It was as if the events of the past six weeks had never happened.

Until after supper, that is. Then Snape nodded to Dumbledore, Dumbledore nodded back, and Snape quietly made his way down the hill. By the time he reached the gate, it was already open for him, and he slipped through and apparated to Croydon. There, in his new laboratory, in his new lab coat, surrounded by things bubbling and brewing, he continued to make medicines and potions for the Dark Lord's infirmary. *There is a certain surreal quality to this that will take some getting used to.*

It was, however, a routine that was easy to follow. Snape would spend the nights at Hogwarts, the days doing his work as a professor preparing for the school year, and his evenings in Croydon. The routine lasted less than two days.

Snape apparated back to Hogsmeade at eleven o'clock on August 2 and sent a patronus to Dumbledore to open the gate. Once inside, he was met by an answering patronus. 'Come to my office at once. Something has happened.'

Surprised and apprehensive, Snape rushed up the hill and climbed the stairs to the headmaster's tower as quickly as he could. Dumbledore was waiting, and McGonagall and Moody were also there. "What happened?" Snape gasped as he tried to catch his breath.

Dumbledore looked grave. "We were rather hoping you could tell us.

Harry Potter was attacked by at least two dementors this evening, about two hours ago. In Little Whinging, Surrey. Do you know anything about it?"

It was an uncomfortable moment. The first major crisis since his return to the Dark Lord, and Snape had been outside the circle that planned it. It was not an auspicious introduction to the Order of the Phoenix, and he had a feeling that Moody, and probably the others, would wonder if he'd simply not passed the information along.

"All I knew, and reported, was that they were trying to pull a couple of dementors away from Azkaban. My impression was that they were to be guards. Apparently I was mistaken. I believe I also warned you to watch Potter."

"True on both counts," said Dumbledore with a rueful smile. "And, in fact, Potter was being watched. Or should have been watched. We shall have to take up the matter with Mundungus. I regret that I put you in a position where you felt you had to defend your actions. I fear you have spoiled me, and I was beginning to think you could work miracles."

"No, sir. No miracles."

"So far, Severus, it has been an exciting evening. Mundungus Fletcher abandoned his post watching Potter to take care of some private business. Be sure you entrust nothing vital to him, by the way. It is good we know that now instead of finding it out later. Potter wandered away from home for some time, encountered his cousin Dudley, and the two boys were attacked by dementors not far from their house. Luckily Potter was able to conjure a patronus, and Arabella Figg got a message to me."

"Something else to consider," Moody pointed out. "That Fletcher's back-up at the time was a Squib. Not a good combination."

"True, Alastor. So far tonight I have been to the Ministry to persuade them not to expel Potter or destroy his wand, and I have had to threaten his aunt and force the Dursleys to keep the boy when his uncle wished to throw him out."

"Why do they have to keep him?"

"Ah, Severus, there is magic older than most wizards suspect, and the presence of his family has been protecting Potter for nigh on fourteen years. As long as his home is with them, he is reasonably safe. On a day to day basis, of course."

"Of course."

"When do you next return to London?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"Could you go earlier? We could use the information."

"Not without arousing suspicions. It's better if he believes that I told you I have no access to upper level information. That way, if I talk to people about the things they know, it won't look so much like I'm gathering information for you."

"I see. Well, handle it as you think best."

The next evening Snape returned to Croydon as part of his new routine. He was almost immediately summoned before the Dark Lord. Malfoy and Macnair were there as well.

Red eyes skimmed across the surface of Snape's brain as he knelt before his master. Satisfied, the Dark Lord sat back and began his questioning.

"You have heard of the botched attempt to take the Potter boy."

"Yes, Lord. Dumbledore informed me of it two hours after it happened."

"They were not expecting it?"

"No, Lord."

"Do they not watch him?"

"They have been watching him, but his guard left his post."

"What is the name of this careless enemy who unwittingly aids us?"

"I don't know."

"Why is Potter still at the home of his aunt? Do they not care to protect him better?"

"There is some ancient magic invoked by Dumbledore fourteen years ago that ensures Potter's safety as long as his home is with his family. There is some power attached to the protection of kin..."

"Enough. We are aware of this." The red eyes turned on Malfoy. "Bring Wormtail to us."

They knelt side by side, Snape and Pettigrew, and from Pettigrew's fidgeting it was clear that neither of them knew which was in more trouble, or even why the Dark Lord wished to question them together.

"Look at us," the Dark Lord commanded, and both held their heads up, still and obedient, to permit the eye contact. "Now, Potions Master, tell Wormtail what you have just told us."

Without looking at Pettigrew, Snape repeated his information. "There is an ancient magic, invoked by Dumbledore to keep the Potter boy safe. It involves a kin relationship and seems to be effective whether the protection is given from love or from a sense of duty. If the relative actively chooses to safeguard the boy, he is immune from many kinds of harm. His aunt Petunia

agreed to give him a home, from a sense of duty, and as long as he calls that place his home and lives there part of the time, he is guarded.”

“Did you know this, Wormtail? Were you aware of this magic, this powerful ancient magic, when you came to us with the location of the child we were seeking? Did you serve Dumbledore then, and lead us into a trap, where the loving protection of the mother would destroy the one who tried to destroy her son?”

As a desperate Pettigrew stammered and groveled, and protested both his innocence and loyalty, Snape felt his whole body growing cold. He watched Pettigrew and the Dark Lord as if from a distance, amazed at his own sudden detachment from the scene. *Could the Dark Lord be right?*

How ruthless is Dumbledore when the stakes are high enough? When evil is parading in triumph, and your own soldiers are falling into darkness, do you sacrifice one innocent to save thousands of others? Did you step back from being Secret-Keeper for this? Did you support Black in his argument about making Pettigrew the Secret-Keeper for this? Is the Dark Lord right, and the whole thing planned so that the love of a dying mother would channel through her son to destroy your greatest enemy?

Snape realized that he was staring at Pettigrew with loathing and disgust. The Dark Lord felt it and grimaced in what was meant for a smile.

“Yes, faithful servant, he is loathsome, is he not? But we believe he was sincere in his loyalty. Perhaps he was duped by Dumbledore, but that is an error of judgment, not a breach of faith. You are both dismissed.”

Back in his laboratory, Snape found himself feeling dizzy and disoriented. Still in shock, his hands shaking, Snape went to his bookcase and found the little piece of paper he’d put there three days earlier. *Fool! To leave something like this in so obvious a place!* Lighting a Bunsen burner, he rolled the paper into a spill and burned it into nothing.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair. How does a muggle, a seventeenth century muggle, understand so much about the world of witches and wizards? There was no doubt in Snape’s mind that the Dark Lord was foul, but could he honestly say the same about Dumbledore’s being fair? The firm ground of certainty was changing into quicksand, and Snape felt himself sinking.

What do I know for certain? Surprisingly little. I went to Dumbledore all those years ago because I couldn’t stay with the Dark Lord. I assumed that because they were enemies, they were also different. No, that’s not fair to Dumbledore. He was good to me. Usually. Did he deceive me? Did he manipulate me into doing something that he knew I would hate to further his own purposes?

Do I know that the Dark Lord has deceived us to manipulate us into doing his will? Yes, I know that for a fact. I know because it was done to me. Does Dumbledore deceive and manipulate us into doing his will? It's harder to pinpoint, but I don't think I could say 'no' to that question. Does it matter? Don't all people manipulate each other to some extent? Don't I do it, too? At what point does it cease being normal and become evil?

Let's say for a moment that Dumbledore wanted the Potter baby to destroy the Dark Lord. He could have fed me that prophecy. He could have ensured Pettigrew became Secret-Keeper. He probably knew already that Pettigrew was working for the Dark Lord. The only thing wrong with the plan from Dumbledore's point of view is that it didn't work. It failed, and the Dark Lord is still here.

Does my speculating on this and finding it logical mean that it's true? Clearly not. Just because you have a hypothesis that fits the facts doesn't make the hypothesis right. How can I prove or disprove this hypothesis? What do I look for, what do I need, to show me Dumbledore's true actions?

There, suddenly — blessedly — the problem became scientific. He had facts, he had a hypothesis that might explain those facts, and now he needed to work out the steps, empirical steps, that would either prove or disprove his ideas.

Noting the time, how late in the evening it was, Snape left his laboratory for the streets of Croydon, and apparated back to Hogwarts.

The next couple of days were odd ones. Snape spent most of his time at Hogwarts and most of his energy on the Croydon headquarters. Finding excuses for being out of his laboratory was not easy, though it helped if he affected an air of being oblivious to the people around him while he moved from one place to another. His ears were open, his eyes were open, and he only worried that the others would suspect he was gathering information because of his too frequent forays into the corridors.

A meeting of the Order of the Phoenix was called for the night of the sixth of August, and Snape apparated there as soon as his duties in Croydon were completed, which was a little before eleven o'clock. The door was opened to him by Molly Weasley, who actually seemed disappointed to see him, and then he was ushered into the parlor, where he found a rather small group. Dumbledore, Hagrid, and Black were among the wizards there, but Moody and Lupin were not, along with several others who were absent. *It's all right. It isn't as if I have a lot to tell them.*

Then suddenly, just as he'd started to give a report, the room began to fill up. Moody, Lupin, Diggle, Vance, Podmore, Doge, and Tonks entered, along

with a wizard and a witch introduced as Kingsley Shacklebolt and Hestia Jones. Snape waited patiently while they greeted the others and were seated. The last to enter and seat herself was Molly Weasley.

"We seem to all be here at last," said Dumbledore. "Please proceed, Severus. We have kept you waiting long enough."

Snape started with a description of the organization of headquarters, then went on to more current events.

"Well . . . we're a bit short-handed here in . . . London because Nott's been sent up to Glasgow, Yaxley to Cardiff, and Avery to Lincoln. New cells have been formed there, and they're attracting a decent number of people."

Shacklebolt raised his hand. "Is there a minimum number for a cell?"

"Half a dozen. If you can't get six, it isn't worth the trouble to send someone out. I got the impression that the Cardiff cell was quite small, but that Glasgow could be nearly a dozen, and Lincoln twice that, though some of them will go to York and Norwich when those cells open. The London headquarters is near fifty now, but mostly low rankers, about the level of common workers. The Dark Lord is having trouble getting in people with the status and background for the upper and middle ranks."

"Any idea why that's true?" Moody asked.

"So many of the old upper echelon either died or was shut up in Azkaban. New people, especially educated people, are leery of the Dark Lord until he proves he can be successful. Lots of people are waiting — 'on the sidelines,' as the Americans would say."

"Excuse me, Severus," said Dumbledore, "but why so many in the lower levels?"

"There's a lot of discontent. The major complaint I hear is that the Ministry doesn't care about the welfare of the wizard on the street, so to speak. Then, the better educated wizards can find work with the Ministry or with Gringotts, or go into business for themselves, but the poorer ones have trouble even finding muggle jobs. They think the Dark Lord will give them work and a sense of purpose."

"Fudge has a lot to answer for," commented Podmore, and the others agreed.

"Now, tell us about the attack on Potter," Dumbledore continued.

Snape thought for a moment. "That mystifies me. I can't find anyone who was or knows of anyone who was involved in that. That doesn't necessarily mean anything. I'm not in contact with the whole organization by any means, but it's odd that no one knows anything."

Lupin spoke up. “Do you mean it’s too secret, that no one has any information?”

“On the contrary, everyone’s talking about it. They just don’t know who did it.”

“And your Dark Lord . . .” prompted Dumbledore.

“Has said nothing specific. And the two top people just add to the mystery. Malfoy never says anything. He wouldn’t divulge his feelings on his own mother’s death. But Macnair got defensive when the subject of demen-tors and Potter came up. He wasn’t in on it, and it bothers him,”

More fine points were discussed, and then the meeting was over. Black offered refreshments, but Snape pleaded fatigue, and this time Dumbledore didn’t try to stop him. As the parlor emptied into the hall and the dining room, Snape became aware that the place was crawling with Weasleys. Molly, Charlie, Bill, George, Fred — Ron and Ginny had to be there somewhere. Snape was more pleased than ever that he was leaving early.

All I need is to have to deal with Gred and Forge Weasley. My idea of heaven . . . not. With great relief Snape left the house and apparated to Hogwarts, where McGonagall was waiting to let him in.

Over the next few days it gradually became more and more apparent that the daily commute between Hogwarts and Croydon was not going to be practicable. Snape found himself sleeping later and later into the morning and arriving in the Great Hall with barely enough time to grab a bite before breakfast was over. Flitwick was teasing him about getting lazy in his old age, and Sprout began suggesting a list of maladies that started out resembling fatigue and ended either with a funeral or with premature baldness. McGonagall, too, was concerned, but she didn’t tease him about it.

“You really should go up and see Madam Pomfrey. You’re looking much more peaked than usual. I’m telling you this from self-interest, mind you. It makes me positively tired just looking at you.”

Madam Pomfrey was precise in her diagnosis and recommendation. “You’ve reached a physical and mental limit. It isn’t just the ten days since we returned to school, its June and July and then August piled on top of it. Right now you’re stretching yourself — you’re not getting quite enough sleep, and your eating habits are affected — always a bad sign for you. You’re an easy victim for any stray virus that decides it wants you. You could keep on like this indefinitely if all else remains the same. However, school is going to start in three weeks and your workload is going to increase spectacularly. Something’s got to change.”

Dumbledore agreed, and Snape considered how he was going to handle this when he returned to London.

Snape arrived in Croydon that afternoon rather than waiting until after dinner. He immediately put in a request to speak to Lucius Malfoy. He was told that he could meet with Malfoy at five o'clock.

At a quarter to five, Snape was waiting. Malfoy and Macnair were with the Dark Lord, and Snape was prepared to wait for some time. Luckily he didn't have to, for the two of them walked in together at ten past the hour.

"... more than willing to listen to my point of view. That's what comes of oiling the wheels all these years. A gift here, a donation there, and I have a voice in affairs even if it is unofficial." Malfoy entered first and nodded absently at Snape without interrupting his conversation.

"You buy us more time, Malfoy, and you've done a great service. Nothing like discrediting a witness to make people turn their backs on his story. Think it'll work?"

Malfoy smiled, more of a smirk than a smile. "Old Parliamentary trick. If you have a quorum, you can vote. If certain members arrive late, well..."

"You devious old dog! Best of luck to you!" Macnair, too, nodded to Snape, then left.

"What can I do for you, Severus?" Malfoy lounged comfortably in a chair near the window.

"I'd like to request a change of schedule once school starts. Right now it's no problem taking care of both my work at Hogwarts and my duties here, but come September with classes full time, plus grading papers, plus supervisory duties, I don't think I could handle it. Not and be in any condition to be useful."

"Ah, yes. The daily grind of the secondary school teacher. You do have my sympathy, you know. Working for a living — most tedious. How are your potions coming?"

"Everything will be well stocked by the end of August. The infirmary's half finished now, and operations hasn't requested much. Some of the smaller requisitions I could do in my office at Hogwarts during the autumn term."

"Excellent. I'll inform the Dark Lord. He's most content with your work so far, and the request is a reasonable one. I see no difficulty."

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy."

"I'm always pleased to help an old acquaintance. You may go now."

"Yes, sir."

Snape arrived late that night at Hogwarts, and asked to see Dumbledore early the next morning.

Dumbledore was intrigued. "If certain members arrive late . . . Discrediting a witness . . . They did not mention what the meeting was about, I suppose?"

"No, sir. It just sounded like Malfoy was going to suggest a tactic that would allow a vote to be taken somewhere before everyone concerned arrived. To force a certain outcome pleasing to the Dark Lord."

"I shall be going down to London tomorrow morning for a little meeting. I may make a small alteration to my plans. Thank you, Severus."

Dumbledore left early for London the following morning, but Snape had no time to speculate on the headmaster's actions since he was almost immediately inundated with orders of eyes. Newt eyes, bat eyes, octopus eyes, and many-faceted bluebottle eyes. Eyes of every size, shape, and color. Fragile things in delicate brine solutions—twenty-four gross of them packed into dry ice in six large cases—each jar had to be examined for damage before storing them in a special locker built out under the lake to keep them cool. It was a major reason why the Potions classroom was in the dungeon.

Snape worked feverishly all day, not even stopping for lunch. He had to work quickly enough that the eyes didn't rise in temperature, and methodically enough that he was sure he'd looked at every one. It was a simple, yet taxing job.

By supper time, Snape was finished. He went to the Great Hall feeling content with the day's work, for the eye shipment was the biggest single job he had getting ready for classes. Dumbledore was back from London, sitting at the Ravenclaw table playing checkers with Flitwick and looking pleased with his day's work, too.

After supper, Snape caught Dumbledore's eye as he was leaving the Hall. Dumbledore rose and followed, though Snape didn't wait for him. As Snape descended the hill, Dumbledore watched, opening and closing the gate into Hogsmeade to allow Snape to apparate to Croydon.

Snape was met at the door to the Croydon headquarters by Macnair himself. "The Dark Lord wants you. Now!"

Macnair seized Snape's arm and pulled him down the stairs and along the underground corridor to the interview room. The room was dark, with a beam of light creating a circle in the middle. There Snape was pushed to his knees, where he waited, frightened now. Malfoy came in and stood behind him, next to Macnair.

Then the Dark Lord appeared.

"You will explain to us now why Dumbledore chose to arrive early for Potter's hearing, and why you chose not to pass this information on."

What hearing? The thought flitted uncontrolled across the surface of Snape's brain, and he instantly tried to suppress it. That was an error, for pain—cruel and unyielding—cascaded through him, and he gasped and writhed with the agony of it.

"You will not attempt to hide your thoughts from us."

"Lord, forgive me. I will not again, but I was surprised." The pain receded.

"Bartemius was mistaken in you, we see. You do not have so much control over your thoughts as he believed. Now, you will answer."

"Lord, I know nothing of a hearing. I had no information to pass on." Now the pain started again, small and menacing, a tickle, a promise of what would come if the wrong answer was given.

"You knew he was coming to London."

"Yes, but not why."

"You knew Potter had a hearing at the Ministry this morning to answer charges on the use of magic."

"No, Lord, I did not." The pain began to enlarge and twist inside him like a malevolent worm.

"What use are you to us if you do not know the information we require?"

"Lord, I will try . . . No!" Snape dropped forward onto his hands, perspiration beading his forehead as the pain notched upward. "Lord, I will . . . I will get you what you need, only . . ."

"Only . . .?" repeated the Dark Lord, unrelenting in his torment.

"Only I'm no legilimens. I can't read what you need or what they hide. I stumble in the dark. If you could tell me what I must look for . . ."

"Enough. Lucius, this one is innocent of betrayal. He did not know, and therefore could not warn. His crime is ignorance. Severus, you will return to your work. When you have completed your tasks, you will go back to Hogwarts, but each night before you do, you will check with Lucius to see if there is anything specific that you must watch for."

"Yes, Lord. Thank you, Lord." And the Dark Lord was gone.

Malfoy helped Snape to his feet. "Hard luck that. He was furious when he heard Dumbledore'd outfoxed Fudge and his plans. I suggest you tell us everything, just to be safe. Tell us if Dumbledore blows his nose."

"I slipped. I can't believe I slipped like that. I could've died. He said Potter had a hearing, and I let my reaction show like any sieve-brained idiot. Then to compound it—I tried to hide it. I'm just thankful that what I released showed him I wasn't hiding something worse."

Dumbledore poured a glass of mead. It was near midnight, and Snape was grateful that the headmaster was willing to sit up and listen. He himself was too hyper to go to bed or even relax.

"It was all for the best, then. Your slip proved your innocence, and he is more convinced than ever that you cannot hide things from him. I would say it worked out quite well."

"Dumb luck! What if the thing I let slip proved my guilt? I wouldn't be here talking to you right now. You can't trust me with anything, sir. I could just as easily give him your secrets..."

"Calm down, Severus. I believe you are making too much of this. Do you remember your first interview with Riddle? You were what? Eighteen? Nineteen?"

"I remember. How do you...?"

"You told me. We spent quite a few hours together in Hagrid's hut that day, and you told me many things—I recall you were somewhat distraught—but your account of that interview is one thing I shall never forget."

Snape had drained the glass, too nervous to be aware of what he was doing. Dumbledore refilled it.

"You were young and surrounded by friends who were welcoming you into a fraternity, a fellowship. You burned with devotion, and you opened your mind to him freely and trustingly. And what happened? Without your even being aware, your own mind closed down to him with a completeness that I certainly cannot break through, and I doubt he could either. And it was done without any volition on your part. Involuntary self-protection. Now an occlumens who operates with such unerring instinct is not going to slip and spill fatal information casually. I think something in your brain knew that open honesty at that moment was beneficial. I have complete faith in your ability to shield my little secrets."

The combination of Dumbledore's reassurance, his own fatigue, and the mead had a relaxing effect on Snape. He went down to his own rooms, fell asleep easily, and slept dreamlessly for the rest of the night.

There was another meeting at Grimmauld Place a week later. Snape appeared from Croydon to Kensington Gardens to the nearby alley at about

ten-thirty. Black opened the door to his knock and stood aside to let him in. "Snape," he said in greeting.

"Black," was Snape's response. He looked around. Mrs. Black's portrait was blessedly quiet, and there was change in the air. Much of the smell of mildew and rot was gone. "I see you're getting along with the cleaning."

"It occupies the time."

"I envy you that time. I could use more."

"It isn't by choice."

"Of course not."

Lupin and Molly Weasley came out of the parlor at that moment, and the somewhat barbed conversation ended. They went into the parlor where late refreshments were being served.

"Tea?" said Black. "Maybe a sandwich."

"No, thank you. I had something before I came."

"Just a bite. It's really quite tasty."

"No, really. Please don't put yourself out on my account."

Dumbledore intervened before daggers were drawn. "Gentlemen, I suggest you sit down. We are about to begin, and I am sure we all would like to get business over with as soon as possible. There is a lot to cover, and it is late."

Snape took a seat next to Tonks, while Black leaned against the door-jamb. Each studiously avoided looking at the other during the first part of the meeting.

"Now," said Dumbledore, "there is the matter of the circumstances surrounding the hearing at the Ministry on the question of Harry's using magic illegally."

The assembled wizards and witches nodded in anticipation. All had heard something, and none everything, of the matter.

"First, of course, the very fact that Harry would be arraigned before a tribunal for defending himself from dementors is of concern. The Ministry does not wish to concede the existence of the dementors. They wish to accuse Harry of inventing the threat in order to indulge in a gratuitous display of magic ability in a spot where there were no witnesses except his cousin Dudley. Now Dudley Dursley is well aware that Harry is a wizard, and therefore displays of magic before him do not constitute the serious breach of the law that they would before muggles unaware of our world, and yet the Ministry chose to go to extreme lengths of review of the offense and potential punishment."

There was a general murmur against the Ministry at this, but it was quickly followed by silence.

“Next came the rather blatant attempts on the part of the Ministry to circumvent the process of the law by trying to make Harry miss his hearing on the twelfth and lose by default, and by trying to ensure that he had no legal support nor any witnesses to back him up. An owl was sent to Arthur Weasley advising him of a change in time of the hearing, but it seems to have been intended to miss him, to arrive after he had departed his residence to go to work that morning. The Ministry claim to have sent an owl to me, but it seems never to have arrived. I should now like Severus to give his information.”

Having finally realized the fullness of his own role in the previous week’s events, Snape spoke up with some confidence. “On the evening of the tenth I had reason to ask to speak with Lucius Malfoy at our . . . London headquarters. I overheard him say to someone else that they were planning an old Parliamentary trick to force a vote when certain members were sure to arrive late. I informed Professor Dumbledore of this. It seemed to be connected to a strong desire of the Dark Lord to have his return as little publicized as possible while we . . . they build up strength.”

Dumbledore continued. “Lucius Malfoy was present at the Ministry the morning of the twelfth. I would not be surprised to learn that he was there specifically to learn the outcome of Harry’s hearing. Severus.”

“The evening of the twelfth, when I arrived in . . . London for routine duties, I was immediately brought before the Dark Lord for interrogation. Specifically, he wished to know why Professor Dumbledore had arrived early for the hearing, and why I hadn’t reported his intended early arrival to headquarters.”

Tonks turned to Snape, concern in her eyes. “Interrogation?” she whispered. He affected not to hear.

“So now,” Dumbledore concluded, “we know the extent of our problem and our danger. It is not just that the Ministry does not wish Potter’s story of the return of—excuse me Severus—Voldemort made public. It is that Voldemort is aware of the internal workings of the Ministry, and that he has ways of persuading the Ministry to act according to his wishes.”

“Do we have any indication that anyone in the Ministry is actively working for You-Know-Who, or is it just that they’re being manipulated?” asked Shacklebolt. Dumbledore nodded to Snape.

“I’ve heard nothing of one of our . . . his people being ‘in’ the Ministry.

The impression I have is more that we . . . they have influence, not an actual presence.”

“Snape, me boyo,” rumbled Moody from a seat near the unlit fireplace, “I suggest you stop fretting about the ‘usses’ and the ‘thems.’ Just say ‘we,’ ‘us,’ and ‘our.’ You got enough to worry about without tippy-toeing around this lot.”

Snape smiled wryly and nodded his thanks. A general conversation ensued about how to deal with members of the Ministry, and it was concluded that the Ministry employees among them — specifically Arthur Weasley and Tonks — would try to pinpoint leaks.

As the meeting was breaking up, Snape found himself once again next to Black.

“You know,” said Black, “you aren’t the only one in this group who’s at risk for the work they do.”

“I’ll remember that,” replied Snape, “the next time I’m kneeling in front of the Dark Lord waiting to be punished. Note to self: Black’s at risk, too.”

“You know I’m not talking about me!”

“Odd, then, that you’re the only one to say anything.”

“You don’t need to rub people’s face in it.”

“Sorry! Didn’t realize that was what I was doing. Should I have said I was brought before the Dark Lord for tea and crumpets? Would that soothe your sensibilities more?”

Dumbledore was suddenly there. “Time to go back to Hogwarts, Severus. Shall we make our apologies and head for home and bed?”

Snape and Black nodded to each other in exaggerated politeness, and Snape followed Dumbledore out of the house.

* * *

It was less than a week before the train from King’s Cross would arrive, and Snape was in his laboratory setting up a simple distillation apparatus he’d just acquired. During the time that he concentrated on the tubes and clamps, a random thought had surfaced — that he was doing something he loved for someone he despised, and something he hated for someone he respected. *Wouldn’t it be easier if the Dark Lord was the headmaster and Dumbledore the rebel? Then I could chuck the teaching job once and for all, and life would be good.* Such thoughts were dangerous luxuries here, though, and he hid it away.

A lower level messenger knocked, then stuck his head around the open door. "The Dark Lord wants you," he said simply, then left without ever having stepped into the room.

Puzzled at the unexpected summons, Snape nonetheless glanced quickly around before leaving to be sure everything there could be left unattended. Then he hurried to the interview chamber.

Malfoy joined him soon after, and together they waited. Neither spoke, since speculation on the Dark Lord's wishes was frowned upon, but Snape took comfort from the fact that Malfoy seemed quite relaxed and untroubled. *So this is probably a new task rather than displeasure over something that's happened.*

The room was large, bare, and dimly lit. Walls, ceiling, and floor were painted black so that there was a sense that it had no dimensions at all. The only furniture was a large throne-like chair where the Dark Lord would appear. Snape hadn't seen the whole room before, since he'd only been there for interrogation when the contained circle of light where he knelt blocked any view of the rest. Today there was no circle of light.

The Dark Lord came. Suddenly he was there, seated in the chair before them. Snape made a movement forward, his first reaction being to kneel, but Malfoy took his arm and indicated he should stand. There was a pause as the Dark Lord surveyed them.

"Lucius tells us you are weak." The statement was like a long hiss, but neutral in its tone.

Unsure what this portended or how to react, Snape said simply, "Yes, Lord."

The red eyes narrowed and the slitted nostrils flared as the Dark Lord chuckled. It was not a pleasant sound. "You were right, Lucius. No protest, no defensiveness, just an honest statement of limitations. Such do not rise in our service, Potions Master, but they are useful tools, and a wise artist takes care of his tools."

No answer was expected to this, and Snape was silent.

"You have asked to be relieved of some of the pressure of your duties. You are too weak to sustain the level of tasks that I have assigned. It is a matter of physical limitation. You are a half-breed?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Honesty is commendable, but weakness must not be coddled. It must be punished to discourage the merely sluggardly. What should your punishment be, Potions Master?"

Confused, Snape replied, "Whatever my Lord thinks is best."

"Even death?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Good. Know this—we do not grant your request to be excused from service because of your weakness."

Struggling to control his disappointment and bewilderment, Snape said only, "Thank you, Lord."

In the pause that followed, the red eyes caught and held his own. Snape felt the scan that flickered over his brain and poked at his thoughts.

"Circumstances have arisen, however," continued the Dark Lord, "that we wish to address by changing your assignment. The Ministry of Magic is displeased with the lack of discipline at Hogwarts. They are sending a functionary to take an active position there, to evaluate the possibility of a total reorganization of the school. This person is not one of our people, but Lucius informs us that her views and beliefs are such that they can play into our hands. You have a delicate job, Severus. You must not let her know that you answer to us, or even that you know we are here. You must support her without appearing to support her too much, so as not to arouse suspicion. And you must report to us everything that happens at Hogwarts. You will cease from this moment your daily attendance here, and you will report once a week, on Saturday evenings."

"Yes, Lord," answered Snape, immensely relieved.

"Lucius, you will brief Severus on details." And then the Dark Lord was gone.

* * *

On arrival back at Hogsmeade, Snape sent his patronus with, in addition to asking to be admitted, a request to speak to Dumbledore at once. The gargoyle staircase was open, waiting for him, and Dumbledore had a small plate of sandwiches and tea.

"And maybe a glass of sherry? I hope this is about Dolores Umbridge."

Snape stopped, his hand not quite touching the sherry glass. "You know already? The Dark Lord's information isn't in advance of events as much as he thinks."

"I learned this afternoon, but not from the Ministry. I have people there, too, remember. So both of us are in advance of the official announcement. Is your information firsthand or secondhand?"

"Some of it from the Dark Lord himself. I was called to him, and I have an assignment. Dolores Umbridge, in fact, is my assignment."

"Tell me about the whole interview."

"It was strange. I'd asked Malfoy for permission to go to . . . London less frequently once the term started, and the Dark Lord called this weakness. He said weakness could not be 'coddled,' and I thought he was going to punish me. Instead he denied the request, then gave me the Umbridge assignment and said I wouldn't have to go to . . . London as frequently. So in effect he granted my request after all."

Dumbledore smiled. "It is good to know he is still vulnerable. Poor Riddle . . . so insecure in his position that he has to beat it into you that you have no influence on his decisions. 'I am not doing this because you asked, Severus, but because I have my own reasons.' Oh, and I have deduced that his headquarters are in the Greater London Metropolitan Area, but not what we traditionally think of as London. One of the outer boroughs, maybe?"

"How . . . ?"

"You keep trying to say the name, and all that comes out is London." Dumbledore was gazing placidly into Snape's eyes. "So I would guess it was Barnet . . . or Harrow . . . or Hounslow . . . or Bromley . . . or Croydon . . . or — ah! Croydon. See how nicely you shut down — without even trying. Now, tell me more about Umbridge . . . I am sorry, I have upset you."

"I just never realized before how easy I was to manipulate."

"No, Severus, do not think that. The only reason I was able to see it was because you wanted to tell me. Now, Umbridge."

"They're looking for anything they can find to discredit you or Potter. The two of you are the source of all the rumors about the return of the Dark Lord, and to admit that's happened is political suicide for Fudge and his upper level of administrators. So her job is to get Potter. And you if possible. The Dark Lord wants me to be marginally helpful to her, but not under any circumstances to let her know of his presence. That would stop her from playing into his hands. I doubt she'll trust me, though. Lucius says she's rabid about blood purity. Hates mongrels of any kind. She's particularly looking forward to sacking Hagrid. And I'd keep Flitwick away from her, too."

"I shall keep that in mind. Hagrid is not here at any rate, so that is one less source of friction at the beginning of the term."

"They want her in the Dark Arts job. They're afraid any other instructor might warn the students about the Dark Lord, or at least not stop the students from gossiping and spreading rumors. Part of her job is to prevent

them from focusing on him at all. This is one of the things that suits the Dark Lord at this point. Until the organization is set up, anything that keeps the general wizarding world from paying attention to us is an asset.”

“Do you have any idea who Riddle’s source of information in the Ministry is?”

“None. Except Malfoy, of course. He’s spent the last fourteen years building up a network of contacts, and now he’s benefiting from all the hard work. He can just about go anywhere in the Ministry and talk to anyone, and no one stops him or is even suspicious of his motives. I’d advise our own people to be very cautious around him. They assume Arthur Weasley is working for you, and Moody, of course, but they don’t have any solid information about any of the others. Not in the Ministry.”

“Thank you, Severus. This is all most useful. It is past midnight now. We should both of us be getting to bed.”

The week’s respite that Snape had hoped to have was not to be. On Tuesday the mark on his arm began to throb, and he went at once to Dumbledore.

“I’m being summoned.”

“You should leave at once.”

“It isn’t an urgent summons. More a ‘come as soon as you can, but don’t be obvious’ summons. I have no idea why. It could mean I’m in trouble.”

“Think of it as a chance to collect more information.”

“Very comforting.”

The interview was not long, and once again Snape was permitted to stand rather than kneel. He took that as a good sign.

“You brought us a prophecy sixteen years ago.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Repeat the prophecy.”

“I’m no longer certain I remember the exact phrasing.” Pain had already begun, soft and persistent in the center of Snape’s being. As he spoke, it prodded him toward the right words. “I think it was, ‘The one with the strength . . . power to defeat . . . vanquish the Dark Lord approaches . . . Born to them . . . those who have thrice . . . defied him, born as the seventh month . . . dies . . .’”

“This is not the complete prophecy.”

“No. I was interrupted and prevented from hearing the rest.”

“Who does know the entire prophecy?”

“Only Dumbledore.”

“The seer does not remember her prophecies.”

"No, Lord. She is entranced when she speaks, and therefore oblivious to them."

"Has she prophesied since?"

"Once to my knowledge. To predict the return of Petti . . . of Wormtail to you."

"Does she remember that prophecy?"

"No, Lord."

"Return now to Hogwarts."

"Thank you, Lord."

* * *

"So, he was interested in the prophecy."

"Yes. He wanted to know the entire thing, only I don't know it. And he knows that I don't know it. I can't help wondering why he even asked."

"Nonetheless, that he is interested is very valuable information. There are other places he can investigate. It is best you not know of them, but I shall try to have them guarded. Advise me again if you learn of anything."

"Certainly, Headmaster."

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1995 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FIRST QUARTER)

Early in the morning on September first the summons came again. *He knows the Umbridge woman is arriving today. He knows the students are arriving today. Why does he send for me today?*

Snape went at once to Dumbledore. "Something's happened. It still isn't an urgent summons, but I can't ignore it. I have to go."

Dumbledore looked calm. "The last time it was only for a couple of hours. I dare say you'll be back by lunchtime. Professor Umbridge is not due until just before the feast, so you will miss nothing. Good luck."

The moment Snape entered the Croydon headquarters, he was seized by three Death Eaters he didn't know and his wand taken from him. They then hustled him along the main corridor, down a flight of stairs at the rear of the building, and into a small basement room with a chair, a table, and a dim light in the ceiling. There he waited for three hours, growing more nervous by the minute.

When the door opened, it was only to admit Macnair, followed by the Carrows. Alecto smiled sweetly at Snape and drew an index finger across her throat.

Snape had risen at their entrance, and Macnair took the chair, conjuring two more for Alecto and Amycus. He motioned for Snape to stand at the foot of the table, opposite him, then leaned back with a speculative smirk on his face.

“Slipped up this time, didn’t you, Potions Master. He’s not happy with you. Not at all, my dear, not at all. You’ve been talking to people. Telling them things you shouldn’t. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve seen the sun for the last time.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“No? Mr. High and Mighty up there in your little kingdom where the rest of us can’t go — you think you’re better than us. We have your measure now. You’ve sold us out. You’ve been selling us out for some time, but now your game is over because now we have proof.”

Snape was trying to glimpse behind Macnair’s eyes, trying to see some sign of bluffing. His own heart had sped up, and he breathed as if tight bands circled his chest. Something had happened. Something very bad had happened. “The Dark Lord knows I’m faithful.”

“The Dark Lord knows you’ve cheated him of something he wants very much. His anger is great. Your punishment could deflect that anger away from the rest of us. You’re not wriggling out of this one, Snake. Ha! If you could, I’d send my own people up to you for wriggling lessons. No, Dumbledore’s sold you out, Snake. He used you, and he dumped you, and now you get to pay.”

Macnair rose and came to stand beside Snape, his face close, his breath hot on Snape’s neck. “And after he finds you guilty, he’s giving you to me. I don’t like Cruciatus curses, Snakey. They don’t linger with you long enough. I break bones. Kneecaps.” He ran a finger down Snape’s spine. “Remember last time? I bet you were feeling that for a while. Anything I want — I just can’t kill you. That pleasure belongs to the Dark Lord. Not that I would want to kill you. Spoils the fun, killing.”

On either side of Snape, Alecto and Amycus were grinning. Snape didn’t answer. There was nothing to say. *It’s about the prophecy. Dumbledore did something with that information, and the Dark Lord knows it could only come from me. He could have warned me. Dumbledore could have warned me...*

A knock at the door, and a Death Eater looked in. “Bring him now,” was all he said.

They shoved Snape out the door and pushed him along the narrow corri-

dor to the interview room. *I can't run. I can't fight. Both are signs of guilt. Keep to the story. Nothing wrong. I did nothing wrong.*

There were others there, but Snape couldn't see them beyond the circle of light where he knelt. The Dark Lord appeared and the pain was like the time before — a hint, a promise, a reminder . . . Red eyes filled his vision.

"We have a mystery for you to unravel, Potions Master. You like mysteries."

Snape let the images cascade into his consciousness: Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Peter Wimsey, Brother Cadfael — what could the Dark Lord care about these? The eyes bored deeper, raking through the places where doors had been found before.

"Tell us of the Ministry of Magic."

"They make and enforce the laws . . ." Snape doubled over suddenly, clutching his stomach.

"No schoolboy lessons. Tell us of the Ministry. What is inside?"

"I've never been anywhere inside except Law Enforcement. Years ago."

"Who works there?"

Snape thought of Fudge and Umbridge, but knew that answer would raise the Dark Lord's anger. "The Weasleys," he blurted out, "Arthur and Percy, Sturgis Podmore . . ."

"You know of Podmore."

"I told you of him before. I've met him three times."

"Then you will be sorry to hear he is arrested."

Twelve hours later Snape apparated back to Hogsmeade. For a moment he stood next to a tree on the outskirts of town, then his legs buckled and he slid to the ground, leaning his head against its trunk. *I've been here before. Déjà vu all over again.* With some effort he forced himself to study the stars in the night sky.

Only about nine o'clock. They're in the middle of the feast. I can't send him a message, not there in front of everyone. When? Midnight? Three hours. I have to wait three hours.

Time ticked by, and Snape drifted in and out of a dreamlike state, a nightmare state, until he heard a woman's voice, "Professor? Professor? Is that you?" She was whispering as if afraid to be overheard.

"Here," Snape said quietly, and she came and knelt beside him. It was Madame Rosmerta from the Three Broomsticks.

"Dumbledore said you might be coming in, and you might need help. Do you think you can stand?"

Snape nodded, and she got him to his feet and through the village to her inn. There she put him onto a cot in the back storeroom. "You just rest a while. I'm going to leave a message for Dumbledore."

A few minutes later she was back with blankets, pillows, tea, hot soup, and bread. Snape accepted them gratefully, managed to eat some of the soup, and then quite suddenly fell asleep on the cot. It had, after all, been a long day.

He woke up before dawn in Dumbledore's office.

* * *

"He was going to kill me! Not right away of course, but they had the knives sharpened! Do you have any idea what I just went through? Dragged in front of him, locked in a cell, dragged out again, punished, my head throbbing from the mind probes! Macnair going on in loving detail about what he was going to be allowed to do to me!"

"But you made it. You are with us again. Have a glass of . . ."

Snape stepped forward and struck the mead from Dumbledore's hand. "Don't treat me like this! I just spent the worst day of my entire life, and you're not going to just kiss it and make it better! You did that to me! When I left here yesterday morning you knew what I was walking into! Good luck, he says! See you at the feast, he says! Were you already planning my funeral?"

"I am sorry. You are right. It was unforgivable."

His eyes narrowing, Snape drew himself to his full height and stared up into Dumbledore's eyes. "Don't you dare try to take my anger away from me, too," he said icily. "I have a right to be angry with you. You can't deny me that."

"You are right, of course. Be angry for as long as it takes you to work this through. And yet you are with us now, so some other decision was reached in your case besides transforming you into Macnair's private playground."

"I'm on probation."

"And what does probation entail?"

"Good, solid, usable information. Something they can use to plan operations that don't turn sour at the last minute. I have to give them someone in the Order. Or something so valuable it's worth the same thing. He's tired of wasting time with me."

"I thought your potions work was valuable on its own. Or your spell work. Or the defense lessons."

“They would be if I was in London all the time. But he’s letting me stay here at Hogwarts. He feels it should be worth something.”

“What exactly will happen if you do not deliver what he wants?”

“I suppose it depends on the circumstances. This time I was lucky. More than one person had the information that he was interested in the prophecy. It couldn’t definitely be narrowed down to any one of us, and he had to weigh future value against the satisfaction of present vengeance. If he hadn’t thought I’d be useful, he’d’ve killed me anyway. If any other leak comes back to me, I’m dead. If I can’t get him the information he wants, I’ll be called back to London permanently, chained in my laboratory, and worked like a slave. Neither prospect is inviting.”

“We shall have to come up with information to give him, then. Do you think information about Professor Umbridge would satisfy him?”

“If it included inside tidbits about the Ministry of Magic, it would be better.”

“Good. Let us commence Operation Umbridge. You will like her, Severus. Just the type you love to deflate. Oh, and Severus . . .”

“Yes, Headmaster?”

“Would you like that glass of mead now?”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

OPERATION UMBRIDGE

Snape went down to his dungeon office where he spent the two hours before breakfast trying to reorder his thoughts and calm his nerves. Breakfast, however, brought a whole new range of speculation as he checked out the familiar and the new faces at the Slytherin table.

Dear Draco. I didn't see your father all day yesterday. Do you... does he know I was hauled before the Dark Lord? Or was he kept out of the loop because he sponsors me and was in danger of being tarred with the same brush? You're certainly reporting back to him, so I'll have to watch my step. Especially now that I'm on probation, and Lucius is probably wanting to distance himself from me.

McGonagall came and sat with him. "I was worried when you weren't back for the feast."

"I'm glad someone was."

"That bad a day?"

"I've had better." There was silence, and Snape glanced up at McGonagall. "Sorry. Shouldn't be flip about it. It was probably the worst it's ever been. I really thought for a while that he was going to..."

"I take it you're Professor Snape."

Snape looked around, but didn't have to look up. Dolores Umbridge was at eye level from where he sat, even though she was standing. "I'm Snape," he replied. "Do I have the honor of addressing Professor Umbridge?"

"You do. And what was it that you really thought he was going to do?"

"Survive the night," said Snape without batting an eye. "Which is what made his passing right before dawn such a terrible shock. As I was just telling Professor McGonagall, my great-uncle Tiberius practically raised me from a boy. Hard to think he's no longer with us."

"That was why you weren't with us last evening. I wondered. I'd had such glowing reports of your dedication to the school and to sound teaching that it was something of a surprise to find you truant."

Snape looked away to hide the sudden emotion he felt at the too recent death of Great-uncle Tiberius. "Ah yes, the children," he said, with just a trace of noble melancholy. "They are, after all, the reason we go on."

McGonagall was pursing her mouth as if she'd just bitten into a very sour pickle, but she always looked like that when she was trying not to laugh.

Umbridge glanced from one to the other, opened her mouth, thought better of it, and cleared her throat with a little cough. "Hem, I'd like you to drop by my office this morning, say around ten o'clock. There are some things we need to discuss." She nodded to both of them and waddled off with a self-important air.

The two professors watched her go in shocked disbelief. "Who does she think she is — headmistress?" said McGonagall. "Ordering you around like that."

"Maybe she thinks she's the Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic."

"You mean you're going? Dancing to her tune?"

"I'm not sure what her tune is."

"She made a speech last night. She interrupted Dumbledore in the middle of a sentence and insisted on making a speech. A very boring speech."

"Oh, do tell. She must be planning to show us the error of our ways."

"She believes in preserving the time-honored traditions of our people, but throwing out what has not proven to pass the test of time, and yet she disapproves of progress for progress' sake."

"In other words, she gets to decide what stays and what goes."

"As bald-faced a threat as I have ever seen in my life. You're not going, are you."

"I have to. I can't afford to have more than one Dark Lord angry with me at the same time."

At precisely ten o'clock, as requested, Snape knocked on the door of the Dark Arts office on the second floor. Dolores Umbridge's voice responded, "Come in."

The room was flooded with light, for it seemed Umbridge had opened every curtain and drape in the room. *I wonder if she's aware that the potions on the lower shelves need to be kept out of direct sunlight or they lose their potency? She'll find out, but not from me.*

"Ah, Professor. Hem, I've been looking forward to meeting you. Pity you couldn't be there at the feast."

"If it had been anything less serious, I wouldn't have allowed it to interfere with my duties at Hogwarts. I'm thankful I have the weekend to order

things properly in Slytherin house.” Umbridge was sitting at her desk, but had not invited Snape to sit, so he stood in front of her like an errant student. *The analogy with the Dark Lord was more à propos than I’d thought. Like the interview chamber, only light instead of dark.*

“I’ve had excellent reports of you. You’re one of the teachers who sticks to time-honored ways of doing things. No newfangled innovations.”

“It’s something of the nature of potions. If you must stir seven times anti-clockwise, changing it to six will not help you.”

“Exactly! Change doesn’t help.”

Snape forbore to comment. After a moment of silence, Umbridge began to tap on the desk with her quill. “I hope,” she said at last, “that there are other teachers here who share your dedication to our hallowed traditions.”

“All of them, insofar as I am aware.”

“What about Professor McGonagall?”

“A lady of incredible fortitude. I wouldn’t take her job for all the tea in China.”

“Is Transfiguration so hard?”

“No, but Head of Gryffindor house is. They’re not chosen for intelligence, logic, diplomacy, or any other disciplined trait, but for bravery. They therefore tend en masse to opt for confrontation in any situation. If there’s a fight, Gryffindor drew wands first. She keeps them under control. I’m not sure how she manages it.”

“What about Professor Sprout?”

“An excellent herbologist. I depend upon her for much of my yearly supplies. Plants are something else that you can’t overly innovate with.”

“And Flitwick? I understand he’s part . . . goblin?”

Snape was bristling now. Flitwick had been his Charms teacher and his cribbage partner for many years now, and he was beginning to really resent Dolores Umbridge. “I believe that is correct. Goblins have a spectacular ability with charms that’s lost on most other races. If we didn’t have Flitwick, we’d have to settle for a mediocre wizard.”

“I hear that you, too, are a half-breed . . .”

“Half-blood. I am sure you’re aware of the difference.”

“Still, any pollution of the pure bloodlines . . .”

“Strengthens the species. You have studied biology, have you not? Too pure a bloodline exaggerates undesirable traits . . .”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m sure you don’t.”

"I was hoping . . . Lucius Malfoy led me to believe . . . that you would be more cooperative."

"Not if it means the watering down and destruction of the traditional curriculum at Hogwarts. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout are key to this school. They teach nothing that you would object to, and replacing them in the short term is beyond the scope of imagination. There are no replacements available."

The quill resumed its tapping. *Idiot, you have an assignment with this woman. You're supposed to support her. Remember yesterday.*

"What about Dumbledore?"

"What about Dumbledore?"

"Is he as dedicated to the traditions of Hogwarts as his teachers?"

"I would have thought so. Until . . ."

"Ah! Until when?"

"The Headmaster seems somewhat preoccupied lately."

"Professor Snape, did you know you had a file at the Ministry? A rather thick file at that."

"No, I didn't."

"It seems that many years ago you were named as a Death Eater during the roundups and trials, but Dumbledore spoke up for you, and you were exonerated. You owe him quite a lot, don't you?"

The woman really does look like a toad. A squat, ugly toad with a long sticky tongue . . . "I suppose I do."

"Your perspective on this would be valuable to me. Since you were, hem, one of You-Know-Who's workers, you would certainly be in a position to give authoritative information about his return. Do you believe this story of Dumbledore's that You-Know-Who has come back?"

"The headmaster is deeply concerned about the safety of our world."

"Your loyalty is commendable, but you didn't answer the question."

Snape looked Umbridge in the eyes. *Funny how so many people assume eye contact equates with honesty.* "I know of no evidence that would substantiate the headmaster's claim."

"Then you don't believe he's come back."

"No. I don't."

Umbridge leaned back in the chair, a smug look on her face. "That's what I was hoping to hear. This story is a concoction of Dumbledore's, using that poor deluded boy as a pawn, in order to take power in the wizarding world. He wants to control the Ministry, you know."

"That's not something I would expect from him."

"Oh, you don't know Dumbledore. He's crafty. Did you know he's already collecting a group of fanatic followers around him, dedicated to convincing the general populace of the truth of his sham threat?"

"No . . . that's scarcely credible. People are surely not that gullible." Snape had trouble repressing the ghost of a grin at the thought of Molly Weasley being described as fanatic. Moody, yes, but Molly . . .

"If Dumbledore manages to raise a force, an army, around him, he could become a bigger threat to the order and safety of our world than You-Know-Who ever was. He needs to be discredited and exposed for the ambitious, power-hungry manipulator he is. That boy Potter needs to be discredited as well. He's in it for the glory, and he's easily duped."

"I certainly agree with you about Potter, but I'd prefer to stay out of the conflict. My classes take up quite enough of my time."

"I know you don't like me, Professor Snape. You have to understand, however, that this is a matter of overriding importance. I'll expect your support in my work, even if it interferes with your daily tasks."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You may go."

Snape closed the office door before he let out a long breath. A line from an old movie came to him. 'That girl, she's one.—A witch? You just never learned to spell.' It suited Dolores Umbridge—only a witch because of a slight spelling error.

Step one accomplished. She thinks she can manipulate me into helping her. She also knows about the Order, so maybe I can use her or the Ministry to accomplish another of the Dark Lord's tasks without anyone really getting hurt.

The rest of the day was spent interviewing the first years, meeting with the Quidditch team, briefing the prefects, of whom Malfoy was now one (a ploy to placate Lucius), and addressing the entire house in the hour before dinner. It was then, his school duties completed, that Snape had to consider the next, bigger problem.

He said to come once a week on Saturday evenings. I was there Tuesday, and I was there Friday, but the probability is that he still expects me there tonight. Better to be overly zealous than lax, especially now.

Going in to dinner, Snape decided to try something. Catching Dumbledore's eye, he projected a thought—*Can we talk before I leave, not in your office?* Dumbledore dipped his head once in a nod and continued his conversation with McGonagall.

After eating, Snape rose and left the Great Hall. Dumbledore waited a few minutes, then followed, meeting Snape at the top of the path down the hill.

"So you're going again tonight?"

"He expects it."

"Have you decided on something to sell him?"

"Yes. You."

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Are you sure that is wise?"

"Umbridge wants power. I'm going to advise him to get it for her."

"Ah. So I must play along."

"Or not. As you choose. But expect trouble from the Ministry if he heeds me."

"It is good of you to warn me."

"It's more than you deserve."

* * *

Snape stood alone in the presence of the Dark Lord. The fact that neither Malfoy nor Macnair was there seemed auspicious.

"You have made contact with Umbridge."

"Yes, Lord. She had Malfoy's recommendation and expected to speak with me. That happened this morning."

"She wishes to protect the Ministry by denying our return."

"Yes, Lord. She asked my opinion directly, and I told her that Dumbledore was mistaken and that you had not come back. She expects my help."

"And you agreed."

"I disputed her assessment of the instructors, insulted her intelligence, and then allowed her to blackmail me with the threat of using my past against me. She knows I was your servant fourteen years ago. At that point I agreed."

"Good. Good. And so the Ministry will continue to shield us. Good."

"Lord, there is more."

"Tell us."

"Lord, Umbridge believes that Dumbledore is using word of your return to acquire power. She knows he has loyal supporters helping him gather information, and she refers to them as a private army. She believes his target is the Ministry of Magic itself, and she believes that his ultimate goal is to rule the wizarding world. She would welcome any move on the part of the

Ministry that would give her increased authority at Hogwarts, and correspondingly decrease Dumbledore's authority. She will not rest content until Dumbledore is removed from Hogwarts and entirely discredited."

"She supports a direct attack on Dumbledore himself. She will work to oust him."

"Lord, she does, and she will."

"This is useful information indeed. We will instruct our people to advise the Ministry to curtail Dumbledore's authority. Since Umbridge will support this from the other side, we are certain of success. You have done well."

"Thank you, Lord."

Sunday was quiet. There were a few more interviews left over from the day before, but basically it was the calm before the storm. Snape made the most of it, playing cribbage with Flitwick in the staff room despite Umbridge's scowl, and catching up on reading in his own rooms. No summons came from Croydon, and given the Dark Lord's attitude the day before, Snape accepted by dinner time that none would come. He went to bed early and slept reasonably well for the first time in weeks.

The second class Monday morning was double potions with the Slytherin and Gryffindor fifth years—for Snape the most trying group in the entire school. Worse, it was the one group where he was certain that his students were reporting back to the Dark Lord about him, because it contained Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle. Not to mention Harry Potter.

Snape opened the dungeon classroom door after the morning break and quieted the class down. Fifth year was when he made his OWL speech, and this morning was no different.

"Before we begin today's lesson, I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some of this class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an 'acceptable' in your OWL, or suffer my displeasure. After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me. I take only the very best into my NEWT Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying goodbye."

Goodbye to Potter, Weasley, Longbottom, Crabbe, Goyle, probably Malfoy. Granger might even be sufferable in a class where she has to compete with the best, many of them seventh years. I can hardly wait.

"But we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell, so whether you are intending to attempt NEWT level or not, I advise all of

you to concentrate your efforts upon maintaining the high pass level I have come to expect from my OWL students.”

The class started on their first potion of the year, the Draught of Peace, an extremely complex brew that required great care. For the first time, he hadn't set the ingredients out for them, but rather required them to get everything from the store cupboard. This forced the students to study the potion in its entirety before starting, since leaving it in the middle to get another ingredient would ruin the potion. Snape did, however, keep an extra-watchful eye on Longbottom, who'd been known to come up with strange ingredients even under the most controlled of situations.

Everything went surprisingly smoothly for almost the entire class period, so much so that Snape was beginning to get worried. Surely the gods only allowed such happiness right before they inflicted severe punishment. Ten minutes before the class ended, he called out, “A light silver vapor should now be rising from your potion.”

That was when Potter, blessedly predictable Potter, gave the Death Eater children a show. *There are times when it hurts me that Lily's son inherited none of her talent, and others when I am deeply grateful.* Walking over to where dark gray steam issued from Potter's cauldron, Snape said, “Potter, what is this supposed to be?”

“The Draught of Peace.”

“Tell me, Potter, can you read?”

“Yes, I can.” The boy faced him defiantly, ready for a fight.

“Read the third line of the instructions for me, Potter.”

Potter had forgotten to add hellebore to his potion, and the deflated look on his face was more than enough to satisfy Snape. “This mess is utterly worthless,” Snape said calmly. *“Evanesco!”* And the contents of the cauldron disappeared, to the great delight of the Slytherins.

Class ended with no other hitch except that Goyle's potion set his robes on fire, a small emergency that made Snape think of his fire extinguishers in the lab at Croydon. As he finished assigning homework and collecting the flasks that the other students were presenting for a grade on their potions, he noticed the Three Musketeers in conference in the back of the room.

Probably upset that Potter got a zero on the class work, when everyone else received at least a little credit, even Goyle. Then Snape was hit by another thought. *Crawling with Weasleys. Grimmauld Place was crawling with Weasleys that day. Ron was undoubtedly there, too. Maybe Potter as well. Was that why so many of them arrived late at the same time? Escorting Potter? Do*

the three of them know I was making a report that evening to the Order of the Phoenix?

It was a disturbing thought. Malfoy, et al. knew he was a Death Eater. Now Potter, et al. likely knew he was in the Order. Dumbledore and the Dark Lord knew both. *But some day Malfoy and Potter may call on me to take sides, and that could cause trouble. Depending on the circumstances, it isn't always safe to show the world where one's true loyalties lie.*

The rest of the week passed smoothly. Snape was not surprised to hear from his Slytherin students that Professor Umbridge would not allow them to use magic in their Defense Against the Dark Arts class. It struck him as entirely consistent with her attitude that Dumbledore might be trying to form a private army. He was also not surprised to learn that Umbridge had given Potter four nights of detention in his very first class with her. *She's definitely not the one to be cheeky to. It would probably never occur to her to subtract points from a house. She'd go straight for the offender every time.*

Friday evening brought a little good news. The Gryffindor team, under its new captain Johnson, held tryouts for Keeper to replace Wood. Those competing for the spot were generally a sorry lot, the mediocre players having the best attitudes, and the good players suffering from an excess of whining or hubris. *Slytherin may have a chance to win this year.*

Saturday was colored by anticipation of a meeting with the Dark Lord, and what had once been a relatively relaxed day was now tense and unpleasant. It was not helped by McGonagall showing him an article in *The Daily Prophet*.

"Sturgis Podmore's been sent to Azkaban," she summarized as he read the short item. "Six months."

This was the incident that angered the Dark Lord so much. He told me of Podmore's arrest. What was Podmore doing outside a top-security door? Did the door have something to do with the prophecy? This is all so mysterious. And why did the Dark Lord say he knew I was interested in mysteries?

Snape looked at McGonagall. "I thought he worked for the Ministry."

"He did. Though what he would be doing there at one in the morning trying to break down a door escapes me."

They stopped talking as Umbridge passed by. Then, as he turned the pages to keep Umbridge from seeing what they'd been looking at, another article caught Snape's eye. "Whoa! It says here that Sirius Black is hiding in London!"

"Let me see that." McGonagall snatched the paper from Snape and

skimmed over the article herself. "Do you think someone saw him? It says a tip-off from a reliable source." She squinted suspiciously at Snape. "This wouldn't have something to do with you, would it?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Well you've got to give him something, don't you. Names, dates. Maybe one of your colleagues on the 'other side' is the reliable source."

Snape was speechless. McGonagall regarded him pityingly. "I thought I told you."

"If you did, it didn't register completely."

"But you were telling me last week how difficult it'd been at your meeting on the first."

"I still don't think of it extending into Hogwarts."

"Get used to it. It's going to be extending into a lot of places we used to think immune."

That evening after dinner, Snape apparated to Croydon. He was called into the interview room to face the Dark Lord.

"Your idea of the last session was successful, Potions Master," said the Dark Lord. "The Ministry reached a decision yesterday evening. The Umbridge woman will be given power to interfere at Hogwarts. Have you any more to report?"

"No, Lord. Though I expect to have more after the news becomes public."

"That will be on Monday. *The Daily Prophet* will announce it."

Snape spent the rest of the evening in the laboratory. He had more than a week's work to catch up on, and was glad to have some quiet time.

Malfoy looked in around nine o'clock. He seemed quite satisfied with events. "That was a good idea of yours. The Dark Lord is pleased with both of us. I owe you one."

"Consider it payback for last June, when you spoke up for me."

Malfoy smiled. "I like the way your mind works," he said.

Sunday was peaceful. Snape allowed himself the luxury of sleeping an hour later than usual, then lingered over breakfast. The calm before the storm. Things might not be so relaxed after Monday. Most of the rest of the day was spent correcting the previous week's homework. This was not normally something that Snape enjoyed, but now it was so far from the tensions of Croydon and Umbridge that he actually took pleasure in its mundane normalcy.

Monday hit with the force of a nuclear explosion.

"Look at this!" shrieked McGonagall, thrusting *The Daily Prophet* under Snape's nose. "Look what those dunderheads at the Ministry have done! 'Hogwarts High Inquisitor' my posterior! If I ever get my hands on the administrative nincompoop who orchestrated this, he'll be singing soprano for the rest of his life."

Snape nearly choked on his sausages. "You never know," he coughed into a table napkin, "it might have been a woman. After all, Umbridge herself is a woman."

"You don't have to be insulting."

"It's the archetype of ruthless ambition. Lady Macbeth. You can't expect us poor males to be able to compete with anyone as single-mindedly motivated as this, can you? For truly savage focus you have to have a woman."

McGonagall was mollified. "And just you remember it, too, laddie. A real woman will stomp you senseless into the ground as soon as look at you."

Dumbledore is missing something here. Let's chuck the Blacks, Lupins, Moodys, and Shackletons. Put together an army of Mollys, Minervas, Nymphadoras — that's where we win the wizard war. Who has the Dark Lord got? Just Bella, and she's in Azkaban. There was Alecto, too, but Snape didn't include her. He figured if your IQ was smaller than your age, you didn't count.

Umbridge summoned, and Snape danced attendance.

"I now have the power to observe and evaluate all of you. It's Monday morning, Potions Master. Shall I evaluate you first?"

"Only if you want to give comfort to the friends of Dumbledore. It's well known that the two of us don't get along. If you were to delay my evaluation, it might make a point. Or not. It's entirely up to you. Shall I expect you later this morning?"

Umbridge paused and looked speculatively at Snape. "I wonder what's really going through your mind," she said.

"Nobody knows. Sometimes I don't know myself. Shall I expect you this morning? As it is, I'm about to be late for my first class, and the students will wonder why."

"No. I'll check the others first. Lucius Malfoy has spoken highly of you again, and I wouldn't want to upset Lucius by appearing not to take his advice seriously."

And you are a tactical idiot for telling me that piece of information. "I am grateful for Mr. Malfoy's good opinion. And when you do deem it the proper moment to inspect my classes, I shall receive you with all the respect commensurate with your position."

"I knew I could count on you."

Potions classes went extraordinarily well that day. Snape was able to put the fear of God into his students by grading their homework as if it were their OWL examinations. Most of them got D for Dreadful, which was not a passing grade. It inspired them for the class to come. Not even Potter — for heaven's sake, not even Longbottom — botched the class work. *Why isn't my life always like this?*

Not everyone was as pleased as Snape. At supper that evening, Trelawney looked positively exhausted. Umbridge had been to evaluate her, and the encounter had evidently not been a pleasant one for Trelawney. Snape could hardly wait until Umbridge got to McGonagall.

The truly strange part of the day was that Dumbledore did not come down to dinner. In fact, it was to be some time before Snape saw Dumbledore again.

On Wednesday during the lunch break, McGonagall brushed past Snape in the Great Hall. "London this evening," she hissed. "Be ready."

Snape didn't react at all, which was wise since he noticed a moment later that Umbridge was watching him. The rest of the day he spent acting perfectly normal, and after supper retired to his rooms to work, something he was doing most evenings in any case. It was there that the misty little cat found him around nine-thirty and whispered, 'now' into his brain.

Life would be so much easier if I had an invisibility cloak or were an animagus. Snape stood just out of sight where the dungeon corridor flowed into the entrance hall, trying to determine if anyone anywhere was watching. Deciding it was safe, he darted out the main doors and scurried down the hill to the Hogsmeade gate, where McGonagall was waiting.

"What about Dumbledore?"

"Lying low for the time being. Something strategic, I understand. Trying to give that woman enough rope, just to see what she'll do with it."

"Maybe he doesn't want to give the Ministry an excuse to tighten the rules any further."

"Maybe." At a word from McGonagall the gate was unlocked and they slipped through. A quick agreement on location, and McGonagall said, "Now." An instant later they were in London, around the corner from Grimmauld Place.

Black opened the door and admitted them wordlessly into the house. The portrait of his mother seemed to be asleep, and Snape joined the general consensus to keep her that way. Silently they made their way to the parlor,

where the others already waited. Greetings were quickly exchanged, and they sat down.

"All here now?" grunted Moody, who seemed to be in charge. "What's going on at Hogwarts?"

"The Ministry is trying to take over," replied McGonagall, and she explained Educational Decree Twenty-three and its immediate impact on the school. "It's blatant intimidation. Poor Trelawney was beside herself. At the moment it's just authority to inspect, but they could change it to authority to replace, and pack the school with their own people. Albus is staying out of it so as not to give them more reason to step further in. If he plays along, we may be able to defuse the situation. Especially since she told Severus they suspect him of planning an attack on the Ministry."

Snape wished McGonagall hadn't said that, as all eyes turned to him.

Black had an evil, speculative look on his face. "That's hardly the information that'd come up in casual conversation," he said. "Why would Umbridge confide in you? Or are you playing a three-way game now?"

There was a subtle shift in mood, and Snape was beginning to feel as if he were on trial. "She checked Ministry records on me. She knows I was a Death Eater. She thinks she can blackmail me into helping her. She has some information about the Order, which she regards as Dumbledore's private army."

"Have you been increasing the amount of information she has?"

"That's enough, Sirius," interjected Moody. "It'll be helpful to get inside news."

"Bet Umbridge likes inside news, too. And Voldemort. How long before you figure out how to sell everybody to everybody?"

"Enough!" Moody and McGonagall shouted at the same time, while the other members of the Order looked uncomfortable.

Snape, who'd winced at the Dark Lord's name, was now angry. "I noted that *The Daily Prophet* has placed you in London," he said to the room in general. "That puts all of us in danger."

"We're protected by a Fidelius Charm."

"No, you're protected by a Fidelius Charm. We have to go out onto the street. How many people visited here socially while your parents were alive, and may pass by, knowing you're in London, and wonder why the house can't be seen anymore? And may want to watch and see who comes wandering through the square and then just disappears? While you sit inside, nice and safe."

Black was on his feet, lunging toward Snape as Lupin, Weasley, and Shackbolt tried to restrain him. "It's hardly worth their effort, now is it? Since you've given them all our names anyway!" he yelled.

All the members of the Order were now on their feet except for Snape, who remained seated just out of Black's reach. It took Moody, McGonagall, and Molly Weasley several minutes to restore calm, and even then it was abundantly obvious that an explosion was brewing just under the surface.

"Is what he said true?" McGonagall asked Snape after the room had quieted.

"Of course it is," snarled Black. "Look at him. He'd sell . . ."

"I didn't ask you!" McGonagall snapped. "I asked Severus."

"I gave the Dark Lord the names of all those who'd been members of the Order before, when Pettigrew was still part of it. He knows all those names anyway, and would already have given them to the Dark Lord. I told the others this at an earlier meeting."

"Well, that's logical at least. Now, the two of you have to stop bickering. It's bad enough we have to fight You-Know-Who without fighting each other as well."

Moody coughed, and the others turned to him, apparently thankful for the diversion. Snape and Black studiously avoided looking at each other.

"We also need to evaluate the incident involving Sturgis and the Department of Mysteries," Moody began.

Snape was alert at once. *Department of Mysteries? Is this about the prophecy? Is this why the Dark Lord mentioned the word?*

"My understanding is that Sturgis was under an Imperius Curse," Moody continued. "That's why he was trying to break in. I also know that he was on guard there, protecting something because of information Dumbledore received." He turned to Snape. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Three weeks ago, I'd have said no. I didn't even know there was a Department of Mysteries until this moment. But if it contains things like prophecies, then Podmore was there because the Dark Lord is interested in a prophecy. One that talks about Potter."

"How do you know?"

"He mentioned it in a meeting." Snape had no desire to tell the Order the whole story of the prophecy or why the Dark Lord would be questioning him about it. "He was also furious when Podmore failed to get it and was arrested."

"And how did you learn that?"

"I was one of the people he suspected of passing the information to Dumbledore..."

"Now we get to hear how dangerous your work is compared to everyone else." Black let his voice drip with sarcasm.

The memory of that day was too powerful, and Snape didn't trust himself to reply. Instead he closed his mouth and sat back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest. In the sudden silence, Moody snapped his fingers, and Snape glanced up automatically into Moody's eyes. Into the enchanted blue eye...

"Who's guarding the place now?" asked Moody as he looked away.

"Several of us," Arthur Weasley said. "We have shifts and take turns. There's me, and..."

"Better not give too many names," said Black. "The walls have ears."

Discussion continued for nearly twenty minutes more, but Snape took no part in it. Then Black went into the kitchen to see about refreshments, the others got up and began to mingle, and Moody crossed the room to sit by Snape.

"Was that it? Was that the day he was furious?"

Snape looked at his hands. "It isn't important," he said.

"I say it is important, boyo. Answer the question. Was that the day?"

"Yes. But I'd prefer not talking about it."

"Up to you, but if that's what you go through when he's ticked off, you've got a harder job than I thought."

"The Dark Lord is renowned for his temper. I wasn't the only one. I'm not supposed to mention it, though. Makes other people feel inadequate."

"Again, it's up to you. You ever want me to speak up for you, let me know."

Snape nodded, then rose and approached McGonagall. "Can we leave now?" he asked.

"We ought to socialize a little."

"Right. Me — socialize here. I'd go back alone, but you're the one who opens the gate. Can't we point out that we have classes tomorrow morning?"

"All right. I'll tell him we're leaving."

A few minutes later, Snape and McGonagall left 12 Grimmauld Place and apparated back to Hogwarts.

* * *

Things settled into a welcome routine. Weekdays were devoted to classes, grading papers, and other school duties. Snape gave up reading on the weekday evenings in order to finish all his duties during the week and save one day for complete relaxation. Saturday mornings were spent clearing up the last of the week's work and a thorough inspection of the classroom and stores. Saturday afternoons Snape tried to set aside to review the week and prepare for his trip to Croydon. The interview after the passing of Educational Decree Twenty-three was typical.

"Things are going according to plan at Hogwarts."

"Yes, Lord. Classes are being disrupted and teachers intimidated. Umbridge is acting as if she was already headmistress."

"And Dumbledore?"

"Has retreated. He hasn't appeared at meals or, so far as I can tell, spoken with any of the teachers."

"He is weaker than we realized. What further news do you anticipate?"

"More of the same for the next few weeks, unless Umbridge is suddenly given more authority."

"We shall work on that goal from this end. You need only report how successful our efforts have been on your side."

"Yes, Lord."

Both information gathering and potion making having faded into the background, Snape found himself assigned to teach classes in defensive techniques. Malfoy met with him on that same Saturday to work out a schedule. Basically Snape had two one-hour classes back to back each weekend. Malfoy had been thick enough to schedule the first one for that very evening.

"You know it's been over fourteen years since I taught this."

"Isn't it like riding a broomstick? You never forget?"

That class was held in a large basement room. The first five students were flippant and disrespectful, especially when he insisted they learn to fall before he would teach them anything else. They made it obvious that a potions brewer was not their idea of a qualified defense instructor.

"All right," said Snape, taking off his jacket and laying his wand aside. "You and you. Yes, you with the big mouth. You're wizards with wands and I'm a muggle with no magic. Go for me. Together."

He used defensive moves his mother had taught him years before he was old enough to go to Hogwarts. Even though he was rusty, Snape ducked, dodged, dropped, and rolled, and not only evaded every spell they threw at

him, but was also able to knock one off his feet with a well-placed kick, and pin the other's arm behind his back to extract his wand.

Snape had no further problem with any of his defense classes.

Sundays were Snape's days of rest. One day a week he lay back and forgot potions, homework, or fighting. On Sundays he read, or played cribbage, or let McGonagall try to teach him chess. Life was, in fact, beginning to resolve itself into something pleasant. Pleasure is like pride, however. It never goes unpunished.

The first Saturday in October was a Hogsmeade excursion, the first of the year. Snape was assigned supervisory duties, and was almost looking forward to it. Usually the students were reasonably well behaved in Hogsmeade, knowing that any infraction of the rules would result in their losing the privilege. In addition, Snape had prepared a small gift — a selection of rare mulling spices — for Madam Rosmerta, to thank her for taking care of him the night of September first.

It was after presenting the spices, and then staying to savor a tankard of ale, that Snape noticed the unusual number of students turning down the lane that led to the Hog's Head Inn. *Students don't frequent the Hog's Head. It isn't out of bounds, but it isn't savory either. Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs, all going in the same direction. What could possibly lure Macmillan, Finch-Fletchley, and Goldstein into the Hog's Head?*

Snape didn't hurry, not wanting to startle any of the students, but after the rush seemed to have thinned out, he left the Three Broomsticks and approached the windows of the Hog's Head. The students were there, an uncommonly large number of them gathered in one place. At the center of attention were Potter, Granger, and Weasley.

Instinct told him he didn't want to know, and Snape beat a sudden and hasty retreat back towards the Three Broomsticks. On the way, by unhappy accident, he ran into Dolores Umbridge.

"Any problems down that way?" she asked, but he told her there were none, then invited her into the Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer.

Spending the rest of Saturday in the company of Umbridge ruined Hogsmeade for Snape. To crown his frustration, she didn't even have any good information to pass on to the Dark Lord. Just questions.

'Is McGonagall always so confrontational?'

'Has Flitwick ever talked about his goblin ancestors or tried to contact goblin relatives?'

'Why would Dumbledore hire as obvious a fraud as Trelawney?'

‘Does Sinistra always keep her students up after midnight?’
‘Why hasn’t Grubbly-Plank been given a permanent position?’
‘Has Sprout ever poisoned or caused permanent injury to a student?’
‘When did Binns die?’

and

‘Where is Hagrid?’
To which Snape replied:
‘Yes.’
‘No.’

‘You’ll have to ask him.’

‘Usually.’

‘We don’t have one available.’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘I never asked. Before my time, certainly.’

and

‘I haven’t got a clue.’

The relentless woman did not give up until it was time for the students to return to the Castle. Snape, facing the window, noticed that the students from the Hog’s Head were drifting out of the lane in carefully spaced groups of three and four. He kept Umbridge in conversation, determined that he would find out what was going on before she did.

Walking Umbridge back to the Hogwarts gate, Snape wished her a pleasant evening and turned back into Hogsmeade.

“Where are you going?”

“I had duty today. That means I have a free evening.”

“Where are you going?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I may stay at the Three Broomsticks. Or go to London to see a play. ”The Hothouse“ just opened at the Comedy Theatre, or I could catch ”King Lear“ in Leeds. It’s supposed to be an interesting production.”

“I didn’t know you were interested in muggle theatrics.”

“Now you know. Have a nice evening.”

There was nothing Umbridge could do, and Snape whistled a little as he headed back to the Three Broomsticks. The only disappointing thing was that he wouldn’t be seeing a play. He was going to Croydon.

The second self-defense class was tense. Snape didn’t dare ask questions, but he kept his ears wide open. Something was happening in the next few days, and it would be inside a building. The two Death Eaters involved had

to get in and out without raising an alarm, even if it meant failing in their mission. Since nothing but total success ever pleased the Dark Lord, even obeying orders could lead to a certain amount of punishment. Snape sympathized inwardly, though he made no outward sign that he realized what they were hinting at.

On arrival back at Hogwarts, Snape sent a patronus to McGonagall to admit him. She was patrolling the entrance hall when he walked in, and he quietly passed on the information. Then she asked about the play, and puzzled, he quickly invented something about the London comedy.

They wished each other good night. As he turned toward the dungeon corridor, Snape caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Umbridge had been watching them from a staircase.

On Sunday morning, after a leisurely breakfast, Snape and Flitwick started a game of cribbage in the Great Hall. They'd barely finished three hands when Filch came up to them — Snape later felt it had been timed to interrupt their game — with a message that was more of a command than a request.

"The Inquisitor wants to see you. She said now."

Flitwick's eyebrows lifted dramatically, and down the table McGonagall gave Snape a quizzical look.

"Tell her I'll be right up," said Snape.

"Tell her yourself. You'll make it up there as fast as me if you know what's what. She's in a foul mood."

Snape excused himself to Flitwick and went up to the second floor. Once again, Umbridge did not invite him to sit. Instead she kept him standing there for nearly three minutes while she finished writing something on a long scroll of parchment. It gave Snape a chance to look around the room, with its unusual dried flower arrangements and lacy frills.

Finally Umbridge seemed to notice he was there. She placed the quill feather to her lips and regarded him for a moment. "Interesting," she said, "how you can get entirely the wrong impression of someone at first. I would never have taken you for a shill."

"I beg your pardon."

"Yesterday. A shill for the students. You were coming up the lane from the Hog's Head and decoyed me into the Three Broomsticks. Do they buy you, or are you doing it for Dumbledore?"

"Oddly, it was for the pleasure of your company. Which I am beginning to regret."

"You're not good enough at flattery to be able to butter me up. Luckily I have other sources of information, so your little ruse didn't work. Where did you go yesterday evening?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but to London. To a play."

"Which one?"

"The Comedy Theatre. They're playing 'The Hothouse.'"

"How did you get in? It was sold out."

Warning bells screamed trap, but Snape was not sure which way the pit lay. Locking himself down, he looked into Umbridge's round eyes, hoping she had no occlumency skill. "It would be a poor wizard who couldn't get admitted to a sold-out performance," he said, and saw the spark of triumph behind her eyes. "But it wasn't necessary. The show wasn't sold out."

"How did you like it?" Umbridge sounded petulant.

"It's always delightful when the author is one of the actors. You never miss the nuances."

"Favorite bit?"

"All of Act III."

Unable to trip him up, Umbridge changed her tactics. "I've been very nice to you so far," she said, "but now it's time for me to inspect your classes. I'll be at your morning Potions lesson tomorrow."

"I look forward to it."

"Just out of curiosity, Professor, about how many of your students know about your — shall we say 'colorful' — past? More to the point, how many of their parents know? I for one might not be comfortable if a child of mine were under the tutelage of a former follower of You-Know-Who."

"I would say quite a few. Some of their parents had equally colorful experiences."

"But if there were to be a general protest at your continued employment here?"

A year ago you'd have had me. I'd dance to your tune or face Azkaban. You may still have that power, but at least now I have other places to go. "It would be up to the Board of Governors."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Fascinating about Educational Decrees, how much they can change things in the course of a morning. There's a new one coming out tomorrow."

Time to give in. "I understand, Ma'am. I hope you don't think I was being rude."

"Not at all, Professor," Umbridge replied, smiling with sickening sweetness. "I'm sure we'll work very well together. Now, what were the students doing in the Hog's Head?"

"I presumed they were planning something against Slytherin, since my house was the only one not represented. I didn't want them to be interrupted as they would then simply move somewhere else where I wouldn't be able to find out anything. As it is, I may be able to pick up some information from the staff or the other patrons. It would have to be done carefully."

"There's no need. They weren't plotting against Slytherin. It was against me. And henceforth you will allow me to make such decisions, instead of steering me away from the malefactors. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Snape, and he was dismissed.

Most of the students had left the Great Hall for various intellectual and nonintellectual occupations appropriate to a Sunday morning, but most of the teachers were still there. At first Snape didn't think much of it until he returned to his seat next to Flitwick. Then he noticed that they seemed to be looking, not exactly at him, but in his direction.

McGonagall slipped over, her eyes on the doors. "What happened? Quick, before Filch comes in."

"Urge your students to be circumspect. She thinks they're plotting against her, and she already has a new Decree approved that'll be made public tomorrow. Do you talk regularly to Dumbledore?"

McGonagall nodded.

"She thinks he's the center and source of all plotting. No matter what happens, she'll try to pin it on him."

"That was Albus's own take on the situation."

"She's blackmailing me into helping her. It'll be easier if you all affect not to like me."

"In other words, behave normally."

"Cute."

"Anything else?"

"Walk softly. She'd dearly love to tighten the screws."

McGonagall left him and went to sit with Sprout and Vector. Flitwick moved down the table to speak to Sinistra and Pince. Snape was by himself sipping a last cup of tea when Filch looked into the Hall, then backed out again.

Snape rose to leave the Hall for his own rooms as Sprout joined Trelawney

and Grubbly-Plank, Vector edged nearer to Futhark, Sinistra struck up a conversation with Hooch, and Pince went to find Madam Pomfrey.

A good thing no one was really watching this time, but if the network goes this smoothly from classroom to classroom, Umbridge has a fight on her hands.

The next morning revealed the contents of Educational Decree Twenty-four. Every student organization, society, team, group, or club was summarily disbanded, and could only be reconstituted with the permission of the High Inquisitor. The Great Hall was frantic with little groups of students trying to find out if knitting circles and chess tournaments were now illegal.

Snape saw the word 'team' and called the Slytherin Quidditch team together. "Draw up a petition. Make it very respectful, subservient even, but get the team approved. Tell the captains of the other houses." He then gathered his prefects. "Any club or society we have, petition for reconstitution. If you have a Transfiguration study group, petition for it to be approved. Anything where you meet regularly in a group of more than two, call it a club or society and petition. We don't want to be on the wrong side of this Decree."

After breakfast, in the staff room, Snape confessed to quite a different motivation. "I want to hit her with every little gathering of students I can think of. Heck, if I could invent new ones now, I would. I want that woman buried in paperwork up to her..."

McGonagall and Grubbly-Plank, who like Snape didn't have classes that hour, were chuckling at the thought when there was a knock at the door. McGonagall opened it, and Snape could hear Potter talking outside. *What is he doing here now? Doesn't the boy have a class?*

Grubbly-Plank was next to the door, and suddenly got up and joined McGonagall. A moment's more talking, and Grubbly-Plank reentered the room holding a beautiful snowy owl. She set her newspaper and pipe to one side in order to tend to the bird.

McGonagall came back in as well, having sent Potter on his way. "What do you think, Wilhelmina?" she asked.

"Looks like it was attacked. Takes a real villain to go after a beauty like this one. She's strong though, to make it here with her wing injured like that."

Snape edged closer. "You think the owl was attacked on purpose? To keep a message from getting through?"

"Maybe," said McGonagall. "Or maybe just to have the chance to read a message before it reached its destination. That's how traps are set."

“Who would Potter be exchanging messages with anyway? He hates his muggle family.”

McGonagall stared at Snape over her glasses. “He has a godfather in London. Or had you forgotten?”

Snape wanted to throw a conniption fit. He could not, however, say anything because of the presence of Grubbly-Plank. He could think it, though. *Potter’s endangering every one of us by maintaining a direct, uncoded link with the headquarters of the Order in London. How many people don’t know that the great snowy owl is Potter’s bird? Azkaban must not be as terrible as they say. It didn’t change Black at all. He’s still reckless with other people’s lives.*

The first bell sounded, and the morning break began. Grubbly-Plank took the owl and headed out toward Hagrid’s hut for her morning lesson. Other teachers came into the staff room, and prevented Snape from discussing the matter with McGonagall. Then another thought hit him. *How secure are the patronuses? Could Umbridge see me send the patronus to McGonagall to let me in every Saturday? How soon before she’s wise to that?*

The bell rang signaling the end of the break, and Snape gathered his things, took his leave of the others, and made his way to the dungeon classroom. Umbridge was waiting for him with ill-concealed impatience, and he let her in, locking the door behind them.

“I expected you to be here to receive me,” she snapped.

“Class hasn’t started yet,” he replied. “You will be able to observe from the corner without disrupting the dynamics of the class too much.”

She sat where he pointed, and then Snape went to open the classroom door. What met him was totally unexpected. A line of Gryffindor students faced a line of Slytherin students, and in the middle were Malfoy and . . . Longbottom? Neville Longbottom was struggling to get at Malfoy, and was being restrained by Potter and Weasley. *I do not know what it is, and I do not care what it is, NOW is not the time!*

“Fighting, Potter, Weasley, Longbottom? Ten points from Gryffindor. Release Longbottom, Potter, or it will be detention. Inside, all of you.”

The students filed into the room and to their seats. When most of them were settled, Snape announced, “You will notice that we have a guest with us today.” All eyes turned to the corner where Umbridge sat, but after the short mention, Snape paid no further attention to her.

“We are continuing with our Strengthening Solutions today — you will find your mixtures as you left them last lesson. If correctly made, they

should have matured well over the weekend. Instructions on the board.” Snape waved his wand, and the instructions appeared. “Carry on.”

Snape spend the next half hour moving around the room, checking as he normally did on the progress of the various students’ potions. After half an hour, Umbridge got to her feet with an audible “Ha,” and came over to him.

“Well, the class seems fairly advanced for their level, though I would question whether it is advisable to teach them a potion like the Strengthening Solution. I think the Ministry would prefer it if that was removed from the syllabus.”

Snape forbore to comment, merely straightening from where he bent over a cauldron in order to look at her.

“Now . . . how long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?”

I am sure that information is in my file, so your motive in asking would be . . . ? To see if I remember? Or if I’m lying? “Fourteen years.” *Two months and nine days.*

“You applied for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post, I believe?”

Why are you asking this? “Yes.”

“But you were unsuccessful?”

“Obviously.”

“And you have applied regularly for the post since you joined the school, I believe?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any idea why Dumbledore has consistently refused to appoint you?”

As a matter of fact, I do. But I am not telling you. “I suggest you ask him.”

“Oh, I shall.”

“I suppose this is relevant?”

“Oh yes. Yes, the Ministry wants a thorough understanding of teachers’ — er — backgrounds.”

You misspelled witch! Let’s just scrawl ‘Death Eater’ all over the walls.

Umbridge ceased her questioning of Snape and began talking to one or two students about the class. Snape felt a prickle in the back of his head, and turned to find Potter staring at him. For just an instant, he was gazing into the green eyes, Lily’s eyes, and he felt the same way he’d felt the first time he ever looked at Potter. *I have to be careful. Luckily, Potter’s no legilimens, but it wouldn’t be safe to be surprised by Lily’s eyes if one were in the same room.*

Then Potter looked away, and Snape noticed he’d botched his assignment. As usual.

"No marks again, then, Potter. You will write me an essay on the correct composition of this potion, indicating how and why you went wrong, to be handed in next lesson, do you understand?"

"Yes," Potter answered sullenly, and Snape could almost feel the anger. A glance over at Umbridge, however, showed that the exchange had pleased her.

The students cleaned up, the bell rang for lunch, and the room quickly emptied. Umbridge remained, and came nearer after they were alone.

"Fourteen years. I have to check your file again, but doesn't that mean you started teaching here before..."

Snape turned and regarded her calmly. "I suppose it does," he replied.

"I didn't know You-Know-Who let his followers take other jobs."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sure you do. Dumbledore can be too trusting at times, no?" Without waiting for an answer, Umbridge left the room.

If that woman ever learns how to put two and two together to make four, I could be in trouble. As it is, she thinks she has an ironclad hold on me. But if we ever reach the day when I can tell her how I really feel...

Things at Hogwarts were quiet for the rest of the month. Part of this was because Umbridge had finished her interviews, and no longer interfered in classes. Part of it was because the weather was depressingly horrible, for it was a month of incessant wind and rain. And part of it was that for some reason many of the most active, irrepressible students seemed to be rather calmer than usual, as if they had found some outlet for their energy.

Snape and McGonagall were back to betting on Quidditch games, and the student body as a whole seemed more intense about Quidditch than usual.

"It's probably because there was no Quidditch last year," said McGonagall at supper near the end of October.

"That, and it's a relief to know Umbridge can't cancel it," added Sprout. "Is it true she tried to keep the Gryffindor team from being approved?"

"It is," said McGonagall. "I had to go to Dumbledore about it, and he overruled her. She was not happy about that, let me tell you."

Sprout nodded happily. "It's good to know Dumbledore still has a hand in things. He's been so quiet and retiring lately."

Snape was sitting a few seats away, listening to the conversation. Now he joined in. "How do we know Minerva doesn't have him locked up somewhere and is just pretending that instructions and intervention come from him? Maybe she's ruling Hogwarts now."

"You!" cried McGonagall. "I've been meaning to talk to you. What's this about allowing your students to hex mine and not stepping in to stop it?"

"Whatever are you talking about, my dear lady?"

"You know perfectly well that Bletchley hexed Johnson on Tuesday. There were witnesses."

"All of whom were Gryffindors conspiring to discredit the Slytherin Keeper. Besides, they've been hexing us, too, only they don't tell you about that. Bet they didn't say one word about the hex that Bletchley was retaliating for."

"You mean you knew all about this and didn't try to stop them?"

"About as much as you tried to stop a couple of Gryffindors from hexing me back when both of us were a lot younger than we are today. Consider it payback."

"You did look cute being carried up from Herbology with a Venus flytrap hanging onto your ear, and giggling like a lunatic. Even today I can look back and say honestly that it was the only time I ever saw you laugh."

Flitwick chuckled at the memory, too and Sprout, even though she'd heard the stories before, began begging for details. McGonagall settled herself to regale a growing audience with the legend of the famous Gryffindor-Slytherin hex wars of the '70s. Snape, knowing himself to be one of the stars of her story, stood and left the group to its fun.

"You be sure to get the story about Black's bats right," was all he said as he left the Hall.

Things were almost as calm in Croydon. The Dark Lord was displeased, but not with Snape. Whatever the two Death Eaters had tried to get, they'd not been successful. In the wake of two failures, the Dark Lord put in a series of requisitions for potions. Snape was interested in the combination.

There were Wit-Sharpener Potion, Unctuous Unction, various Sleep-ing Draughts, and Forgetfulness Potion, all of them very useful in situations where you did not want any fighting, or any traces left of your presence. Two items especially caught Snape's attention: Polyjuice Potion and Veritaserum.

It seems the Dark Lord was impressed by Barty Crouch's ability to fool the entire school, including Dumbledore, into believing he was Moody for over nine months. *If one of our people takes the place of someone in the Ministry, it could wreak havoc.*

That was when Snape decided to use part of his time to tinker with the two most potentially dangerous potions. He asked for an interview with the Dark Lord.

"You wish extra funds to purchase ingredients for Veritaserum and Polyjuice Potion. You will explain why."

"It occurred to me that the Polyjuice Potion would be more useful to your operatives if its effects could be extended for longer than an hour. It may not be possible to accomplish this, but I should like to try. It would involve a large number of variant solutions, since I would have to test each ingredient separately in varying strengths and also the effects of different combinations of changes. I would also like to try producing Veritaserum in a gaseous form that could be sprayed in someone's face."

"Why is such extensive testing necessary? Is this normal in science?"

"No one knows what we are looking for. It has not been tried before. Edison tested over six thousand materials during a period of fourteen months before he found the right one for his incandescent electric light filament."

"We see. Very well, you have authorization to order materials and start your experiments."

Snape waited until he was back in his laboratory before he allowed himself a private thought. *I'd be willing to bet he doesn't know who Thomas Edison was.*

* * *

Snape went out and bought a stack of notebooks, pens that wrote in different colors, rulers, markers, labels, filing cards, and a couple of calculators. The crates of ingredients arrived the third week in October, and he started setting up his experiments. By the weekend before Halloween, he had fifty different solutions brewing, each one a slightly changed version of either Veritaserum or Polyjuice Potion. Everything was meticulously labeled, and he was taking extensive notes.

The scope of the experiments was a bit different from what he'd told the Dark Lord, however. In fact, Snape was trying to find a way to shorten the amount of time Polyjuice Potion would be effective. *Imagine someone infiltrating the Ministry in disguise changing back to his true form fifteen minutes before he thinks he will. The Dark Lord would think it was carelessness rather than the potion.*

In the case of the Veritaserum, he was trying to produce a weaker brew, one that would make the victim want to tell the truth, but which a strong person could fight successfully. *If some people can fight Imperius Curses, they should be able to fight Veritaserum, too.*

Unfortunately, a complication was thrown into Snape's life just at the moment when he thought everything was under control. He apparated back to Hogsmeade that evening and sent his patronus to McGonagall. On reaching the entrance hall, however, he found Umbridge waiting for him.

"Where have you been?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"Some of the teachers commute, you know. They apparate home every night and return in the morning. Just because I'm the head of a house doesn't mean I'm chained to Hogwarts every minute of every day. I'm not on call for emergency duty until eleven o'clock, and until then my time is my own."

"Where did you go?"

"It's none of your business."

"I can make it my business."

"Very well. I moonlight as a referee for World Championship Wrestling. I was in Detroit, Michigan prepping for Halloween Havoc tomorrow. Want a tip? Don't bet on Hulk Hogan."

Umbridge glared at Snape for a moment, then stomped up the stairs to her office. *She's going to check. Gad, I hope Hogan loses tomorrow, or I'm in trouble with her again.*

Hogan, as it turned out, was disqualified, leaving Umbridge to debate whether Snape had been bluffing or telling the truth. He was not about to say. The following week was taken up with two events, the Halloween feast and the first Quidditch match of the season — Slytherin against Gryffindor.

Dumbledore reappeared at breakfast on Monday. The teachers tripped over each other in their hurry to welcome him back and express their concern about his absence. He admitted only to having been 'a little under the weather.'

"Severus," Dumbledore called down the table, "I understand that McGonagall has been showing you the fine points of chess. I am pleased that I might have an opponent who is at the beginning level, and therefore does not totally outclass me. Would you be interested in a game this evening?"

"It would be my pleasure, Headmaster."

And so that evening at the staff table, in full view of Umbridge, they set up a chess board, and Dumbledore and Snape played against each other. Dumbledore had not been lying about his abilities either, for Snape found himself playing an opponent at precisely his own level. Within minutes, all

the other teachers were forbidden to comment or advise. Many of them left, bored by the amateurish game.

After several moments and the capture of Snape's second knight, Dumbledore looked up and smiled sweetly. As their eyes met, Snape heard in his head, *What has been happening at Croydon?*

Not a lot. He wants something he can't get. I think it's in the Ministry. He's asked for potions that help get information or that conceal a person's presence.

I hear you are still having problems with one of your colleagues.

He thinks confronting the Dark Lord should be on a level with a Sunday picnic.

You need to put it aside.

I will if he will.

What about the 'Lady?'

Fine until she thought I was helping the students skirt her rules.

Were you?

Not by intention, but that was the practical effect.

Stay on her good side. We may reach a point where you are our only contact. "Checkmate," said Dumbledore, moving his bishop to attack Snape's king. "Thank you for a most pleasant game."

"Any time," Snape replied.

Halloween was uncommonly low-key that year. There were a few jack o' lanterns, and the occasional picture of a black cat, but the food was normal supper fare, and there was really no sense of its being a feast.

Snape felt it was the perfect occasion for being a bit morose.

Doesn't anyone remember what day it is today? You'd think Potter would remember, but never once in his life have I seen him do anything to commemorate it. Neither does Dumbledore. I bet Black doesn't either. Lily died on this day fourteen years ago. The worst day in the whole year.

Snape left the table at the earliest possible moment and spent the rest of the evening in his own rooms.

C H A P T E R F I F T H

P R E P A R A T I O N S

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1995 (THREE DAYS BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

The following Saturday was the Quidditch match. The whole school was looking forward to it, and Snape was no exception.

Snape was up early on Saturday. It was cold and overcast, actually rather good Quidditch weather. There was a high level of excitement as Snape made his way to the Great Hall. Slytherin students were decked out in green and silver, while Gryffindor sported their own red and gold. Some of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students wore red and gold, too, but most were less partisan for Gryffindor than they'd been in earlier years.

Little groups of Slytherins were laughing and talking around their table, and Snape noticed they were wearing badges. A little like last year when they got the badges supporting Diggory in the Triwizard Tournament. A close look showed him the badges carried a crown with the words 'Weasley is our King' inscribed inside.

Weasley? He's the new Gryffindor Keeper, isn't he? I wonder what this is about. A glance down the table made it clear that the source of the badges was Malfoy. Malfoy was the Slytherin Seeker, and his two goons Crabbe and Goyle had just been made Beaters. *I need to check out the parents of Bletchley, Montague, Warrington, and Pucey. We may be approaching an all Death Eater Quidditch team here.*

Once the game got started, the meaning of the badges became clear. Weasley was nervous and intimidated by the Slytherin team and the chanting from the Slytherin crowd. 'Weasley cannot save a thing, He cannot block a single thing...' rose in a well-practiced roar from the green and silver stands.

Snape was astounded, and immensely gratified. The students had been working behind the scenes on their anti-Weasley performance, and it was a

powerful and unified show of house spirit, with flags and banners waving and the song rising as if it was one huge voice. Slytherin house by itself overpowered in chants and cheers Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff put together. It was rousing.

And the game did not let them down. With well-practiced skill, the Slytherin team tore into Gryffindor's defense and landed score after score. The board rang up forty points for Slytherin before Gryffindor managed to score once. Slytherin was outflying, outplaying, outscoring Gryffindor in every part of the game and then . . .

And then it was over. Both Seekers located the Snitch almost simultaneously, dove groundwards, and just before contact with the grass, Potter had the Snitch, with Malfoy so close to him that their hands were touching at the moment the Snitch was caught. The whole stadium rose to its feet in the last seconds, Snape with them, and then Gryffindor's stands erupted in cheers.

What happened next was not clear. It looked like an errant Bludger hit Potter, and Malfoy was saying something as the two teams converged on the Seekers, and then Potter and one of the Weasley twins charged Malfoy, Malfoy was on the ground clutching his stomach, and Potter was hitting him. Then Potter had been bowled over backwards by an Impedimenta cast by . . . Madam Hooch?

Snape clambered down from the stands and ran to the center of the pitch where he knelt next to Malfoy. A quick look into the boy's eyes told Snape that he really was in pain. Potter had punched him in the stomach, hard, and in the nose as well. Snape had vivid memories of what that felt like, having been punched in the stomach himself. He conjured a stretcher and supervised the other members of his Quidditch team as they carefully lifted Malfoy onto the stretcher, and started moving him up the hill to the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey.

It was only then that he looked around and noted that the Gryffindor team had disappeared from the pitch, as had McGonagall. *She'll be angrier about this than I am. I would not like to be those students facing her wrath. I'll leave their punishment to her and find out about it at dinner.* As it was, he had to calm the team going up the hill, for Bletchley and Montague wanted to go after Potter and Weasley right then and there, and Snape had to talk them out of it.

Why does Gryffindor always have to react with physical violence?

Supper was tense, and not just because of the animosity between the two houses. Gryffindor was somber, reacting to the news that their Seeker and

Beaters had been banned from playing Quidditch for the rest of their lives. Slytherin was in an 'it serves you right' mood, forcing Snape to threaten dire punishment to anyone who taunted Gryffindor. The other two houses were simply stunned.

And then there was McGonagall.

"Educational Decree Twenty-five! She's taking all authority out of our hands and giving it to herself! Not only does she have the power to determine punishments and sanctions, she has the authority to alter the punishments we determine for our students! If I ever get my hands on Fudge..."

"I take it there's no process of review for her decisions."

"Review her decisions? Severus, the woman thinks she's infallible! Infallible and omniscient!"

"And now omnipotent by the sound of it."

Sprout and Flitwick nodded glumly. It was the four heads of houses who were most affected by the new decree, since they had the most control over the individual students. "What do we do now?" Sprout asked.

"Think about it very carefully. This requires gathering information and planning. We can't let that woman take over the school like this."

Then Umbridge entered the Great Hall for dinner, and the four teachers moved apart. Snape couldn't have continued the conversation for very long in any case. He had to go to Croydon, and this time he would have news to report.

Thus it was that Snape did not learn until nearly midnight that Hagrid had returned to Hogwarts.

* * *

Snape had no illusions about his meeting that night with the Dark Lord. He would have to be persuasive and be prepared to think fast.

On arrival at Croydon, Snape asked for an interview. It was granted an hour later. Once again, no one was there but Snape.

"Tell us of the situation at Hogwarts."

"The Lady is taking more power to herself."

"Describe that power."

"She has now been given the authority to determine all punishments for students, and to overrule the other teachers if she doesn't agree with what they have decided."

"This has little bearing on our main purpose."

"That is true, Lord, except that the other teachers are being pushed in the direction of rebellion. They resent her increased authority deeply."

"That is not what we wish. We wish you to explain why you think this was wisely done."

"It was not planned by our people, but it can rebound in our favor. The most important element of what is happening is that Dumbledore is not perceived as being part of it. The teachers wonder at his absence and his lack of action. They're beginning to doubt whether he has the will or the spirit to defend his own position. If they decide to act without consulting him, it means they've lost faith. Which also means they won't believe his stories about your return."

"We see. This is an interesting, even though unplanned development. Is there anything else?"

"Only that the students, too, seem to be rebelling against the Lady. Also without the assistance of Dumbledore."

"You will continue to keep us informed."

"Yes, Lord. Thank you, Lord."

Snape spent the rest of the evening with his self-defense classes and checking his simmering potions. It was too early to really tell with either the Polyjuice Potion or the Veritaserum, both of which took over a month to brew, but Snape had high hopes.

On his arrival back in Hogsmeade, Snape was met by an unseasonably early snowstorm and—Hagrid.

"What are you doing here? And more to the point, where have you been?"

"That's right Professor. Tell me how much ya missed me and were worried about me, and how ya couldn't live without my checking up on yer diet every two weeks. Go on. Tell me."

"I missed you and was worried about you. You can forget the diet part, though. I watch what I eat. Where were you?"

"We can talk about that later. Right now, I'm t' tell ya not t' send a patronus t' Dumbledore. Seems someone's watching. Seems someone's dying t' catch ya at something. Best not t' give them ammunition."

"Understood. Can you let me in the gate?"

"Well I'd be a poor groundskeeper an' I couldn't. What d' ya think Dumbledore sent me down here for?"

They walked to the gate, which Hagrid opened, then went their separate ways—Hagrid to his hut, and Snape to the castle. "Remember," Snape said as they parted. "You have to tell me everything."

A couple of inches of snow scrunched under Snape's feet as he climbed the hill, and his feet were soon wet and cold. *Luckily the falling snow will cover my footprints.* No one was watching in the entrance hall. *If she wanted to know whether or not I was in tonight, it wouldn't be so hard. All she had to do was knock on the office door to know I was out. Before I talk to her tomorrow, I need to establish an ironclad alibi.*

The alibi turned out to be easier than Snape had thought. Even as he approached the short, narrow flight of stairs that led to the dungeons, Sprout's voice spoke his name.

"Severus, what are you doing up so late?"

"Checking the snowfall. And I might ask you the same question."

"I'm going back out to the greenhouses. I've shut all the roof and wall ventilation ports, but it's still terribly cold in there, and the outdoor frames need insulation. There're also some annuals that'll be frostbitten and useless by tomorrow morning, and perennials that need tenting. I could use some help, and with your knowledge of plants, you'd know right away what needs doing."

"My pleasure. Just point me where you want me to go. When did the snow start?"

Sprout looked at him quizzically. "About ten o'clock. Where were you, that you don't know that? On second thought, don't tell me. I might not want to know."

"Best you don't. You could do me a favor though."

They were outside now and heading for the greenhouses. "What favor? I'm not promising until I know."

"If anyone asks, I went out to tend the plants with you as soon as the snow started. I was coming downstairs from the Astronomy tower, and you caught me in the entrance hall on your way out."

"Oooo . . . deception. May I assume that 'anyone' means a certain particular one?"

"I love the way you jump right to the crux of the matter."

"Well, since you've been here since the snow started, you already know what needs doing. You get out into the field on the east slope and gather up the plants that are dying in the frost so we can start preserving them tonight."

"Aye-aye, captain. I'll bring them to the greenhouses."

The two separated and went about the business of saving Hogwarts's herb crop. A job that would have been impossibly large for two muggles was difficult but doable for a witch and a wizard and a pair of wands. While Sprout

warmed the greenhouses and piled straw around the frames, Snape bundled piles of annual plants, sending them up to the Herbology workrooms, and brought more straw down to the planted areas to shield the perennials. Some he covered in paper tents as protection from the cold air, and others that could weather a snowstorm easily, he left alone.

The plants now safe, Snape and Sprout met in the workroom to begin the lengthy sorting, chopping, and boiling of the frostbitten harvest to preserve their essences for potion-making. Outside the snow continued falling—it was now a foot and a half deep, and the stars wheeled overhead on their way toward morning, but neither Sprout nor Snape had any intention of deserting their task. The cold had damaged the cellular structure of the cuttings, and any delay in processing them meant loss.

By dawn it seemed that every pot, pan, crock, cauldron, or kettle that Sprout had was cheerfully bubbling over one of several flames. The two professors sat back and surveyed the results of their industry, only just now realizing how tired they were. It was a contented tiredness, though, for they knew the job had been well done.

Carefully locking the door to the workroom, Sprout and Snape made their way together to the Great Hall where Sunday breakfast was just being laid out. “I’m famished!” Sprout cried, and made a beeline to the food. Snape followed, a bit more restrained, but he too was hungry, and the smell of the food was alluring.

“Whatever you two were doing, it’s certainly given Sprout an appetite,” commented McGonagall as Snape took his place at the table.

“Herbs,” Snape explained through a mouthful of kipper. “Snow. Cold.”

“Ah! I’d not thought of that. It takes a gardener to realize that there’s more to snow than fun throwing snowballs. Were the two of you out all night?”

“Mmmm...” Snape swallowed and was able to speak more coherently. “After covering the plants and bringing in the damaged ones, we had to start the preserving process or they’d have been ruined anyway. We just finished.”

“Where were you last night?” asked an accusing voice next to Snape’s ear. He turned to look Umbridge in the eyes.

“Saving Hogwarts’s potions material,” Snape replied. “We could have used some help, actually, Sprout and I.”

“Why didn’t you ask for it?”

“No one qualified enough. Except for us, of course.”

“What about me.”

"You never sat for a NEWT in either Potions or Herbology, much less passed one. That's definitely under-qualified."

"How do you know that?" Umbridge demanded, her face purpling.

"I checked. Hogwarts has files, too, you know." And Snape smiled sweetly at Umbridge.

After breakfast, since it was Sunday, Snape went to his own rooms, lay down on his bed, and fell quickly asleep. He woke again around one o'clock, which on Sundays was in the middle of the lunch period. He went to the Great Hall for a quick bite to eat, then decided to go down the hill to see Hagrid.

Hagrid at first didn't want to open the door. After several I-know-you're-in-theres, three open-this-door-nows, and a loud I-don't-need-a-key-to-bash-down-pine, the door opened and Snape was admitted.

"Tea?" said Hagrid, as if they'd not just had a confrontation about Snape's being allowed to visit at all.

"What the hell happened to you?" Snape countered.

Hagrid turned away, hiding his face in the ceremony of pouring tea. "It's nothing. We went up t' talk t', well, you know . . . giants . . . and they wasn't always so hospitable."

"No. You're lying. Some of those cuts and bruises are no more than thirty-six hours old. Some less. You got them shortly before you arrived here, and maybe . . ." — Snape looked closely — "maybe even in the last hour or so. There's a slight swelling there that's going to be a bruise tomorrow."

"Can't hide things from you, can I? Ya read minds, ya do. Sneaky trick."

"I'm not reading your mind, Hagrid. I'm a healer. I know bruises and cuts. Something is beating on you, and you don't want to tell me what it is."

"Well then, maybe ya should go."

"Well then, maybe you should tell me what's happening."

"Well it ain't like anyone could stay up there with what was going on."

"Well that sounds like you brought one of them back with you."

"One o' them? Ya ain't getting racist too, are ya?"

"Progress! You brought a giant back with you and are now defensive about his presence. You're afraid others will reject him for what he is, and he is so close to what they think that even you're not sure he'll pass inspection. And you are the most obstinate, pigheaded, self-absorbed . . ."

"Ya keep talking like that, and I'm going t' pound ya . . ."

"Who is he, Hagrid?"

"How d' ya know it ain't a she?"

Snape paused. How did he know it wasn't a giantess? "Well . . . I . . . well . . . She-giants don't beat you up like that!"

"A lot you know about she-giants! They ain't worth nothing if they don't beat ya up!"

This was incontrovertible. Snape retreated. "All right, you have a little friend hidden back there in the woods. Just as long as you're okay, I'll leave you alone. Forget I said anything."

"You just remember that, Mr. Big Shot wants t' jump all over everyone else's fun."

"I'll leave you alone. I will, I swear I will. I just thought . . ."

"Don't think. Ya think too much. So do them others. Ya just don't let them think for ya, see. You don't think, and they don't think, and we're all happy. I catch ya thinking, and I'll sit on ya 'til yer circulation stops and ya can't walk no more. Got me?"

By this time, Snape was backing quickly away. This was a Hagrid he'd never seen before. This was a Hagrid to set against Umbridge, and Snape was already trying to figure out how to do it. *Not today, surely, and not tomorrow either. Not for many days. But someday, get Umbridge down here checking on this giant . . . ess, and we're going to have the Donnybrook of all Donnybrooks.*

"Not to worry, Hagrid. I'm leaving, and I won't disturb you further. If you need anything, let me know."

Snape made his way back up the hill to his office and room. *Too much in too short a time. I need some rest. I need to think this one through. I need to figure out how to get Umbridge and Hagrid in the ring together.*

The thought was a pleasant one, and comforted him all afternoon.

Umbridge sent for Snape later in the day.

"You weren't in your office last evening."

"I know."

Umbridge waited for a moment, until it was clear no more information was coming. "So you don't intend to answer my question?"

"You didn't ask one." *Careful, Severus. You don't want her to get too impatient with you.*

Not having a quill in her hand to tap, Umbridge began drumming her fingers instead. "Where were you last evening?"

"I told you. Out saving the potions-grade plants from the frost. You can check the concoctions, decoctions, tisanes, effusions, tinctures, and other preparations that Professor Sprout and I worked on all night if you doubt me."

"I mean before that."

"I went up to the Astronomy tower."

"Why?"

"To observe cloud structure and take barometric readings."

"You're not the Astronomy teacher."

"That's not astronomy. That's meteorology." *I could string her along like this forever, but do I really want to waste that much time?* "The study of weather," Snape continued, "Weather, especially humidity, affects potions-making, and I was also worried about the herbs. A potion is only as good as the ingredients that go into it. A sudden frost can be a disaster."

"No one saw you go up there?"

"I assure you, the next time I take barometric readings, I'll arrange for witnesses."

Umbridge seemed to debate with herself the value of continuing this unprofitable line of questioning, then suddenly changed the subject. "Tell me about Hagrid."

"I doubt I could add to what's already in his file."

"You went to see him this morning."

"I did. I've been acquainted with Hagrid for twenty-four years and wanted to say welcome back."

"He's been in some kind of fight, did you notice?"

"Hard not to. I even asked him about it."

"And?"

"He preferred not to tell me. Since it isn't really my business, I didn't press the issue."

"In your opinion, is he a good teacher?"

"I've never watched him teach, and have no basis on which to form a judgment."

"It would be better for you if you cooperated a little more."

"I've answered your questions."

"I need a different kind of answer."

"I believe that's called suborning a witness."

The drumming stopped. Umbridge's eyes narrowed, and the corners of her mouth twitched in the crude imitation of a smile. "I can think of places much better suited for this kind of interview than Hogwarts. Tread carefully, Potions master, or you may find yourself in one of them."

"Is Educational Decree Twenty-Six going to give the High Inquisitor the authority to arrest and incarcerate the teachers?"

"Perhaps. I have a short list. You're on it. When the time comes, you may wish you'd kept on my good side. You may go now."

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank you, Ma'am."

On Monday morning, Hagrid was back at the staff table for breakfast. The teachers all came up to greet him, as did several of the students — mostly from Gryffindor. There was a certain tension, and the definite sense that many would miss Professor Grubbly-Plank.

Hagrid plunked his chair next to Snape's and began helping himself to an enormous plate of food. "Sorry 'bout the way I spoke t' ya yesterday, lad," he muttered. "I was a little testy."

"Understatement of the year," Snape replied, also in a low voice. "Snap my head off, was the way I regarded it. Have you met the Lady yet?"

"She sent me a message she would observe a class. Tomorrow."

"Who do you have?"

"Gryffindor and Slytherin, fifth years."

"Drat! She must have picked that one on purpose. You have to be careful."

"I thought it was pretty good." Hagrid sounded puzzled. "It's got the students as like me best."

"It's also got the student who dislikes you most, and Lucius Malfoy is hand in glove with the Lady."

"Well, that's all right, though. I got a powerhouse lesson planned. Knock her socks off."

"I'd rather see you have a nice, safe lesson. You can't afford to take chances."

"That's what Hermione said."

Point to Granger. The girl does have a head on her shoulders. "You should listen to her. What's your lesson about, anyway?"

"Nothing out of the way. Animals we keep right here at Hogwarts."

"Sounds adequate . . . Heads up! There's Umbridge. Pretend we're not talking."

Snape and Hagrid finished their breakfast in silence.

The morning Potions lesson was with the same students Hagrid would have for his inspection the next day. Malfoy, released from hospital the previous afternoon, was thirsting for revenge, while Gryffindor was still reeling from the shock of losing Seeker and Beaters at one blow.

It was a tinderbox waiting for a match.

The potion of the day, a rather complex one, was meant to stimulate the hippocampus, and was called the Elixir of Remembrance.

"Maybe it'll help Weasley remember which goals he's supposed to be defending," sneered Malfoy, loud enough so the Gryffindor students on the other side of the room could hear.

Snape weighed the relative merits of having a man who was both Dolores Umbridge's advisor and the Dark Lord's lieutenant angry with him, and allowed Malfoy to keep talking.

"Of course, first he'd have to remember that he plays Quidditch, and then he'd have to remember to take the potion."

Crabbe and Goyle laughed at Malfoy's witticism, but Snape cringed. Approaching Malfoy, Snape whispered quietly for his ear alone, "Your bon mot was lacking in literary quality. If I were you, I'd hold back until you had something of truly astounding wit to offer. Otherwise you might find yourself the butt of a few jokes."

"What do you mean?" Malfoy hissed.

"Your comment was on a twelve-year-old level. You can do better than that. Don't give them the chance to shoot your poorer efforts down when you can flatten them with your best."

The attempt to come up with something that was his 'best' kept Malfoy quiet and occupied for the rest of the double lesson.

Hagrid's inspection by Umbridge was, by all accounts, a disaster. According to the Slytherin students, who were not at all sympathetic to Hagrid, Umbridge had treated him like an ignorant buffoon, pretended she couldn't understand what he was saying, accused him of exposing the students to vicious animals, and accepted at face value all the jokes they wanted to tell her. It was a while before Hagrid was ready to show his face to the staff.

Which was probably just as well, since his face continued to be cut and bruised with what were clearly fresh injuries, leading Snape to wonder if there wasn't after all a giantess somewhere in the background.

"Has he been to you for treatment?" Snape asked Madam Pomfrey on Thursday, two days after the inspection.

"I haven't seen him at all. If it weren't for the rest of you, I wouldn't know he'd been injured."

"Rest of us? Who else told you?"

"Who hasn't? Everyone who saw him on Monday and Tuesday at the staff table. McGonagall conveyed Dumbledore's concern, Flitwick and Sprout came together, Hooch was calling Trelawney a nervous old biddy for worrying that it might be contagious . . . I may be the only one at Hogwarts who hasn't seen Hagrid's face."

"Could you go visit him?"

"Not without his asking. It doesn't seem life-threatening, or likely to cause permanent disability. I can't treat him without his permission."

* * *

November slipped away in relative quiet. The weather continued cold and snowy at Hogwarts, confining the students to the castle more than usual. This, oddly, did not increase the number of violent incidents, and Snape wondered again where some of his problems were channeling their energy.

The teachers had by now perfected the information chain, together with a series of coded messages, so in a way it was a disappointment that Umbridge gave them no opportunity to use it. The Lady once again appeared dormant, though the more rabid members of the staff were sure she was just waiting for the proper moment to spring her next surprise.

Things were happening at Croydon.

In the laboratory, the first experiments with Polyjuice Potion came up duds. Most of the alterations Snape had made merely rendered the potion completely ineffective. The only two ingredients that seemed to offer any hope for manipulation at all were the boomslang skin and the bicorn horn. At least when Snape adjusted them, the potion still brought about a transformation. He started several new batches brewing.

The Veritaserum gave more hope. It was harder to test, since Snape didn't want to use it on himself while he was at Croydon, so he brought a couple of samples with him to Hogwarts. Since he was absolutely certain that McGonagall would pump him for information if she were involved in the testing, Snape confided instead in Professor Flitwick. The results were, not surprisingly, mixed.

"I never knew you had . . . dear me . . . problems with your father," was Flitwick's response to testing with the first batch.

The second and the third, tested on different days, were similar, but the fourth batch showed promise.

In fact, it showed more than promise. Having drunk a dose of the potion, Snape found himself filled with unexpected feelings. He knew he'd been given Veritaserum, and he resented it. He wanted to resist, but that was not all. He wanted to deceive Flitwick. He began, in fact, to invent answers that were plausible but false.

“Now I am confused,” said Flitwick at the end of that session. “How could *Witch Weekly* name them couple of the year when you said before that they had so many problems?”

Snape explained, and the next time he was in Croydon, he made sure to bottle up several vials of the ‘adjusted’ Veritaserum to keep with his supplies at Hogwarts.

Then, in December, Croydon was once again tense with activity. A new class came in for defensive training, and requisitions were made on the stores for potions of cooperation and forgetfulness. It appeared that everyone involved had been constrained by a need-to-know order, and the two times someone started to say something in Snape’s presence, they were hushed immediately by their comrades.

Snape reported this to Dumbledore at once. Dumbledore called for a meeting of the Order for midnight Monday the ninth. Snape didn’t usually leave Hogwarts during the week, and by midnight Umbridge would be convinced he was asleep. Long before breakfast Tuesday morning they would both be back.

Molly Weasley opened the door to them at Grimmauld Place, though Black came directly from the kitchen to the hallway at the sound of their voices. After a quick greeting to Dumbledore, he edged over to Snape and muttered, “I hear you’re giving Harry a bad time.”

“If you mean he’s been producing inferior potions and receiving correspondingly low grades, you’re quite right. Typical of him to go crying to you.”

Dumbledore stepped between them, forcing the two apart. “No bickering!” he demanded in a menacing tone, then led the way into the parlor.

Snape’s report was short and to the point. “Half a dozen Death Eaters, maybe more that don’t need training. They have someone inside who’ll admit them. They’re carrying potions for interrogation and forgetfulness, so they’re hoping to be in and out without being detected. They’re not anticipating resistance or violence, but . . .”

“But what?” prompted Moody.

“They’re under a strict secrecy order — they won’t talk in front of me — but they’re nervous about something, something at headquarters, not the target building. A couple of them were projecting rather strongly. It seems someone important’s going with them, and they’re scared.”

“Any idea who?”

"The highest ranking would be Malfoy or Macnair. If I were one of the ground troops, I'd be a lot more afraid of Macnair than of Malfoy."

"Understood," Moody said. "We have to set watchers again. We can rotate through the night hours like we did before." Tonks left right away, and the others stayed for refreshments.

Dumbledore followed the others into the dining room, but Snape hung back in the parlor. The rest affected not to notice, so Snape stayed there, lounging in a comfortable chair, ignoring the hum of conversation in the other room, and glancing around at the walls and the shelves of the parlor. Dark objects from every corner of the world were displayed there.

My great-grandfather would have loved this place. Great additions to his own collection. Pity they all belong to Black.

A half an hour later, Dumbledore was ready to go. Snape rose and joined him on the way to the door, where Black let them out into the night. They exchanged no words.

Once in the street, Dumbledore turned to Snape. "One of these days, you will accept his hospitality." It was a command.

"I think he prefers that I don't. It would require his being hospitable to me."

"One of you is going to have to take the first step."

"Why? As it is now, we both know where we stand. No surprises."

"It is bad for the morale of the others. It impedes teamwork."

"The day I have to join the others as a member of a team is the day my usefulness to you as a spy is over. Better to keep things as they are."

"I want you to make peace with Sirius."

"Tell him to make peace with me. I wasn't the one who went around beating other people up."

Dumbledore looked puzzled. "Is this an incident I do not know about?"

"There were a lot of incidents you didn't know about."

"I would still like you to make the first move. Sirius spent twelve years in prison with little to do but brood. It is not surprising that he finds it hard to let things go."

Snape made eye contact with Dumbledore for several seconds. "Define prison," Snape said at last, and it was Dumbledore who looked away.

Dumbledore said no more, and together they apparated back to Hogwarts. There were still a couple of hours left for sleep, but Snape was not able to avail himself of them, as his conversation with Dumbledore had

revived too many bad memories. For the next few days, he was more bad-tempered than usual.

The situation between Croydon, Grimmauld Place, and Hogwarts remained unchanged for a week and a half. That was just enough time for it to begin to seem routine, even normal. Then, shortly after midnight the Thursday before the winter break was to begin, all hell broke loose.

Snape was driven from sleep by sudden searing pain in his left arm. He staggered from his bed in blind panic, the mind-numbing brutal insistence of the summons so intense that he was out of his rooms and halfway across the entrance hall before reality brought him to a wrenching halt.

I can't disapparate from Hogwarts. I can't even leave Hogwarts walking through the gate on my own feet. Someone has to open the defenses for me.

Sprinting up the stairs to the gargoye statue that was the entrance to Dumbledore's tower, Snape became aware that he was not the only person being summoned. The place was full of Weasleys of various ages, McGonagall apparently having just aroused them and brought them to Dumbledore. Snape hissed at her from a niche, and she came over after shooing the Weasley children up the spiral staircase.

"What are you doing here?" McGonagall asked, almost accusingly.

"I'm being summoned. Urgently. I need the gate opened."

McGonagall's look was almost fearful. "I think Albus will want to speak to you first."

Snape waited on tenterhooks while McGonagall brought Dumbledore down.

"He is calling you? When did it start?"

"Maybe fifteen minutes ago. Please, Headmaster, I have to go."

"Only a moment. We shall be leaving from here shortly, and you will be able to disapparate from this spot. Much faster than going to the gate. Do you have any idea what he wants?"

"No. There's no way to tell."

"We must assume that he knows, then. My concern is how much to give him. A little information will help you, and may also help us." Dumbledore thought for a moment. "Harry had a dream tonight, and in that dream he was present in the body of a huge snake that attacked Arthur Weasley. Only the snake really did attack Arthur. He is being taken now to St. Mungo's. Riddle must be aware of the contact, or he would not be summoning you so urgently. You are authorized to tell him what I just told you. See if you can find out what the experience was like from the other side."

"Get the snake to talk, you mean? I thought you were going to give me a hard assignment."

"Do not be cheeky. Minerva will signal you when it is safe to disapparate."

Each second seemed like a minute as Snape waited for the signal to go. At last McGonagall appeared on the spiral staircase where he had a good view of her. She motioned to him to wait, paused, and then gave him a thumbs-up. Snape concentrated on Croydon and disapparated.

Malfoy was waiting when Snape walked into headquarters. "Thank goodness you're here. He's getting very impatient. What kept you?"

"Magical shields. He knows that."

"Just let what you have be valuable."

And yet, when they came to the interview room, it was only Malfoy and Snape before the Dark Lord, and they were not required to kneel.

"You did not come to us at once."

"It is impossible to leave Hogwarts without the assistance of the headmaster or deputy headmaster. Leaving at one in the morning is unusual."

Malfoy drew in a sharp breath, and pain tickled the corners of Snape's brain. *Don't be flippant. Don't even approach being sarcastic. This man owns you, Severus. Be respectful.*

The Dark Lord allowed silence to fill the room. Then he spoke again.

"Who allowed you to leave, Dumbledore or McGonagall?"

"Dumbledore."

"Then he knows you have come here."

"Yes, Lord."

"What does he want?"

"He wishes to know of the snake."

"Tell us how he is aware of this snake."

"The Potter boy had a dream, and in the dream he was the snake. He saw himself attack Arthur Weasley, and upon awaking alerted Dumbledore that Weasley was injured. Weasley has been taken to St. Mungo's."

"What else does Dumbledore know of the snake."

"Nothing, my Lord."

"So Dumbledore wishes to scan the mind of a snake. This amuses us. Has Potter had such dreams before?"

"None have been spoken of."

"So it begins. This is excellent news. We must study how this serpentine propensity of Potter's can be manipulated to our advantage. You may go."

Snape and Malfoy left together, each to apparate to a different part of Britain. Before they parted, Malfoy said, "You have no idea how relieved I was to hear you had something to tell him. I don't know what happened to him tonight, but it was as if someone had set him in a bed of nettles. He hated not knowing. I owe you another one."

In Dumbledore's office later, Snape tried to make sense of it all.

"Malfoy said something had happened to the Dark Lord himself. And the Dark Lord thought it funny that you wanted me to look for a snake. What are the chances that the Dark Lord was the snake?"

"You mean that Harry touched the mind of Riddle directly? That would explain how Riddle knew at once of his presence. You have a better feel for this than I do, Severus. What are the chances that Riddle, having already unconsciously influenced Harry's dreams, will now try consciously to influence those dreams further?"

"I think it's very possible."

"Will he start immediately?"

Snape thought for a while. "My sense was that he doesn't want to alarm Potter. Or you, for that matter. I don't think he has anything specific that he wants Potter to believe or do. When he comes up with something, he'll move. We may have some time to plan before he does."

"How would you feel if I asked you to teach Harry to block Riddle's thoughts?"

"You're joking. Please tell me you're joking."

"Why not? It seems a logical step."

"The Dark Lord nearly killed me last June because he thought I was teaching myself occlumency. Can you imagine how he'll react if he finds I'm teaching it to someone else?"

"How would he find out?"

"Through Potter. Once he tries contact with Potter's mind, unless Potter has already mastered occlumency, it's a direct link to me. Are you trying to kill me?"

"Not if I can avoid it. What makes you think Harry cannot master occlumency?"

"He's his father's son. There's nothing subtle about him. James was as transparent as the daylight, and his boy is no different. He'll sacrifice the thing he loves best to sentiment, and anything else that gets in the way. I prefer not being a sacrifice. At least not to his sentiment."

Thursday and Friday passed quickly, and suddenly the term was over and

they were on Christmas break. Students and teachers deserted Hogwarts en masse, leaving the usual skeleton crew and stragglers. Even Umbridge left for the holidays, and Hogwarts was temporarily transformed into an island of peace in a tumultuous world.

Saturday found Snape back in Croydon.

Malfoy stuck his head in the door of the laboratory, but hardly glanced around. "He has a question for you. It'll take just a minute."

Snape went down to the interview room and stood before the Dark Lord.

"Has Potter had any more dreams?"

"I don't know. He left Hogwarts early Thursday morning and is in . . . the south now. He won't be back at Hogwarts until next term."

"Do you know exactly where he is?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Tell us."

The safest thing at that moment was to honestly try to think and say the name, which Snape did, knowing full well that it wouldn't be possible. "He's in . . . south . . . at . . . square . . ."

"Look at us."

Legilimency revealed the shield of the Fidelius Charm. There was no way to break through it, and the Dark Lord was satisfied. "That is of no consequence. We have already received information from another source. We have sufficient weapons. You will attempt to discover if Potter has had more dreams. It is important."

Back with Malfoy, Snape confided his task. "He also said we had a new source of information."

Malfoy chuckled. "It came to me, totally unexpected. You might say it fell from the blue, but it gave us a tool to use against Potter when it comes to it. Enough said. The less you know, the safer."

Snape returned to his class and his potions, but on his return to Hogwarts he went straight to Dumbledore.

"He's trying to project dreams into Potter's head. He wants Potter to know something or do something to the Dark Lord's advantage. I'm to find out if the dream incursion has been successful, and what the dreams are."

"Harry has told no one of any dreams. I shall contact the members of the Order and have them watch out for any sign that he is connecting with Riddle."

"Why don't you just ask him?" When several seconds passed without an

answer, Snape looked over at Dumbledore. “He wouldn’t tell you, would he?”

“He would be more likely to tell Sirius. It is fortunate that he is spending the break at headquarters. With the two of them together, Sirius may be able to find out things that would be harder for us here at Hogwarts.”

“I don’t suppose we could just explain the situation to him.”

“Unfortunately, that might make things worse. That would open the possibility that Riddle would find out the full extent of our knowledge of his actions, putting Potter and you into greater jeopardy.”

“Now I see where this is going. You’re making another case for occlumency lessons. If I don’t teach him, he’s likely to give everything he knows about me to the Dark Lord.” Snape stood and walked over to the cabinet where Dumbledore kept his mead and poured himself a glass. “This is a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation, isn’t it?”

“I fear so. You must weigh which action is likely to give you the most protection and place you under the least risk.”

“Does that mean you’re leaving the decision up to me?”

“It does.”

“Then I would prefer not to.”

“That quick a decision? May I ask why?”

“It’s more personal than you realize. You can find someone else to teach him. You could do it yourself. I could teach any other student. I do not want to teach him.”

Dumbledore remained silent, waiting.

I have to explain to him. He thinks I’m refusing because of some childhood feud involving James and Sirius. But Arthur Weasley’s lying in St. Mungo’s — he could have been killed — and I can’t let Dumbledore think that I’m being that petty at a time like this. I can do this if I just figure out how to start.

The long, gentle silence helped. Snape knew Dumbledore would wait patiently until he was ready.

“It’s instinctive. Shutting people out, I mean. I was shutting my father out before I was old enough to understand that I didn’t have to — that he couldn’t read me anyway. The first time I locked you out, I wasn’t really intending to do it. It just happened. The same with the Dark Lord. I didn’t want to shut him out. It just happened.”

Snape took a deep breath. “Letting people in can be instinctive, too. I won’t say I never shut my mother out, but the few times I did required conscious effort, hard effort, and she could sense the strain. There’s one other

person I was never able to lock out. She didn't know how to read me either, but that wouldn't have made a difference. Every time I looked into her eyes, I was an open book."

Dumbledore nodded. "And he has his mother's eyes."

"I felt it from the beginning. The day he was sorted. He touched his scar as if it hurt, and looked straight at me. It was like looking into her eyes again. If he'd known how to read that day, he'd have had me from that moment. But he didn't know. And now you want me to teach him that reading is possible. I'll never be able to let down my guard around him again."

"This is a serious issue for you, I see."

"It's worse. What if he can't learn occlumency? There are things . . . The fastest way to get someone to want to hide his thoughts is to try to access the thoughts he most wants to hide — thoughts of humiliation, fear, intense or shameful emotion . . . It can boomerang, and he could conceivably access my thoughts, and I might not be able to keep him out. Those thoughts would then be available for the Dark Lord to see every time Potter sleeps. Some of those thoughts, if the Dark Lord sees them through Potter, would let him know that I deceived him from the very first. They're a death sentence."

"I had not thought of that." Dumbledore rose now, too, and poured himself a glass of mead, refreshing Snape's glass as he did so. Then he asked a strange question. "How many of these thoughts are we talking about?"

"I don't know. I wasn't even considering the question before this little chat of ours. What difference does it make?"

"What if you could put those thoughts somewhere where Potter could never access them?"

"You can't just take thoughts out of your head."

"I have a pensieve."

"Oh."

This was not, truth be told, Snape's idea of an optimal solution. The optimal solution was for Dumbledore to teach Potter himself. That, however, could lead to the same worst-scenario situations that Snape foresaw for himself, except that having the Dark Lord access Dumbledore's thoughts was, over all, a greater disaster.

"Let me show you the pensieve," Dumbledore said. "Have you ever used one before?"

Learning to use the pensieve was easy. Deciding what to place in it was hard. The capacity of the basin was limited, so it could hold a large number of short memories, but only a few long ones. Snape sat in his office for hours,

staring at the ancient symbols carved around the outside of the stone, reviewing all those thoughts he'd managed to keep hidden from the Dark Lord in June.

It really is a matter of what I can explain to the Dark Lord and what I can't. There's nothing about my family I have to worry about, except the moment I discovered that Death Eaters arranged Nana's death with an Imperius spell. That has to go into the pensieve.

The memory swirled in the basin like a liquid mist, lightly coating the bottom with white silver. After that, Snape's choices revolved around three people — Dumbledore, Hagrid . . . and Lily.

Thank goodness the Dark Lord knows that Dumbledore considers me his own spy. Almost all of our conversations can be explained. And since I'll be evoking unpleasant memories in Potter, that's what Potter'd be most likely to see in me. Most of my interactions with Hagrid were pleasant, and therefore unlikely to come out, or explainable if they do. The most dangerous memory is of the day I returned to Hogwarts and betrayed the Dark Lord to Dumbledore.

That was a long memory. The pensieve was filling up, the silver clouds of his thoughts rippling as if disturbed by a breeze. Now there was the problem of Lily . . . Lily, who'd brought about the destruction of the Dark Lord through the power of her love . . . whose friendship would, in the Dark Lord's eyes, constitute the blackest of treasons.

I have never shown Lily to the Dark Lord. Anything he sees of her will tell him I've been hiding my thoughts, deceiving him. There's too much, and I can only fit two more long memories into the pensieve. Most of my memories of Lily are good, pleasant memories, though. Best to concentrate on the bad ones, the ones most likely to be pulled out during occlumency lessons.

That narrowed the list down considerably. First and foremost was the day that Lily died. The whole episode — from the moment of hearing of the Dark Lord's demise, through the black despair of the Astronomy Tower, to waking up from sedation in the hospital — all had to go.

One other long memory remained — the day Sirius and James had humiliated him in front of the whole school, and Lily had come charging to his defense. *If the Dark Lord sees that, he'll know there was something between us, will wonder why he never saw it before, and will look for more.*

Now there was room for only two short memories, and they were obvious. First was the day Snape had struck Lily, the day he'd realized that his father's demon lived in him and that he could never be close to anyone without hurting them. The other was the argument when he'd accused Lily of

betraying him by teaching his spells to James. With that last memory, the pensieve was full.

Three long memories, and three short memories. The others either unlikely to be drawn out or something I can explain. Something I hope I can explain.

* * *

"It will work, then?" Dumbledore smiled. "I am pleased."

"It'll work as far as past memories are concerned. At least the most dangerous things can be protected. There still remains the very act of teaching occlumency. He's not going to be happy about that."

"Will not the fact that I have ordered you to do it be of any help in deflecting his anger?"

"You haven't ordered me to do it."

Dumbledore turned his back on Snape, then wheeled suddenly, wrath blazing in his eyes. "Enough of your excuses and your petty scruples!" he snarled. "I will not tolerate your disobedience! You will teach this boy to hide his thoughts, or your tenure at this school is over. If you cannot be useful to me, you might as well be dementor fodder at Azkaban! Do you understand!"

"Yes, Headmaster," Snape whispered, hanging his head and allowing fear to wash through him.

After a pause, Dumbledore relaxed his pose. "Do you think that will assist you in making your case?"

"It's better than nothing. Have you ever considered a career in the theater?"

The Saturday before the new term, Snape left early for London. He had first to visit Grimmauld Place to let Potter know about the occlumency lessons, then go from there to Croydon. Dumbledore had covered one of Snape's problems by giving him a letter to let Black know he was to be allowed to speak privately to Potter. The second problem was trickier. Snape had to decide whether or not to tell the Dark Lord about the lessons.

"Come in, Professor. What a pleasant surprise," Molly Weasley smiled at him as she opened the door. "Will there be a meeting?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Weasley," Snape replied. "No meeting today. At least no large one. I'm here at Professor Dumbledore's request to speak with Master Potter."

"In that case, you'll probably be most comfortable in the kitchen. I'll let Harry know you're here."

"Look what the cat dragged in," said a voice from the stairs, and Snape and Molly looked up to see Black descending towards them. "Or maybe it was a snake. Look what the snake dragged in."

"I've been instructed to speak with Potter," Snape said calmly, holding out the letter. "Professor Dumbledore..."

Black seized the letter, tore it open, and read quickly. "Fine. You can talk. The kitchen's perfect. Molly, you can tell Harry to meet us there. Unless, of course," he sneered, "Mr. High-and-Mighty also objects to smelling my food."

Snape ignored the jibe. "I believe you'll notice that the letter says a private conversation."

Gesturing Snape towards the kitchen, Black growled, "I'm not leaving Harry alone with you." The volume of his voice was rising, and Snape wondered suddenly if Black had been drinking. "I wouldn't trust a sneak like you alone with Harry. So you take me, or you get out of my house."

"Very well," Snape responded. "I suppose when one is truly bored, even eavesdropping provides entertainment."

"Get in the kitchen, Snively, before I decide to throw you out."

"Believe me, I have as great a desire to return to fresh air as you have to see me leave."

They sat for a moment in stony silence, the width of the kitchen table between them, staring at opposite sides of the room. Then the door opened, and Potter said, "Er..." and entered.

Trying to act as if Black weren't there to threaten him, Snape motioned toward a chair. "Sit down, Potter..."

"You know," Black interrupted, tipping his chair back and staring ceilingwards, "I think I'd prefer it if you didn't give orders here, Snape. It's my house, you see."

Potter took Black's cue and sat next to his godfather so that Snape was obliged to talk to both of them. Snape forced his anger down, and with an effort to be calm said, "I was supposed to see you alone, Potter, but Black..."

"I'm his godfather!" Black was now close to shouting.

"I am here on Dumbledore's orders, but by all means stay, Black. I know you like to feel... involved."

Black's chair slammed back into its place. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Merely that I am sure you must feel . . . frustrated by the fact that you can do nothing useful for the Order." Black was silent, and Snape continued. "The headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term."

"Study what?" Potter said, and it was clear he'd never heard the word before.

"Occlumency, Potter. The magical defense of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one."

"Why do I have to study Occlu . . . thing?" His obtuseness brought vivid images of Crabbe and Goyle into Snape's mind. *How can you be Lily's son? If it weren't for the eyes . . .*

"Because the headmaster thinks it a good idea. You will receive private lessons once a week, but you will not tell anybody what you are doing, least of all Dolores Umbridge. You understand?"

"Yes. Who's going to be teaching me?"

Do you honestly think that I came all the way here to play messenger boy for someone else? Or does the prospect distress you so much that you refuse to accept its reality?

"I am," Snape replied.

Potter stared at Snape, the look on his face one of horror. Black thrust his own face forward intimidatingly. "Why can't Dumbledore teach Harry?" he demanded. "Why you?"

The angrier Black became, the more sharp and focused Snape felt himself growing. The conversation was nearing a point of actual battle, and Snape began automatically to shut down even as he prepared to leave the house. "I suppose because it is a headmaster's privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks. I assure you I did not beg for the job."

Rising, Snape adjusted his cloak around his shoulders. It was nearly time for him to be at Croydon. He addressed Potter, turning slightly to shut Black out of his vision. "I will expect you at six o'clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anybody asks, you are taking Remedial Potions. Nobody who has seen you in my classes could deny you need them."

As Snape turned to leave, Black snapped, "Wait a moment!"

"I am in rather a hurry, Black . . . unlike you, I do not have unlimited leisure time . . ." Snape was shut down completely now, sensing attack. His hand moved toward his wand. Just in case . . .

"I'll get to the point then," snarled Black, rising. His height and bulk loomed forward over Snape, a clear physical menace, and the memory flashed

into Snape's mind of Black's fist slamming into his stomach. He gripped his wand as Black continued. "If I hear you're using these Occlumency lessons to give Harry a hard time, you'll have me to answer to."

"How touching. But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like his father?"

"Yes, I have."

"Well then, you'll know he's so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off him."

Black charged around the table, his wand now out in his hand, but Snape drew his wand, too, and they faced each other, barely two feet apart, for the duel that had been set brewing twenty-three years earlier, the first time Black threatened Snape in the halls of Hogwarts. Potter was yelling Black's name, but Black paid him no attention, and Snape concentrated only on the coming fight. Black's voice rose in anger while Snape's sank to a controlled whisper.

"I've warned you, Snivellus, I don't care if Dumbledore thinks you've reformed, I know better . . ."

"Oh, but why don't you tell him so? Or are you afraid he might not take the advice of a man who has been hiding inside his mother's house for six months very seriously?"

"Tell me, how is Lucius Malfoy these days? I expect he's delighted his lapdog's working at Hogwarts, isn't he?"

"Speaking of dogs, did you know that Lucius Malfoy recognized you last time you risked a little jaunt outside? Clever idea, Black, getting yourself seen on a safe station platform . . . gave you a cast-iron excuse not to leave your hidey-hole in the future, didn't it?"

The goading worked. Black raised his wand. *Now it begins. Watch his eyes. You'll see the spell in his mind before he can cast it.*

And then Potter was between them, screaming "NO!" and trying to stop Black. "Sirius, don't . . ."

His spell casting blocked by Potter, Black still pushed forward. "Are you calling me a coward?" he roared, as Snape sidestepped Potter to get a clearer shot.

"Why, yes, I suppose I am."

"Harry. Get. Out. Of. It!" and Black broke loose, lunging at Snape while Potter scrambled to intervene again. The boy planted one hand firmly on Snape's chest as he blocked Black with the other, and the two stood, the distance between them that of Potter's outstretched arms, wands pointed at each other's head.

Come for me. Come for me. Make my day.

And then the kitchen door banged open and the whole tribe of Weasleys burst into the kitchen, Arthur among them gleefully pronouncing, "Cured! Completely cured!"

The tableau froze for a moment as the Weasleys took in the strange scene and Snape and Black began to retreat from their confrontation.

"Merlin's beard," gasped Arthur Weasley, "what's going on here?"

It was over. The duel would wait for another time. Recovering faster, Snape pocketed his wand and strode to the kitchen door, still too focused on Black to speak to the Weasleys. His last words were for the boy. "Six o'clock Monday evening, Potter," he said, then turned and left the house.

Snape walked quickly away from number twelve. Even though he was late, he wandered the streets around King's Cross for a while. He couldn't apparate directly to Croydon because it would be noticed instantly by the Dark Lord that something had disturbed him. *If he calls me in to report, he'll know.* In addition, he'd not yet decided what to do about the occlumency lessons.

If I tell him, he'll be angry. If I don't tell him and he finds out later, he'll be furious. Either way, I'm in for a rough ride. How can I explain teaching occlumency when I've told him my own is involuntary? How will he react if I'm successful with Potter? How much can I blame Dumbledore? It helped that Dumbledore had given him permission to disclose the lessons, but it didn't make the decision easier. Fascinating that I am allowed to tell the Dark Lord, but Dumbledore absolutely does not want Umbridge to know. Sad, that we can't trust our own Ministry.

When he was finally calm enough, Snape apparated to Croydon, where he left a request to speak with the Dark Lord, then went directly to his laboratory. The next batches of the Polyjuice Potion and the Veritaserum were nearing their completion, and he tended them. Within the hour, a messenger came to ask him about his interview request.

"He wants to know if it's urgent or routine. If it's urgent, he'll see you tonight. If it's routine, it can wait until next week."

Snape stared at the man. "The Dark Lord has always seen me before."

"Not tonight, Professor. Big things brewing in the next couple of days. Wouldn't be surprised if they locked some of us out. Security, you know."

"It's routine. It will wait."

Snape fretted for another half hour, then the word came down that all extraneous personnel were to leave the building for the weekend and return

the following Tuesday. Snape walked out with the others, then apparated directly to Hogsmeade.

Fifteen minutes later, he was with Dumbledore.

"You decided not to tell him about the lessons," Dumbledore said as Snape walked into his office.

"I never had the chance. They sent us all home and locked the building down. Something big is happening this weekend, or Monday by the latest."

"How do you know?"

"They told us to return on Tuesday."

"We shall reposition our people on guard at the Ministry and double the number. Any more than that, and Fudge will get suspicious. What are the chances that it is a different target?"

"I don't know. I know I was denied an interview and sent back here for security reasons. And I wasn't alone or singled out. This one is top, top secret."

"So we can only watch and wait."

"What if the Ministry wasn't against us?"

"We would alert the muggle Prime Minister and put a watch around every important building or site. The guards at the Ministry and at Azkaban would be reinforced, and listening posts would be alerted to report any unusual increase in magical activity. If the Ministry was not against us."

Snape went to bed and slept fitfully. The next day the students returned from their break, and the day after was Monday, and the beginning of Potter's occlumency lessons.

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - O N E

O C C L U M E N C Y

Monday should have been a thoroughly normal day, and to outward appearances maybe it was, but inwardly Snape was dreading the evening. At the end of his last class, he went up to Dumbledore's office, using side staircases to avoid Umbridge, now back at Hogwarts, and took the pensieve down to his own rooms. There, in the dark, he set it on his desk with a candle on either side to help him focus.

Seating himself in a chair in the corner, Snape contemplated the pensieve, then began to review and lock away all his thoughts about Lily. It was painful to remember what had been lost, but beneficial, too, for this was Lily's son he was trying to help. Lily's son. He hadn't felt that so strongly since two years earlier, when Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban. How much had changed since then.

In the dim silence, Snape rose and placed three memories into the pensieve, the one long and two short of Lily that he'd chosen. Every other trace of her was locked away. Then he sat again to review the long relationship with the Dark Lord, that had started in trust and turned so foul, shutting away all of it, hoping it would not burst open and spill out when he confronted the green eyes.

A knock startled Snape from his reverie, and he watched as the office door opened and Lily's son stepped into the room, confused by the dark and the candlelight. "Shut the door behind you, Potter," Snape said quietly, and the boy did as he was told. Snape moved forward and motioned to a chair on the other side of the room from the desk. He himself sat in front of the pensieve, watching Potter's shadowed face across the room, shadows that hid Lily's eyes.

"Well, Potter, you know why you are here. The headmaster has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than Potions." *If not, I am dead, and you are dead, and all is lost.*

"Right," Potter replied, his voice not masking the scorn.

"This may not be an ordinary class, Potter, but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me 'sir' or 'Professor' at all times."

"Yes . . . sir."

This is going to be harder than I thought. We've added a new layer. Now I have Lily's eyes, James's face, and Sirius Black's mannerisms. "Now, Occlumency. As I told you back in your dear godfather's kitchen, this branch of magic seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence."

"And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?"

Because you did a mind-meld with the Dark Lord and attacked Arthur Weasley while inhabiting the body of a snake. "Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency . . ."

"What's that? Sir?"

"It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person's mind . . ."

"He can read minds?"

How do I explain this? I speak to Dumbledore of reading, and call myself an open book, but that's because we both understand that to be a quick way to refer to something far more complex. But if Potter thinks only of the simplistic action of reading, he will not learn to hide his thoughts and feelings.

Snape tried to make Potter understand the subtle control of memory and emotion that allowed an occlumens to reveal those thoughts that would confirm what he was saying while concealing those that would contradict him. It was almost as if the boy was not paying attention.

"So he could know what we're thinking right now? Sir?"

"Time and space matter in magic, Potter. Eye contact is often essential to Legilimency."

"Well then, why do I have to learn Occlumency?"

I don't know. Maybe you vicariously enjoyed attacking Weasley. Maybe you have secret ambitions of becoming a Dark Lord yourself and want to pick up hints on how to go about it. Maybe you're just lazy and stupid.

With a deep sigh, and a prayer for patience, Snape went back to the beginning and once again tried to explain.

Make it simple, Severus. He has to understand this. "The usual rules do not seem to apply with you, Potter. The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The

evidence suggests that at times, when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable — when you are asleep for instance — you are sharing the Dark Lord's thoughts and emotions. The headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord." *Any simpler, and I'll be using words of one syllable only.*

"But why does Professor Dumbledore want to stop it? I don't like it much, but it's been useful, hasn't it? I mean . . . I saw that snake attack Mr. Weasley and if I hadn't, Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have been able to save him, would he? Sir?"

This is like beating my head against a brick wall! He really does need words of one syllable. I can't tell him how I know — he's dumb enough to blab it to everyone, including the Dark Lord. Was James like this? "It appears that the Dark Lord has been unaware of the connection between you and himself until very recently. Up till now it seems that you have been experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser. However, the vision you had shortly before Christmas . . ."

"The one with the snake and Mr. Weasley?"

"Do not interrupt me, Potter. As I was saying . . . the vision you had shortly before Christmas represented such a powerful incursion upon the Dark Lord's thoughts . . ."

"I saw inside the snake's head, not his!"

"I thought I just told you not to interrupt me, Potter?" *Does two plus two always give you three, Potter? Can you not infer the simplest thing? Is there no intuition in you at all?*

"How come I saw through the snake's eyes if it's Voldemort's thoughts I'm sharing?"

Pain lanced through Snape's left arm, and his breath hissed inward with the shock of it. "Do not say the Dark Lord's name!" he gasped. The two of them glared at each other.

"Professor Dumbledore says his name."

"Dumbledore is an extremely powerful wizard." *And I will not give you the truth as a weapon to use against me.* "While he may feel secure enough to use the name . . . the rest of us . . ."

"I just wanted to know why . . ."

"You seem to have visited the snake's mind because that was where the Dark Lord was at that particular moment. He was possessing the snake at the time and so you dreamed you were inside it too . . ."

"And Vol . . . he . . . realized I was there?"

Thank goodness! We've arrived at last! "It seems so."

"How do you know? Is this just Professor Dumbledore guessing, or..."

Snape froze. That information in Potter's brain was dangerous. He shifted the subject. "I told you to call me 'sir.'"

"Yes, sir, but how do you know...?"

"It is enough that we know. The important point is that the Dark Lord is now aware that you are gaining access to his thoughts and feelings. He has also deduced that the process is likely to work in reverse; that is to say, he has realized that he might be able to access your thoughts and feelings in return..."

"And he might try and make me do things? Sir?"

"He might." *And if that were all, I would feel much calmer about this.* "Which brings us back to Occlumency."

It was time, but Snape still had three more memories to put in the pensieve. Placing the tip of his wand against his temple, he thought the nonverbal spell Dumbledore had taught him and withdrew the memories of Nana, his return to Dumbledore, and that terrible Halloween night. Then Snape carefully removed the pensieve to a safe counter and turned to face Lily's son, his own wand ready in his hand.

"Stand up and take out your wand, Potter." The boy obeyed, seeming relieved that the desk was between them. There was still the prohibition against a student attacking a teacher, but Snape quickly dismissed it. "You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of."

"And what are you going to do?" Potter asked, his nervousness evident in his voice.

Explanation was necessary. Legilimency practiced against an unsuspecting target, except in battle, was unethical. "I am about to attempt to break into your mind. We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius curse... You will find that similar powers are needed for this... Brace yourself now..." As Snape spoke, he also checked his own mind to be sure his thoughts were still locked away. Then, gazing into the well-loved eyes, he cried, "*Legilimens!*"

It was a bizarre feeling, for up until this moment Snape's only experience with legilimency was reading the surface thoughts of someone about to fight him, or the projected thoughts of Dumbledore. Now it was as if a window opened in the front of his mind, and through that window he could see and

feel the thoughts flitting through Potter's brain. He projected an undefined negative feeling, and the memories responded as if trained.

A fat little boy — his cousin? — rode a red tricycle, and Snape himself felt the resentment at not receiving such toys . . . A dog chased a small Potter up a tree while others laughed . . . The Sorting Hat's voice told Potter he would do well in Slytherin — *He was almost sorted into Slytherin? Does Dumbledore know?* . . . Granger lay in the hospital after the disastrous experiment with Polyjuice Potion — *poor girl, muggle-born like Lily*, and Snape realized that the doors in his mind were being forced open . . . Dementors clustered around, and Snape cringed in remembered fear as he fought to keep his own vision of them away . . . A girl drew near, and Snape realized there was a sprig of mistletoe . . . Then Potter was yelling, "You're not watching it! It's private!"

Sudden burning pain hit Snape's right hand, and he broke the connection as he jerked hand and wand away from Potter's attack. Glancing down, he saw an angry red welt, like the mark of a whip, across his right wrist. *Interesting. The boy fought back because of the girl.*

"Did you mean to produce a Stinging hex?" he asked.

Potter had moved closer to the desk and fallen as he attacked. Now he clambered to his feet. "No," he answered, his voice hard and wary.

"I thought not. You let me get in too far. You lost control." Snape was watching for any sign that Potter had seen his thoughts as well.

"Did you see everything I saw?"

"Flashes of it. To whom did the dog belong?"

"My Aunt Marge."

Snape rotated the injured wrist, trying to relieve the sting. "Well, for a first attempt that was not as poor as it might have been. You managed to stop me eventually, though you wasted time and energy shouting. You must remain focused. Repel me with your brain and you will not need to resort to your wand."

"I'm trying, but you're not telling me how!"

"Manners, Potter," Snape replied, though he realized the boy had made a point. *I can't tell you how to do it because I don't always know how I do it. It just happens. You can't teach instinct. I can't teach anything with Lily staring at me out of James's face. Try something different, Severus.*

"Now, I want you to close your eyes."

Potter glared at Snape, clearly angry at being forced to reveal his thoughts.

If you don't want to show me what you're thinking, learn to block me. Your anger is hindering your concentration. "Clear your mind, Potter. Let go of all

emotion . . .” Yet the boy was not letting go of his emotions. He didn’t seem to be trying, his anger bubbling up so strongly that Snape could feel it even without eye contact. A familiar anger, boiling near the surface. “You’re not doing it, Potter . . . You will need more discipline than this . . . Focus, now . . .”

Then the passion began to diminish, the turmoil to lessen. It was a hopeful sign. Snape raised his wand. “Let’s go again . . . on the count of three . . . one — two — three — *Legilimens!*”

A great dragon reared up in attack, black scales glistening through the haze of fire and smoke, and then . . . Snape was startled to see Lily in front of him — Lily and James waving and smiling — *Is this my thought, given to Potter even with the green eyes closed?* Snape struggled to control his own feelings, and noticed only at that moment that the image was framed in a mirror, a mirror he recognized . . . which dissolved into the staring dead eyes of Cedric Diggory . . .

Potter was on the floor, howling NOOOoooo! as Snape broke contact and released him, nearly as shaken and distraught as the boy. But Snape recovered faster, now burning with anger himself. *I know where this comes from, this self-indulgent, lethal sentiment that’s going to get us all killed. He’s been wallowing in it at Grimmauld Place. There’s another one who never could control his emotions or his actions!*

“Get up!” he snapped at Potter. “Get up! You are not trying, you are making no effort, you are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!” *Handing the Dark Lord weapons!*

Potter stood, and Black’s uncontrolled, murderous anger blazed from Lily’s eyes. “I. Am. Making. An. Effort.” he forced out.

“I told you to empty yourself of emotion!”

“Yeah?” Potter snarled, and his mouth curled in a way James’s never had. “Well, I’m finding that hard at the moment.”

“Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord! Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily — weak people, in other words — they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!”

They confronted each other across the desk, fire and ice, and Snape could see the violence brewing behind the green eyes as his own mind began automatically to lock down in the face of an imminent attack. “I am not weak,” Potter hissed in a threatening whisper.

"Then prove it! Master yourself! Control your anger, discipline your mind! We shall try again! Get ready, now! *Legilimens!*"

A large man nailed a board over a slot . . . Dementors glided next to the lake at Hogwarts . . . Potter was running with a man, with Arthur Weasley, down a corridor toward a black door, but swerved aside down a flight of stairs . . .

"I KNOW!" Potter screamed. "I KNOW!"

Snape broke away again and stared down at Potter, once again on the floor. "What happened then, Potter?"

"I saw — I remembered. I've just realized . . ."

"Realized what?" A terrible feeling of apprehension was growing in Snape.

Potter looked up suddenly, "What's in the Department of Mysteries?"

Now fear began to overtake anger, and Snape could feel the blood drain from his face. "What did you say?"

"I said, what's in the Department of Mysteries, sir?"

"And why . . . would you ask such a thing?"

Potter's face took on a speculative look as he seemed to search Snape's features. "Because that corridor I've just seen — I've been dreaming about it for months — I've just recognized it — it leads to the Department of Mysteries . . . and I think Voldemort wants something from . . ."

Pain seared again. "I have told you not to say the Dark Lord's name!" But over and above the pain there was now well-defined and focused fear. *The Dark Lord has been trying to break into the Department of Mysteries for months, and Potter has been dreaming of the Department of Mysteries for months. They've been linked for months, this idiot boy and the Dark Lord, and we're only now finding out about it.* With an effort, Snape forced his own emotions into the background.

"There are many things in the Department of Mysteries, Potter, few of which you would understand and none of which concern you, do I make myself plain?" *And I thank Providence that I, too, am ignorant, for you now can never learn that information through me.*

"Yes," replied Potter, rubbing the scar on his forehead.

Once a week may not be enough. "I want you back here same time on Wednesday, and we will continue work then."

"Fine."

"You are to rid your mind of all emotion every night before sleep — empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?"

“Yes.”

“And be warned, Potter . . . I shall know if you have not practiced . . .”

“Right.” And Potter picked up his book bag and left the room.

Snape didn’t watch him go. Shaken to the core of his being, he moved mechanically to the pensieve to retrieve his thoughts. Only then did he realize how the relationship between himself and Potter had subtly changed. The stilted formality of ‘Professor’ and ‘Sir’ had disappeared, and they had spoken and interacted as equals. Equals caught in a strange mesh of mental connections that included Lily and Black and, most frightening, the Dark Lord, who had now touched both their minds. It was a net that Dumbledore had to be protected from at all costs.

Picking up the pensieve, Snape started for Dumbledore’s office, when another thought came to him. *Chased up a tree while everyone laughed. His childhood must have been miserable. Not what I imagined at all.*

Filling Dumbledore in on the extent of Potter’s contact with the Dark Lord and its implications was a matter of fifteen minutes. Dumbledore was concerned, and agreed that contact with Potter at this time could put them all into jeopardy. Then Snape went back to his rooms and tried sorting and reviewing everything he’d seen and felt that evening.

The summons came shortly before eleven, not a blinding, numbing insistence, but one strong enough that Snape knew he had to leave at once. Sneaking from the castle, he sent his patronus to Dumbledore with a request to be allowed out, and was soon disappearing from Hogsmeade.

Midnight Croydon was calm and peaceful as Snape made his quiet way to the headquarters building. Around him other Death Eaters were apparating in, all of them apparently as mystified as he. They filtered into the building in small groups, and were ushered into a now crowded interview chamber.

Lucius Malfoy was standing at the door, and pulled Snape aside as soon as he saw him. “They’ll all know quick enough,” he whispered, “but you’re going to get a preview. Somebody wants to see you.”

After the evening’s session with Potter, that didn’t sound like good news. Snape trailed reluctantly behind Malfoy down one of the basement corridors into a dim room where a group of people were gathered.

“Look who’s here,” chuckled a female voice, a sultry contralto that even after fourteen years Snape recognized instantly. “My little puppy dog’s come running to greet me at the door.”

Snape turned to the voice, registering as he did so the faces of Rabastan

and Rodolphus Lestrange, of Aloysius Mulciber, Antonin Dolohov, and Augustus Rookwood, all suddenly and inexplicably free of Azkaban prison. She stood behind them, raven hair brushed back away from her face, heavy-lidded eyes and pouting lips crinkled in what might pass for a smile. Snape felt his heart sink down to his feet, even as he prayed that his voice sounded warm and pleasant.

"Hello, Bella," he said. "Welcome home."

"My, my. You've grown up," Bella commented as she moved to Snape's side. "The last time I saw you, you were scarcely more than a teenager. How did you survive the interregnum? I'll bet you have a wife and children by now."

Snape realized to his embarrassment that he was blushing, and Malfoy crowed with laughter. "You're talking to a monk, Bella. Dumbledumb keeps him locked in a cell most of the year, and the month he gets free, he spends with books."

"Dumbledore? You're still teaching at Hogwarts?"

"Fourteen and a half years now," Snape replied. "It was that or join you in dementor heaven."

"Sounds like Dumbledore knows how to tighten the screws. How did you manage to slip the chain and get here tonight for the party?"

Once again Malfoy answered for Snape. "Madam Lestrange, you are looking at a double agent. Dumbledore thinks Severus spies for him when Severus really spies for us."

"Really?" Bella hooked a finger in the fastening of Snape's cloak and pulled him closer to her. "I bet you make a great spy."

"I do my best," Snape said, feeling like a schoolboy again.

Rodolphus edged over to the little group. "Unhand this boy, wife, or I shall have to do battle for your honor." He winked at Snape and Malfoy as he grasped both Bella's wrists and pulled her into a kiss. "Gad, I've missed you."

The two locked lips just as an underling stuck his head into the room. "The Dark Lord is ready for you now. Just go through that door, please."

The escapees from Azkaban were introduced to the throng of Death Eaters, many of whom had apparated in from the branch offices, and there was cheering and back slapping, especially at the news that the dementors now worked for the Dark Lord.

"The best part," Macnair shouted to the crowd, "is that the Ministry still doesn't believe in our existence. (*Cheers from the crowd.*) They're blaming the

escape on Sirius Black. (*Boos and jeers.*) And we are free to operate unchecked. (*Wild, tumultuous cheering.*)”

Of course, the whole evening degenerated into a mad party. At one o'clock in the morning, Snape found himself sitting next to Bella as she tried to twist his hair into ringlets. “You know,” she teased, “we really have to find you someone. It isn't right for a man as young as you to be forced to live like a priest.”

Snape 'd had just enough to drink to consider this highly amusing, thoughts of his father's demon being suspended in the general happy glow. “Just make sure she's dark,” he said, “with deep, mysterious eyes.”

“Ah, you like them hard to control.”

“Why should I control them? Some of the most fascinating women in the world were born to be controllers themselves.” Rodolphus, isolated in a corner, was beginning to get pugnacious, but Snape was not focused enough to care about him.

“I remember when I controlled you.” Bella shifted her attention from Snape's hair to the buttons on his jacket.

“Happiest time of my life.”

“T isn't fair. A young man like you shouldn't be wasting away in a cloister. I'm going to find you a woman. A good woman. One who'll beat you when you want beating.”

“I don't think I said anything about beating. Why not just someone who'll boss me around?”

“You got it, puppy dog. Now just point me in the direction of my husband, before he gets too antsy and tears your face off.”

A couple of hours later, it was Dumbledore's job to get Snape to stop giggling and generally sober up enough to teach classes.

* * *

By breakfast time, Snape was in acceptable condition, and Dumbledore left him to join the staff table. About twenty minutes later, Snape followed him down. For the most part, the Great Hall looked normal. Potter, Weasley, and Granger were deep in *The Daily Prophet*, so Snape assumed the news of the breakout was already public. Dumbledore and McGonagall were engaged in a private conversation, the seats on either side of them filled with teachers who were studiously not paying attention, while Dolores Umbridge scowled down the table at them, knowing there was no place she could insert herself

to listen. Snape sat at the far end from her, not trusting himself to eat anything but toast and coffee.

Flitwick joined him.

"You're looking a trifle peaked this morning, Severus. You're not ill, are you?"

"Nothing time won't cure," Snape replied.

"Have you heard the news? *The Daily Prophet* says ten prisoners escaped from Azkaban yesterday evening. The Ministry is claiming that Sirius..."

"Black is involved. Yes, I heard."

Flitwick peered at him. "It's in this morning's paper, which comes directly to the Hall, and which you have not yet picked up. Nor did you speak to anyone before speaking to me. So, did you have a pleasant evening? And did you get any sleep?"

Snape winced. "Yes and no, Sherlock," was all he said. *How many people know about my double life? How many other teachers are being admitted to the Order? I hope that's how Flitwick knows.*

More information was filtering through the grapevine as teachers leaving the table for their classrooms ostensibly greeted teachers newly arrived for breakfast. "Good morning, Filius — Severus," bubbled Sprout in passing, managing to whisper "Trelawney — Hagrid — probation" as she passed.

Throughout the day it was the same. Tiny groups of teachers would form for thirty seconds, break, and reform in different groups in different places. There wasn't a lot to pass from person to person, but it was good to know the network was functioning.

Wednesday morning brought a surprise. Pinned to the house notice boards and to the staff room door was Educational Decree Number Twenty-Six: 'Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.'

Snape and Sprout, both of whose houses were on the dungeon level, met in front of the staff room and read the notice together.

"That power-hungry, interfering old..." Sprout began, but then saw the look on Snape's face. "You have an idea. You're going to pull a Lockhart on her, aren't you? Spill, Severus."

"I can't do it myself because I'm under orders to stay on her good side, but you can. Especially since you are so good at acting innocent." He bent and whispered in Sprout's ear, and she grinned.

At the end of breakfast, a group of brave Hufflepuffs remained at their

table after the bell rang for first classes. Sprout, seeming casual and unaware, contrived to pass by Umbridge as she left the staff table and was stopped.

"Isn't that your house," Umbridge snapped, pointing at the loiterers. "Tell them the bell's rung and their classes will begin soon."

Sprout smiled a timid and diffident smile. "I'm sorry, Professor," she replied. "That information is not strictly related to the subject I'm paid to teach," and she marched past and out of the hall without another word, managing to give her students a sly, conspiratorial wink as she did so.

All day, Umbridge found herself facing situations that had nothing to do with academic subjects and teachers who refused to disobey Educational Decree Number Twenty-Six, at least not in Umbridge's presence. By supper time, Professor Umbridge was very short-tempered indeed.

Wednesday ended unpleasantly with Potter's second occlumency lesson. Even before the boy arrived, Snape was regretting his decision to have two lessons in one week. Dumbledore'd said one, and though Snape felt Potter needed more frequent work if he was to have even a small chance of success, the experience was so distasteful to Snape that he wondered if it would be counterproductive.

"Did you feel anything Monday night?" Snape asked after Potter sat down in the chair opposite.

"I thought I wasn't supposed to. Sir."

"If you think I am going to let you get away with not answering the question, you are very much mistaken."

"No. I didn't feel anything. I emptied my mind like you told me to."

"We shall see."

They stood facing each other and Snape began, already knowing what he was looking for. He projected an image of the Dark Lord, and was rewarded with the memory of wild, almost insane laughter. He broke off contact immediately.

"You lied to me."

Potter glared back defiantly. "You don't know when that happened."

"Yes, I do. It happened Monday night, the moment the Dark Lord received word that the Azkaban breakout was successful. I am a mediocre legilimens, Potter, but even I could pull that out of you with absurd ease."

"But I wasn't asleep when it happened. You told me to empty my mind before I went to sleep."

"I didn't ask you if you dreamt anything. I asked you if you felt anything. You lied to me. Now, we shall continue."

It started with another string of bad childhood memories, but Snape wasn't looking for these. Although unpleasant, they didn't make Potter defensive enough. Snape was looking for the girl. "Tell me about Miss Chang," Snape said quietly.

The girl's image surfaced at once, and Potter did nothing to stop it, although Snape could now feel anger rising in him like a tide. "Mistletoe," Snape prompted, and got the image that Potter had reacted to on Monday.

"Stay away from that!" Potter yelled, the Stinging hex flying from his wand to be deflected by Snape, who was expecting it this time.

Snape broke contact. "Physical reaction. Typical Gryffindor move. No matter how you're attacked—verbally, mentally—you always react physically. But physical reaction won't keep me out. It won't keep me from seeing the image. And you won't be facing the Dark Lord with a wand in your hand either. You have to learn to block this mentally."

"So teach me how."

"Try thinking of your mind as two compartments. One is there to be seen, and the other is for hiding things. Put the image of Miss Chang in the second compartment and close it off so that even you can't see it. Then, no matter what I do, don't open that compartment."

"I don't have any compartments."

"Anger, any strong emotion, gets in the way. You can only keep me out if you can learn to regard me clinically, coldly, and leave your emotions out of it. Let's try again."

But it was useless. Either Potter would not, or he could not, let go of his anger. Snape deflected hex after hex, and saw image after image. Finally, drained, he stopped.

"You know, Potter, if I got you angry enough, I could watch your whole life like watching a movie. You are that open. Your next session is on Monday. Please try working on emotional control during the next few days. Try putting feelings aside and viewing everything dispassionately."

After Potter left, Snape sat for a while in front of his cold fireplace, his head in his hands. *James was like that. He never could hide his feelings. When the Dark Lord came that night, did James try to protect Lily? And did the Dark Lord read where she was just as easily as I saw Miss Chang in Harry's mind? James would have faced him with a wand, fighting. And he would have given Lily to the Dark Lord right there, even as he died trying to save her.*

Snape informed Dumbledore of the signal lack of any progress at all in

the occlumency sessions, and of Potter's lying. Dumbledore asked to be informed only of any change in Potter or, if there was no change, a monthly report. They decided that a lesson once a week was sufficient, especially since it appeared that too many sessions might cause Potter to rebel.

And then there was Croydon.

The next summons came the very next day, Thursday. Snape left after supper and was asked to wait at the entrance by a junior level Death Eater. A few minutes later, he was joined by Lucius Malfoy and Bella Lestranger, who smiled and said, "Good. Now you can show me around your laboratory."

A protest formed immediately in Snape's mind, but he never voiced it for Malfoy was making faces at him over Bella's shoulder. Instead he replied, "Certainly," and led them upstairs where he released the magical locks and ushered both into his fiefdom.

Bella wrinkled her nose as she sniffed the air. "I'm not convinced this is a useful setup," she stated. "You only come in once a week. What happens if we need supplies in the meantime?"

"Why does this concern you?"

"I'm in charge of Operations now." Behind Bella's back, Malfoy was nodding confirmation.

"Both Operations and the clinic are more than amply stocked. And you can always send for me to make a special trip down. As you've done tonight. The inconvenience is minor, whereas the damage that could be done by giving unqualified personnel access to brewing potions is enormous."

"The Dark Lord thinks you're being too secretive."

"No, he doesn't. You're the one who likes to poke around in everything." Malfoy was making hissing noises and emergency stop gestures, but Snape ignored him. Instead he continued, "Why don't we ask for an immediate interview with the Dark Lord and both explain our positions to him."

There was a pause, and Snape could practically see the gears turning in Bella's brain. "No," she said at last. "It's too minor an issue to waste his time with."

"I doubt he would consider the total collapse of his potions supply a minor issue." Snape stepped to the row of cords that attached to bells in the support staff area. A moment later a messenger appeared at the laboratory door. "Please request that the Dark Lord grant an interview this evening to me, Mrs. Lestranger, and Mr. Malfoy." The messenger was gone at once.

"This really isn't necessary," said Bella.

"I think it is," replied Snape.

To the surprise of all three, the interview was granted at once. With all three standing before him, the Dark Lord addressed Snape first. “We know, Potions Master, that you are not pleased with our desire to give our personnel in Operations access to your laboratory. You will explain your position.”

Snape explained. He explained in excruciating detail. It was hard to tell if his words were making an impression. “Lord,” he said finally, “if they are allowed into the laboratory, I can no longer be responsible for the quality of your potions. What if one of them decides it is too cool, turns up the heat, turns it back down, and doesn’t tell me. I’d be giving your people doses of wound healing medicine that made them bleed more instead of less. No offense to your new head of Operations, but she doesn’t know the basics of advanced potion brewing. I know. I used to tutor her. She couldn’t even tell you what H_2SO_4 was.”

The Dark Lord fixed his gaze on Bella, who turned crimson and looked at the floor.

Seizing his advantage, Snape pressed it home. “Please, Lord, keep them out of my laboratory. Or let me leave Hogwarts and tend it twenty-four hours a day. Or get another Potions Master. I would rather serve you as a soldier on the front lines of battle than supply you with potions whose quality I could not guarantee.”

Bella lost. The Dark Lord pronounced that the laboratory would remain under the exclusive control of Snape, and that any person found entering it without express authorization would be punished.

Lucius Malfoy was pleased. Bella Lestranger was not. *I’ve made an enemy, perhaps, but winning this battle was worth it.*

By the time of Snape’s regular Saturday trip to Croydon, things were truly being shaken up at headquarters. Bella Lestranger had clearly finessed a power play and was now, with her husband Rodolphus, the Dark Lord’s lieutenant for all of Great Britain. Her only disappointment was the continued influence of Lucius Malfoy. Battle lines between Malfoy and the Lestranges were being drawn, and Bella was out for blood.

Luckily for Malfoy, the Dark Lord was not entirely blind to Bella’s shortcomings. She’d worked hard to persuade him to send Malfoy out to one of the branch offices, but Malfoy’s value as a contact with the Ministry of Magic was too great, and he remained in charge of the London/Croydon headquarters.

It was in the context of this duel for power that Snape found he had unwittingly placed himself in Malfoy’s camp. The confrontation between him and

Bella over access to the laboratory highlighted certain areas of weakness in her leadership abilities, and while her energy, creativity, and devotion kept her in charge of coordinating all Operations in the country, her authority to intervene in the internal structure of the various branches was reduced. As a result, Malfoy valued Snape even more highly, while Bella . . .

"She's already got Macnair, and she's after you now, you know," was Malfoy's way of putting it as the two met for tea in the staff lounge. "At least that's what some of my contacts tell me."

"That could be interpreted in a variety of ways."

"She means it in a variety of ways. She'd like to seduce you over to her side. That would strengthen her and weaken me. If she isn't successfully in wooing you, she'll try to discredit you or eliminate you. No more power to her, but less for me. A dangerous enemy, that one."

"She was like that even in school. I've been wooed before. It's a carrot and stick operation. Rabastan and Rodolphus were the stick. Protection from them was the carrot. It worked quite well."

"I'm sorry you've gotten caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Things were nicer before. Part of me is beginning to regret the recent depopulation of Azkaban."

It was a dangerous thing for Malfoy to say, and Snape was keenly aware of being made part of a small conspiracy. "How would you like me to handle attempts at seduction?"

"It's a hard thing I'm going to ask you to do, but do you think you could string her along? Make her think that you might be for sale if the price is right? It could buy me some time, and in that time she'll have more opportunities for making mistakes. Ultimately, I think, she'll bring herself down."

The branch offices were experiencing changes, too. At the end of January, Yaxley was unceremoniously booted out of the position at Cardiff, which had seen almost no growth and very little in the way of action. Nott was ordered down from Glasgow to replace Yaxley in the hope that new management would spur the office to greater things, and Yaxley returned to Croydon.

Avery was fortunate enough to retain his control of the Lincoln office, while Rabastan Lestrange took over Nott's job in Glasgow. The attempt to establish an office in York was abandoned in favor of Manchester, where Rookwood was dispatched to set things up. Finally, the Norwich office opened under Dolohov, using some of the people from Lincoln as a core group.

In three weeks, the newly released lieutenants from Azkaban had managed to consolidate their power in the most important positions in the or-

ganization, with the sole major exception of Croydon itself. There was a sense that it was only a matter of time before both Avery and Nott would be replaced, and then Malfoy would be isolated in London.

Seduction started the first weekend in February. Snape had hardly been in his laboratory for ten minutes before Bella herself pushed open the door and walked in. Behind her was a younger female Death Eater with long dark hair and sultry brown eyes.

"I would prefer that you knock," said Snape. "Letting drafts in like that could spoil some of the Dark Lord's favorite potions, and then I would have to complain."

Bella ignored the comment. "I have a job for you. Top priority. This is Delphina Vaughn, a distant cousin of mine. She's being groomed in Operations for field work and needs self-defense training. You start today, come in three times during the week whenever you can make it, and finish next Saturday. The Dark Lord has particular interest in this one, and will be watching you." Then, abruptly, Bella spun around and left the room.

Snape regarded the young woman for a moment. He guessed her to be under twenty-five years old. "Just sit in that chair," he told her, "and don't touch anything. It will take me about fifteen minutes to finish up here, and then we can go to the training room." As he worked, Snape could sense that she was watching him, sizing him up. *I wonder what, exactly, Bella has assigned her to do.*

The answer came sooner than he expected. In the training room, Snape started with the first routine lessons on falling, rolling, and recovering. Vaughn's first falls were clumsy, but she soon got the hang of it and was hitting the mat like a gymnast. On her tenth fall, however, she seemed to twist her ankle, and sat there for a moment, not even trying to stand.

"Are you all right?" Snape asked.

She nodded, and he walked over to her, holding out his hand to help her rise. She grasped his wrist and rose smoothly to her feet, clearly uninjured but now close enough to him to clasp her hands behind his neck, leaning against him as if for support. "That was fun," she whispered. "I know some good falls, too. Would you like to try them?"

Snape remained very still, acutely aware that he was as taut as a strung bow. "I think we had best stick to the lesson plan," he said coldly, his voice sounding hoarse in his own ears.

"Whatever you say, Professor," she teased, and instruction continued by the book, but now every move, every command and response was charged

with flirtatious tension, a commodity Miss Vaughn manipulated to perfection. It was insulting that Bella would think he could be ensnared in such a blatant fashion, and yet Snape was unable to ignore the effect that the sight, the touch, the very scent of this woman had on him.

When the lesson was over she glanced at him sideways, veiling her eyes with long lashes. "When is our next lesson? Tomorrow?"

"I don't know," was Snape's curt reply. "It depends on what's happening at Hogwarts."

"I hope it's tomorrow. I'd like to see you again soon." She stepped forward as if to kiss him on the cheek, but Snape pulled back an arm's length, then watched as she pouted her way to the door. "Next time," she said, "maybe we'll have more fun." And then she was gone.

Retreating quickly to the sanctuary of his laboratory, Snape sat for a while, rubbing his forehead with one hand. *Well, Bella said she was going to get me someone, but I honestly didn't think it would be like this. Does she think I'm going through a mid-life crisis, or something? I'm too young for a mid-life crisis.— Too young to live like a priest — that's what Bella said. I must have looked like a fool tonight, trying not to stare at a girl young enough to be... well, my younger sister.* Snape stopped, amused by the situation. *Why am I thinking of myself as ancient and of her as a child? I'm definitely not ancient, and someone in her twenties is certainly no child.*

Apparating back to Hogsmeade, Snape sent his patronus up to Dumbledore and was admitted. The trudge up the hill in the snow gave him time to cool down, and Snape was feeling relatively calm as he entered his office, there to come face to face with Dumbledore.

"Here you are, Severus. I thought we might talk. To come straight to the point, that was by far the most vibrant patronus you have ever sent me, yet it also gave me the sense that all was not well. Did you have a... pleasant evening?"

"Doesn't this rank as a violation of privacy?"

"Well, I suppose it does. And normally I would have nothing to say about your personal life. But this was your normal visit to... London, and it was hard to imagine anything... well, normal... I mean usual... that would have produced such a... glow."

Dumbledore looked so confused, embarrassed, and expectant, all at the same time, that Snape could only sit down at his desk and burst out laughing. Several moments later, after he managed to control himself, he said, "Headmaster, I have a beautiful young woman who is trying to seduce me."

"You are joking."

"Thank you, sir. You have just done wonders for my morale."

"I did not mean..."

"Naturally not. It just slipped out, Freudian-like."

"Now Severus, you have caught me unawares and unprepared, and it is hardly fair..."

"I've always suspected that you think of me as a tool rather than a human being, and now I have proof."

"That is not..."

"Why can't I enjoy life a little? After all, it's not like I was a hundred and..." Snape looked shrewdly at Dumbledore, "fifty? ... one? ... two? I'm not out of the game yet, you know."

"The last time you giggled like this, you had been drinking."

"And enjoyed every moment!" Snape stopped, suddenly calm and wary again. "Professor," he said, "Bella Lestrangle has brought in a temptress she claims is her cousin to entice me into her camp and leave Lucius Malfoy isolated in a headquarters power struggle."

"Ah," said Dumbledore, nodding, "now I understand. This is not a suddenly blossoming relationship. It is a trap. And a rather heavy-handed trap by the sound of it."

"I'm supposed to go back three times in the middle of the week for her defensive training, one on one, and finish next Saturday. I find the whole thing offensive, that Bella thinks I'm so starved for affection that I'll walk right into this one in such a short time. The young woman also seems to feel she can twist me around her little finger. Although she is very attractive. Very."

"Was she using any spells?"

"No. I detected none. Not that she won't in the future. This is going to be a very tense week."

"Is there any way you could take advantage of the situation?"

"I hope you don't mean play along with her? There are certain parts of my life I'd like to keep private, and the idea that Bella Lestrangle would get a detailed account... You have the right to ask a lot of me, Headmaster, but there I draw the line."

"Well, it was a thought. You have been rather tense lately."

"Now you're joking at my expense."

"Why not? You joked at mine."

"Touché."

“Seriously, though,” continued Dumbledore, staring into the empty fireplace, “there are many different layers of intimacy, some of them quite superficial. This young lady might be a source of information. It might also be valuable to have you neither in Malfoy’s camp nor in Bella’s. That way both would be trying to lure you to them, maybe with offers of higher status, and Riddle would see you as independent of faction and therefore more devoted to him. It could work very much to our advantage.”

“It could backfire. They might both see me as another rival and conspire to get rid of me first.”

“I leave it up to you, Severus. You have a much better feel for the situation on the ground than I do. But do consider it.”

“Just out of curiosity, if I did follow your plan, would I have to report on it to the Order? Sirius Black is another person I’d rather not have know anything about my private life.”

“It would be entirely between you and me. Think about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Snape spent most of Sunday thinking about it, then decided to return to Croydon that evening. He knew Bella would see this as an indication that he was falling into her trap, but it also left him with more flexibility later in the week. He still hadn’t determined how he would handle the whole situation, but there was something to be said for playing it by ear.

The best part was that Snape didn’t have to worry about Umbridge spying on him. That Lady had put both Hagrid and Trelawney on probation and was now observing all of their classes and maintaining a running evaluation that had the two teachers on the edge of nervous breakdowns.

The good part was that it had Umbridge on the edge of a physical breakdown. In order to accommodate this killing schedule, she’d had to change the times of all her own classes, teaching Dark Arts in the early morning and evening, and also rearrange the times of Hagrid’s and Trelawney’s classes where they conflicted. It was only a matter of time before the woman suffered a total collapse (some of the teachers had a pool going), and in the meantime Umbridge had lost interest in Snape’s actions.

So, after a fairly leisurely and meditative Sunday, Snape ate supper in the Great Hall and then left the grounds and apparated to Croydon.

Miss Vaughn stuck her head into the laboratory less than five minutes after Snape arrived. “Oh good! You’re here. I was hoping we could continue the lessons today. Frankly, I think five lessons isn’t enough. I’m hoping you can be here every day this week.”

"That, I fear, is not possible. Let's just take this lesson business one day at a time and see how you progress. Who are you going up against, anyway?"

The question seemed to confuse her. "I really don't know yet," she finally said. "They'll tell me after I complete my training."

Which means you probably aren't going out into the field at all. You probably have a nice, safe desk job, and the field assignment is a ploy to convince me that lessons are necessary. "Wait there a few minutes and I'll be with you."

The session started with a review of the previous day's moves, then progressed to holds that used the opponent's own weight and movement against him. One week was definitely not enough time to teach the more advanced moves, but the simpler ones could be covered. Especially since it appeared that Miss Vaughn had excellent muscle control and coordination.

The instruction of necessity involved considerable physical contact. Snape had first to disarm or throw Vaughn, then he had to show her the holds to use on him and have her practice the throwing. She inevitably turned each move into one with more contact than was needed, and clearly derived pleasure from teasing and flirting with him.

They came to one move where he feigned an attack, and she was to use his forward momentum to pull him past her and trip him. Instead, she pulled him forward and then blocked him with her own body. They stood for that instant, face to face, touching, and then she kissed him.

Snape stood very still, his heartbeat throbbing in his ears, and after a moment she stepped back. "What's wrong?" she demanded. "Don't you like me?"

"I hardly know you."

"Why should that get in the way? Or maybe you just don't like girls."

Refusing to be baited, Snape crossed his arms over his chest and regarded her thoughtfully. "Maybe I don't like pushy, aggressive girls."

"I can be sweet and soft."

"Quite the chameleon, aren't you?"

"Come on, why do we have to be so serious?" She reached forward and pulled his arms away from his chest, placing them behind her at the small of her back. Suddenly, Snape wanted her to kiss him again, and he ceased thinking or caring about Bella. She leaned forward, and their lips touched.

Intensely aware of his own tension, Snape gingerly tried returning some of the pressure against his mouth. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she stepped back to stare at him in wonder.

"You've never done this before! Cousin Bella said you lived like a monk, but I didn't... Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

Snape turned away, staring down at his hands. "Bella put you up to this, didn't she, Miss Vaughn?"

"No. Of course not. I mean... Well, yes she did. She said you needed to relax, a little recreation. She says the way you live isn't healthy for a young man. And I agree with her. I do. I mean at first I thought it would be more like a job, but most of the men I meet, well they just turn into octopuses around me, all hands, you know. But you — it was fun being the aggressive one, you seemed kind of nice, in a straight-laced, reserved kind of way. Look, I'm sorry. But you know, maybe I could give you some lessons."

"What would you teach me?"

"How to kiss. You don't want the next woman to know you're an amateur, do you?" She scooted around to the other side of him so that they faced each other again. "It's easy, really. Just put your arms around my back, and lean forward a bit. Relax the muscles in your face and open your mouth just a little. And when I press my mouth against yours, you just push back at exactly the same pressure."

It was like following instructions in a training course, but this time the kiss was far more satisfactory and lasted longer. "There," she said as they separated, "that was much better."

"You know, Miss Vaughn, I could get used to this very easily."

She had silver laughter. "Silly, you just kissed me. You can stop being formal. Call me Phina. It's what my friends call me."

The lessons, both kinds, continued for another hour. At the end, Phina was far more proficient at her studies than Snape was at his. "That's all right," Phina assured him. "You just need more practice."

Back at Hogwarts, Snape tried to figure out where all of this was going. *I'm using her for my own ends. But then she's using me for her own ends. As long as we're honest about that, is it so bad?*

Monday was Potter's occlumency lesson, but on Tuesday he could go back to Croydon. Snape found himself looking forward to the next lesson with some pleasure.

It was a trick of fate that Snape's lessons with Phina were the only bright spot in his life that week. Potter continued to be dismally inept in his occlumency, Hagrid continued to be bruised and insist nothing was wrong, Dumbledore remained aloof from everything to keep Umbridge from exploding, while Umbridge continued her harassment of both Hagrid and Trelawney.

Trelawney had started visiting the staff room at odd moments, a place she'd never frequented before, clearly a little worse for having monitored the quality of the sherry in the kitchens. Hogwarts was running out of pleasant places to congregate with one's colleagues.

But in Croydon all was light and sunshine. Phina was bright, cheerful, amusing, gentle and, it turned out, a great listener. She was an apt and attentive pupil who always practiced her homework assignments (so different from Potter), but she never pushed or made demands on Snape. He was actually beginning to enjoy her company, despite the fact that academics were not her strong point.

"Have you ever gone to a play," Snape asked on Thursday, their fourth session.

"Is that like Quidditch?" was Phina's immediate response.

"No, it's something muggles do. A group of them performs a story in front of an audience. Plays can be quite entertaining. No magic allowed, though."

"Odd thought. Do you mean we'd pretend to be muggles? What would I wear?" She was dressed in midnight blue robes, rather plainly cut, almost like an evening coat.

"Without the hat, you'd be fine as you are. A little overdressed maybe, but no one would really notice."

"All right. Sounds like fun."

It took but a moment to leave headquarters, then apparate to Hammer-smith, where *Macbeth* was playing at the Lyric Theatre. Phina was giggling.

"What's so funny?"

"Cousin Bella was watching. She's going to be so pleased that I got you to go off alone with me. I don't think I'll tell her we were watching a play."

"What will you tell her?"

"I'll make up something. I always do."

"About me?"

"Not yet. I haven't known you long enough. You're not the first one she's set me after, you know."

Snape thought about this for a moment. "She's only been out of Azkaban for a month, and you would have been what? eleven? when she was sent there. Either you started young, or she works very fast."

"All right, I lied. But I'll still make something up."

The production was somewhat *avant garde*, but lost none of its dramatic impact. Phina giggled over the witch scenes, but followed Lady Macbeth

with fascination. "They're like Cousin Bella and Rodolphus," she whispered. Then, as Macbeth waded deeper into murder, and Lady Macbeth sank into madness, she gripped Snape's arm, practically holding her breath until it was all over.

"They never lie," Phina announced as the two exited the theatre into a chilly London night.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Muggle witches. They never lie. Macbeth was told the truth. He was fooled by the truth. He assumed he understood the prophecies, but he didn't. That's what destroyed him."

The shock of what she said ran through Snape like a jolt of electricity. Six months earlier, he himself had been thinking the same thing about Dumbledore and a prophetic truth that had lured the Dark Lord to his doom. Was Dumbledore like Shakespeare's witches?

First escorting Phina back to Croydon, Snape then apparated to Hogsmeade, where the gate opened for him without bringing Dumbledore down. Which was just as well, since Snape needed time to think. *Banquo said it: But 'tis strange: and oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray us. Did Dumbledore trick me into betraying the Dark Lord?*

Even though it was late, Snape did not go to sleep. Instead he started making notes to help him order his thoughts.

Question 1: *Did Dumbledore know that Trelawney was going to make a prophecy?*

Probably not. Prophetic utterances are neither forecast nor predictable. Trelawney herself would not know. At least, not if it was a true prophecy. The possibility exists that the scene was staged for my benefit, though I would not normally credit Trelawney with acting ability.

Task: *Find a way to demonstrate that Trelawney's prediction was the real thing.*

Question 2: *Did Dumbledore arrange for me to come to Hogsmeade that day to overhear the prophecy?*

The Dark Lord sent me to interview for a position. What prompted him to do that at exactly that time? Might Dumbledore have found a way to arrange it? And how would Dumbledore have known that I would overhear the prophecy? No one suggested that I follow him upstairs to listen outside a closed door.

Task: *Find out why the Dark Lord decided to send me to Hogsmeade that day.*

Question 3: Assuming that the prophecy was real and my overhearing it a coincidence, why then did Dumbledore let me leave and return to the Dark Lord with that information?

If I had just received a prophecy about a child who would destroy the Dark Lord, I would want to do everything possible to protect that child until he was old enough to fight. Letting the Dark Lord know could result in the child's death. So why didn't Dumbledore use a memory spell on me? Didn't he suspect that I was a Death Eater?

Task: Find out what, if anything, Trelawney knows about the aftermath of the prophecy incident. (Does she even know she prophesied?)

Tired now, Snape went to bed. He spent the next couple of days trying to work out how he could gather the information he wanted.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1996

Saturday was calm and peaceful, primarily because three-quarters of the students were in Hogsmeade, and Snape did not have supervisory duties with them. It was only at supper time, with the students back on the grounds and his normal weekly trip to Croydon about to start, that Snape realized the questions about Dumbledore's actions had chased all thoughts of Phina Vaughn from his head.

I suppose that's evidence that I'm not really infatuated with her. I feel better about a casual... friendship? than about a relationship.

The one who met Snape at the door in Croydon, however, was Lucius Malfoy.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to stab me in the back?"

"Why Malfoy... whatever are you talking about?"

"Word is Bella dangled a skirt in front of you and you're dancing to her tune now."

"Dancing. That might be fun. The word is wrong. Oh, yes, Bella is trying, and I'm not running away, but I haven't spoken to Bella in a week, and no one has talked to me about what 'side' I'm on."

Malfoy glared, stepped back, and then began to relax a little. "So you didn't fall straight into Bella's arms?"

"Now there's an unpleasant image. No, you can rest easy. Bella doesn't own me. Of course, you don't own me either."

"Wouldn't dream of it. All I want is you, safe and sound in your laboratory and not working against me."

"It sounds like we agree on something."

Malfoy and Snape went back to their respective stations, where Snape checked the potions that were brewing. The Polyjuice Potion was almost ready, and he estimated a Wednesday return to bottle it and start testing it. He wasn't as concerned about the Veritaserum, since he already had what he wanted. He brewed it now only in case the Dark Lord inquired.

A little later Phina came for what was supposed to be her last lesson.

"You seem distant today," she complained after a warm-up and the first few throws. "Are you tired of me already?"

"You've learned what you were supposed to. Technically we're almost done."

"That's it? One week and a couple of kisses, and we're through?"

"I hardly see a future for us. You're going out into the field."

She was silent for a moment. "What if I wasn't going into the field?"

"Are you authorized to tell me that?"

"It's just a 'what if.' Can't you hypothesize?"

Snape registered that Phina's vocabulary seemed to have miraculously expanded. "All right, hypothetically speaking, if you weren't going out into the field, I might invite you to dinner. But I can't until you're authorized to tell me what you're really doing. Until then, we have no future, and it's useless trying to pretend we do."

Phina dropped the subject, but her face wore a strangely calculating expression throughout the rest of the self-defense lesson.

Before apparating back to Hogwarts, Snape rechecked his potions and realized the Polyjuice would be ready earlier than he had calculated. *Looks like I'm coming back on Monday. I'll have to reschedule with Potter.*

That was the action of a moment the next day. Outside the Great Hall just before a leisurely Sunday breakfast, Snape pulled Potter aside and informed him that Remedial Potions lessons were being switched to Wednesdays. Potter seemed relieved at the postponement, but otherwise said nothing.

Croydon was back to normal on Monday, and Snape saw neither Phina nor Malfoy. He checked his potions, bottling small amounts to take back to Hogwarts and test, then got ready to leave. On the way out he saw Avery heading for the interview room.

"What brings you to London? I thought you were in Lincoln?" Snape said in greeting.

"Special assignment. Got to hurry now. He's waiting."

Snape delayed, hoping to hear something, but eventually returned to Hogwarts none the wiser as to what Avery was doing in London.

Wednesday's occlumency lesson with Potter was dismal as usual. Even young Dursley's pranks had become boring, since the muggle boy had no creativity whatsoever, his mind centering entirely on punching, stealing, predictable name calling, and toilets. Potter kept insisting that he was trying to clear his mind of emotions, but Snape knew he was lying. They were going nowhere.

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - T W O

MIND GAMES

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1996

The following Saturday was the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. The only interesting thing about it was assessing Ginny Weasley's performance as a Seeker, and watching Potter and the Weasley twins try to conceal their bitter disappointment at not being able to play, that and the spectacular unity and involvement of the Slytherin stands in their drive to knock Gryffindor out of competition.

Louder than the stands of either of the two competing houses, the Slytherins set up a constant roar of 'Weasley is our King,' clearly flustering the Gryffindor Keeper, who missed save after save. The new Gryffindor beaters were more of a comedy team than Quidditch players, and the only reason Gryffindor didn't lose by 390 to 80 was Ginny's near miraculous capture of the Snitch, making the score a more respectable 240 to 230. Slytherin was now favored to win the Quidditch Cup. Snape tactfully stayed away from McGonagall for the rest of the afternoon, and didn't mention the word 'Quidditch' once at supper.

That evening at Croydon started out normally. Snape spent most of the time in his laboratory, a little disappointed that his training sessions with Phina were now over. *Maybe I should have done something more to show Bella I was interested in her cousin. Maybe her assignment could have be lengthened.*

Snape also paid a couple of visits to the staff lounge, just to see who was there. He was almost hoping to see Peter Pettigrew, thinking that he could start an acquaintance that would eventually allow him to get information about Dumbledore and the Fidelius Charm, or about the Dark Lord's actions just before the death of the Potters, but headquarters was remarkably quiet, and there were few people in the halls, none in the lounge.

Just as Snape was about to leave, that changed. Without warning, the mark on his arm began to sting fiercely. Snape locked the last of his cabinets, shut up the laboratory, and hurried to the interview room. Death Eaters were coming in the main entrance, having apparated from all over the southern district, offices were emptying and soon several dozen people were gathered in the interview room, Bella and Rodolphus Lestrage prominent among them, looking decidedly worried. Malfoy was there, too, his cold face unreadable.

The Dark Lord appeared.

"You will explain how it is that you have misled me."

Bella spoke. "My Lord, we got you inside. It was more than anyone before us was able to accomplish."

"It was not what was promised. Malfoy, you will speak."

"Lord, this is why we must continue to use employees of the Ministry, and the potions of deceit that my staff provide. Only select functionaries of the Ministry know their way around the Department of Mysteries. If we go blundering in without knowing where we're going, we'll be detected, maybe even apprehended."

The Dark Lord turned his crimson gaze on Bella again.

Knowing herself to be under attack, Bella began to look for someone to blame. "Lord, I believe that a great part of our problem was the ineptitude of those who worked on this task before us. They not only failed, they alerted the Ministry to our attempts and made them more alert to our presence."

"Avery," was all that the Dark Lord said.

Snape felt sorry for Avery as his old school colleague stepped forward. *I guess this raid was the reason he was pulled in from Lincoln last Monday. Tough luck if Bella sacrifices him on the altar of her ambition.*

"Lord, we haven't alerted the Ministry. The Ministry still doesn't believe we exist. The only ones who have any idea of our attempts to enter the Department of Mysteries are Dumbledore's people, and they have to use spells of concealment so that the Ministry doesn't know they're there. But if we go in fighting instead of by stealth, and leave unconscious or dead wizards for the Ministry to find the next day, they will know we're there, and we'll be further from our goal than ever."

Unconscious or dead wizards? Was someone injured tonight? Someone I know?

"Snape. Tell us of Dumbledore's people."

Stepping forward diffidently, Snape tried to look at neither Bella nor

Malfoy. "Lord, the Order's watch on the Department of Mysteries is a routine that they established after the incident with Arthur Weasley in December. One of them is on guard each night. They've become a bit lax about it since nothing has been happening, or at least they had. If I understand correctly, after tonight they'll redouble their watch."

The Dark Lord turned to Bella. "This concerns me, as well. Not only have you failed in your mission, Dumbledore is once again aware of our attempts and will increase his precautions. What has been done with the one we disposed of?"

"We wiped his memory and took him to Devon. We left him bound on the moors. It'll be days before he's found." Bella seemed disappointed that it wasn't worse, but Snape feared the bitter cold of a February night.

"Is this true?" The Dark Lord fixed his gaze on Snape.

"No, Lord. The instant they realize he's not at his post, they'll search for him. Dumbledore can locate any of his people in minutes if he really wants to. They'll recognize the memory spell and know where he was attacked."

"Then he must be killed and his body disposed of."

"I'll go myself," said Bella.

"No, I want you here. Send an operative."

"It will take me only a few minutes to explain where he can be found."

"Good." The Dark Lord turned to the assembled Death Eaters. "If any of you has information that will assist in this task, you will not keep it from us. If any of you conceives of a plan, however poor its chances of success might seem, you will bring it to us at once. You may now go, excepting the Lestranges, Malfoy, and Avery. And you as well Snape, in case we have questions about charms or potions."

"Let me first show my agent where to find Dumbledore's man," Bella asked.

"Lord," Snape said quietly, "may I also go to lock things away in the laboratory. I left there hurriedly at your summons. It would only take five minutes."

"Go, both of you," the Dark Lord replied. "Return quickly."

Snape rushed to the lab. Nothing needed locking down, but now he had a moment alone. He couldn't apparate through the defenses of headquarters or of Hogwarts, but neither of them would stop a patronus. In all his years in the service of the Dark Lord, Snape had never heard anyone allude to using a patronus as a messenger, or of using a patronus at all. He prayed that the

idea was so alien to the organization that even if seen, his fox would not be recognized.

Throwing open a window, Snape concentrated. *The one on guard tonight was attacked. They've bound and left him on the Devon moors, but are going now to kill him. You must work fast.* Then silvery Renard sped north on the wings of thought, while Snape rushed back for the Dark Lord's meeting.

In the corridor outside the interview chamber, Snape passed Bella and a tall blond Death Eater. They were walking slowly towards the main entrance where he could apparate once he was outside, Bella still filling him in on the location in Devon.

The meeting was brief, there being no new ideas to review that night. The five of them were put on call, with allowances made for Snape's schedule at Hogwarts. Before they broke up, however, the blond Death Eater returned with bad news. The quarry had escaped. Dumbledore, it seemed, had gotten there first.

Dumbledore didn't speak to Snape that night, nor all Sunday morning, but after lunch he once again brought out the chess board and set it up at the staff table in the Great Hall. By now fully aware of the abysmal level of play, the other teachers left them alone.

Who was it?

Shacklebolt. Good that you got to us. He narrowly avoided frostbite.

Did you go?

No. Tonks, Lupin, and Moody. Moody found him. Enchanted eyes are a god-send on a moonless night. How did it happen? For the benefit of the people in the Hall, Dumbledore said, "I'll have your knight in two moves."

Bella persuaded the Dark Lord to attack the door directly. They disabled Shacklebolt and actually got inside. They found themselves in a room with multiple doors that kept shifting, so the Dark Lord is hardly any closer to what he wants. He's furious, and everyone is walking around like there was broken glass underfoot. He's obsessed. He thinks about it all the time. He has to get that prophecy.

How are Harry's lessons going?

Useless. Worse than useless. He can't block the smallest probe. He always tries to fight back with spells, which leaves him open all the time. He won't do any exercises, though he lies and says he does. I'm beginning to think that he resents me so much that he's inviting contact with the Dark Lord just to spite me. "There, no knight for you. Look out for your bishop."

That is distressing. Do you know the source of this resentment?

It seems to have worsened from mild dislike ever since he came into contact

with Black. Sometimes when he looks at me, it's like Black looking at me. The same tightness around the eyes, the same backward tilt of the head, the same way he lifts the side of his mouth...

We can only keep trying.

Monday morning brought catastrophe. Owls began inundating Potter with letters, attracting the attention of Umbridge. And then the Quibbler arrived. A few students got the scandal sheet regularly, but this time Miss Lovegood brought a few extra copies. She gave one to Flitwick, and the teachers gathered around. Snape listened for only a few seconds, and was horrified by what he heard.

Potter had given the Quibbler an interview about the return of the Dark Lord, naming the names of Death Eaters. Malfoy was mentioned, as were Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Avery, Pettigrew, and Macnair. *I hope the Quibbler has good security. The entire editorial staff are now targets.*

By ten o'clock, Educational Decree Number Twenty-seven threatened any student found with a copy of the Quibbler with expulsion, thereby guaranteeing that every student in school would want to read it.

And the owls and letters kept coming.

It was no surprise to Snape that his arm started aching during his first afternoon class. It was a 'come tonight' summons, so he caught Dumbledore's eye at supper and flashed a mental message to him. 'Good luck' was the silent response.

Once again Snape was on his knees before the Dark Lord, a triumphant Bella now smirking down at him, and Malfoy not allowed in the chamber. Once again subtle pain danced at the corners of his mind, warning of punishment to come if his answers didn't satisfy.

"Potter's actions are part of your assignment. This interview undermines all our efforts at secrecy. Yet you allowed it."

"Lord, it happened outside Hogwarts. The students had an excursion to Hogsmeade. I was not assigned supervisory duties for the excursion."

"Why did you not go anyway?"

"First and second years remain in the castle. Those who don't go to Hogsmeade supervise them." Snape gasped as fire flickered along his spine.

"You hide your failure behind excuses."

Bella smiled. "Macnair wants you all to himself for about five hours. Shall we indulge him?"

There was silence in the chamber as Snape closed his eyes and simply waited. The Dark Lord spoke again.

"You should be punished."

"Yes, Lord."

"Macnair will be given this happy task."

"Yes, Lord."

"If there is any good news to be gleaned from your failure, you will tell us now."

"The Umbridge woman still believes Potter is lying. She's published Decree Twenty-seven. Any student holding a copy of the Quibbler will be expelled."

"This is better. So all is not yet lost. Tell me, Potions Master, can you guarantee that the woman will continue to believe as we wish her to believe?"

"Yes, Lord."

"You speak quickly. Surely you know that you wager high stakes in this game — Macnair is hungry. Bella..."

"Yes, Lord."

"Do you trust that this miserable servant will perform the task he has been given?"

"With the proper oversight, Lord, I do."

"Then he is yours. If he repeats his pitiful failure, you may punish him as you see fit."

"Thank you, Lord," but the Dark Lord was already gone. Bella looked down at Snape, gloating. "You see, puppy dog? I always get what I want. You may stand up now."

Snape rose slowly, his knees stiff from their long contact with the stone floor. Bella twitched a finger, and Snape fell in behind her as she left the chamber. Macnair was waiting in the corridor, and Snape had the distinct impression he was salivating. Bella flirted her way over to him.

"Sorry, Walden," she cooed, "no toys today. I get to play first. Keep your knives sharpened, though. You never know..."

Beckoning again, Bella led Snape to her own office on the second floor. "Sit down, Cursemaster," she said, pointing to a chair. "We're going to talk."

Snape sat while Bella perched on the edge of a large, wide desk. "Let's make sure we understand each other," she said. "You used to help Malfoy, but you screwed up. You didn't keep your eyes on all your little chickens, and one got away from you. Now Malfoy's star is falling, while mine is rising, and I get rewarded with all kinds of perquisites, one of which is you. And to think I wasted Phina's talents on you when you were just ripe for plucking. By the way, didn't you like Phina?"

"She was very attractive."

"But not your type. What is your type, puppy dog? Not me, surely? What about Narcissa? Or maybe Lucius? Is that why the two of you are suddenly so devoted?"

"You know better."

"Do I? You're the subject of quite a bit of gossip, you know. I keep telling them you're like a priest, serving a cause higher than yourself, but most of them think it's just a matter of finding out which way you swing. Macnair even hopes you secretly enjoy being punished. It's his fondest dream."

"I thought we were supposed to be talking about business."

"You are my business, puppy dog. When I say 'heel,' you jump to my side. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Rodolphus stuck his head in. "Having fun, I see. Well, you're just going to have to play later, so pack your toy back to Hogwarts and help me, sweetheart. I need a briefing. I've got a day to learn the ropes up in Manchester, and then Augustus is coming down here."

Bella grinned at Snape. "You know your job. Get back up there and do it, or I may find answers to some of my questions sooner than you'd like."

Snape left quickly, though Rodolphus managed to snag him for a moment in the corridor. "She does love to get her claws into someone, doesn't she? So much better you than me."

Seldom had Snape been so relieved to be back at Hogwarts.

Umbridge had her spy antennae up again, so Dumbledore thought it best to continue to play chess. It was much less suspicious than meeting in either office or going out of the castle for a private stroll. Unfortunately, chess needed time, and on a Tuesday they only had time after supper.

I was pleased you made it back in one piece.

It was touch and go. Seriously. Macnair was drooling. Now I'm on probation, and I belong to Bella Lestrange.

You have my sympathy. What is it that you are supposed to do to avoid being chopped into little pieces? "Ah, Professor Snape, once again your knight is in jeopardy."

"I see it, Headmaster." I have to make Umbridge believe that Potter is a liar. Not a difficult task. I was afraid it would be much harder.

There's more. They're bringing Rookwood in from Manchester today. Something so important that Bella is losing Rodolphus to it. Dolph has to baby-sit

Manchester for awhile. She is going to be so antsy. “Watch your queen-side rook, Headmaster. I’m castle hunting.”

Dumbledore pondered his next move. *That is disturbing news. You are probably not aware, but in the time before he went to Azkaban, Rookwood worked for the Ministry... in the Department of Mysteries. We need to know what he tells Riddle. When do you go back next?*

Not until Saturday, unless I’m called.

We must be contented with that, I suppose. “Check.”

Snape found abundant opportunities during the next few days to malign Potter’s credibility to Umbridge. The Lady, now totally isolated from the rest of the faculty, hung onto Snape’s apparent support like a drowning swimmer.

After a day, Snape noticed he was being observed with some respect by Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Theodore Nott. Lucius must have told them that I’m working at the Dark Lord’s express orders. Looks like he doesn’t hold it against me that I’ve been captured by the Black Queen, or the boys wouldn’t be so respectful.

Saturday revealed that the organization had been shaken up again. Rookwood was back in Manchester, Rodolphus was back in London, Avery was in disgrace at headquarters, while Yaxley took over Lincoln. Everyone who’d backed Avery was trying to look inconspicuous, and Malfoy was backtracking and flattering Bella shamefully.

Phina sashayed into Snape’s laboratory shortly after he arrived. “Cousin Bella is upset that you didn’t go report to her first,” she said, then grinned wickedly as Snape hurried out of the laboratory and up the stairs, Phina right behind him.

Bella was pacing her office as Snape rushed in. “It’s about time you remembered who was important in your life,” she snapped. “What’s happening at Hogwarts? Does Umbridge still dance to our tune?”

Snape reported that that was, indeed, the case, at which point Bella seemed to lose interest. “Go back to your beakers and test tubes. Next time remember where you go first.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He returned to the laboratory, Phina in tow. She sat quietly in a corner, watching his every move like a hawk, but Snape didn’t have the courage at that point to tell her to leave, even though her presence hampered his movements. When it was time for him to go, she blocked the doorway. “No lessons tonight, Professor? Maybe Cousin Bella is right. Maybe I should be jealous of Macnair.”

The following Saturday was more of the same. Snape went first to report to Bella, then down to his laboratory where he found a leather-clad Phina swinging a riding crop. "I thought I'd take on Macnair on his own ground," she sneered.

"It's bad enough having Bella torment me, I don't need you, too!"

She smiled. "You mean Mommy's little boy doesn't like being spanked?"

"I hate being spanked!"

"I'm so glad to hear that, because I'm just not the spanking type." She walked over to him, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him, and it was so wonderful to have something even a little bit normal happening in his life at that moment, that Snape kissed her back, willing to do anything she wanted just to keep her there to chase the image of Bella away.

Phina leaned away from him, satisfaction shining in her face. "Take me to dinner?" she said.

It was the best offer Snape 'd had in nearly a month. *Anything to get out of here!*

"I don't know," he said. "How do you feel about garlic?"

"I suppose if we both eat it, it won't matter. Why? Do you have a place in mind?"

"I don't know if it's still there, but around ten years ago I went to this nice Greek place near the Tottenham Court Road tube station . . ."

"Sounds great. Can I wear this?"

"Only if you want them to call the police."

Phina settled for a long skirt with a peasant style blouse and dangling earrings. Both donned warm coats, checked out with personnel, and apparated to an alley near the tube station. From there it was a short walk to Percy Street and a cozy looking restaurant with an orange and blue marquee. Tables were set on the sidewalk despite the cold, but Snape and Phina went inside.

A small flick of a wand put Snape's name on the reservation list, so they got a table at once. The back of the restaurant was wider than the front, and they sat in the corner where the wide section met the narrower front, shielded from the windows and the door by the jog in the wall.

"So teach me, Potions Master. How does one eat Greek food?"

"The best way is to start with the appetizers, the *mezedes*. A lot of them are like spreads or dips that you eat with pita bread." The restaurant had a mixed plate of *taramosalata*, *houmous*, *tzatziki*, and feta cheese, which Snape suggested as a good introduction to Greek food.

"So what are they?" Phina demanded, but Snape refused to tell her until after she tried them.

"This one is my favorite," Phina declared after trying them all several times. She was pointing to the *houmous*.

"Pureed chickpeas with sesame seed butter and lemon juice. That one is fish eggs, that's yogurt with cucumber and mint, and that's goat cheese. And they just about all have garlic."

Any prejudice Phina had ever had about garlic seemed to be disappearing. She loved the chopped lamb cooked in grapevine leaves and the seafood pilaf, fascinated when Snape told her the rings of slightly chewy meat were squid.

"Why did you come here ten years ago?"

"I got to know London during the Dark Lord's first reign, but after his fall I had to stay at Hogwarts. I hate Hogwarts. So after awhile, on my free evenings I used to come down to London to eat at a restaurant and take in a play. It made me feel a little bit less like I was in prison."

"I didn't know Hogwarts was so bad."

"I suppose just as a place, it isn't. But it wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. And anytime you're forced to stay in a place, you hate it."

"What did you want to do with your life?"

"More like what I'm doing now. Work in a laboratory."

"Why didn't you just leave?"

Fortunately for Snape, the floor show started just then, so Phina's attention was diverted by the Greek dancers. She swayed and clapped to the music, then played an amusing game of trying to keep Snape from looking at the belly dancer.

By the end of the show, they were relaxing over baklava and coffee, talking about the school in France that Phina had attended. They even managed to extend the evening with glasses of amaretto, but by then they both had to admit that it was time to be returning to Croydon. Phina took Snape's arm as they returned to the alley near the tube station and disappeared.

Bella was there almost as soon as the two arrived. "Where have you been," she asked curtly.

"Out," Snape replied, and Phina giggled.

Bella just nodded. Snape didn't need legilimency to deduce from the glint in her eyes that Bella was mentally removing Lucius Malfoy's name from the list of possible rivals. Macnair's, too. "I hope you had a good time," was all she said, and then she went back upstairs.

Snape left Phina at headquarters and apparated back to Hogwarts.

* * *

He was in the interview chamber, staring down at Rookwood kneeling before him...

I have been badly advised, it seems.

Master, I crave your pardon...

I do not blame you, Rookwood. You are sure of your facts?

Yes, my Lord, yes... I used to work in the Department after — after all...

Avery told me Bode would be able to remove it.

Bode could never have taken it, Master... Bode would have known he could not... Undoubtedly that is why he fought so hard against Malfoy's Imperius Curse...

Stand up, Rookwood.

Snape was fighting now, fighting against the vision, fighting against the memory, suddenly locked into something that he didn't want to see, that terrified him.

I shall need your help. I shall need all the information you can give me.

Of course, my Lord, of course... anything...

Very well... you may go. Send Avery to me...

The link was broken, and Snape staggered back, breathing hard. As he stared down at the boy kneeling on the office floor, so similar to the man kneeling in the memory, Snape realized he was shaking. Swallowing quickly he said, "Get up, Potter. That last memory. What was it?" Of course, Snape knew what it was. He needed to find out if Potter knew.

Potter pushed himself to his feet. "I don't know. You mean the one where my cousin tried to make me stand in the toilet?"

"No. I mean the one concerning a man kneeling in the middle of a darkened room..." *A familiar room. A room where I have knelt too many times. Have you seen me kneeling there, Potter?*

"It's... nothing."

Snape tried to read the boy, but Potter was avoiding eye contact. "How do that man and that room come to be inside your head, Potter?"

"It... it was... just a dream I had."

"A dream." A dream where you enter the Dark Lord's head and look out from his eyes. And when the Dark Lord sleeps, does he dream through your eyes? Is he dreaming of me teaching you occlumency right now? "You do know why we are here, don't you, Potter? You do know why I am giving up my evenings to this tedious job?" *Not so you can betray me to the Dark Lord on a daily basis.*

"Yes." The hard edge of Potter's defiance shone through his apparent obedience.

"Remind me why we are here, Potter."

"So I can learn occlumency." The green eyes looked everywhere except at Snape. *Is this how Dumbledore used to see me?*

"Correct, Potter. And dim though you may be, I would have thought that after two months' worth of lessons you might have made some progress." Potter was looking at him now, hatred in his eyes. "How many other dreams about the Dark Lord have you had?"

"Just that one."

Liar. Right now I don't care whether or not you get yourself killed, but I'll be damned if you take me with you.

"Perhaps you actually enjoy having these visions and dreams, Potter. Maybe they make you feel special — important?"

"No, they don't." Yet the boy's body language belied his words.

"That is just as well, Potter, because you are neither special nor important, and it is not up to you to find out what the Dark Lord is saying to his Death Eaters."

"No," Potter spat back at him, "that's your job, isn't it?"

You have no clue, do you? You hate me for seeing the images that you broadcast freely, but you have no idea what it's like to have your mind ripped open by brute force. You have no idea what other people are enduring for your sake. Bode dead, Podmore in Azkaban, Weasley lying poisoned in a hospital, Shackbolt freezing on the Devon moors, all to keep your miserable little self safe. All to keep the Dark Lord from finding a prophecy that could destroy you. What I wouldn't give to be looking into your eyes the moment you realize how many people suffered for you, you ungrateful little piece of...

"Yes, Potter. That is my job." *And I do my job. As Weasley does his, and Shackbolt does his, and Dumbledore does his.* "Now, if you are ready, we will start again... One... two... three... *Legilimens!*"

Dementors. All the boy saw were dementors coming closer. It was not what Snape wanted to see, and he tried to change the image, reminding Potter of Dursley, and of the Chang girl. It did no good. It was as if Potter controlled the dementors. Snape had his own memories of dementors and now, as he stared into Lily's eyes, he felt Potter's images and his images merging, joining, opening the doors that he fought to keep closed, opening them to the green eyes...

"*Protego!*" Potter screamed, and the shock wave of the spell hit Snape and

flung him back so powerfully that he nearly lost his footing on the stone floor. His wand hand swung upward to flail for balance, and he staggered back against the shelf where the pensieve lay holding his thoughts.

Then Snape felt his own memories drawn up and out from the locked down areas—his parents fighting, always fighting... scenes of cruelty and humiliation from other children... himself, sinking into deep depression after the death of his parents... a vial of slug juice... “ENOUGH!” and Snape’s own nonverbal shield struck out, knocking Potter backwards into shelves of jars and bottles, breaking one.

The Reparo spell was instinctive in a potions master, and as the broken jar repaired itself, Snape realized first that Potter was pale and trembling, and then that he himself was as well. He turned now to the pensieve, to straighten it.

“Well, Potter... that was certainly an improvement... I don’t remember telling you to use a Shield Charm... but there is no doubt that it was effective...” Over and above the distaste he felt at knowing that Potter had seen thoughts he had always managed to keep private, Snape was cognizant of two immensely important things. The first was that Potter had actually begun to resist him mentally. Not with the Protego spell, but before that, when he refused to show images of Dursley or of Chang. The second was that Potter had read him, used legilimency. It was no simple surface contact—what had been on the surface was dementors. No, this probe had reached deep, and Snape was fairly certain that Potter was not aware of what he’d done.

“Let’s try again, shall we?” They took their now familiar positions, the boy clearly more nervous than usual. “On the count of three, then. One... two... three... *Legilimens!*”

It was one of Potter’s dreams. They were in a corridor Snape did not recognize, speeding past torchlit stone walls toward a black door... light beckoned through the partly open door... and then—Snape dropped his wand, struggling desperately now to break the contact. He knew Potter’s mind, had been touching Potter’s mind weekly for two months now, and this was not Potter’s mind!

He was inside the Dark Lord’s mind as the Dark Lord reviewed his own memory of a day two and a half weeks earlier. This was the Department of Mysteries. These were the doors that blocked him from his goal. He had a plan, and that plan involved Potter. And so he reached out now to Potter’s mind, to lure him, to entice him... to intrigue him with the puzzle of the doors... to touch the mind that touched Potter’s mind...

In blind panic, Snape struck Potter, knocking him to the ground, and wrenched himself away from the link. Staggering backwards, he banged into the work counter and fell to the floor on his hands and knees. Potter lay, apparently unconscious, on the other side of the room.

Dear God, did he see me? Did he look through Potter right into me and recognize who he was looking at? Am I a dead man from this moment? Minutes passed, and no summons blazed on his left arm. Slowly Snape's heartbeat and breathing returned to normal.

Snape pulled himself to his feet and went to check Potter. The boy lay on his back and, despite the fact that he was breathing heavily, seemed to be all right. "Potter?" Snape said quietly. There was no response. "Potter. Potter! POTTER!"

Potter opened his eyes, gazing around the room in bewilderment.

"Explain yourself!"

"I... dunno what happened. I've never seen that before. I mean, I told you, I've dreamed about the door... but it's never opened before..."

Fool. Fool. He's reaching right past every shield and defense Hogwarts has, right into the midst of us, and you're too precious to try to do anything about it. "You are not working hard enough! You are lazy and sloppy, Potter, it is small wonder that the Dark Lord..."

Potter's head tilted up and back, the way Black's always did just before an attack. "Can you tell me something, sir? Why do you call Voldemort the Dark Lord, I've only ever Death Eaters call him that..."

Snape gritted his teeth against the stab of pain and then...

A woman screamed outside, from above, from the entrance hall. "What the...?" Snape murmured, listening as other sounds mingled with and replaced the voice. He glanced over at Potter. "Did you see anything unusual on your way down here, Potter?"

Potter shook his head just as another scream pierced through the stone. Snape was out the door in an instant. If something was wrong in the castle, the teachers were needed.

The entrance hall was filling rapidly. Students poured out from the ground floor classrooms where they'd been studying, from the Great Hall where some were finishing supper, from the floors above. Pushing his way through a crowd of Slytherins blocking the dungeon stairs, Snape took in the trunks, the hysterical Trelawney, and the dumpy, smirking figure of Umbridge on the marble staircase and headed for the great oak doors. He had to call Dumbledore, but he couldn't do it where everyone could see.

As it turned out there was no need, for Dumbledore already knew. Snape burst through the doors into the night, where the bright disk of the moon, just past the full, had already risen above the hilly horizon. Its light illumined the lawn, the path up the hill, and the tall figure of Dumbledore striding towards the castle. He was coming from the forest, a fact made obvious by the creature that was following him.

The palomino body and pale blond hair of the centaur shone like gold in the moonlight, but Snape was far more concerned about the powerful hooves that cut into the path with every mighty step. He scooted out of the way of the pair, over to the side and well out of striking distance, the only disadvantage being that he could no longer hear what was happening inside.

She can't sack Trelawney. Dumbledore has to do something. She can't send Trelawney away. The instant Trelawney walks off these grounds, she's easy prey for the Dark Lord. He wants the prophecy. There are three ways to get the prophecy, and he's trying to break into the Department of Mysteries because he can't touch the other two. But if Trelawney leaves, the Dark Lord doesn't have to break into the Department of Mysteries. All he has to do is break into Trelawney's mind.

The door into the entrance hall was open, but blocked by the great bulk of the centaur. Snape strained to understand the threads of conversation that filtered out to him. Then it was over, and the crowd in the entrance hall began to drift away. The centaur entered the castle, leaving the doors now free to pass. Snape slipped inside.

Dumbledore was ushering the centaur to the corridor of classrooms on the left that were mostly used as study rooms. Umbridge was stomping up the marble stairs, steaming with rage. Potter was standing by the dungeon stairs, watching the centaur go by, a look of great joy and wonder on his face...

Potter! I have to talk to Dumbledore about Potter. Snape walked swiftly across the hall and down the kitchen corridor to the rear staircase. He took the steps two at a time up to the floor where the gargoyle statue was, there to wait until Dumbledore returned, trying to sort out everything that had happened in this very confusing evening.

* * *

Snape stood in front of the fire in Dumbledore's office, staring down at his hands. They'd been arguing for half an hour, and Snape felt drained,

exhausted, fear and helplessness swirling through his brain like malevolent harpies, prodding, goading, laughing.

Dumbledore came over and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I wish the situation were different," he said gently. "Have you thought of any plans?"

"Yes. Nail the two of clubs to a tree and blow my brains out."

"I would like to hope that things are not that bad."

"If he saw me, they're worse. And you want to keep me where he'll continue to see me. Isn't there anyone else? Someone who doesn't have to walk into his lair every week? Someone who can stay safe at Hogwarts?" *Someone like you?*

"We cannot help it, Severus. The situation exists, and we must deal with it as best we may. Harry must learn occlumency. The bitter truth is, only you can teach it to him."

"He won't learn from me. He refuses."

"He has already learned. He started to block you out today."

"It isn't fast enough or complete enough. The Dark Lord will find me. He may already have found me."

"You have not been summoned."

"Suppose it's a trap, that he's luring me in with a false sense of security, so I'll walk into headquarters unsuspecting on Saturday? Then it'll be too late."

They stood there for awhile, watching the fire as Snape ran scenario after scenario through his head, but none was a solution. It was growing late, so he took his leave and went to his own rooms to go to bed. But not to sleep.

"Y're off yer feed again."

"I'm not hungry, Hagrid. What do you keep doing to your face?"

"'T ain't nothing important. But you got to keep yer strength up. I ain't seen ya so thin since ya was a first year. Have some kipper. Ya always liked kippers."

"I'll tell you what, Hagrid. You stop getting your face all beaten up—then I'll think about eating more." But this was Saturday, and anything as normal as eating was impossible.

Wanting to be alone, Snape returned to his own rooms. For some reason he felt a compulsion to straighten and clean everything. He noted that supplies of powdered lichen and dried marula fruit were running low, and left a note on his desk that they would have to be ordered before the first of May. Another note advised that the potions the fifth years were working on

needed to be stirred three times clockwise on Sunday, or they would not be in fit condition to use Monday morning.

Skipping lunch entirely, Snape began drawing up outlines of the material that needed to be covered before the OWLs and NEWTs in June. A separate piece of parchment contained the numbers of a vault at Gringotts and an account at Barclay's. It was only after he noted down that the dark items from his great-grandfather's collection should go to Hogwarts school that Snape fully realized what he was doing.

As he left his office for supper, Snape locked the doors with the set of keys Dumbledore had given him almost fifteen years earlier instead of using the magical locks he'd devised himself. Then he went to supper, where he toyed with a small plate of food while listening politely to Flitwick telling him how poor Sibyll Trelawney was still weeping over her fate three days after being sacked, and to McGonagall about how the weather was making her miserable with her aching bones, and to Sprout about the wilt that was attacking the early sprouting heart's-ease and feverfew.

When Dumbledore left the Hall, Snape rose and followed. "Headmaster," he called softly in the entrance hall. Dumbledore stopped and waited for him. "I thought I would leave a little earlier than usual, if you don't mind opening the shields for me now." Then Snape extended his right hand.

"Of course not," said Dumbledore, looking puzzled and worried as he took the proffered hand. He looked into Snape's eyes, but Snape had shut down, and there was nothing for Dumbledore to see. When their hands separated, Dumbledore was holding the set of keys.

Snape turned and walked through the doors, down the hill, and into Hogsmeade, where he disappeared.

* * *

Snape apparated into Croydon several streets away from headquarters and made his way through lines of cars and groups of pedestrians, his pace slowing noticeably the nearer he approached. *Why can't I just walk in as if nothing were wrong? Look at me. My skin is clammy, my mouth is dry, my stomach is tied into knots I never knew existed... This is my punishment for calling Sirius Black a coward...*

A turn to the right, and there it was. The door to headquarters, a short block away. *This is it. There is no other route to take. Whatever lies on the other side of that door must be faced and dealt with. Fear must under no circumstances*

be allowed to hinder action. I've been hammering into Potter for two months that emotions must be controlled. Practice what you preach, Severus. Straightening his back, his head high, Snape walked up to the door, raised the latch, and entered.

Three steps into the building and they seized him, Rodolphus on one side and Macnair on the other. "Good boy, showing up early. Dark Lord wants to see you," and they hustled him down the stairs and along the corridor to the interview chamber. Bella was already there, as was Malfoy, as was the Dark Lord.

"He comes? this servant who serves me not," hissed the Dark Lord. "Your memory grows dim. We must refresh it for you. You will kneel."

Even before his knees settled on the floor, the Cruciatus Curse hit. Snape's body arched backward, and then he had no body, only pain that radiated into every corner of his being, obliterating everything else except the echo of screaming...

And then the pain was gone. It had lasted, Snape reckoned as he lay very still on the cold stone floor, but a few seconds. This was not punishment, only a reminder. A rough hand gripped his left shoulder and turned him onto his stomach, so he could push himself back onto his knees. *Angry, but not murderously angry. Steady. Find out what's wrong.*

"What are your tasks, faithless one?"

"To provide your people with potions and charms, and to teach them to defend themselves against enemies."

"And what else?"

"To bring you information about Dumbledore and his followers."

"And what else?"

"To persuade Dolores Umbridge and the Ministry that reports of your return are false, so that we may operate in secrecy."

"And what else?"

Snape was thinking feverishly now. What else had the Dark Lord ever commanded him to do, even if it was not given as a formal task?

"To report on the dreams of Harry Potter."

"What do you know of the dreams of Harry Potter?"

This is it. He knows. "He dreams of snakes, and of the Department of Mysteries."

"What has he seen of the Department of Mysteries?"

"A door."

"Has he gone through that door?"

“Yes, and found many other doors.”

“Does Potter confide his dreams to you?”

Snape walked through a minefield, and he knew it. A wrong step meant, not death, not yet, but the end of life. “No, Lord, he does not.”

“Then how do you know?”

“He confides in Dumbledore, who speaks to . . . McGonagall.” *Who never leaves Hogwarts and is therefore not an easy target.* “She lets things slip from time to time.”

“And it did not occur to you that we might want this information at once.”

There. That was the transgression. Relief flooded through Snape, while he struggled to turn it into a semblance of misery. Covering his face with his hands he said, “I have failed you, Lord. Punish me.”

“That will come. Tell us why Potter does not enter the dream.”

Snape was baffled and made no effort to hide it. “Lord, I do not understand.”

“We wish him to enter the dream, to seek the prize, to choose a door. He merely watches.”

“Forgive my ignorance, Lord, but how can one do more with a dream unless he seeks the real door? And nothing will induce him to leave Hogwarts.”

“We are better informed. You will all leave now, except Lucius who will consult with us. Macnair, you will spend a few minutes—a very few minutes—impressing upon this servant why his reports must be timely.”

Malfoy flashed a quick smirk of triumph at Bella, and then the four of them—Bella, Rodolphus, Macnair, and Snape—were back in the basement corridor. A door was ajar to a vacant room just ahead, and the three shoved Snape unceremoniously into it.

“I guaranteed your performance to the Dark Lord, puppy dog, and you made me look bad. This doesn’t stimulate my maternal instincts.” Bella’s wand was in her hand.

Snape let his own wand slip from sleeve to hand as well, but Macnair stepped between them with a wicked grin. “Don’t forget the Dark Lord, Snape. He gave me a few minutes with you, and if you fight me, you disobey him.”

“He didn’t give Bella anything.”

“Why, Bella, I believe he’s right. You’ll just have to step outside.” The Lestranges retreated and shut the door behind them.

“Don’t worry,” Macnair chuckled as he took the wand from Snape’s now

unresisting hand. "I won't do anything fatal — or even permanent. Just give you more to think about for say, a week. Besides, I watched you last June. You thrive on danger. Pain makes you feel more alive. No reason why we can't both enjoy this." He seized Snape's wrist, twisted his arm behind him, and pushed him into the wall. "You do understand that the Dark Lord's business overrides everything else? Say 'sir.'"

"Yes, sir."

"And you will bring him every tidbit of information as quickly as you can, not caring about your own safety or convenience?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now for the reminder." The tip of the wand ran slowly down Snape's side. "Something you don't use often. Something you won't really need..." The wand stopped as Macnair whispered "*Ignis — Renes Dextimus!*"

Fire seared the middle of Snape's back, and he cried out once before he slumped to the floor. Macnair tossed his wand beside him. The pain was already subsiding to a sharp ache.

"Don't worry," Macnair said. "You'll notice it for about a week. That should be enough to impress the lesson on your mind. After that you'll be fine. You don't really need more than one kidney anyway." Then he was gone, and Snape was alone in the room. Slowly, gingerly, he got to his feet.

Fine. The Dark Lord is pissed, and now his sadistic chief executioner is in love with me. Well Dumbledore is going to hear about this. I want a new job. Or at least a raise in pay.

* * *

Dumbledore tapped a finger thoughtfully on the arm of his chair as he watched Madam Pomfrey examine Snape's back. "Have you ever considered the possibility that Macnair may be right," he said after a while.

"Don't you start in on me! I'm getting just a little tired of all this insinuation that I might be sick and twisted!"

"Now, do not get defensive. You do not exactly lead a normative life. And you do have a... tolerance for unpleasant situations exceeding that of any other person of my acquaintance."

"That's because you put me into more unpleasant situations than you do any other person of your acquaintance."

"Only because I know you can tolerate it."

Madam Pomfrey cleared her throat. "He's right about the damage. There isn't much I can do outside of pain killers. It will continue to hurt for about a week, then it will clear up. There's no permanent damage to the kidney. Shall I get you something for the pain?"

"No, that's all right. I can..." Snape stopped and glared at Dumbledore. "On second thought, Madam Pomfrey, I would love something for the pain. I hate pain."

"Here then," she replied, handing him some lozenges. "Two every four hours. And you..." —this was to Dumbledore— "try not to damage him anymore. At least not for a while. I do have other things to attend to."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey. Of course." The two men waited until the nurse was out of the room. Dumbledore poured mead.

"I am serious, Severus. You have an attitude toward pain that is positively unique in my experience. You neither embrace it nor flee it. You seem to view it as a natural and unavoidable part of existence, to be dealt with on a practical level. And there are times, I swear, when it seems that you regard suffering as a kind of validation. It is no wonder that someone as unsubtle as Walden Macnair misinterprets you."

"You didn't see me today in Croydon. I was terrified. I had to force myself to walk into the building."

"But you did walk into the building. I have never understood why people equate lack of fear with courage. I must remind you that anything is easy if you are not afraid of it. And many times lack of fear is merely an indication of ignorance. No, true courage means being afraid, being horribly afraid, and doing something anyway."

"Lots of people do that. Every day."

"Very few would ask me to cast a Cruciatus Curse just to be sure he could stand up to the pain." When Snape didn't reply, Dumbledore smiled. "You see? Practical. Pain for you is a tool."

"I have never wanted to inflict..."

"No, no, Severus. I mean your pain. Admit it. You used your own willingness to endure pain as a means to inspire Riddle to trust you. It is a rare ability. I should like to think that I could do the same, but I have yet to be put to the test."

"But I don't ever want it to happen again."

"Good. That is healthy. A tool of necessity, never of choice. That is what Macnair does not understand."

They sat for a while in silence. Then Snape changed the subject. "What do you think the Dark Lord meant when he said that he was better informed?"

"I do not know. But this I do know. Harry must never leave Hogwarts except to go to a place equally secure. Riddle has some task for him that requires Harry's physical presence. I do not know what it is, though I can guess from the things that you have told me. No, Severus, we cannot relax our vigilance. At all costs, Harry must not set foot off the grounds of Hogwarts."

The following Saturday was the middle of March. Snape went immediately to Malfoy on arrival in Croydon.

"I just wanted you to know that nothing special happened at Hogwarts since last weekend. I've heard of no changes in Potter's dreams. Should I tell him that myself?"

"No, I'll do it. I'm seeing him in a few minutes. It's only hearing through someone else what he should have heard first that sets him off."

"What if something happens and I don't hear about it?"

"Then you have a rough night." Malfoy watched Snape's face for a moment. "Look, I wouldn't worry too much. You're in a valuable position and you've provided some useful information. He has no one to replace you with. You'd have to out and out betray him to be in real trouble. He's not really that angry. He knows you're loyal. And you get hyper enough about a couple of pinpricks; you're not going to risk real punishment. If you tell him you didn't know something, he'll believe you. He may nudge you to keep you on your toes, but he'll believe you."

"Comforting thought."

"It should be. Avery 'd give his right arm to be as safe in front of the Dark Lord as you are. He's in serious trouble. By the way, when's the next Hogsmeade outing?"

"Two weeks."

"Good. Maybe we can get Potter then."

Snape went cold inside. "I... don't think you will." In response to Malfoy's quizzical look, he explained. "That interview for the Quibbler—it was given in Hogsmeade. In punishment, Umbridge has revoked Potter's Hogsmeade privileges. He can't go there for the rest of the year."

"Ha! Another blow against Bella Lestranger! She was so certain that she could finesse a kidnapping. I have to give this news to the Dark Lord at once. Maybe then he'll listen to my plan."

"Your plan?"

"Best you not know. What you don't know can't throw you to the lions. Or in this case, Macnair."

Working later in his laboratory, Snape registered the sound of someone entering, but didn't immediately turn around.

"You might look at me, you know," said Phina.

"You were conspicuous by your absence last week."

"Last week you were in trouble."

"And what weathervane forecasts 'fair' for today?"

"You think I'm very shallow and self-serving, don't you?"

"Not at all. If I were concerned about my health I wouldn't associate with me either."

"You make me laugh. I like that." She moved to a position where she could watch his profile as he mixed a cough medicine for the clinic. "I thought we might go to dinner."

"No, my lovely. You tell Bella I'm not stepping out of observation range of the security guards for all the tea in China."

"I told her you wouldn't bite. Are you always this cautious?"

"Only where my life and health are concerned."

"Suit yourself," said Phina, "but that doesn't mean I won't try again next week."

* * *

"Kidnapping?" said Dumbledore later that night. "That is more serious than I thought."

"It's a very good thing that Umbridge already restricted him. If it'd happened after I heard about that, I could be in Avery's position."

"We shall do our best to keep you away from such an unpleasant spot."

"Shouldn't you tell Potter? Maybe it will make him cautious and give him incentive to work on his lessons."

"Now Severus, the boy is only fifteen. He is safe here on the grounds; there is no need to frighten him with this. He has enough to worry about. McGonagall and the other heads of houses, however, need to know that he must not leave Hogwarts under any circumstances. Every other consideration has to be sacrificed to that."

"Headmaster... What's in this prophecy that I don't already know about... that the Dark Lord doesn't already know about... that makes it so dangerous?"

"Best you not know."

Snape accompanied Dumbledore to Grimmauld Place later in the week. Kingsley Shacklebolt opened the door this time. He seemed surprised to see Snape, but offered his hand as soon as they were inside and the door closed. Snape took it.

"I owe you one," Shacklebolt said, and Snape nodded. There was no need to say more.

"Look what the cat dragged in," was Black's muttered comment as they entered the parlor.

Dumbledore glared at him, anger seething in his eyes. "Don't start it, Sirius, or..."

"That's all right, Headmaster," Snape said gently. "I understand the need to appear to be frustrated by inactivity."

Black growled in response, but held his tongue.

After Snape reported on the friction at headquarters between Malfoy and Bella Lestrange, and explained the Dark Lord's desire to kidnap Potter, Dumbledore rose.

"Voldemort—you will excuse me, Severus, but it must be said—Voldemort wishes to obtain the entirety of a prophecy currently stored in the Department of Mysteries. This prophecy was spoken by one person, who does not consciously remember it, heard in its entirety by another, myself, and in part by a third, which is how Voldemort learned of it. That partial knowledge nearly destroyed him fifteen years ago, and he fears to act without knowing the rest. The prophet was Sibyll Trelawney, and she is being housed for her protection and ours at Hogwarts. I am in relatively little danger. There remains the stored prophecy, which cannot be retrieved from the Ministry except by its subject. Hence Voldemort's desire to capture Harry Potter. Like Trelawney, Potter must now at all costs be kept within the grounds of Hogwarts for his own sake and for ours."

The matter was discussed at some length and then the group retired to the kitchen. Snape once again waited for Dumbledore in the parlor. After a few minutes, Black came back in.

"Don't stand up. I won't be long. How are Harry's lessons going?"

"Poorly. Either he has no mental aptitude for this at all, or he is deliberately resisting for reasons of his own."

"Maybe he's just too honest to be a good occlumens."

"Allowing yourself to be swept away by an emotional roller coaster is not the same thing as honesty. And it will not help him fight the Dark Lord."

“Harry’s stood up to Voldemort before. He’s not afraid.”

“Lack of fear in the face of danger is sometimes just stupidity.” Snape watched carefully as Black’s face began to crimson. “And courage is no shield against legilimency. Potter will stand, wand in hand, bravely facing the Dark Lord, and spilling out through his honest, undisciplined mind every piece of information the Dark Lord needs to accomplish his goals.” He paused. “Just like his father.”

Black lunged at the seated Snape in fury, but Snape had already read the move and dove for the floor, rolling back onto his feet in one smooth motion just as Dumbledore came through the door.

“It’s all right, Headmaster,” Snape said calmly, replacing his wand quickly into his sleeve. “Black and I were just debating the relative merits of physical versus mental defenses.”

Dumbledore gripped Snape’s elbow and steered him out of the house. “Sometimes I think the two of you together are more trouble than Riddle and all his Death Eaters combined.”

* * *

“He wants to see you,” was all Macnair said, then accompanied Snape to the interview room, but without any kind of physical pressure. Malfoy and Avery stood on one side of the room, the Lestranges on the other. Snape stayed back, but in between them, as did Macnair.

The Dark Lord arrived. “Speak, Bella.”

“Lord, the quickest way to get our hands on Potter is the Hogsmeade excursion next weekend. We could have operatives at every major gathering point in the town. They would not fail to capture Potter and bring him to you.”

“Lucius.”

“Lord, is it not still our policy that we must keep our presence secret and out of the public eye? We are strong, but not yet so strong that we can afford to give up our well-planned caution. Even if Bella is right, and Potter can be taken, the kidnapping of a Hogwarts student from the middle of Hogsmeade, in full view of seventy-five percent of the students, would destroy that secrecy. It is, of course, my Lord’s decision whether or not the capture of Potter is worth revealing our presence to the entire wizarding world, but I must point out that this should only be done if it has a one hundred percent guarantee of success. Sending even half a dozen of our people into Hogsmeade would

alert the populace and the students to our presence regardless of whether they kidnap anyone, and all that we have worked to preserve will be lost . . .”

“Stop. Severus, you will now speak.”

“Lord, the people of Hogsmeade will notice strangers, as will the students. The capture of Potter may well be worth the risk of exposing our operations—I am not competent to speak to that point—but you will not get Potter. Umbridge was furious with Potter about his interview for the Quibbler, and she is obsessed with punishing him. She won’t let him out of Hogwarts, and any attempt to kidnap him will fail. He won’t be there.”

“So you side with Malfoy.”

“Lord, I side with no one. I tell you what I know.”

“Go then, all of you. Lucius and Bella, we will inform you of our decision.”

The six filed out of the interview chamber.

“Lord, I side with no one.’ That’s a good line. I’ll have to remember that.” Macnair was chuckling.

“It’s the truth.”

“Didn’t say it wasn’t. It’s still a good line.” Macnair left them.

Bella crossed over to Snape and hooked a finger under a button on his frock coat. “Puppy dogs shouldn’t cross their mistresses,” she said quietly.

Malfoy pulled Snape away. “Severus has lab work to do, Bella. Go sharpen your knives somewhere else. And remember—his work is important to the Dark Lord. Don’t distract him.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The arrival of Phina in the laboratory was as predictable as the outcome of a Stalinist election.

Snape didn’t even look up from his work. “Bella doesn’t believe in following Lucius’s advice, does she?”

“What advice?”

“Not to distract me.”

“She’s not distracting you. I am. I want to go to dinner.”

“Tell me, what did you like best about that dinner, the food? the entertainment? the novelty of pretending to be a muggle?”

“I notice you didn’t say the company.”

“I hate the whole process of being disillusioned, so I tend to skip over it.”

“Well, I liked the company and the food the best.”

“Do you want to try doing something ordinary and mundane.”

“Depends on what it is.”

“Go shopping. Bring back shoulder of lamb, onions, garlic, and an assortment of vegetables — anything you like.”

“Who’s going to cook it?”

“I am.”

By the time Phina got back, Snape had two cauldrons set up over flames. As she watched with some trepidation, he cut everything into chunks and added them to one or the other cauldron, then began sprinkling them with powders from a variety of jars.

“What’s that stuff?” she finally asked.

“This is cumin.” He pointed to the other jars. “Those are ginger, cinnamon, saffron, turmeric . . .”

“Is this going to be Greek?”

“No. Moroccan.”

“I didn’t know you could cook.”

“What’s to know. You add the right ingredients in the right amounts in the right order and heat at the right temperature for the right amount of time. It’s just like potion making.”

“I never thought about it that way.” Phina fidgeted as Snape watched her dispassionately. “Okay,” she finally admitted, “I never thought about it at all.”

They magicked a low table, pillows, and cushions, and sat on the floor by candlelight, eating Moroccan lamb and vegetables with their fingers, and washing their hands with mint scented water.

“That was wonderful,” sighed Phina, and suddenly it seemed quite natural that she should be next to him, reclining on a cushion, teasing him with strands of her hair.

This is crazy. If Bella catches us, she’ll skin us both alive. But Snape knew that death lay waiting at every turn — in Bella’s overarching lust for power, and in Macnair’s lust for a more private dominance, in the chance memories sifting through Potter’s brain in sleep, and in his own stumblings caused by fatigue or fear. Now, more than anything, Snape wanted life. Life that smiled and giggled up at him from an embroidered pillow. No longer caring about the consequences, Snape folded Phina in his arms and kissed her, his whole being taut and vibrating like the strings of a harp as she melted . . .

“You SLUT! You TROLLOP! You WHORE!” The door slammed open with a crash that shook the room, Bella screaming at the top of her voice, advancing on the suddenly parted duo like the wrath of a vengeful god. “The

fortunes of our whole house hang in the balance, and you Demean yourself with this half-breed FLUNKY, this SERVANT . . .”

Snape was on his feet, wand in hand, long pent-up frustration boiling over in fury. “Get. Out. Of. My. Lab., you villainous Witch!” To his right, window panes exploded outwards in violent shatterings of glass—cabinet doors burst apart as jars and canisters leapt to the floor—Bunsen burners flared, setting the cauldrons bubbling again, filling the room with the acrid smell of burnt meat. His wand raised, Snape advanced while Bella retreated, dodging beakers, test tubes, cruets, and pipettes as they smashed into the wall behind her, showering her with shards of glass.

Then Bella was out of the room, and Snape turned to Phina. To Phina, whose white face and wide eyes revealed her shock and fear. “I . . . think . . . I need to be going now,” she said, as she edged towards the door.

There was no point in trying to stop her. Snape watched, hating both Bella and himself, as Phina slipped through the door into the hallway. Then, quickly, she looked back in, sweeping the chaotic destruction with a glance. “Did you really do all that? Wow!”

Snape set about the patient task of repairing the damage. The only other time he remembered losing control like that was at the age of thirteen, and then Dumbledore and Hagrid had been his targets. *Have I truly learned so little in all that time?*

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - T H R E E

FLIRTING WITH ENEMIES

They spoke in quiet voices, even though it was late and the castle slept, even though Snape's office was too far from any other room for them to be heard.

"... and if he finds a way to sneak out, Bella's people may snatch him, despite the certainty of being seen. On the other hand, if he stays at Hogwarts they'll try Lucius's plan, and I don't know what that is, but it involves luring Potter off the grounds."

"So we keep him here. I shall alert everyone I can. Do not fret, Severus. We shall succeed in this."

"Can we trust Potter not to do something horribly stupid? He is the most unpredictable factor in all of this."

Dumbledore sighed. "The day will come, Severus, when you will understand that there is good in the boy. And a glimmer of intelligence. He knows that now is not the time to be breaking rules."

There was a pause heavy with portent, and then Dumbledore spoke again. "Now tell me about this girl."

"What girl?"

"Do you love her?"

"I presume you're asking if I'm going to bring her to Hogwarts and introduce her to you."

"No, I am asking if you love her."

"I'm not even sure what that means."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. "You are serious, it would seem."

"Yes, I am. People throw that word around like a weapon. They use it when they're talking about a whole range of emotions, some of them contradictory. Does it mean affection, tenderness, infatuation, the desire to protect, the desire to dominate, possessiveness, jealousy...? People use it to cajole, coerce, and manipulate, but I've never seen anything I could separate out and

point to and say ‘this is love.’ I don’t think it exists.” Snape had risen and was standing by the fireplace, his back to Dumbledore.

“What about Lily?”

“What about Lily.”

“She sacrificed herself for her child. Is not that love?”

“Maternal instinct. Rabbits have it. Wolves have it. Mother birds will risk their lives for their young and then not even recognize them the following season. How is ‘love’ different?”

“You are bitter tonight. Something happened.”

“I wanted something. I almost had it. It was taken away. There was no love involved. Satisfied?”

“No, but I shall have to be content with it.” Dumbledore rose, too, and laid a hand on Snape’s shoulder. “You have a right to some joy in life. I hope you find it.”

After Dumbledore was gone, Snape stood for a while staring down at the cold stone of the fireplace. He was thinking of his father. Toby had needed Eileen. Needed her presence in his life, her care, her validation of his existence. Needed her so much that when she died, he died too.

Is that love? The desperate need that supersedes and overwhelms the need for life itself? Who would want that? I can understand sacrifice. I can understand being given a choice and choosing to die so that something else can live. But even that isn’t love. Sometimes it’s pride, or fear of consequences, or guilt, or most likely a strong sense of duty...

The question didn’t go away as Snape mechanically readied himself for bed, though it did permute into a wide-ranging variety of different aspects. Restless, sleepless nights were becoming habitual.

The week passed quickly, with end of term and Easter break coming up, the need to both court and avoid Umbridge, the mind-throbbing frustration of Potter’s occlumency lesson — and suddenly it was Saturday and the Hogsmeade excursion.

Potter stayed on the grounds, his friends keeping him company rather than go to Hogsmeade. From returning Slytherins, Snape learned that there’d been several strangers in the village, strangers that seemed to be waiting for something. Snape had a reasonable idea of what he would find when he apparated that evening to Croydon.

No one was waiting to usher him into the interview chamber. Snape breathed a sigh of relief, then went up to his laboratory where the next batches of Polyjuice Potion and Veritaserum were in their final stages

of preparation. A half hour later, Malfoy came into the room looking immensely pleased with himself.

"Your information was perfect. She had eight people up there from three different offices. Not a hair of Potter did they see. Ha! Poor Bella. She's still with the Dark Lord, answering for her sins. He is not happy with her, oh no. He'll want to speak with you when he's finished with her."

"Why?"

"To find out how much damage was done. I wouldn't mind being a fly on the wall right now, I will admit."

It came sooner than Malfoy expected, for a Death Eater stuck his head in then and said simply, "He wants you. Both of you."

They hurried down to the chamber, where a groggy Bella was still on her knees before the Dark Lord. Snape did not feel the least sympathy for her.

"You will report to us now."

"Potter did not go to Hogsmeade. Returning students were commenting on the unusual presence of a number of strangers. Although they were curious, no one seems to have connected it to us."

"Then this careless servant has been more fortunate than she deserves. Presumptuous one, you will beg this servant's forgiveness for having impugned the quality of his information to us."

Bella twisted around, her eyes slightly glazed from her punishment. "You were right, Snape," she forced out in a rasping voice. "Forgive me for questioning you. You were right, and I was wrong."

Red eyes turned on Snape. "You will respond."

The assessment of possible future needs took only a second. "There's nothing for me to forgive. You serve our Lord loyally and advise him to the best of your ability. If you err in your advice, it is for him to forgive you, not me."

Malfoy did not look at all pleased, but the Dark Lord nodded. "You say well. Malfoy, you will remain and give me your counsel. Potions master, you will leave and take this erring one with you."

Snape bent and helped Bella to her feet, supporting her out of the chamber. Steering her into the same room they'd been in before with Macnair, he sat her at the table and went to find Rodolphus, who was waiting nervously in the staff lounge, forbidden to come nearer while his wife was being disciplined. Snape quickly prepared a cup of tea and followed Rodolphus down.

The tea was hot and soothing, and though Bella shuddered a little as she

drank it, she seemed to feel better. Shakily she recounted her experience to Rodolphus, who looked up at Snape.

"It was good of you to say what you did. I owe you one."

"I was looking out for myself."

"It was still good of you."

A half hour later, Phina walked into the laboratory. "Cousin Bella sent me," she said, grinning provocatively. "She wants to make it up to you for all the things she said last week. I'm a peace offering."

"Have you ever come here on your own initiative?"

"Yes. Last week. That's why cousin Bella was so angry. I'm not supposed to like you, just get you all hot and bothered."

"Nice image."

"I thought so," said Phina, closing the laboratory door. "Are you all hot and bothered?"

"Hot and bothered? Not really. More cool and collected. I get like that when heads are rolling." Snape continued checking his potions, not wanting to face Phina at the moment.

Phina pouted a little. "Cousin Bella will be fine. The Dark Lord really does value her, you know."

"Did he tell you that, or is that Bella's version."

"You can tell just watching him. He gets all gooey-eyed . . . All right, it's Cousin Bella's version."

"I'd be careful how you speak of the Dark Lord. That came very close to ridicule. If I thought you meant it, I'd have to report you."

"You're serious!"

"Always where my life and health are concerned. Has Bella mentioned why the Dark Lord holds her in such high regard?"

"Oh, yes. It's because out of all of you, she was the only one who refused to believe he was dead and gone. She got herself thrown into Azkaban not for what she did before, but for searching for him when everyone else believed he'd been destroyed. She never gave up hoping for his return. Never. He prizes that, and he prizes her."

"Surely that includes Rodolphus and Rabastan."

"No, because she had to work hard to convince them. The only other one was Barty Crouch. He never gave up hope either, not until he was finally captured anyway. They say he cracked then. Bella never cracked. And she's still here. Don't you want to get all hot and bothered?"

“Not really. The ease with which we were interrupted last time rather puts a damper on things. It might have been much more embarrassing.”

“That’s all right,” Phina laughed. “We don’t have to go that direction. There are other fun things.” Behind him, Snape sensed a wand being drawn and items being conjured. He turned to find the cushions and pillows arranged on the floor again. Phina stepped near and began undoing buttons. “First we have to get this jacket thing off of you.”

The frock coat off, Phina insisted Snape lie down on the cushions on his stomach, hands under his head. Caution warred with curiosity in his mind, but curiosity had caution beat by a good four to one, so he did as he was told. “Normally I prefer bare skin,” she said, “but it can be just as good through the shirt.”

Snape hardly had time to wonder what ‘it’ was when she positioned her hands, fingers on his shoulders and thumbs at the base of his neck, and began to massage his back. Gently at first, then with increasing pressure, she worked her way to the small of his back, up the rib cage, to his neck, shoulders and upper arms, where the cycle began again, kneading and stroking the tension out of muscles that had been tight for years. It was wonderful. Snape had no idea how much his back ached until Phina began to make it feel better.

The rhythm and pressure were hypnotic. Snape found himself drifting, unthinking and uncaring, his eyes closed, aware only of the purely physical relaxation that spread through him, wanting it never to stop . . .

His eyes opened lazily to candlelit darkness and the softness of pillows. Phina lay beside him on the cushions, staring at the ceiling. At his movement she turned to look at him. “I wish I could say that was the first time anyone ever fell asleep on me,” she said, “but actually it happens a lot. How do you feel?”

“Fantastic. Where did you learn to do that?”

“I don’t know. It seems to come naturally. Now, put your arms around me. We’re just going to enjoy the moment.” Which Snape did, losing himself in the warmth and peace, in the scent of her skin and hair, until reality impinged on his content.

“What time is it?” he asked suddenly.

“Nearly midnight.”

An hour later than usual. Snape started to rise, but she pulled him down, and they kissed for the first and only time that night. Then he stood and slipped on his coat, helped her to her feet, and together they removed the evidence of the evening. After locking the laboratory, he bade her good night,

and left to return to Hogwarts, wishing for the first time that he could stay at Croydon instead.

Even though there was only one chess board out in the Great Hall the next day, two games of chess were being played.

You were late in last night.

Not inordinately so, I don't think.

Any trouble?

Not what I would call trouble. Not for me at any rate. Bella had some explaining to do.

Until midnight? "Check."

Oh no. Bella was out and about long before that. "You forgot to cover that bishop. Serious mistake."

So you were being interrogated until midnight?

No. I was in the laboratory by eight.

What happened in the laboratory? An explosion?

Define explosion.

Dumbledore paused, his hand on an unmoved knight, peering at Snape over the rim of his glasses. *Do not be cheeky. Your young lady was there, no?*

Well if you already knew that, why were you beating around the bush?

And?

And what? Why didn't I ever realize before what a voyeur you are?

Here I am, shepherding my young son through his first dating...

I'm not that young! "Check!"

Compared to me, you are an infant. "Capture your rook and check to you."

"How dare you think that because of your age you have a right to..."

Snape paused, suddenly realizing he was speaking out loud. "...show off how good you are at chess. I swear you deliberately made me think you were an amateur just so you could beat me now."

"We all have our little secrets, Severus. I am not as clever as you seem to think I am, but then again, neither are you."

The game ended five minutes later when Dumbledore mated Snape's king.

Monday started out normally. There were the usual problems in Potions class, and the usual end of term hysterics, but on the whole, normal was the operative word. In fact, Snape might not have known anything was amiss until the following morning had not he and Sprout lingered in the Great Hall after supper discussing the early summer plantings.

The evening was well advanced when Snape and Sprout left the Hall, both towards their respective rooms. At once, as if a floodgate opened, a flurry of Hufflepuff students came clattering down the staircase, ignoring the two professors entirely, and heading for their own dormitories as if bloodhounds were after them.

“Whoa!” yelled Sprout, but none of them heeded. A boy at the tail end of the stream was easier to catch. “Zacharias, what is the meaning of this!”

The boy paused only a moment. “Sorry, Professor. Umbridge . . . caught us . . . Potter . . . hide from her . . . Dumbledore . . . gotta go . . .” and he vanished into the kitchen passage with the others.

Sprout hurried after him and was gone for many minutes while Snape waited in the entrance hall. When she returned, she was almost running. “They’ve been organizing a combat group behind Umbridge’s back,” she gasped to Snape. “They called themselves Dumbledore’s Army.”

Both professors sprinted for the stairs, Snape ahead of Sprout only because he was younger and had longer legs. As they reached the floor with the gargoyle statue and the spiral staircase, they narrowly avoided running into a group of people. A group of impressive people headed by the Minister of Magic himself, Cornelius Fudge. Umbridge was with them, as was Kingsley Shacklebolt, who saw Snape and gave him a short, decisive shake of the head, then looked quickly away. Behind them McGonagall was descending the spiral stairs with Potter as Umbridge turned to the group from the Ministry.

“Shall we discuss this grave matter in my offices, gentlemen?” she said, and they nodded agreement and followed her.

McGonagall sent Potter up to Gryffindor house and was about to leave when the two professors hissed her over to them. “Oh, it’s terrible!” she exclaimed in unconcealed anguish. “They caught the students organizing an army, and now Dumbledore’s fled from Hogwarts!”

* * *

Malfoy and Snape left the interview chamber together.

“Very timely news. He was wondering what was going on. He thought old Dumbledore looked a bit combative.”

Snape felt his heart nearly skip a beat. “The Dark Lord can see Dumbledore?” he asked, trying to keep his voice sounding casual.

“From time to time. It takes quite an effort, and the Potter boy’s mind has to be in the right receptive condition. It only lasts a moment, so it’s nowhere

as useful as the dream connection, but he hopes to be able to improve the link with practice.”

It was cold. The corridor was very cold. *Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm cold.* “Can he hear what they’re saying?”

“Not yet, but he’s working on it. Can you stay? I’d like to go over a few things with you.”

“No, not tonight. I have to get back before Umbridge notices I’m gone. I’m not sure how easy it’ll be to get out anymore. The Dark Lord may wish to be reminded of that.”

“All right. Good luck at Hogwarts.”

Snape made it in good time. It was another hour before Umbridge was finished and the Minister left. Then he was summoned rather brusquely to her office. She did not invite him to sit.

“I think I commented to you before that you seem to spend quite a bit of time away from Hogwarts, Professor.”

“No more than I’m entitled to. Less than many of the others.”

“Yes, but you come back at very late hours.”

“Eleven o’clock can hardly be considered late, certainly not if one goes to the theater.”

“You must have the spells for opening and closing the gates, though, to be able to move around so freely.”

“No, I don’t. The Headmaster always lets me in. Occasionally the Deputy Headmistress.” Snape knew exactly where this conversation was going. McGonagall must have refused to turn over the spells.

“I see. Well, until this whole matter of chain of command can be resolved once and for all, your excursions may be somewhat restricted.” She waited, but Snape saw no reason to comment. “There is another matter I wish to discuss with you. All potions kept for the needs of the school in general are in your custody, no?”

“Except for medical stores. Madam Pomfrey has those.”

“I understand you are required to stock a small supply of Veritaserum.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Very small. One vial.”

“Bring it to me.”

“I can’t do that, Ma’am. The regulations are very strict. I can only give it to the Headmaster or to the Deputy Headmistress.”

“But I’m the High Inquisitor.”

“There is no mention of the title ‘High Inquisitor’ in the regulations. If I were to give the Veritaserum to you, I would be breaking the law.”

Umbridge tapped her fingers on the desk, clearly debating whether to push the issue or not. At last she said, "That's all. You may go now."

Snape sped down to his office and unlocked the cabinet with the controlled stock in it. The little vial of Veritaserum with its Ministry registration label was near the front, full except for three drops that had been used on Barty Crouch the year before. Quickly Snape got another vial and emptied the Veritaserum into it, stoppered it, and hid it in the wardrobe in his bedroom. Then he rinsed out and dried the official vial.

The little flask of false Veritaserum that he'd made in Croydon was in another cabinet, unlabeled and anonymous. Carefully, Snape filled the official vial with the false serum, full except for three drops. The deception was undetectable. Snape replaced the vial in its cabinet and locked it securely.

The next morning, Educational Decree Number Twenty-eight was posted, announcing that Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor, was now also Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. One of the new headmistress's first actions was to summon her potions master and demand the vial of Veritaserum that was kept locked in his office in case of need. Snape went down into the dungeons and returned at once with the vial.

It was interesting to Snape to note that Umbridge was still working out of the Dark Arts office. It seemed that the headmaster's office refused to recognize the authority of the Ministry of Magic. As far as the office was concerned, Dumbledore was still headmaster. *How would one go about punishing a piece of architecture for insubordination?*

McGonagall was not in the mood to be kind at breakfast.

"I see you caved in very quickly. And here I had just convinced myself that you'd developed a spine."

"Now, now. You were nasty to me last year, too, and then you had to backtrack and apologize."

"You mean all is not what it seems in faeryland?"

"All is not what our beloved and fearless leader wishes it to be."

"So counsel me. What should I do if offered a cup of tea on the second floor?"

"Accept it graciously and drink it politely. It cannot harm you. Just don't give in to sudden impulses unless you actually desire to make enemies."

"Mendaciuserum?"

"More like Fraudiserum, but you have the right idea."

"You wicked, wicked boy. And to think there was a time when I was naïve enough to consider you trustworthy."

"It depends on who's trusting and what it's worth."

"There. I have no illusions left."

Word passed quickly among the teachers that no one was going to be overwhelmed by a sudden passion to confess all, and they relaxed and tried to formulate plans.

As it turned out, the one called before Umbridge was Potter. Were it not for the fact that the whole school was in danger, Snape would have been quite content to have Potter forced to spill his soul to Umbridge. It served the evil little prima donna right for causing all the trouble in the first place.

He knew she was looking for any excuse to take over the school, so he hands her one on a silver platter. I still believe Dumbledore should have told him the Dark Lord wants to kidnap him, but I honestly don't think it would have made any difference. He's too conceited to imagine that an idea of his might have a flaw, so he'd have gone right on with his meetings, and the result would've been the same. I'd wager even now Potter doesn't realize he forced Dumbledore out. If he thinks of it at all, which he probably doesn't, he probably believes that Dumbledore took the blame out of affection, because precious Harry Potter is so unique and lovable that the whole world must want to sacrifice themselves for his benefit. Just like his father. Just like Black. Now it's Potter against Umbridge, and I don't know which I'd prefer to have lose, since they both so deeply deserve it.

As it turned out, Potter told Umbridge nothing, though whether this was as a result of the false Veritaserum or not, Snape never learned. The day was full of surprises, most of which could be credited to Fred and George Weasley, and Umbridge was kept busy all day answering the desperate calls of teachers with firework dragons in their classrooms, none of whom seemed to be the slightest bit upset with either Fred or George.

A select group of Slytherin students had begun working for Umbridge, headed by Draco Malfoy and several other children of Death Eaters. Snape was reasonably sure that Lucius had approved the action, since it would help deflect attention from the work of their parents and keep Umbridge focused on Hogwarts as the center of her problems. The only headache for Snape in all of this was that one of his Chasers had vanished, and he had Slytherin students combing the castle for any trace of the boy.

Umbridge didn't seem to think the disappearance of a student was worth her notice, and refused to be of assistance.

By Wednesday, things seemed to have returned to a semblance of normality. Classes were conducted as usual, and it turned out that most of the fireworks had been used up in one day, so that there was no repeat of the previous day's chaos. The only thing that spoiled Snape's peace was the thought of occlumency lessons with Potter.

Snape hadn't seen Potter since Dumbledore's departure. Every time he thought of Potter, he became furious and ill at the same time. Part of it was the sheer arrogance of the boy, combined with a talent for committing stupid actions unparalleled in Snape's experience. *How could he not have realized that Umbridge would be watching him more closely than anyone? Wasn't it Potter's account of the return of the Dark Lord that had brought Umbridge to Hogwarts in the first place? Wasn't it Potter's interview that had suddenly upped the stakes? How could he disregard his own role in the events of the entire year!*

That was the furious part. The ill part was waiting for the mark to itch or burn, wondering how he would be able to depart Hogwarts unseen on either a scheduled or unscheduled trip to Croydon. And how he might return undetected. Dumbledore had been sheltered up in his office, but McGonagall's rooms were near Umbridge's, and Umbridge's wrath was now directed against McGonagall for withholding precisely the information that allowed Snape to enter and leave the grounds. *Which makes me feel like a paramecium on a glass slide under Umbridge's microscope.*

Too tense to even go to supper, Snape waited for Potter in his dungeon offices. The time for the lesson came, but no Potter. Snape began to place the dangerous memories into the pensieve anyway. *Thank goodness Dumbledore allowed me to keep it down here instead of carrying it up to him every evening. If it had been in his office Monday, I'd have no way of hiding these.*

The door opened. Snape recognized Potter's step without turning around. "You're late, Potter," he said, trying to keep his anger out of his voice. Then he turned to face the boy. "So. Have you been practicing?"

"Yes," answered Potter, in a blatant lie. The boy's own dislike was palpable.

"Well, we'll soon find out, won't we? Wand out, Potter." Snape was now making a serious effort to control his own feelings, the very sight of Potter rendering that discipline more difficult than usual. *Control yourself, Severus.* "On the count of three then. One . . . two . . ."

The office door was opened suddenly by an agitated Malfoy, whose shocked look told that the last thing he expected was to find Snape and Potter together, wands drawn. Snape lowered his own wand quickly and

tucked it away. *Death Eater child and Inquisitorial Squad. That's all I need. To have both Umbridge and his father know that there is some special arrangement between Potter and me.*

"Professor Snape, sir . . . oh . . . sorry," was all Malfoy managed to say.

"It's all right, Draco. Potter is here for a little Remedial Potions." It was the cover story already planned and used before, but Snape realized from Malfoy's gloating expression that Potter was going to be more than a little teased about it. He was unconcerned about Potter's feelings. Quite the contrary.

"I didn't know," was all Malfoy said.

"Well, Draco, what is it?"

"It's Professor Umbridge, sir . . . she needs your help. They've found Montague, sir. He's turned up jammed inside a toilet on the fourth floor."

"How did he get in there?" *And how did Umbridge get involved? I thought she didn't care about Montague.*

"I don't know, sir, he's a bit confused . . ."

"Very well, very well . . ." Getting a student out of a toilet might take some time, presuming that Umbridge did not want the plumbing damaged. "Potter, we shall resume this lesson tomorrow evening instead."

Malfoy trailing behind, Snape hurried out of his office and up the stairs to the fourth floor boy's lavatory. He assumed that Potter had left the office at the same time.

It took longer than expected to extract Montague from his predicament since, from what they could glean from the dazed Montague himself, he had apparated into the toilet and was therefore wedged in as tightly as was possible. A series of enlarging (for the pipe) and shrinking (for Montague) spells eventually effected his release, and Snape helped get him downstairs to Madam Pomfrey before returning to his office.

Potter was still there. Potter was not only still there, he was deeply immersed in a pensieve memory, oblivious to the fact that Snape had reentered the room. Snape felt a moment of stunned shock as his mind registered that Potter had no scruples about violating another person's privacy, and then anger and panic began to surge in him as the full import of what was happening struck. The memories he'd worked so hard to conceal from the Dark Lord were now freely available for discovery and review, floating around in Potter's undisciplined mind, accessible by dream connection, waking intrusion, or face-to-face legilimency.

Edging nearer, Snape was able to see which memory Potter had found.

It was the Levicorpus incident, with Lily standing bravely in front of the whole school, challenging James Potter in his defense. One glimpse of that memory and a decade and a half of concealment from the Dark Lord would be shattered.

Furious, Snape gripped Potter's arm and dragged him from the pensieve. "So," he hissed between clenched teeth, "been enjoying yourself, Potter?"

Potter struggled to release his arm from Snape's grip. "N-no..." he stammered, though whether from fear or shame was hard to tell.

Not that this boy will ever feel shame. He has no concept of what that is, not Mr. Perfect Potter. Just like his father. "Amusing man, your father, wasn't he?"

"I... didn't..."

Snape realized then that he was shaking Potter, and pushed the boy away from him. Potter staggered and fell to the floor. "You will not repeat what you saw to anybody!" Suddenly Snape saw a vision of students passing gossip through the different houses... and someone telling Draco... and Draco telling Lucius... and Lucius telling...

"No, no, of course I w..." Potter was saying, but Snape wasn't listening.

"Get out!" he screamed at the retreating Potter. "Get out! I don't want to see you in this office ever again!"

There was a jar in his hand, and Snape hurled it at the door, narrowly missing the boy, who was out into the corridor and racing toward the stairs and Gryffindor house. It didn't end there for Snape, though. Two more jars followed, shattering on the threshold, at which point some instinct of survival kicked in and the next spun a hundred thirty-five degrees and smashed into the back of the fireplace.

Two dozen beakers, flasks, cruets, vials, bottles, crocks, and other vessels were flung savagely against the hearthstones, until Snape finally collapsed exhausted next to his desk. It did no good. Ultimately nothing could do any good, for the danger was not within Snape's control. The danger was within Potter's control, and that was no control at all. All Snape could do was wait until the moment when Potter revealed his secrets to the Dark Lord, and then all the plotting and scheming would be over.

There was only one thing that might have helped at that moment, and that was to talk to Dumbledore, but Dumbledore wasn't there. Dumbledore was gone, perhaps forever, because of Potter. Potter with his total disregard for the rights, the interests, the needs of anyone but himself.

At that moment of blank despair, Snape hated Harry Potter with every fiber of his being.

Then the Easter break began, and the school emptied. Only the fifth and seventh years stayed in any numbers, studying madly for their OWL and NEWT exams.

On Saturday morning, Snape slid into the chair next to McGonagall and said in a more or less conversational manner, "Going anywhere during the holidays?" then dropped his voice and added, "I need out tonight."

"I hadn't thought about it. There's so much that needs to be looked after here. Timing, of course, is key. Do you have a particular time when you like to go?"

"Generally at the beginning of the break," Snape said, then bit off a piece of sausage, murmuring 'seven' at the same time. "But I usually come back early so I can spend the last week preparing for the third term." Another bite of sausage covered the word 'eleven.'

"Well this break you may have to forgo a vacation." McGonagall's voice dipped as she added 'done.' "We have a duty to ensure that our classes do not suffer from the turbulence of the events that surround them. This coming term in particular we must work hard to see that the standards of Hogwarts do not fall." — 'Be punctual,' was the last whispered exchange.

Snape snuck out of the castle at six thirty, just to be sure that nothing delayed him too much on his way to the gate. By ten to seven he was crouched behind the bushes that lined the path up the hill, waiting for the percussive snap in the air that said the shields were lowered. When that came, he slipped through the gate then, out of curiosity, waited to see how much time McGonagall gave him. The thrum of the closing spell shivered through him a bare five minutes later.

That woman really believes in punctuality. I can't be late tonight, or she'll lock me out for the rest of the weekend. It was not the most comforting thought as Snape apparated to Croydon.

Things had gotten to the point that Snape expected to be met at the entrance to headquarters and directed to the interview chamber. That the messenger was a lower-level operative was the good news. *Unless the Dark Lord is becoming more subtle in his management techniques.*

Malfoy joined Snape in the basement corridor, and they went in together. The Dark Lord was direct and to the point. "Has Potter dreamed of entering farther into the Department of Mysteries?"

"I do not know, Lord. Potter does not discuss his dreams with me. The one he might have spoken with was Dumbledore, but now Dumbledore is gone from Hogwarts, that line of communication is closed."

There was silence, and then the Dark Lord spoke again. "The good news was not entirely to our benefit. Our plans would progress more swiftly if we were certain that the boy receives the images in their entirety when they are sent. When was it that the boy first knew he had entered and encountered the many doors?"

"The Wednesday before you reprimanded me for my slowness in reporting."

"You are sure."

"Yes, I am, Lord. I was near him when it happened and . . . he commented on it."

"And yet that was many days after the initial projection."

"Lord," interjected Malfoy, "perhaps all you must do is project the same image multiple times. He'll think it's a recurring dream. Slow certain steps will lead us to our goal more safely than quick, uncertain ones."

"You see, Potions master, Malfoy counsels caution while Bella Lestrange counsels precipitate action. What do you counsel?"

It wasn't a question Snape wanted to answer. He was more than content to have Lucius and Bella be the Dark Lord's advisors. Let them take the blame when something didn't work. He took a deep breath. "Make wise use of the time we have, Lord. Right now we are undetected and may operate at leisure. This is the time to move carefully and be sure that every step is successful. Later we may not have the luxury of abundant time. Then, we'll have to move quickly and take our chances."

"You have a talent for taking both sides, Potions master. This amuses me. Take care that you always do it for my sake, and not for your own."

"Yes, Lord. That is always my intent, Lord."

Malfoy and Snape left together, each heading for his own work area after they left the basement area.

Phina didn't come to the laboratory that evening, and Snape found that he missed her presence. He even worried a little that something might have happened to her. The rest of the evening was quiet and restful, however, until Snape left headquarters to apparate back to Hogwarts. That was when he was accosted by a ghostly image in the form of a phoenix. "The Order needs you tonight," it said in Dumbledore's voice, and then vanished.

Wonderful. McGonagall will have the gates open in ten minutes and keep them open for five. What are the chances I can get back to Hogwarts before I'm locked out? And how do I explain that to Umbridge tomorrow morning? This had better be important.

Snape apparated at once to Grimmauld Place, where Lupin opened the door. “Dumbledore’s already here,” he said, “but this isn’t a full meeting. Basically he wants to talk to you.”

Dumbledore was in the kitchen talking to Black when Lupin and Snape walked in. Snape immediately stepped to one side, away from the table, and waited quietly. Black leaned back in his chair and regarded Snape thoughtfully, a small, wry smile on his lips.

After a moment, Dumbledore spoke. “I hope you will excuse me, Sirius, but I have asked Severus here because I need to confer with him for a moment. This was, unfortunately, the only convenient place as it is the only location available that is protected by a Fidelius Charm.”

“I understand completely. Don’t worry, Professor, I know that if you think something is necessary, then it probably is. I have no objection to your using the premises when you need them.” He continued watching Snape, but didn’t move.

“Oh dear,” sighed Dumbledore, “I fear we have an awkward situation. Is there perhaps somewhere where I might speak privately with Severus?”

“Don’t worry about disturbing me; the conversation won’t bother me at all.”

“I was thinking perhaps somewhere out of the general common areas . . .”

“So you’re telling me to get lost in my own house.”

“I would not have put it quite so harshly.”

“There’s no sense offering you refreshments, is there?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Black rose and sauntered out of the kitchen, Lupin accompanying him. Dumbledore gestured toward the empty chair. “Please sit down, Severus. I need to ask you about Hogwarts, and especially about Harry.”

Snape sat down where Dumbledore indicated. Three days earlier he’d wanted to discuss this with Dumbledore. Now he wasn’t sure.

“Umbridge first,” Dumbledore prompted.

“She’s officially headmistress now. Decree Twenty-eight. She has two major opponents: McGonagall — who won’t give her the security codes to the grounds, and your office — which won’t let her in. Both students and teachers are giving her a hard time, the students playing practical jokes, and the teachers holding an Italian postal strike.”

Dumbledore had started chuckling at the mention of McGonagall’s name. Now he laughed out loud. “You are going to have to explain that one to me, Severus. None of our teachers is Italian.”

"The government workers of many countries are forbidden by law to strike. When the employees of the Italian postal service failed to negotiate what they considered a decent contract, which included updating their job descriptions, they began actually enforcing every postal law and regulation still on the books. Postal service ground to a halt in a matter of days since no one had ever bothered to revoke hundred-year-old regulations. Needless to say, they won."

"So my staff is doing only what Umbridge says they can do, and making her do all the rest?"

"That's it in a nutshell."

"And how is McGonagall holding up? And Hagrid? And Trelawney?"

"McGonagall loves a fight. She'll circle the wagons and . . ." Snape stopped at Dumbledore's quizzical look, then elaborated. "American slang. A reference to pioneer wagon trains when attacked by hostile Indians. You really do need to become familiar with other cultures, sir. Well, she'll dig trenches and settle in for the long war. Hagrid . . . I don't know what's happening with Hagrid. It's like he's beating himself up. I can't think of anything else that could cause such extensive damage. But you knew that already. It hasn't changed. Trelawney hides in her tower. She's safe. Umbridge has forgotten she exists."

"And Harry."

"Has still not learned occlumency."

"There. Something has happened. Tell me about it."

Snape looked at his hands, then at the table, the walls, the ceiling . . . everywhere but at Dumbledore. "There's been an incident. Do you recall you offered me the use of your pensieve?"

"Potter looked in it and saw one of your memories? That was an inappropriate action."

"No. It isn't just that. When it comes to that, I shouldn't have trusted in Potter's sense of decency. I should have made him step out of my office first and then locked the door on him. That was my own naïveté, my own stupidity. But the Dark Lord is actively trying to influence his dreams, is actively in contact with his brain every day. Not only that, I learned only after you 'left' that the Dark Lord has been able to look through Potter's eyes while Potter is awake. He saw you that day and knew you were angry about something. I don't care what Macnair thinks, I don't want to be tortured. I don't want to die. I have to stay out of Potter's surface thoughts and below the Dark Lord's radar. I told Potter never to come to my office again."

"I am deeply disturbed to hear that, Severus. It is vitally important that the boy learns to block Riddle's access to his mind. You really must resume the lessons. It is imperative."

"Do you mean that Potter's ability to use occlumency is more important than my life . . . than whatever the Dark Lord will do to me between now and the day I die? If you can look me in the eyes and tell me that is so, then I'll resume the lessons."

"You trust me that much?"

"I do."

"If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then unto me.' The problem is, I do not know which of my three boys will blossom in importance and become the chief player in this drama."

"Three boys?"

"Yes. Tom, Dick, and Harry." At the sight of Snape's raised eyebrows, Dumbledore smiled. "We do have your full name in our files, you know, though you might prefer 'Tom, Russ, and Harry.' Still, there are three, and I do not yet know which is the most important of them."

"So are you saying I shouldn't resume the lessons?"

"I am saying that I do not wish to lock you into a position that you feel you cannot escape from should the need arise."

"That's just a fancy way of saying you don't want to be responsible for the consequences of a decision you make."

"I suppose, in a way, that is a fair comment."

The two sat quietly for some minutes as Snape debated whether this was an appropriate time to bring up another matter that he'd been considering for some months.

"Sir, may I ask you a question? It is related to the matter at hand."

"That has a portentous sound. Very well, yes, you may."

"Whose idea and whose decision was it to make Peter Pettigrew the Secret-Keeper for the house in Godric's Hollow?"

Dumbledore's surprise at this question was revealed only by the length of time it took him to respond. "The decision was James's."

"Only James's?"

"I believe so. Yes."

"Not Lily's. And whose idea was it?"

"I don't believe I should answer that question."

"That answers it. The person is still alive. That means it was Sirius Black's idea. Black tried to weasel out of a dangerous position by giving it to someone even weaker. Sterling character, that one."

"It was true that Sirius would have been suspected at once. There was some merit to the idea of giving the position to someone no one would suspect."

"Really? I'd say any one of the three friends would have been suspect. Why not go back to the original idea of making you the Secret-Keeper? Even better, why not make James or Lily the Secret-Keeper? Then the Secret-Keeper would always be in the place protected by the charm."

"I cannot answer your question. I did not become aware of the switch until two years ago. What does this have to do with Harry's occlumency lessons?"

"I think James's arrogance killed Lily. I think he was so convinced that his own plans were flawless that he never made provisions for unexpected contingencies. I think he honestly believed that his foolhardiness and emotional intensity were more than a match for simple mind games, but that his own undisciplined mind was pouring out to the Dark Lord the exact location of his wife and child even as he died trying to protect them. I think that Potter is just like his father, and he will betray every one of his friends and colleagues to their dooms, never abandoning, even at the moment of his own death, the belief that he must have chosen the right path because his motives were sincere. I don't want to be one of the sacrificial victims."

"So you blame James for Lily's death."

"Among others."

"Am I on your list of suspects?"

"I don't believe I should answer that question."

"Ah. Now I must bring the conversation back to its beginning. Do you think it possible for you to resume Potter's occlumency lessons?"

"No. Enough damage has been done. My person and my position have already been placed in jeopardy, and I don't wish to make the odds any worse. It might be different if you could guarantee to me that Potter is essential while I am expendable, but you can't or won't do that. So far as I can tell, we have a stalemate."

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - F O U R

WHEELS OF FORTUNE

Dumbledore sighed. "I am, of course, disappointed that you have reached this decision, but I shall respect it."

"It isn't as if you have much choice. What about the others? Potter has lethal information on them, too. Shouldn't they be warned?"

"Would it do any good? Is our cause served by making people unnecessarily cautious?"

"I'll remember you said that in case anyone asks. Now, how am I to get back to Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore sent a patronus to McGonagall, and Snape found the gate open on his arrival. He made his way wearily to his own room and sank onto the bed, not even bothering to undress. His conversation with Dumbledore had left him intensely depressed.

He has no idea what it's like to go to Croydon every week not knowing if I'm going to return. And he doesn't care. Last year, when I asked him to cast the Cruciatus Curse, I'm sure he was more concerned about his having to cause pain than about my having to feel it. If he thought it was necessary, would he throw me to the wolves? In a heartbeat. Would he throw Potter to the wolves... a totally different question. Am I jealous of Potter?

It was a new idea, and one Snape didn't like. Did he, in fact, resent Potter's position in Dumbledore's regard? *Has Jacob stolen Isaac's blessing, and am I Esau? Am I angry because Dumbledore never kills the fatted calf for me, but welcomes prodigal Potter with open arms?*

Yet the Easter break seemed to pass without incident, and midway Snape made another routine visit to Croydon.

"Long time, no see," stage-whispered Phina as she vamped in the laboratory doorway.

"I was here last week."

"True, but I wasn't. The Wheel of Fortune sent Lucius up and Bella down, so you and I had to suffer. Did you suffer the lack of me? Really suffer?"

"Maybe. Is there a reward for saying 'yes'?"

"I thought tonight we might go somewhere of my choosing."

"Am I going to be mugged and left bleeding by the side of the road?"

"Actually, it's been a while since I've seduced anyone, and I'm a little rusty. I was hoping to get in a little training time."

"Where were you thinking of going?"

"I sublet a little flat in the West End. It's cozy. We'd have to apparate together, of course."

"Let me finish these potions. It'll take about half an hour."

It took forty-five minutes, and then Phina clasped Snape to apparate to a flat that was the entire third floor of a nineteenth century town house. Snape took in Phina's version of Art Deco decor as she lowered the lights, put on some mood music, and opened a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

Handing him a glass of the wine, Phina pulled Snape down onto a cherry-red loveseat with rounded back and arms. "Kiss me, dahling," she intoned in a neoclassical '30s drawl, and encircled his neck with her arms, still holding the wineglass.

Trying not to laugh, Snape did as he was told, and the first touch of their lips reminded him why he enjoyed her company so much. He managed to deftly remove the glass from her hand, and they kissed lingeringly, lost in the moment of intimacy. All was going excellently until Phina destroyed the night with four words.

Looking up at Snape with wide eyes, she asked, "Do you love me?"

Snape pushed himself to a sitting position on the edge of the loveseat. "What do you want?" he asked.

Phina stared at him. "I thought that was obvious."

"People who ask that question do so because they want something."

"Well about a hundred years ago I wanted you. Now I'm not so sure." Snape didn't look at her, and a moment later she added, "I guess the answer was 'no.' If you're not opposed to talking, I could make some coffee."

Phina got up and went to the kitchen where she ran water into an hourglass-shaped espresso maker and lit the stove. Snape followed her as far as the kitchen door. She looked over as he watched her. "Coffee only comes with conversation. No conversation, no coffee, you go back to wherever you want to go back to. *Capisci?*"

"I understand."

Mutual silence accentuated the bubbling of the coffee maker, then Phina poured two demitasses and they sat facing each other across the kitchen table. "So," she challenged, "is it the fact that I'm ugly and repulsive?"

"No! Gad, if there's anyone neither ugly nor repulsive, it's you. It's just that this was all going so... well, so..., and then you had to make it personal."

"It has a tendency to be personal. Sort of the nature of the beast."

"I don't mean... I mean — you were doing a job, and I was playing along, and it was... uncomplicated... lighthearted even... and we didn't have to think about... I don't even believe... Drat! I had this conversation just a few weeks ago."

"Really? With whom?"

"Dumbledore."

Phina locked her mouth shut and looked for a moment as if she was about to explode. Then she burst out laughing. "You and Albus Dumbledore! I can't even picture it — if I tried, I'd just die! Which of you..."

"I didn't mean that! You know perfectly well I didn't mean that! For crying out loud, Phina, stop laughing. I'm walking out now. You can just tell Bella you failed miserably and I don't care what excuse you give..."

"No... no..." she gasped, waving him back into the chair. "I'm sorry. You took me by surprise. I didn't... I don't... Oh, Lord!" When the giggling fit calmed down, Phina took a deep breath, placed both hands squarely on the table, and looked Snape in the eye. "I take it this was a philosophical discussion."

"Well, yes. Of course." Then Snape began to chuckle, too. "The problem is... Well, Dumbledore knows about you — not you specifically, but a... a woman. He could sense a presence in my life, and he asked if I loved... you. I have to tell you honestly, I don't believe there is such a thing. I think part of the population uses the word in order to manipulate another part of the population. 'Love' is a con game."

"You've never loved anyone?"

"Don't use that tone of voice. I've felt affection for people, and I've been jealous, and I've felt..." Snape paused, not used to any kind of admission of emotions. He knew he was blushing, and he knew that Phina could read this part of him like a book.

"Now we come to the heart of the matter. Semantics!"

"It isn't that simple!"

"Of course it is! You're afraid of the word 'love.' You're willing to admit

to anything else, just not the L word. Well come on, Cursemaster! I hate you, I loathe you, I abominate you. Let's just have fun!"

The incredible thing was that Snape still wanted to debate the issue, but Phina was having none of it. She seized his wrist, dragged him out of the chair, and pulled him into an embrace. It was a couple of hours before Snape even began to wonder what time it was.

The time window was a narrow one, and Snape didn't make it. At 11:06 he arrived in Hogsmeade. Barred from the grounds, he was forced to send a patronus. At 11:08 he walked through the gate. McGonagall had ample reason to complain now. Complaining was, however, not the only thing on McGonagall's mind.

Only moments after arriving in his office, Snape answered a knock at his door. It was McGonagall in nightgown, tartan plaid robe, and hair net. "Who is she?" McGonagall demanded.

"Minerva, do you really think this is the time to . . ."

"Don't you dare try to wriggle out of this one! That patronus was practically . . . well, it was. There's not much will affect a patronus like that, and so I'm asking. Who is she?"

"Mata Hari."

"Not the slightest bit funny, young man. If you are jeopardizing the lives and safety of colleagues of mine for purely personal reasons, I'll . . ."

The accusation stung deeply. "No, no there's no one in danger. It isn't like that."

"You're dancing attendance on a Death Eater. You'll explain to me what it's like."

"She's just . . ."

"Well?"

"She's Bellatrix Lestrange's cousin, and . . . well . . . she's . . ."

"Assigned to lead you by the nose and diddle you into spilling everything you know about all of us."

"No! It has nothing to do with you."

"How do you know?"

"She's . . . well . . . she's . . ."

"You've said that before, laddie. Now explain to me why I shouldna be worrit."

"She doesn't really want to do what Bella tells her to. She's more independent, more . . ."

"And that's what she told you. How do ye know she's telling the truth?"

And there it was. Snape didn't know. He had no idea at all what Phina did when they weren't together, what she divulged to Bella, whether or not she was playing the same game with different men several times a week. Was he giving Phina secrets of the Order? He didn't think they'd ever discussed the Order when they were together, but what did they talk about? Snape wasn't sure. And therefore it might have been the Order.

"Minerva, I'm sorry. I've been . . . how do I explain?"

"Ye've been traipsing after a skirt, that's what ye've been doing. And at any other time I'd be saying good on ye. But now's no' the time, and this girl's no' the one. Does Dumbledore know?"

"Yes. He asked me if I loved her."

"Well, do ye?"

"I don't accept the concept. There's no such thing."

"T is a good sign that in the throes of passion ye can still debate a philosophical point. She's no' got her claws into ye so far as ye cannit get out. Ye stay away from that girl, Severus. She's no good for you. And she's no good for me and the others either. Ye need to think of someone besides yourself from time to time."

McGonagall returned to her rooms, and Snape to his bed, but not to sleep. What McGonagall had said revolved in his mind endlessly all that night, as he weighed the relative merits of trusting someone like Phina.

There was no doubt that McGonagall was upset; she would never have reverted to a burr otherwise. *Can't she understand that I know Phina well enough to know that she wouldn't betray me? I've known her for months. She came to me for defense training.* Snape recalled the first lesson in the training room . . . but that wasn't right — the first time he'd seen her was with Bella. Being introduced by Bella . . . *But Bella didn't escape from Azkaban until January, so that was only the beginning of February, just over two month's ago! Have I only known Phina for two months?*

It was a distressing thought, for seeing Phina was fast becoming the most important thing about Croydon. Snape forced himself to reconstruct the relationship, but sometimes the sequence of events was fuzzy. I took her to the theater, then to dinner . . . no, she asked me to take her to dinner . . . was that before or after Bella caught us together? Slowly — slowly because he really didn't want to see it — slowly a pattern emerged.

Whenever Bella hits a low point with the Dark Lord, Phina disappears for a week. Then when she comes back, the stakes get higher, the meetings become more

intimate. It's as if every time Bella is insecure, Phina takes greater measures to move me into Bella's camp. Was she following orders tonight?

But McGonagall was wrong if she thought Phina's goal was to learn about the Order. Phina was there because of Bella's rivalry with Malfoy. It was a purely internal matter, nothing to affect Hogwarts or Grimmauld Place at all. *Everyone at Croydon knows I spy for the Dark Lord at Hogwarts, yet Phina has never once asked about it.*

Could that possibility arise? *What did we talk about tonight?* Snape had to admit he didn't remember. Not that there was all that much talking. *Could I lower my guard and say something without realizing it? If that could happen, then McGonagall's right. I would be putting the others in danger.*

The last week of Easter break went smoothly and quietly. There were no disruptions to spark Umbridge's anger, diligent students sought out professors for help studying for their OWL and NEWT exams, and Snape never once asked McGonagall for special permission to leave in the middle of the week, so by Wednesday she was speaking to him again.

"That woman is hinting that she'd like to observe all of my classes, as she did with Trelawney. Can you imagine the nerve of the creature! Has she nothing to do as headmistress that she can waste time with such tripe?"

"I take it you still haven't given her the 'keys' to the castle."

"And let her control all our comings and our goings? You'd better hope I don't laddie, or you're going to be between a rock and a hard place."

"Are you going to let her observe you?"

"If it comes to that, I have no choice. But she's making a major tactical error."

"Which is?"

"You're supposed to be clever. You figure it out."

Snape thought for a moment. "She's trying to pressure you into giving her the spells. But if you do, then she can dismiss you any time she likes. As long as you keep the spells secret, she has to keep you here at Hogwarts. She's treating you like she treated Trelawney before she sacked her, thereby encouraging you to withhold what she wants."

"There. You are clever. The problem is that the woman has no subtlety."

"Good thing for us."

Saturday came, the last free day before the returning students raised havoc in the Hall and classes resumed on Monday. Snape ate supper as usual and then made his routine trip to Croydon.

Phina was in the laboratory almost as soon as Snape arrived, sidling close

and beginning to tease him with her fingers. Since Snape was trying to measure out the ingredients for a metal-dissolving potion and was about to pour acid, this was decidedly not the time.

“Stop that!” he snapped at her. “You shouldn’t be here bothering me.”

“Did you hear that, young lady?” drawled a voice from the doorway. “You shouldn’t be here bothering him.”

Phina stepped away quickly as Malfoy walked into the lab.

Phina stomped out of the laboratory, not attempting to hide her disappointment. Malfoy stepped aside to allow her to pass.

“You’d better watch out for that one,” he said calmly to Snape. “She’s a man-eater.”

“Bella set her on me.”

“She’s trotted out the big guns, then. Miss Vaughn only hunts serious game.”

“Do you know her?”

Malfoy smirked. “Well, I don’t exactly ‘know’ her, if you take my meaning. She didn’t frequent headquarters until Bella returned. The family depends on her more in financial deals and bla . . . persuasion.”

“I see. I’ll be careful. Was there something you wanted to discuss?”

“Just to inquire if you had any opportunity to observe Potter and find out if he’s responding to the Dark Lord’s projections.”

“No, I haven’t. Most of the students have been studying for exams and generally locking themselves in their houses. Not to complain or anything, but Draco is part of the problem.”

“Really? How so?”

“The Inquisitorial Squad is a masterful idea — it has totally hoodwinked Umbridge — but the squad members are sometimes over enthusiastic. The students of the other houses, especially Gryffindor, tend to stay away from the common areas where they might be observed.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll send word to Draco.”

“Would it be appropriate to tell me if the Dark Lord has made further progress? If not . . .”

“Not a problem. He has, in fact, been able to catch more glimpses of things through Potter’s eyes. This happens most often if Potter’s upset about something. He seems, for example, to be having some disagreements with his friends. The Dark Lord would be interested in learning more details about this, which is the main reason I’ve come to talk to you. He still can’t hear what’s said, and he has no access to Potter’s mind yet outside the direct visual

connection. He was rather hoping you could provide context to help him expand the connection. It may prove to be as valuable as the dream link.”

“Tell the Dark Lord I am ready to do as he wishes. I’ll note down anything I observe.”

“I know you have the Dark Lord’s best interests at heart.” Malfoy left the lab then, turning at the door to say, “Watch out for that girl.”

Phina didn’t return that night, Malfoy’s attention having rendered any contact dangerous, thereby giving Snape time and opportunity to ponder their relationship and her motivation. He finished his work and apparated to Hogsmeade at precisely 11:00, presenting McGonagall with no reason to complain.

The next morning Snape and McGonagall spoke over breakfast.

“Was all calm in the south?”

“Dead and dull. Nothing to not report home to mother about.”

“I’m pleased to hear it. I sympathize if this puts a damper on your social life.”

“Unavoidable. You did give me a lot to think about.”

“There’s a good boy.”

Later Snape tried to analyze why he was reluctant to tell McGonagall about the Dark Lord’s attempts to see through Potter’s eyes. His justification was that Dumbledore already knew. And there was also the chance that knowing would cause McGonagall to alter her behavior, thus making the Dark Lord suspicious. Snape rather thought, however, that the real reason was that he didn’t want to confide in anyone but Dumbledore. Then he’ll remember that I’m important, too.

Monday was the first day that Snape would come into contact with Potter since he’d pulled the boy out of the pensieve. *Who has he told? How many Gryffindors have been regaled with the image of me suspended upside down by Potter’s father?* It was a whole different problem from that of the Dark Lord seeing Lily.

It was also a whole different problem from the possibility of the Dark Lord watching him through Potter’s eyes. *I don’t want Potter to think about me more than he has to. Below the radar...* During Monday morning potions, Snape acted as if Potter didn’t exist. Potter did the same regarding Snape. Everything was going smoothly until Potter brought a sample of his potion to Snape’s desk for evaluation.

Snape wasn’t sure what it was — James arrogant grin and air of superiority or Sirius’s strut and defiant tilt of the head — but Potter deposited the flask of

potion on his desk, then turned away, and without conscious thought Snape's hand brushed forward and the flask lay broken on the floor. At the sound of shattered glass, Potter spun around.

"Whoops. Another zero, then, Potter," Snape said quietly. Off to one side he could hear Draco Malfoy laughing at Potter's discomfiture. The icing on the cake was that Granger, in an effort to be helpful, had cleaned out Potter's cauldron, and Potter had no more potion to turn in for the assignment. It was a satisfying moment.

As the afternoon wore on, however, the memory of the incident became less and less satisfying. *Childish! Foolhardy! Malfoy told me that the Dark Lord can see through Potter more easily if he's angry or upset. So what do I do? I make him angry. And why do I take the chance of both Potter and the Dark Lord focusing on me? A petty impulse. Severus, you're an idiot.*

Monday afternoon double Potions had just ended, and Snape was beginning to set the room up for the following morning, when there was a sudden commotion in the corridor. Slytherin students were running for the entrance hall, and the air was charged with excitement. Wishing he had the same instinct for a fight or a prank that a fourteen-year-old had, Snape quickly locked the classroom door and joined the crowd.

Students were streaming down the stairs, some holding their noses or gagging, some trying to wipe slime off their clothes or out of their hair, others just moving with the flow of bodies. In their midst, pushing to get ahead before the entrance hall became too crowded with Hufflepuff and Slytherin students pouring out from their respective dungeons, were Fred and George Weasley.

Aha! We know who's in the center of whatever the problem is!

Fred and George didn't make it. Their path to the great doors and freedom was blocked by both students and teachers, some of whom had come from the Great Hall where supper was almost ready. The wall of bodies forced the two pranksters to turn at bay in the center of a ring of students, professors, and ghosts, Peeves hovering protectively above them. Umbridge, too, came charging down from the upper floors, out of breath but menacing.

"So!" crowed Umbridge at realizing the twins were trapped. "So . . . you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?"

Snape looked over at Fred and George in shocked admiration. He himself had cast some inventive curses, hexes, and jinxes in his day, but a swamp inside a building was a stroke of genius. Ordinarily he would be incensed at

the rule breaking. Seeing as it was Umbridge's problem, however, he decided to keep his mouth shut and enjoy the scene.

Filch pushed his way down from the second floor, Potter right behind him, croaking something about approval for whipping. Umbridge gloated. "You two are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school."

The Weasleys defied her, defied her in front of everyone, then raised their wands and cried in unison, "*Accio Brooms!*" The crash that echoed down the staircase reminded Snape that Umbridge had confiscated the broomsticks, but that made no difference. The brooms were loose and joining Fred and George.

Mounting the brooms, the twins informed the whole crowd that they were leaving Hogwarts and setting up a joke shop. "Special discounts to Hogwarts students who swear they're going to use our products to get rid of this old bat!"

As Umbridge screamed "STOP THEM!" the pair rose above the crowd. "Give her hell from us, Peeves!" was their parting shot, then returning the poltergeist's salute, they were gone.

The students were jumping up and down and cheering. Umbridge was livid and apoplectic. Snape was watching McGonagall, who was moving her lips silently. Fred and George Weasley were escaping from Hogwarts, and McGonagall had just opened the defenses to set them free.

It took an hour and a half to get the majority of the students into the Great Hall and settled for supper. As Snape was setting the Inquisitorial Squad to round up Slytherin students first, the mark on his arm began to itch. *Not now. Please not now. She'll be watching all of us like a hawk.* The summons didn't increase in intensity, however, so Snape was able to plan his departure.

"He sends for you quite a bit, doesn't he?" was McGonagall's comment when Snape made the request.

"This is the first non-routine trip since Dumbledore left, and that one was on my initiative."

"Well, if you weren't working for us, I'd be keeping a record of when he had these little crises. It might show a pattern."

"May I tell him you said so?"

"Will you make me sound fierce and menacing?"

"Like a tigress."

"There's a sweet lad. Leave at 10:45. Back at 11:30. Don't be late."

"But that's hardly enough time if he wants me to do something special."

"Tell him I'm getting suspicious."

* * *

"You like to live dangerously," whispered Malfoy as he joined Snape in the interview room. "He isn't pleased about the delay."

"You did remind him that things aren't quite 'normal' at Hogwarts, right?"

The Dark Lord appeared. "You did not come when we summoned."

"Lord, forgive me, but the school was in an uproar, and departure wasn't possible."

"Tell us."

"Two students, children of Arthur Weasley, changed a wing of the fifth floor into a swamp, defied Umbridge in front of the whole school, destroyed her office door in order to retrieve their brooms, and fled Hogwarts. The school has not yet quieted down."

"How is it these children were able to escape, and you are not?"

Snape opened his mouth, closed it again, and swallowed. "They had the connivance of Professor McGonagall."

"We would not have expected it of her. You get no such cooperation."

"She is looking for patterns in my trips here. She wishes to link the times you summon me to identifiable events. Tonight I told her that I needed something from my home in Lancashire. She gave me half an hour, but I managed to persuade her to increase it to forty-five minutes."

"You did well. We do not wish her to become too suspicious. Now, tell us what Potter was doing at about four-thirty this afternoon."

"I don't know. No, wait. He was watching the disturbance caused by the Weasleys."

"You are sure that was all?"

"No, Lord. I was not near him. I saw him on the stairs just before the Weasleys left the school."

"Perhaps you can explain why at about that time I saw him in conversation with Sirius Black. It appeared to be a floo-powder connection."

"No, Lord, I can't." Pain nudged him then, and Snape searched the memory for a clue. "He was on the second floor. That's where Umbridge's office is. Maybe he..."

"Why her office and not some other hearth?"

"Hers is the only one not monitored by the Ministry. That was revealed when Fudge came to arrest Dumbledore, and McGonagall told the rest of us."

"So Potter took advantage of the disruption. Lucius, it would appear that your information was quite correct concerning Potter's ties. Unable to confide in Dumbledore, he turned to Sirius Black."

* * *

In a normal year, the school would settle down after the Easter break, fifth and seventh year students now studying frantically for their OWL and NEWT tests, and the rest almost equally concerned about exams. This was, however, no normal year. The example of Fred and George had touched off an epidemic of dungbombs and stinksap so fierce that students were walking through the upper corridors with bubble charms protecting their heads. Never before had Snape been so grateful that his rooms were in the dungeons.

The worst hit of all was Umbridge. In addition to having to deal with the pranks, she could not get rid of the swamp in the fifth floor corridor, and neither Flitwick nor McGonagall would admit to being able to do so. Snape was relieved that he wasn't asked. Somehow a large number of the employees of the Ministry seemed to think that Professors were as compartmentalized as their subjects, and never suspected a Potions teacher of being an expert spell caster as well.

The next weekend was the last in April, and Snape once again apparated into Croydon. He was taken directly to the Dark Lord where Malfoy and Bella were already in conference. The air seemed charged, and Bella looked murderous.

"Stand before us, Severus," said the Dark Lord. "We wish you to reach into your memory once more for the benefit of these two servants."

Snape relaxed at the speaking of his name, a clear indication that whatever was happening, the Dark Lord was not angry with him. "Yes, Lord," he replied.

"Speak again the words of the prophecy which you overheard."

Ignoring the intake of Bella's breath, Snape recited, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."

"Is this the whole prophecy?"

"No, Lord. The speaker was in a room on the other side of a door. I was interrupted and pulled away from the door, and so did not hear the entire prophecy."

"Who was in the room?"

"Professor Dumbledore and Professor Trelawney."

The Dark Lord's red eyes turned to fix on Bella. "You will speak again your advice to us."

"It's too dangerous to try to penetrate the Department of Mysteries. If our people are discovered, our secrecy is compromised. And in any case, only three people can take the sphere. I say we send our operatives against those who heard it and force the information from them."

"Severus?"

"We're speaking of three people who heard the prophecy. I'm one, but I didn't hear the whole thing. Another is Trelawney, but she remembers nothing of it, and in any case won't leave Hogwarts, and we can't enter to pull her out. The only other is Dumbledore, and I doubt he could be taken without exposing our whole operation, and even if it were possible, he could not be forced to talk."

"Do you see, Bella? Severus shares Lucius's view of this matter." The Dark Lord now turned to Malfoy. "You will speak again your advice to us."

"Entering the Department of Mysteries requires more patience and better preparation, but in the long run it is safer and less liable to be detected. Since the prophecy concerns Potter, he could be induced to enter the Department and take it. We could then take it from him."

"Severus?"

"It is the same problem as with Trelawney. Potter cannot leave, and we cannot get in."

"You can get in."

"Only with the permission of the headmaster or deputy headmistress. And I could not get out again without the same permission."

"Lord," said Malfoy, "my son Draco has told me there is another way to get Potter out."

Puzzled, Snape turned to stare at Malfoy, not understanding what he was talking about. "No, Severus," said the Dark Lord, "look at me now."

Eye contact firmly established with the Dark Lord, Snape listened as Malfoy explained. He knew he was being tested, and let some of his nervousness show.

"Two years ago, there was an incident in Hogsmeade. Potter didn't have

permission from his guardians to go into the town, but he managed to make it anyway using some kind of invisibility charm. He attacked Draco. Draco knew it was Potter, however, because he saw Potter's head. He reported this to Professor Snape."

At Malfoy's first sentence, Snape remembered the incident and himself chastising Potter for taking chances with his life at a time when Sirius Black was loose. He allowed this memory to surface as he listened, letting the Dark Lord see it in its entirety before Malfoy finished.

"So, Lucius, it appears that once again your information is correct."

"Lord," Malfoy continued, "I again advise that we continue with the dream contacts, trying to make Potter desire to find what's in the Department of Mysteries. If that continues to be unsuccessful, we've lost nothing except a small amount of time. Then we can try to lure him out by other means."

"What other means, Lord?" asked Bella.

"Lucius has received information from a source that we do not wish known that the person most precious to Potter is your cousin, Sirius Black. We shall use this cousin of yours as bait."

"How do we find him, Lord? Sirius has been in hiding since he escaped from Azkaban."

"Tell Bella and Lucius, Severus. For whom does Sirius work now?"

"For Dumbledore."

"And where can he be found?"

"Lord, you know I can't say. I can't even think it."

"Forgive me, Lord, but if we can't get our hands on Sirius, what good is Lucius's plan to us?" Bella was sneering at Lucius in ill-hidden triumph.

Malfoy broke in. "Even without his person, we can still project an image. The image may be enough."

"Lord," cried Bella. "What if I can bring you the person of Sirius Black? Wouldn't that be better?"

"Then, Bellatrix, you would be most dear to us."

The session with the Dark Lord was a long one, though for most of the time Bella and Malfoy argued the same points again and again while Snape kept quiet. By the time they were released it was clear that the Dark Lord supported Malfoy. It was also clear that both Bella and Malfoy were upset that Snape hadn't taken sides more strongly, and that both believed he could be persuaded to.

Malfoy was first, as he walked with Snape up to the laboratory. "Thank you for agreeing with me that Bella's plan was foolish."

"I wasn't agreeing with you. I was stating my own opinion. It happened to coincide."

"Thank you, anyway. Bella can get a little crazy sometimes. She seems to think kidnapping and torturing half of England can be done without calling attention to ourselves. I keep advocating a more subtle approach, but Bella keeps insisting that her way is quicker."

"I'm the slow but steady type myself. But that's also a coincidence."

After Malfoy left, Bella arrived.

"You didn't play nicely this evening, puppy dog. Mommy's not happy."

"We've had this conversation before. I have one master here."

"And you want to serve that master to your best ability. So you should see that my way is best."

"Your way has a tendency to be reckless. Sometimes you go too far and your efforts become counterproductive."

"When has that happened. Name one occasion."

"The Longbottoms."

"That's ancient history. How about something more recent?"

"There isn't anything more recent. You've been out of Azkaban for less than four months, and you've been kept on a tight leash. It isn't like you've had the opportunity to get into a lot of trouble."

"You don't trust me, do you, puppy dog? After all I've done for you."

"Believe me, I remember everything you ever did for me. Or to me."

"And it will keep getting better. Phina sends her love."

"Now you're lying."

Bella pouted, then left, her eyes cold and calculating, leaving Snape with the feeling that she would like to see him on a platter with an apple in his mouth. *Steady, Severus. Stay on her good side. You don't want her for an enemy if her star starts to rise.*

Phina didn't come that evening, though Snape hadn't really expected her to. He wasn't worried. If the pattern held true, the next weekend would be a very pleasant one. Right now he wanted some time to himself to decide how best to impart all this new information to Dumbledore.

At breakfast the next morning, Snape passed McGonagall on the way to his own seat, whispering as he did so, "I need to talk to Dumbledore." McGonagall replied at the end of breakfast, walking openly to Snape's chair.

"I have a job for you, Professor."

"On a Sunday?" Snape asked, pretending to be offended.

"There's a shipment of *Bombyx mori* corpses due in today at Hogsmeade. The shipper can't guarantee the exact time since they're coming in from China. You ordered them, you receive them. Sometime between one and four o'clock this afternoon."

"But Professor! I have work . . ."

"You ordered them, you be there to receive them."

Umbridge scurried over a moment later. "*Bombyx mori*," she asked, "what's that?"

"Silkworms. They boil the cocoons to use the threads for silk. The boiled larvae are used in potions."

"Oh. I guess you have to be there."

"Of course. And I was going to use the afternoon for reviewing student files. Of all the rotten luck."

* * *

"They're talking about kidnapping Black to lure Potter to the Department of Mysteries. I think you should tell Potter."

"Who will tell him? You? He would never believe you." Dumbledore peered at Snape over the top of his glasses. "None of the rest of us can enter Hogwarts."

"McGonagall can tell him."

"Let me be more explicit. I do not think it is wise to let Potter know. We know that he has not yet learned occlumency. We know that you, for whatever reason, will not instruct him further, though even that might not affect the outcome. We must suspect that soon, if not already, Riddle will access Potter's mind and learn these things from him. Potter must be kept in ignorance for all our sakes. I shall alert Sirius and the others. Going into Grimmauld Place may become dangerous for a few weeks."

After his conversation with Dumbledore, Snape also alerted the Inquisitorial Squad to keep their eyes on Potter's comings and goings. One could never be too sure.

The next Saturday was the first in May. It was important for two reasons, first because Snape expected to see Phina again, but earlier and also important, because Slytherin was playing its last Quidditch match of the season against Hufflepuff.

Since the beginning of April, the Slytherin team had been searching for substitutes. First Montague was put out of action by the toilet thing — an incident that left him confused for weeks — then Warrington broke out in hives that resembled breakfast flakes. The other team members were scrambling for replacements.

In the end it was close. Hufflepuff won by only a few points, and Snape cheerfully paid off his bet to Sprout. Only one game was left, Ravenclaw v. Gryffindor, and Slytherin still had a chance to win the cup.

And then there was Croydon. It was Saturday, it was May first, and Snape was looking forward to Phina walking into his laboratory. She did not disappoint.

“Hi there, short dark and sexy. Long time no see.”

“And where have you been?”

“You mean we still have illusions? Let me dispel them. Last week you were radioactive. The Malfoy isotope has a half-life of . . .”

“You’re not supposed to understand any of that.”

“Because I work for Bella, I’m supposed to be stupid?”

They apparated to Phina’s flat in the West End. Once again she opened and poured a bottle of wine. Once again she pulled Snape to her as they played the little kissing game. This time Snape, with the wisdom that comes of no longer being a novice, was able to anticipate some of her moves.

This time, however, the fact that Phina was out for big game could not be lost on anyone. To say that the first encounters of the evening were highly satisfactory was an understatement.

“I have to be back at Hogwarts before eleven.”

“That gives us a few hours. Want me to show you something even more fun?”

“Let’s wait on that. You may be trying to set a personal record, but I’m not.”

She filled the glasses again, letting him watch her. “What are you feeling for me now?”

“Longing.”

“At least it begins with an L. Didn’t you ever love anything in your life? What about your parents?”

“What about them?”

“Your mother. You must have had some feeling for her.”

“She was a strong woman and a creative witch. I depended on her and respected her. And I was a little frightened of her.” *And I was closed off so*

completely sometimes even she couldn't read me, but you, dear Phina, will never hear the word 'occlumency' from me.

"And your father? Oh, sorry. He was a muggle, wasn't he?"

"Don't be embarrassed. I'm not. Besides, I'm beginning to suspect you're not a pureblood either."

"How dare you! I'm a member of the Black family! We're all purebloods."

"Not all. There are a few cousins I've heard of..."

"Wait now. What makes you think I'm not a pureblood?"

"I can't imagine any pureblood witch or wizard mentioning the half-life of radioactive isotopes. Most of them can't use a telephone. Do you know about Albert Einstein, too?"

"Is that a name? Seriously though, I think I just like things that are destructive. Radioactivity and atomic bombs and missiles with nuclear warheads."

She started tickling then, and the conversation about science was submerged in more important things. Later, they resumed talking.

"How about affection or tenderness? Or jealousy? Do you feel jealousy? Protectiveness?"

"No, you're too strong and... dominating. About everything. I admire the way you just reach out and grab what you want, and your enthusiasm."

"Then why don't you like cousin Bella? She's like that. She throws herself totally into everything she does. I'd think you'd want someone strong and decisive advising the Dark Lord. Not like that weak, waffling Malfoy."

"I knew we'd come around to Bella and Malfoy eventually. Strong and dominating isn't always wise."

"I'm just going to have to work harder with you, aren't I?"

"I'm looking forward to it."

Snape made it back to Hogwarts on time to enter without a problem. He found himself musing about the future and wondering if, after everything was over, there could still be a place in his life for Phina.

May brought a lessening of pranks and more serious study. Snape was very pleased with his seventh year Advanced Potions class. Every student was certain to achieve an Outstanding or an Exceeds Expectations on their NEWTs. Snape's classes had a reputation for scoring above average, even on the OWLs, and the sixth and seventh years were introduced to the fine art of modifying and improving potions, having the benefit of their professor's long experience doing both. This was one of the reasons Snape would only accept into those classes students who scored an Outstanding on their OWLs.

Which, along with memories of his evenings with Phina, was one of the things putting Snape into a relatively good mood. It was absolutely certain that he would not be seeing a large number of his least favorite students next year. Potter, Weasley, and Longbottom would be gone, as well as Crabbe, Goyle, and possibly even Malfoy, though that was less certain. Granger would certainly continue, but might be easier to work with in a group where she was more challenged and faced stiffer competition.

Snape continued to stay away from Potter as much as possible. He did not want to be at the forefront of Potter's mind on the day the Dark Lord was finally able to see Potter's thoughts as well as the scene before his eyes. Interestingly enough, Potter seemed to be doing better in his potions work, though nowhere near good enough to hope for an Outstanding on his OWL.

On the Saturday just before the middle of May, Snape was again called into the interview chamber. He entered in the middle of Bella's report.

"... was there. Completely gone."

"You are certain of the location."

"I've known it all my life."

"You have our authorization to assign observers to the place. Do not act without express permission. There are other things being planned of which you are not aware."

"Yes, Lord." Bella turned, nodded to Snape, and left.

"Potions master."

"Yes, Lord."

"We shall need new stocks of medicines and healing potions. Especially those for injuries caused by spells. You will start at once."

"Yes, Lord."

Snape checked first with the clinic to find out what was most lacking, then went to his laboratory and began laying out the necessary ingredients for about a dozen different potions. It was the part of his work he could take the most pride in — the part that healed rather than harming.

Phina looked in, but seemed already to know that they would have very little time together. "Will you be finished before eleven?" she asked.

"If all goes well, by ten."

"I wanted to ask you a favor."

"Depends on what it is."

"We started out with self-defense classes. I could use a refresher course."

"You have a desk job."

"Now why are you so sure of that? Just because I didn't go out into the field last time?"

"Admit it. The lessons were a ruse to get close to me."

"Right you are, Sherlock. And it worked."

"Now you're doing that half-blood thing again. When did you ever read Sherlock Holmes?"

"Oh, that's what it means! I just heard people say it. I never read anything. So, how about a refresher? We won't have time to go to my place."

They spent the last hour in the training room, reviewing the falls, the holds, and the defensive spells. Phina was still in excellent form, and initiated a game in which every time she blocked a spell, she got to steal a kiss. Snape was conscientious enough about his work to give her a hard spell to block from time to time. He didn't want her to get sloppy.

On arrival back at Hogwarts, Snape sent Dumbledore a patronus telling him that Bella and her Death Eaters were planning some surveillance and possible action that might center on Grimmauld Place. He advised extra caution for the next few weeks.

The third weekend in May, Malfoy came to the laboratory.

"Want some advice? Stay as clear of that woman as you can."

"Which woman are we talking about now?"

"That Lestrangle woman. She's dangerous to everyone around her."

"Lestrangle woman? Do I sense a shift . . . an emotional distancing? She is, after all, your sister-in-law."

"Cissa won't see her. They spoke once after the Azkaban breakout, and now they won't have anything to do with each other."

"I think I'll forbear comment."

"Sometimes I think she won't even obey . . . him. He's warned her not to act without orders, but she's straining at the leash, and we can't trust her to be sensible."

"I'll be careful."

Malfoy left, and Phina came in. "How late will you be tonight, Severus?"

"Another hour or so. Were you planning something?"

"That would give us a little time to pop over to my place. I was hoping to spend a while together."

They apparated to the West End around nine o'clock, but this time Phina put on music and they tried a little dancing, with considerable success. Phina was quieter and gentler than before, and for the first time Snape began to feel that this was indeed someone he wanted to protect. His gratitude for what

she'd done for him was melting into a sense of tenderness, even affection, and it was no longer possible to imagine not seeing her every Saturday. They spent the last few minutes together in contented companionship, and then he apparated back to Hogsmeade.

The following Thursday, McGonagall received an urgent summons from Dumbledore. "We're leaving for London right away," she whispered to Snape at supper. "Something's happened."

Members of the Order guarded all the streets entering into Grimmauld Place. It was as if the small square was a fortress. Everyone who entered was watched carefully, so carefully that Snape was afraid the local muggles might call the police.

"Most of us," said Dumbledore when all had arrived, "already know what has happened. For those coming in from Hogwarts and the Ministry, we have had a little excitement here today. An attempt was made by a squad of Death Eaters to attack and kidnap Remus Lupin. We believe that the real goal was to lure Sirius Black out of this house so that they could capture him."

After waiting a moment for the babble of rising concern to calm down, Dumbledore continued. "Fortunately, we were forewarned of the possibility that this might happen, which is why all of you were cautioned to exercise extreme care in arriving and departing from this place. We had sentries stationed and were able to call in reinforcements before the Death Eaters could accomplish their purpose. For this advance notice we all owe thanks to Severus."

The others nodded, and Shackbolt and Weasley stepped across the room to shake Snape's hand.

"Now," Dumbledore went on, "we must redouble our guard. We have escaped this first attempt unscathed. There may well be another. This is particularly true since apparently we inflicted some damage. At least two of their operatives fell during the fight, though as they were carried out by their colleagues, we have no way of knowing the full extent of the damage we caused. There was, however, blood on the pavement. This could well make them both more intent on striking us, and more careful in how they perform it."

At that moment, the mark began to burn. Severus's arm jerked at the sudden pain, causing the others to shift their attention to him.

"I thought that might happen," said Dumbledore quietly. "You had best go."

Croydon was in an uproar. Malfoy himself met Snape at the entrance. "You don't have to go to him, he doesn't want you. He's with Bella now, and

he's furious. There's been a fight, entirely against orders. She'll be lucky if she makes it out of this one."

"Why was I sent for?"

"You need to go to the clinic. There've been injuries, bad ones, and the medics need more help. You're to see what potions they need and to assist in the healing. You are something of a healer, aren't you?"

Snape raced upstairs to the clinic, and was met at the door by one of the healers. "Good! You're here! We have one damage to a skull, still unconscious, and another severe blood loss. Can you get . . ."

Another healer came over. "We'll only need the medicine for the concussion — the blood loss patient just died."

With a nod of understanding, Snape was out the door and headed for the lab. Unconsciousness for this long meant almost certain neurological damage and required special regenerating potions. Luckily they probably had a lot of time. It was not the sort of injury that killed quickly, not like losing large amounts of blood.

Malfoy came up to the laboratory while Snape was working. "Are you all right? I just came from the clinic. This must be a rough night for you."

"People get injured. Healers heal them. It's a job."

"You scare me sometimes, you know."

Snape paused in the decanting of a nerve regenerator. "Why would I scare you?" he asked finally.

"You can be so deadly cool about things that would floor other people. Almost as if it didn't mean anything to you. Would you be this calm if something happened to me?"

"Maybe. Probably not. But then, I know you."

Malfoy was silent. Too silent. Snape stoppered the flask of potion with exquisite care and checked the others, already finished and waiting to be taken to the clinic. The lucidity of the moment was breathtaking, and he marveled at the sharpness of the colors and the clarity of the light, and the revelation that hovered between them in Malfoy's silence.

"I'm sorry, Severus. Didn't they tell you?"

"Why should they? They weren't aware that I knew her." Inside he was locking down, closing up, every door slamming shut.

"Then you did know."

"Not until this moment, no. What happened?"

"They're not sure. A cutting spell, but no one knows where it came from. She was in the front, doing all right, and then she started moving forward. It

got her in the throat. Sliced the artery. She never had a chance. She may have been dead before they got her to the clinic.”

“I need to get these medicines over there.”

“Can I help?”

“Yes, if you would take those four. They’re for the confusion cases. I’ll get the rest.”

Both men were quiet on the way to the clinic. There Malfoy drew one of the healers aside and whispered quickly. The woman nodded.

“Would you like to see her?” Malfoy asked. “I told them you were a friend.”

They had cleaned up the blood and wrapped a cloth around her neck, so she looked quite peaceful, except that her skin was very pale and waxy looking. Serene. It was a good word. She looked serene.

Snape glanced over at the medics and waited until they noticed him. “Do you need any more potions this evening?”

“No, this will do very well. I think he’s responding already. Thanks.”

It wasn’t eleven yet, still several hours to go. Come to think of it, Snape wasn’t sure what time McGonagall would have the shields down for him. She might even be with Dumbledore. Snape wanted some time to think, but first there were one or two things...

“Lucius?”

“Yes, tell me what I can do.”

“You said earlier that the action was against orders. What did you mean?”

“The Dark Lord told Bella to set a surveillance team, but not to move in unless she got the word from him. He didn’t want other plans disrupted by badly timed action.”

“So he didn’t order it.”

“No. This was all Bella’s doing. She’ll be ‘discussing’ it with him for a long time tonight.”

“Who else was there?”

“A very motley crew. Amycus and Alecto, Fenrir, Gibbon, some people from the branch offices I don’t know. About ten in all.”

“The spell that hit her, was it enemy fire or friendly fire?”

Now Malfoy looked uncomfortable. “We don’t know. Things were pretty confused at that point, and I’ve gotten conflicting reports. We may learn more after Bella’s able to talk again.”

“Let me know what you hear.”

“I will.”

Snape went back to the laboratory where he turned out the lights and sat by the windows, watching the muggle trains speeding past in the darkness. Just before eleven he apparated to Hogsmeade. McGonagall must have assumed the same as he did, for the shields went down at precisely eleven, and Snape went to his rooms without having to speak to anyone.

The next morning Snape didn't go to breakfast. Instead he paid an inordinate amount of attention to setting up his classroom for his Potions lessons. They were almost at the end of the term, only one week of classes to go, then a week of review, and then exams. The routine was a help, and he'd locked himself down so tightly that he wasn't thinking of anything else.

The morning went smoothly, and Snape was spending the lunch hour in his classroom as well, setting up for the afternoon lessons when McGonagall appeared in the doorway. Snape continued his work without looking at her.

"Are you going to eat at all?"

"I wasn't hungry."

"Dumbledore said to watch your eating habits. No food is a bad sign."

"Dumbledore should mind his own business. As should you."

"Either they're feeding you very well at the 'other place,' or something happened last night. And it is my business, and Dumbledore's. You're on staff here, remember."

"Maybe it has nothing to do with the 'other place.' Maybe it's a Hogwarts problem."

"So you admit there's a problem. Dumbledore was concerned about the fight yesterday. One of the 'problems' about your kind of work is that you know people on both sides. Do you know who was injured yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It isn't important."

"Now you've got me worried. You need to go out tonight and talk to Dumbledore."

"No."

"Why not?"

"There's only one place where we can talk, and I'm not going there. Not now."

McGonagall watched him for another minute, then turned and left. Snape was relieved to see her go. Having her ask questions was forcing him to look at things he didn't want to look at.

The afternoon also went smoothly. Everything was blessedly uncomplicated routine. Snape stayed in the classroom clearing everything up, cleaning, straightening . . . Supper was half over when a silver shadow slipped under the door. For just an instant the ghostly phoenix hovered before Snape's face, and then Dumbledore's voice spoke in his brain.

Something has happened. You may want to talk about it. I am in the Shack, and am quite prepared to wait here all night.

The phoenix vanished, leaving Snape with a decision, but not one that he had to make right away. He continued to straighten, arrange, put away, and clean for over an hour, while the image of Dumbledore in the Shrieking Shack brooded on the edge of his consciousness.

The long northern sunset was beginning to alter the light when Snape eased open the great front door of the castle and hurried across the lawn. Once on the path down the hill, he was sheltered by bushes. There he slowed his pace, still uncertain if this was what he wanted to do. The nearer he got to the Whomping Willow, the slower he walked.

A long stick sufficed to press the knot that froze the tree, then Snape ducked into the tunnel and paused. There was a sense of inevitability about his movements, however, and he was soon wending his way along the uneven stone floor, a Lumos spell lighting the passage.

The basement room was empty, but so still was the air in the Shack that the marks of the feet from the last time he'd been here were visible in the dust—the students, Lupin, Black, his own footprints, and the little rat feet of Peter Pettigrew. It seemed a century ago.

He climbed the staircase softly, making almost no sound. As his hand reached out to push open the door of the upper floor room, Dumbledore's voice spoke from the other side.

"Oh, excellent, Severus. I was hoping you would come."

Snape stepped into the room and looked around. The ancient bed with its hangings was still there, and Dumbledore had found or conjured a couple of armchairs and a small table which now held a tea service for two and a bottle of mead with the appropriate cups and glasses for both.

"Sit, if you feel like it, Severus," Dumbledore said, and gestured toward the empty chair.

"I think I'd prefer to stand."

"As you wish." There was an awkward silence. "I did rather hope you could fill in the gaps in our information about yesterday."

"That? You got eight of them. Only Bella and Fenrir escaped unscathed.

The others were hit by confusion, stunning, and cutting spells. And one backwards spell that's driving the healers crazy."

Dumbledore chuckled. "It looks as if we did quite well. Odd thing, though. I do not recall that any of our people used a cutting spell."

"Maybe you just didn't see it. It was very effective."

"The Death Eater is badly injured?"

"The Death Eater is dead."

"Ah. I am sorry to hear that."

"Sorry to hear of the death of an enemy?"

"Sorry to hear of the death of any wizard. Or witch. It was a woman who died. A woman you knew."

"You didn't read that."

"Dear me, no. I am reading an obsidian wall. I do not want to get analytical where your private life is concerned, but only something really powerful could make you shut down like that. I might even hazard a guess as to who it was."

"Don't bother. I'm sure you're right, though I would argue that 'powerful' isn't the correct word."

"No? Would 'personal' be a better word?"

"Perhaps. I'll have to think about it."

"What happened?"

"There was a surveillance ordered at Bella's request. She — her name was Delphina Vaughn, did I tell you?— she went out as part of the team. Bella got impatient and sent them into action without authorization. There was a skirmish. You know the rest."

"Riddle did not order the attack?"

"No. He's still preferring Malfoy's advice over Bella's."

"Poor Bella. She will not have spent a comfortable night." Dumbledore seemed genuinely saddened. "And you. This must have been difficult for you."

"Define difficult."

Dumbledore sat back, his fingers steepled in front of his glasses. "She was a colleague of yours. You will forgive me, Severus, but one of the things that has always disturbed me is that you did not enter this business as a double agent. These people were once your friends, your coworkers. You have never had the chance to be impersonal where they are concerned. Did you not assist in the engagement of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black? You cannot pretend to be indifferent."

Snape turned away, suddenly fascinated by the simple workmanship of the solid paneled door.

"Severus..." Though Snape did not face him, Dumbledore continued. "You shared something with this... with Delphina. Do not deny it, you were... close to her. You must feel something. Please, consider what that something is, for her sake."

Snape didn't speak, so Dumbledore shifted the focus of his question.

"What was she like? I never met her. How would you describe her?"

The answer was a while coming. "Pleasant to be with. Never demanding. Never judging..."

Dumbledore didn't respond, and Snape was drawn to fill in the silence. "She was independent, intelligent... kind and gentle... understanding... silly sometimes..."

"Did she ask about us?"

"Not once. She was there to woo me away from Malfoy."

"You question her motives."

"There was no question about her motives. She was doing a job. The odd thing was that sometimes I got the feeling that even in spite of the job... she may actually have liked me. Especially the last time."

"Which was..."

"Last Saturday. It was like she was trying to show me something... what she was really like, or what she could be like... I'm not sure." Snape suddenly walked over to the table and poured himself a glass of the mead. "Could she have been saying goodbye?"

"Possibly, though that would require a high level of premonition."

They were silent again, and Snape tossed back what was left of his mead, pouring another glass which he sipped thoughtfully.

Dumbledore broke the silence. "What do you feel now?"

"Empty."

"Do not be angry... but what would you feel if you lowered some of those barriers?" Again the silence spread. "There, I apologize. I have gone too far."

When Snape still didn't respond, Dumbledore poured himself a cup of tea. He wasn't looking at Snape when he asked, "Who else among your colleagues in London will remember her fondly?"

"I don't know. No one that I can think of. I don't know anything about her immediate family. To Bella she was a tool, as least that was the impression

I got. To Malfoy she was an enemy. The healers didn't even know her name, so I don't think she had much to do with the others."

"Then insofar as we know, you are the place where the memory of her true self resides. What, if you will pardon me, will you remember about her?"

"She was one of the best self defense pupils I ever had. It doesn't seem to have done her much good. We went to the theater once — 'Macbeth.' And to dinner." As Snape named the occasions, images floated up into his conscious mind of Phina's intent face as she watched Shakespeare's witches, and her laughter trying to block his view of the belly dancer. And the feel of her hands... "She had very gentle..." He turned to look through the curtains at the houses of the village, not wanting Dumbledore to see his face.

Dumbledore came to stand beside him, a hand resting lightly on Snape's shoulder. "It does not have to be all at once. Let the memories surface a little at a time, as you are ready for them. Sorrow is our best way of honoring the dead." They stood quietly for a few minutes. Then, "Will you try to find out why she died?"

"Does it matter? She was a soldier in a war. That's what happens in wars."

"What if you found that I had killed her?"

"You didn't. You'd never use that kind of spell. But it wouldn't matter. It isn't like a battle gives you a lot of time to make a decision."

"Then maybe you should find out. For your own peace of mind."

After awhile, Snape glanced over at Dumbledore. "I have another question. It's on a different subject, though."

Dumbledore looked down at Snape. "Very well. Ask."

"The defenses controlling access to this shack, are they part of the defenses that surround the grounds of the school?"

Now Dumbledore was silent for a moment. "I am not certain that I wish to answer this question," he said finally.

"They're not, are they? Look, I know I was the reason you put in these defenses. I got onto the grounds too easily back... then. But I have a real problem now. Before you left I had a backup way of getting out at need. If I couldn't ask you, I could ask McGonagall. Now you're gone and Umbridge keeps watching McGonagall. What happens if I'm summoned, really summoned, and I can't get out?"

"I see. That would indeed be a difficult position to be in. You would, of course, never reveal it to anyone else. Who knows of it? Me, you, Madam Pomfrey, Lupin, Black, Potter, Granger, Ron Weasley, Pettigrew I am afraid... Who can get in and out from this side? Me. Very well, Severus. I

shall give you the codes. Do not use them except at great need. To open the shack to enter or leave, you say *Patefacio tugurium*. To close it again, you say *Claudo tugurium*."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Well, I suppose I should be off now. It is getting quite late, and we do all need our beauty sleep. You will take care of yourself, will you not, Severus?"

"Yes, sir. And thank you for that, too."

Climbing to the top of the hill, Snape turned south and searched the starry sky. It took only a moment to locate the constellation Delphinus, and for a while he contemplated the diamond formation of the dolphin's body and its tail of stars before entering the castle.

He started to cross the entrance hall to the dungeon stairs, but was stopped by McGonagall's voice calling from the Great Hall.

"There you are, Severus. Have you a moment?"

She was sitting at the foot of the Gryffindor table, and Snape was surprised to see that she'd saved a quantity of food from supper. Suddenly he was ravenously hungry, and immensely grateful for the late-night feast. He walked over to the table and sat facing her.

"Will you join me?"

"Well, unlike you laddie, I've actually been eating my regularly scheduled meals. But I'll have a bite and a sip of wine to keep you company. Go ahead now. Eat."

Snape did, and the food was delicious. Neither of the two talked for several minutes, but when Snape glanced up at McGonagall, she seemed quite pleased that her offering was being accepted with such relish.

"Have you given any thought to tomorrow, Severus?"

A piece of chicken stopped halfway to Snape's mouth, and he said with foreboding, "What happens tomorrow?"

"Final Quidditch match of the season. Us against Ravenclaw. Who d' ye favor?"

"You have a Keeper and two Beaters culled from the ranks of the Keystone Cops, and you want to know who I favor?"

"I take it your money's on Ravenclaw."

"Usual bet?"

"Usual bet."

The usual bet between them was a knut, but it was the principle of the thing. Snape and McGonagall wished each other a good night, and he went to his rooms. Before going to bed, however, Snape brought to mind the first

time he'd seen Phina, the day Bella brought her to the lab and demanded defense training. Then he slept soundly for the rest of the night.

By long tradition, Snape sat with Flitwick during the match, while Sprout supported McGonagall. The fate of the Quidditch Cup hung in the balance, for if Ravenclaw won, the cup would return to Slytherin. The Slytherin stands vibrated with excitement, 'King Weasley' buttons glittering on their robes, ready to burst into song at the first sign of trouble for the Gryffindor Keeper.

And at first it went predictably well, Ravenclaw scoring an easy goal that Gryffindor was unable to block. Then, out of nowhere, something seemed to electrify Gryffindor's Keeper, another easy one was suddenly deflected from the ring, and Flitwick was dancing up and down on the bench screaming with frustration, "Feint right, you fool, right! He saw that coming a mile away! You miss another goal and your broomstick will be supplying BOAC with toothpicks!"

Resolving to discuss the history of British Airways at another time, Snape focused on the match. The Snitch flickered here and there, but was mostly in hiding. Bludgers were ahead of Beaters by a seven point margin, and while Ravenclaw easily kept Gryffindor from scoring, the game was now being played at the Gryffindor rings. Attack after Ravenclaw attack was set up and run down the pitch to be deflected by the Gryffindor Keeper.

The red and gold stands erupted in small outbursts of cheers that quickly merged into one gigantic roar, drowning Slytherin's well-rehearsed 'Weasley is our king' in a tidal wave of 'WEAS-LEY! WEAS-LEY! WEAS-LEY!' McGonagall rose to her feet, fists raised over her head, arms pumping to the rhythm of her house's chant while Sprout brandished a red and gold pennant above them. Snape watched the whole scene in awe. *Whoever would have thought a purely defensive game could be so exciting? Phina would love it.*

Then, in a twinkling of speckled light, the Snitch was there. Blue and red Seekers spun towards it like hawks after the same rabbit, surging up and diving down in pursuit of the precious shimmering orb, fingers outstretched in desperate longing until . . . in a day of perfect triumph for the House of Weasley, the Gryffindor Seeker shot upwards, the Snitch held aloft in her hand. Gryffindor house exploded.

The players settled groundwards as the stands spilled Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students onto the grass, while Slytherin and Ravenclaw exhibited a more decorous behavior. McGonagall was gracious enough to advance half-

way, then waited for Flitwick and Snape to approach her. “You owe me a knut,” she said, after accepting Flitwick’s congratulations.

“The show was well worth it,” Snape replied as he handed over her winnings.

Supper was marred only by the general disappointment of the Slytherin students, sympathy with whom prevented Snape from sharing McGonagall’s joy, by Umbridge’s clear disapproval of the raucousness that followed the game, and by Snape’s own anticipation of his impending trip to Croydon. That night he did not want to leave Hogwarts.

Croydon, however, was peaceful. Bella was nowhere around — recuperating, it was said, from her interviews with the Dark Lord. Malfoy was closeted with their master discussing ongoing plans. Snape spent a few hours in the clinic with the medics, evaluating the injured who were not responding well to treatment, and speculating on the spells used against them and the possible adjustments to the potions used to heal them.

And somewhere, on a level that was neither conscious nor subconscious, Snape kept expecting to see Phina, and was repeatedly disappointed when he remembered that he could not.

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - F I V E

WHAT IS THIS THING...

The following week, the last in May, was utterly routine except...

On Wednesday, after the last afternoon class but before supper, Snape slipped out to the Whomping Willow and through the tunnel to try the spells that Dumbledore had given him. To his satisfaction, they worked. He enjoyed a small libation at the Three Broomsticks before sneaking back into the Shack and returning to Hogwarts.

"You look content about something," McGonagall commented at supper.

"It is merely the look of independence, of freedom from fetters."

"You're quitting and going into private practice."

"No... but that's an excellent idea. 'Professor Snape's Private School for Perfectly Scandalous Pranks and Spells.' Think of what you could do with the logo 'P.S.P.S. for P.S.P. and S.'"

McGonagall grunted. "It depends on what vowel you put in."

"Spoilsport."

Classes ended, reviewing for exams would take up all of the next week, and on June 1 Snape again went to Croydon. Around nine o'clock, Bella came into the laboratory.

"What do you want?" Snape asked without looking at her.

"My, we are abrupt today. I won't waste your time. I want you to tell the Dark Lord that Malfoy's dream scheme won't work."

"Why should I do that, especially since I have no proof that it won't?"

"They've been working on it for months, and nothing's happened. I'd say that's a pretty fair indicator."

"They don't need me to tell them that."

"We need to act, before it's too late."

"Another piece of unplanned chaos to liven things up? I think the Dark Lord has had his fill for the moment."

"You miss her, don't you?"

Snape paused, because the slight trembling in his hands made it harder to measure the powdered horn. "What I miss or don't miss is none of your concern."

"Black killed her, you know. I can help you get revenge."

"Interesting thought, since there was more than one person there named Black."

Bella was across the space between them in three mad strides, knocking the jar of powder from Snape's hands to smash on the floor and seizing the fabric of his coat. "Who told you! Who told you! It was that rat Gibbon, wasn't it! I'll slit his..."

"Like you did Phina's? How very in character."

It was like dousing Bella with cold water. Carefully she released Snape's coat and brushed imaginary dust from his shoulder with a casual hand. "It's your fault anyway, puppy dog. You taught me the spell."

"No. No, I didn't teach you..."

"Sure you did. All those years ago when you were coaching the dueling classes..."

"Self defense."

"Well, that was one of them. The Digladior. I never got much chance to use it before."

"That's for close range hand-to-hand combat. You can't shoot that across an open space, it's not a thrown spell. You can't aim it. It scatters like bird-shot."

"I wanted it to scatter. You hit more targets that way."

"Right. Your own people."

"She got in the way."

"Now it's her fault. My fault, her fault, never your fault is it, Bella? Disobey orders, misuse spells, kill your own..."

"Shut up, Snape!"

"Did you have a pleasant chat with the Dark Lord, Bella? Was he loving and kind to his favorite?"

Bella's wand was out, pointed at Snape's face. "You have a vicious streak in you, Potions Master. No wonder Phina couldn't stomach you. And all along I thought it was just because you were such a cold fish."

Snape looked into Bella's eyes, rather than at the wand. "Yet another act of unplanned chaos? The Dark Lord is going to want to 'talk' to you

again about disposing of his potions maker without going through proper channels.”

“Cold and impersonal. Poor Phina. The one time she managed to start something, I had to walk in and break it up. What a waste of talent. A warm, passionate person can grow tired of plays and restaurants and philosophical pronouncements, you know. But maybe that’s all you were ever capable of.”

“Not everyone enjoys your love of life, Bella.”

Bella relaxed and put her wand away. “Don’t pretend, puppy dog. I know you can lose your temper — I’ve witnessed it. It was one of the most impressive tantrums I’ve seen in my life. I had high hopes that night that you’d grown up to be a man. Pity.”

“Classic queen-side attack. The Lady Macbeth gambit, I believe. It won’t work Bella. One of the benefits of all those plays and philosophical pronouncements.”

“You’re going to sing to my tune.”

“Shall I tell the Dark Lord you’re trying to persuade me to follow you instead of him?”

“This isn’t over.” Bella swept from the room, her anger radiating around her.

Snape stood calmly in the laboratory in the wake of Bella’s visit, his heart pounding, but not from fear of Bella. *Dear Bella. No subtlety at all. If she’d known the truth, she’d have used it, and to good effect. That she didn’t use it means she doesn’t know it. Should I tell Dumbledore?*

In the end, since it was no news of an urgent matter, Snape decided not to send to Dumbledore, but rather to wait until a more routine meeting. Instead he returned on schedule to Hogwarts, holding close the new-discovered knowledge that Phina had lied to Bella about him. The intimate evenings at Phina’s flat were reported as theater outings and restaurant visits. That was what Bella ’d said, plays and restaurants, plural. The one physical encounter Phina had mentioned was the one Bella knew about anyway.

And Phina’s death was an accident. An accident caused by poor judgment and unrestrained recklessness. Criminal negligence. *If I leaned toward self-sacrifice, I might support Bella as the surest and quickest way to destroy the Dark Lord, but a) I do not lean toward self-sacrifice, and b) while quick, the way would also be violent and bloody. Yet for some reason the Dark Lord does take Bella’s advice seriously. One can only wonder why.*

The reviewing during the next week was intense. Although the first through fourth and sixth years were still finishing off regular classes, there were five years of review for the fifth years, and two years' worth for the seventh years. It was like this every year before the OWLs and NEWTs, and every year Snape hated it. He worked side by side with his students on a weekly basis and knew what they were capable of. The stress connected with exams never allowed a student's real abilities to shine through. If it were not for the irrational importance the outside world attached to them, the exams would be a waste of time.

The only really good thing about the week was that the common room was full of studying students, and no one was causing any trouble.

By Wednesday it became clear that McGonagall and Umbridge had entered a new stage in their battle of wills. McGonagall was summoned several times to Umbridge's office and 'casual' passersby reported argument so intense that they feared the two might come to blows, though the exact words were so distorted by the closed door that none was sure what the disagreement was about.

Snape had a pretty good idea, though. He was not completely surprised when McGonagall stopped by his chair at the end of supper.

"You, Professor, have submitted an order for fangs and claws that is far beyond anything needed by your classes. Please come up to my office at once to either correct what I presume is an error, or explain why I should let the order stand."

Snape followed her meekly up the stairs, knowing there would be no order. When the door was safely shut behind them, McGonagall first searched the office with an anti-spying spell, then whispered, "She wants the defense spells, and with the examiners coming in I can no longer justify not giving them to her. A couple of weeks ago you said you were independent and unfettered. Does that mean you have a way out?"

"I don't know if I should..."

"Listen, Severus. The main reason I've been keeping the spells away from her is to protect your comings and goings. I don't want her to catch you or block your movements. But now we have examiners coming and Dumbledore still isn't back. She's determined to let them in herself, and if I thought I was headmistress I would feel the same. She's getting an injunction from the Ministry of Magic. If I defy it, I can be dismissed."

"Dismissed? If you defy it, you can be arrested. Why didn't you tell me

it was getting this serious? Dumbledore showed me two weeks ago how to get in through..."

"Don't you be telling me, now. I don't want any of that kind of information to be tricked out of me. The bottom line is that for the last two weeks you've had an emergency exit from this place, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. When she gives me the injunction, I'll turn over the spells."

Business seemed over, but Snape hesitated. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course you may ask. I can't say as I'll answer."

"How do the owls get in?"

"You are a shrewd one. Albus explained it when I became deputy, though I must confess I'd never have thought to ask myself. There are two ways. Those coming in from the east could just fly low through the forest. There's no shield there. The centaurs would never permit even Albus to interfere with their territory, but they also guard that side very effectively. There are too many owls from too many families to train them all, however, so the shields have been calibrated to permit their passage."

"You mean you can adjust the shields to block everything except one kind of animal? Or maybe one particular person?"

"Don't you go getting any ideas. The shields are far too big to calibrate to just one individual. It has to be a whole species. I imagine a much smaller screen could be made to allow one person only to pass through."

"What about an owl animagus?"

"I suppose that would breach the defenses. Or ones so small that the shields don't filter them. I am not, however, going to debate with you how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. You can't get through. It's good you have the other way."

Thursday at lunch, Umbridge appeared more pleased than Snape had ever seen her. Clearly the injunction had arrived, had been served, and McGonagall had obeyed.

On Saturday, Snape left the castle after dinner and slipped down the hill to the Whomping Willow, the tunnel, the Shack, and Croydon. When he saw the messenger at the door, he headed directly for the stairs and the interview chamber. The Dark Lord sat calmly enthroned outside the circle of light usually used for interrogations while Malfoy and Bella stood in its center yelling at each other. It was odd to hear Malfoy's voice raised to such a volume, but the moment encapsulated Bella perfectly.

"... foolish, undisciplined behavior..."

“... keeping us locked in the same place, with no progress for...”

Both stopped when Snape entered and all three turned to the Dark Lord.

“Potions Master, do you have frequent occasion to see Sirius Black?”

“Not frequent, Lord, but occasionally.”

“Since he returned from Azkaban, have you seen him angry, defiant, or in pain?”

“I saw him surprised and angry, but only for a moment, as I was knocked unconscious by a spell. Since then I have seen him rude and arrogant on several occasions.”

“But not as I have described.”

“No, Lord.”

“Go then. We shall not need you further tonight.”

As Snape climbed back up the stairs, a shorter, somewhat dumpy man scurried past him. *I haven't seen him in months. Why would the Dark Lord want to speak tonight to Peter Pettigrew?*

The examiners arrived Sunday evening during dinner. Umbridge arranged a small reception for them in the staffroom, since they had already dined and did not want to cause consternation among the fifth years by suddenly appearing in the Great Hall. When the teachers assembled in the staffroom, Umbridge started to make introductions, only to be interrupted by tiny, wizened little Professor Marchbanks.

“No need, Professor Umbridge, no need. We've been coming here for so many years now, it's beginning to seem like home. Minerva, I hope you are well. Much calmer this year than last, isn't it? School was all agog waiting for the third task. Hardly anyone could concentrate on their OWLs.”

Snape waited his turn to greet the four examiners, and old Professor Tofty pulled him aside to ask about some potions work Snape had done for him years earlier. Then the teachers were given their assignments and all retired for the night.

No teacher was allowed to proctor the exam for his or her own subject, so Snape drew the OWLs for Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Muggle Studies. It was fairly easy duty this year since none of them were courses taken by the entire fifth year. Proctoring History of Magic, or Transfiguration could be a nightmare.

Croydon was tense again on Saturday. Snape found a pile of orders for medical potions and set to work on what was going to be a very late night of brewing. It was convenient that he could now get in through the Shack, and didn't have to worry about the eleven o'clock curfew.

Around ten o'clock the Dark Lord sent for him. It was a short meeting observed, as now seemed usual, by both Malfoy and Bella.

"Stand before us, Potions master, and look into our eyes."

Snape obeyed, not overly nervous since this had none of the feeling of being a test.

"Show us Sirius Black as he appears today."

Snape allowed images of Black's face to surface in his mind, trying as unobtrusively as possible to make them ones where Black was not angry. Snide, mocking, impatient, all were revealed. The Dark Lord seemed content.

"Now, let us hear his voice."

Again there was a certain selection on Snape's part to keep anger away from the images, so the Dark Lord heard the comment about what the cat dragged in, and inquiries as to Potter's classes, all of which were acceptable and pleasing.

"You may go."

The second week of OWLs continued to go smoothly. The only night of the week when the students were out of the common rooms was Wednesday, when the Astronomy Practical Exam started at eleven o'clock. Snape took advantage of the quiet and went to bed early.

Pounding on the door startled him awake well after midnight. It was Flitwick yelling, "Severus! Severus! Wake up! Quickly!"

Snape pulled on a robe and opened the door. "What..."

"Minerva... Pomfrey needs you... Now, come now... Oh, to think... To Minerva..."

"What's happened to Minerva? Is she sick?"

"Not sick... Stunned... Four — right in the chest... They were sacking Hagrid... She tried to stop them... Outside..."

Snape pushed Flitwick aside and raced for the entrance hall. Out the doors and down the hill he ran, noting that Pomfrey herself had only just arrived at McGonagall's side. Pomfrey knelt, then waved frantically at him, screaming in the warm June night, "She's not breathing! I can't get a pulse!"

There wasn't a second to lose. "How long ago?" Snape demanded as he ran up and dropped to his knees beside McGonagall's still body.

"Three, maybe four minutes, as near as I can tell."

Snape tilted McGonagall's head back, checked her throat, pinched her nose shut and bent to blow air into her mouth. When her lungs had expanded twice, he shifted to push rapidly on her chest about a dozen times,

then breathed air into her lungs again. McGonagall shuddered suddenly and gasped in a breath on her own.

Pomfrey checked. "We've got her. Wait a few minutes while she stabilizes." She looked up at Snape, who was sitting back on his heels, head down, panting slightly. "There are some things wands and potions can't do. Tomorrow you're going to teach me that muggle trick."

Madam Pomfrey took over and began conjuring stretchers, for McGonagall was not the only one hurt. Several functionaries from the Ministry of Magic, called in by Umbridge as back-up, had been tossed around bodily by Hagrid. Two were still unconscious, while others had various minor injuries. Several of the seventh years were enlisted to help move the stretchers up the hill.

Inside the castle the rest of the staff, though terribly anxious about McGonagall, had stayed at their duty posts and herded the students back into the common rooms, keeping the corridors quiet.

In the entrance hall, Umbridge seized Snape's sleeve, forcing him to look at her. "Come to my office immediately. I want to talk to you."

"No," Madam Pomfrey said at once. "I need him in the hospital."

Snape brushed away Umbridge's hand. "In a medical emergency, Madam Pomfrey outranks you," he told Umbridge, then turned his back and followed Pomfrey up the stairs, leaving Umbridge to fume.

They laid McGonagall on one of the beds while Pomfrey checked the other two unconscious patients. Returning to McGonagall, she listened to her chest, then motioned Snape to McGonagall's side. "There's some kind of flutter. See what you can read."

Leaning forward, Snape gently opened McGonagall's eyes, ignoring the fact that Umbridge had entered the hospital and was watching them. He was interested to find that part of McGonagall's mind was shut down, and not from injury. He passed it by, as it did not pertain to his business as a healer's assistant. "Some damage to the sternum and ribcage at the point of impact," he said as he searched for information about the heart, "lung tissue . . . here's the heart. It seems . . . there's some unusual twitching in the muscles. It's small, but there . . . right side."

"Ventricular fibrillation. Get St. Mungo's. We'll have to move her." Madam Pomfrey drew her wand and began a low rhythmic chant as she moved the tip in a tiny circle around the area of McGonagall's heart.

Snape turned to Umbridge. "We're getting a medical team in from

St. Mungo's Hospital to evacuate her to London. You're going to open the defenses for them."

"I'll do no such thing! You can't order me around."

"No? Watch me." Snape clamped his hand around Umbridge's upper arm and dragged her over to the hospital fireplace. Forcing her onto her knees beside him, he took a handful of floo powder, threw it into the fireplace and said, "St. Mungo's, Emergency Room." A nurse appeared in the green flames.

"Hogwarts school." Snape said. "We have a medical emergency. Patient is female, age seventy, struck in the chest with multiple stun spells..."

"Is this Professor McGonagall?" asked the suddenly anxious nurse.

"Yes. Temporary paralysis to the diaphragm muscles and cardiac arrest. Patient is breathing independently now, but exhibiting signs of ventricular fibrillation. There's a healer keeping the heart stable, but we need a medevac team."

Snape could hear the nurse speaking to others in the emergency room. "Floo transport and apparation are out of the question due to the patient's unstable condition. You'll take two healers and fly her back. Hogwarts," she was talking to Snape again. "We have a team ready to go. Are the defenses open?"

"One moment. I want you to explain to this desk clerk what happens to people who contribute to a death through unprovoked and malicious use of a potentially fatal spell." Snape clutched Umbridge's shoulders and pushed her face into the flame. Though not in direct communication himself, he could hear the nurse say, 'Voluntary manslaughter. One to five years in Azkaban, depending on the circumstances.'

Pulling Umbridge back out, Snape told her quietly, "Lower the defenses."

"Yes, Dolores," said a voice behind them. Snape turned to see Professor Tofty standing near the door. "In case you are wondering, I was conducting an exam and witnessed the entire incident from the Astronomy Tower. Do as Professor Snape says."

Umbridge glowered, furious and unwilling, then reluctantly she pulled out her wand, muttering the spell so that the others couldn't hear.

"Just so we understand each other, if the medics run into a barrier now, it's murder," Snape warned her, then said to the nurse. "Hogwarts is open."

He scrambled quickly out of the way, dragging Umbridge back from the fireplace as the medevac team came through. They carried transport brooms and an aerial stretcher, quickly transferred McGonagall to it, and were gone.

"Now," said Umbridge to Snape as she closed the defenses once more, "Now you come to my office."

"How dare you interfere in my running of this school!" Umbridge hissed, whirling on Snape as soon as the door to her office was closed. Snape raised his eyebrows, but said nothing as Umbridge began to pace back and forth. "You have flouted my authority, disobeyed my orders, undermined my position in front of the rest of the staff . . . How dare you enter into a matter that was none of your business!"

"I suggest you tread with care," Snape finally replied. "Have you any idea what percentage of Britain's wizarding population has learned Transfiguration from Professor McGonagall? I wouldn't worry about your position if I were you. I'd worry about being lynched."

"Silence! You had no right to interfere!"

"I had every right. Madam Pomfrey sent for me as Potions Master and as her medical assistant which, incidentally, is part of my job. Which you would have been aware of if you were doing your job as headmistress."

"Rank, blatant insubordination!"

"Be thankful for it. If Pomfrey and I hadn't been there, there'd be a warrant out for your arrest right now. Your little game was witnessed by the entire fifth year class."

"How do you know that?"

"That's who Tofty was examining up on the Astronomy Tower. If he saw it, they all saw it. Probably before Tofty did. Teenagers have this sixth sense . . ."

"One more word out of you and I'll dismiss you from staff!"

Snape was silent.

"You're on probation. One step in the wrong direction, Professor, and you are out of Hogwarts and into Azkaban. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And your weekend jaunts are over. You're confined to the grounds until the end of term."

"Yes, ma'am."

That morning's OWL exam was in Muggle Studies, and Snape reasoned there was no sense trying to get any sleep before the test, so he headed first to his rooms to dress, then down to the Whomping Willow, deriving a certain satisfaction from disobeying Umbridge so soon after receiving her orders.

The Dark Lord chose not to be available at two in the morning, but Macnair was duty officer, so Snape left with him the information that McGonagall had been injured and sent to St. Mungo's. They both agreed that since it didn't directly impact any of the Dark Lord's plans, there was no reason to disturb him against his express wishes.

A few minutes later, Snape was walking back up the hill to the castle.

At breakfast, Snape filled the rest of the teachers in on McGonagall's status. By that time Pomfrey had gotten word that she was out of danger. The teachers agreed it was good that she'd gone to the hospital, both for the extra care and to get her away from Hogwarts and Umbridge.

The Muggle Studies exam went smoothly. Most of the school slept late because of the previous night's excitement, and those who had to be stirring for the test were quiet and subdued. When it was over, Snape returned to his own rooms, hoping to get some sleep before dinner. It was sure to be relatively quiet, since the entire fifth year class was taking their History of Magic OWL.

As he lay fully clothed on the bed, Snape found himself thinking of Phina, of that night in the laboratory when he'd fallen asleep while she massaged his back. He was tired now. His back and his head both ached, and it would feel so nice to have her fingers soothe away the tension and the pain. *Why does everyone I care about have to die?*

It was then that the true wonder of Phina occurred to him — she hadn't awakened his father's demon. She had teased him, mocked him, yelled at him, and defied him, but at no point had he felt the need to control her or to strike her. *Is that proof positive that 'love' didn't exist between us, or an indication that something fundamental has changed in my life?* While revolving the question in his mind, Snape fell asleep.

He slept through the beginning of supper, and was again awakened by pounding on his office door. This time it was Draco Malfoy. "Professor? Professor, are you there? Professor Umbridge wants to see you, sir. It's important."

Snape stood up and walked to the door. "Quiet down, Malfoy. What does she want?"

"She's caught Potter and Granger in her office, Professor. Potter was climbing into the fireplace. It looks like he was trying to escape."

"Really?" Snape was trying to imagine why Potter would do such a thing. "What does Professor Umbridge expect of me?"

"I don't know, sir. She just told me to fetch you."

"Very well." Snape locked up the office with slow care, then strolled towards the entrance hall and the stairs. He might have to obey Umbridge, but he wasn't going to do it quickly. Draco stayed ahead of him, trying to encourage him to go faster. *Probably afraid he's missing something.* At the door to Umbridge's office, Draco was still ahead. He entered first, Snape not far behind.

"You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" he said as he walked through the doorway, taking in Potter, Granger, both Weasleys, Longbottom and, even more surprisingly, Lovegood. Potter stood before Umbridge's desk while the others were being restrained by a predictable assortment of students from Snape's own house.

"Ah, Professor Snape. Yes, I would like another bottle of Veritaserum, as quick as you can, please."

Hoist on your own petard, you ugly witch! "You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter. Surely you did not use it all? I told you that three drops would be sufficient." Snape was rewarded by the telltale crimson that suffused Umbridge's face.

Her voice simpering, Umbridge coaxed, "You can make some more, can't you?"

"Certainly. It takes a full moon cycle to mature, so I should have it ready for you in around a month."

"A month? A month? But I need it this evening, Snape! I have just found Potter using my fire to communicate with a person or persons unknown!"

"Really?" Snape said, glancing over at Potter. *Tonight. It's tonight and either Malfoy's won and the Dark Lord's concocted a convincing illusion, or Bella's kidnapped Sirius Black.* "Well, it doesn't surprise me. Potter has never shown much inclination to follow school rules."

The boy stared back at him, Lily's eyes meeting his own with steady purpose. Snape saw an image, faint and blurred, of Black on his knees before the Dark Lord, defiant but in pain, and heard the familiar high laughter.

Umbridge was bleating into Snape's ear. "I wish to interrogate him! I wish you to provide me with a potion that will force him to tell me the truth!"

Snape divided his own mind, one side speaking to Umbridge while the other tried to project to Potter. "I have already told you that I have no further stocks of Veritaserum. Unless you wish to poison Potter — and I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy with you if you did — I cannot help you. The only trouble is that most venoms act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling..."

To Potter the message was: *I understand. I'll try to contact him*, but Potter wasn't receiving. Instead he was broadcasting words over and over: *VolDEMORT's got Sirius in the Department of Mysteries...*

Meanwhile, Umbridge was livid. "You are on probation! You are being deliberately unhelpful! I expected better, Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you! Now get out of my office!"

How dearly I would love to see your face on the day you learn that Malfoy has been playing you like a violin, to his tune, not yours. Snape bowed a play actor's bow and turned to the door to leave. Then Potter nearly ruined everything.

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

Snape froze, his hand on the doorknob. The words were so obviously a code that he half expected a paralyzing spell to hit him in the back. Mercifully Umbridge was living up to her image of being a trifle thick.

"Padfoot? What is Padfoot? Where what is hidden? What does he mean, Snape?"

Snape looked around at Potter, projecting a message he was certain the boy was incapable of receiving: *You stupid idiot! If I make it out of this, I'm going to ask Dumbledore for permission to skin you alive and hang your pelt in the staffroom.*

"I have no idea. Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage. And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little, if Longbottom suffocates it will mean a lot of tedious paperwork, and I am afraid I shall have to mention it on your reference if ever you apply for a job."

Closing the door behind him, Snape took a deep breath, then hurried down the stairs to the entrance hall and out into the long, June afternoon that was fading into evening. Supper was half over, but food was the furthest thing from Snape's mind.

As soon as he was sheltered from view by the bushes along the path, Snape drew his wand and sent a patronus skimming south with the message *Potter has seen you in danger. Are you safe? Are you at home?* The message was for Sirius Black, and if Black was in the hands of the Dark Lord in the Department of Mysteries, the Dark Lord would see the patronus and there would be no answer.

The wait seemed to go on forever, but it was really only a few minutes before the ghostly dog brought the reply. *I'm at home and well. Is Harry all right?*

Black deserved an answer. Again the fox traveled south. *He's in trouble for*

rule-breaking as usual, but otherwise fine. As soon as I can talk to him, I'll pass on your message. Do not send again except in need. Umbridge is watching us.

With that business taken care of, Snape walked back up to the castle and into the Great Hall. Some of the students had finished supper, so he sat at the foot of the Slytherin table to eat. That way he could keep an eye on movement in the entrance hall.

Thus it was that Snape saw the curious little parade — Granger, Potter, and Umbridge — as they left the castle and headed down the hill. He went outside to watch them, puzzling why they should be going to the Forbidden Forest. He didn't think there was too much to worry about — Umbridge would ensure that Potter never left the grounds, and that was what was important. So Snape waited.

Several minutes later there was a clatter and a rush of students out of the castle, traveling so hurriedly they didn't even notice Snape standing to one side of the entrance steps. It was the Weasleys, Longbottom, and Lovegood, and they were running for the forest.

Curiouser and curiouser. Then Snape remembered the Slytherin students and rushed up the stairs again.

Malfoy was worst hit, his face covered with bats. Bulstrode and Warrington were on the floor, stunned. The others were recovering from various Impediment and Disarming jinxes. Snape helped the students to the hospital wing, grateful that there were no more serious injuries. Then he went to the windows overlooking the forest to watch for the return of Umbridge and the students.

Long minutes ticked by and finally the sun, descending towards its setting, began to tinge the sky with crimson. Snape could wait no longer. Searching for the best way to communicate, patronuses being good only for short messages, he realized that Potter had chosen Umbridge's office because the fireplace there was not being monitored. He ran up the steps to the second floor and entered Umbridge's domain.

It was a strange feeling, not knowing if she would return and catch him as she'd caught Potter, but there was no help for it. Taking a handful of floo powder from the pot Umbridge kept by the hearth, Snape knelt and tossed it into the fireplace, saying, "Twelve Grimmauld Place."

What Snape saw was the kitchen. "Black!" he called. "Sirius Black! Lupin! Moody! Anybody!"

It was Black who answered. "Where's Harry?" he demanded without preamble.

"I'm not sure," Snape answered. "He and Granger led Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest a couple of hours ago. Several of his friends followed them in. They haven't come back yet."

"A couple of hours ago! And you've been sitting there doing nothing!"

"I've been tending to students they attacked, and I've been waiting for them to come back. They're with Umbridge, who can't afford to have anything happen to Potter. And the whole crew of them are pretty fair spell casters themselves. My main concern is that they don't go to London. They haven't got brooms, and they don't know how to apparate, so I think they're safe on that count."

"What's happening in London?"

"Potter saw a vision of you in the Department of Mysteries being tortured by the Dark Lord. I never had the chance to give him your message, so he doesn't know you're safe. I'm afraid he may try to go to London to help you. He has a tendency to do foolish things like that."

"Brave things, you mean. How do you know about this vision?"

"He projected it to me. I tried to project back that I would contact you, but I don't think he knows how to receive. Anyway, I'm going into the forest to look for them, and I wanted you to know what was happening. If he's found a way to go to London, someone should be sent to the Ministry to head him off."

"I'll go myself."

"That isn't wise. You're the bait. If the Dark Lord gets his hands on you, he'll be able to lure Potter anywhere he chooses. I'm going to try to reach Dumbledore now. Someone should stay at headquarters to let him know what's happening. The logical person is you."

"No. If Harry's in trouble, he needs my help. I'm going in. I'll tell everyone here what's happening, but I'm going in."

"That's only playing into the Dark Lord's hands. You of all people need to stay away."

"No! He's James's son! For Chris'sake, Severus, he's Lily's son! And he's the closest thing to my own son I'll ever have. Dammit, I love him!"

For the length of a heartbeat they stared at each other across the green flames, and all the years that stood between them came down to this one moment.

"Good luck," said Severus.

"Thank you," Sirius replied, and was gone.

The floo connection broken, Snape stood and left the office. Since he

was going outside anyway, he waited until he was clear of the castle before he directed the patronus to Dumbledore. *Potter gone into forest. May be trying to reach London. Vision of Black held by V. Am going into forest to search now. Full details at number twelve.*

Suddenly, in the gathering darkness, the forest seemed very large. *All I can do is follow their footprints and hope that I find them safe and sound.* As he slipped into the shadow of the trees and lit a Lumos spell, Snape found himself remembering every evil story he'd ever heard about the dangers of the Forbidden Forest. There was no help for it, he had to search. And because of the connection between Potter and the Dark Lord, he had to search alone.

He only hoped that he would find Umbridge and the students well, and be able to return with them to the castle.

What little daylight was left faded, and the dark forest grew darker. Snape had trouble following the path of the students, even though earlier it had seemed as if a herd of buffalo had trampled the undergrowth. He had never gone so deep into the trees before.

Then, suddenly, there was a crash of movement and of powerful bodies around him. Snape froze.

The beings were centaurs. They snorted and pawed the ground, feinting towards him and then pulling back. "You walk where you should not walk, human," one great black one neighed at him.

Snape stood, petrified. He'd watched the palomino, Firenze, enter Hogwarts with Dumbledore, but had never gone close to or spoken with him. These great creatures were enormous, towering over him, their powerful hooves cutting into the turf like knives. Snape wanted no hoof aimed at his head.

"I mean no harm," he said, "and I crave your pardon for coming where I have no right, but I seek our children, young ones led into your land by another human, shorter than I and female."

"The plump mare," snorted the black centaur. "Do you seek her as well?"

Snape thought fast, trying to remember everything he'd ever read about horses in muggle books and magazines. "No, she's an outsider. She came to us trying to take over the herd, and attacked our lead mare. She's stolen the foals, three colts and three fillies."

A chestnut stallion advanced. "What do you wish?"

"To find the foals and return them to the herd. Or at least to know they're safe."

"And your lead mare?"

"Was badly injured, but lives. We are caring for her as best we may."

"Will you take the plump mare as well?"

"If you require it, I will, but none of us wish her to return to the herd."

Stamping hooves shook the earth, and neighing pierced Snape's eardrums. The centaurs moved away, leaving only two to watch him. Snape waited, trying to look submissive, not certain how horses did it.

The chestnut advanced on him again. "Your foals are gone. They found the wingéd ones and mounted them. They have gone south. The mare is with us — you may speak with her, but not take her. There is a moving mountain in the forest, a danger to all sentient creatures, thus you will be silent as you travel with us."

"I will obey the herd guardians of this place."

The centaurs led Snape deeper into the forest while he pondered the information they'd given him. The students had found the 'wingéd ones,' which must mean the thestrals. From northern Scotland to London was a few hours' flight by broom or thestral, so there was a very good chance that Black and the other members of the Order would be at the Ministry well before Potter and the students. That was very good news.

What was not good news was the information about the 'moving mountain.' Snape had no idea what that could be, and as the centaurs seemed to fear it, he hoped fervently that he would not encounter it.

Deep into the forest they went until they reached a large clearing. Neighs and trumpetings reverberated through the trees as the guards greeted the herd. Other centaurs, mares and foals, lunged at him, pulling up just before hitting him. Snape stood very still, forcing himself not to run in panic.

Umbridge cowered in an open space on one side of the clearing, her hair disheveled and her robes torn. Young centaurs pranced around her, dodging in from time to time to nip at her or snatch and pull her hair. The fillies especially seemed to enjoy this game. Umbridge groveled in terror like a whipped cur, no trace of her former arrogance left.

"Professor," Snape called as he approached her.

"Snape!" she screamed. "Oh, gad, Snape, get me out of here!"

The chestnut intervened. "You said this mare tried to take control of the herd. Do you follow her, or do you follow your herd leader?"

Snape glanced over at Umbridge, who was now hanging on every word. "I follow our herd leader," he said, and Umbridge moaned.

"This is good. Tell your lead mare that we have her rival. As this is no danger to our own herd, we have not harmed her. We will keep her here until

your herd leader is well again and sends for this rebel to chastise her. You will return to your herd now, and you will return alone.”

Umbridge pleaded and begged, but Snape had no choice. Not that he really wanted one. “I’ll tell McGonagall where you are,” he called to Umbridge, and let the centaurs escort him back to Hogwarts.

Midnight came and went, and there was still no word of any kind from London. Snape paced his office like a caged thing, desperate for news. Had Potter arrived in London? Were Black and the other members of the Order able to stop him? Had Dumbledore received his message? And, worst of all thoughts, did the Dark Lord have the prophecy?

Then, in the wee hours of the morning, the mark on Snape’s arm seared with a terrible pain, more terrible than the day a year before when the Dark Lord had returned. So intense was the summons that Snape almost forgot where he was and started to apparate from his office, stopping just in time to keep from throwing himself against the shields.

Shack. I have to get to the Shack. I have to go to London. There was no room for any other thought, and the summons drove Snape down from the castle to the Willow, where he fumbled desperately for the knot, then ran stumbling and tripping through the tunnel to the Shack. A frantic *Patefacio tugurium* and he was free, apparating at once to Croydon.

Croydon was a madhouse, Death Eaters scurrying like rats, dragging boxes and crates hurriedly packed from rooms that were being gutted. Snape paid no attention, diving for the stairs in panic and racing to the interview chamber, where he threw himself prostrate before the Dark Lord, realizing only then that Bella was already there, lying beside him, moaning in pain.

“You will stand, Potions Master, and you will look at us.”

Snape got trembling to his feet and let the Dark Lord search his eyes.

“What do you know of this night?”

“Only that you have summoned me in anger, and the night brought evil to our cause.”

“They have failed us, these servants. Failed us and left us with dust. Potter came, but their incompetence has lost the prophecy forever, shattered to pieces in the bowels of the Ministry. And this same incompetence brought our enemies, Dumbledore’s Order and even Dumbledore, so that we ourself was forced to reveal our presence to retrieve the smallest crumb from the ashes of so great a debacle.”

The Dark Lord pointed a long thin finger at Bella, and she writhed and screamed on the floor.

"Whom have we lost, Potions Master? Who goes tonight to Azkaban?"

"Lord, I do not know. I was not admitted to the planning."

Pain wrapped Snape in fire as the Dark Lord reached out to punish him. "Do not shield yourself in excuses. Defeat for one is defeat for all. Faithless slave," he said to Bella, "tell your fellow servant whom we have lost."

"Malfoy," she gasped, "Macnair... my husband LeStrange and his brother... Rookwood... Dolohov... Avery... Mulciber... Crabbe... Nott... Jugson..."

Snape listened, horrified, as Bella named every first and second rank Death Eater in Britain except for herself. Then the Dark Lord crooked his finger and she screamed again.

"And how many did Dumbledore lose?"

"One, only one..."

"And who will replace those we have lost?" Bella screamed once more, but the Dark Lord no longer paid attention to her. Instead he turned his crimson gaze on the apprehensive Snape. "Who stands above you, Potions Master? Who is there left whose rank outmatches yours?"

It was an answer that terrified Snape, a fate he would have given anything to avoid. "No one, Lord," he replied, and his voice was a hoarse croak.

"So, highest ranking of our advisors, advise us now."

"Lord, why do your servants strip this place as if for departure?"

"It was set up by Malfoy, and he is its Secret-Keeper. We do not trust his strength of will in Azkaban, even though dementors no longer staff it. All the guardians of our branches have been taken."

"Where will we go?"

"It is for you to advise us. Give us an opinion, Potions Master."

"Birmingham, Lord. It's large enough for our whole organization to get lost in, yet far from any of our former centers. But we can't go there now, we have no building to use. Let our people take as much as they can and scatter. When we have a place, you can summon them again."

"Organize it."

"But Lord, I'm expected to be at Hogwarts."

"You have lieutenants."

"No, Lord. My work until now has been solitary. No one follows me."

There was a pause that Snape didn't know how to interpret. When he spoke again, the Dark Lord's voice had changed, lost some of its anger. "You neither follow nor have followers. Who protects you? Who watches your back?"

"I don't go into the field. Why would I need protection, Lord?"

"You are naïve." Another pause, and footsteps were heard outside the door. An odd couple came in and knelt before the Dark Lord, short dumpy Peter Pettigrew and a big brutish Death Eater that Snape recognized as Nigel Yaxley.

The Dark Lord pointed again to Bella, and she rose to her knees beside the other two, perspiration beading her face. "This is what I have to give you, Severus. Between them a sorry record of failure, though each has also had some insignificant successes and all long to demonstrate their loyalty. You three will go with Severus now. You will listen to him, advise him to the best of your ability, and follow his instructions. If there is any dispute of the smallest kind, I will accept only Severus's report of what happened. You understand."

"Yes, Lord," the three chorused.

"Severus, I give you access to Malfoy's office. You will stay here until these servants know enough to continue without you. Then you may return to Hogwarts. What you tell Dumbledore I leave to your discretion."

Then the Dark Lord was gone.

As Snape's three new lieutenants rose slowly from their knees, Snape turned to Bella. Somewhat apologetically he asked, "Where is Malfoy's office?"

The spare, austere office was a surprising contrast to the rich luxury of the Malfoy home. Neat and orderly, it reflected the part of Malfoy's personality that was seen most at Croydon, away from family or the political concerns of the Ministry. Snape went at once to the files.

One cabinet contained personnel files, which Snape closed immediately after a brief glance told him what they were. The other contained purely administrative material, blueprints of the building, organizational charts, supply orders, lists of contacts... Snape was amused at Bella's reaction to the mass of meticulously ordered files. It was clear she'd never arranged her own department in any organized way.

"Here. This one is a floor plan of all our departments here, and here's a list of those in charge of the day to day operations in each. Yaxley, do you still have access to Cardiff?"

"No, sir. A new spell was performed when Nott took over."

"Drat. That should have been one of your assignments, to go there and shut down the operation. What about Glasgow; that was Rabastan's. No?

Lestrangle, you never visited him there? What about Lincoln, Manchester, and Norwich?”

There was no answer. *This is impossible. Five branch offices, and no one in London can enter them. And their Secret-Keepers are all in Azkaban. Why don't I just let the Ministry get the secrets from them?* But that was not an option. The Dark Lord would accept no more loss of personnel or assets, and would punish the one who failed him now, possibly with death. For now, Snape worked for the Dark Lord to the best of his ability.

Snape began a thorough search of every file in the cabinet. He was rewarded almost at once with lists of safe houses all over Britain, from Cornwall and Kent to the Isle of Skye. Pulling the file out and tossing it on the desk, he said, “Go through that. Those are the locations we’re dispersing to.” Then he saw the narrow folder that was titled simply ‘notes.’

Inside were five small pieces of note paper, folded in thirds and sealed with paper wafers. On the back of each was written a name: Cardiff — Glasgow — Lincoln — Manchester — Norwich. Malfoy thought of everything.

Something so valuable and yet so useless. Only one person can look at each note, and then it's gone. And that one person can't be me because I can't go out to the branches now. And it has to be now. Quietly he handed three of the papers to Yaxley, and two to Bella.

“After we review what needs to be done, Yaxley you go to Norwich, Lincoln, and Cardiff — Lestrangle to Manchester and Glasgow — and do the same there. Pettigrew will coordinate the evacuation here.”

They spent hours going over the details of packing, and which departments had to be near each other to continue operations, and which branches would use what safe houses, and how communications would be set up to minimize exposure. Then Snape’s lieutenants separated, each to his or her assignments. Snape himself went to the Dark Lord with a detailed report of all they had discussed and would do.

It was late afternoon before Snape returned, exhausted, to Hogwarts. In all the time at Croydon, he had not once looked in to observe the packing of his own laboratory. He didn’t have the heart.

Students were congregating in small groups around the lawn and in the entrance hall talking animatedly. At first Snape wondered about it, then he remembered it was Friday afternoon and they were free for the weekend. Then he remembered the fifth years had been taking OWLs and they would just have finished with their last exams. Proctoring OWLs seemed ages in the past but it had really been, what? yesterday morning? Part of Snape’s brain

was telling him he needed to inform McGonagall of something, and another part was saying that it was impossible, though Snape was not sure why. He was too tired to try to find out anything more, having had a total of six hours sleep in the last two and a half days. He made his way quietly to his rooms and lay down, attempting to clear his mind so he could think rationally.

Just as he was drifting off to sleep, a gentle rapping at the door roused him. Dragging himself from the bed, his head now throbbing, Snape opened the door. Dumbledore stood there, smiling benignly.

"Ah, Severus, you have no idea how relieved I was to hear that you had come back in apparent good health. When I returned this morning and found you had left during the night I was concerned, truly concerned. May I come in?"

"Certainly, Headmaster. I'm sorry." Snape stepped aside as Dumbledore entered. He was trying to remember why Dumbledore wasn't supposed to be there, but . . .

"Are you all right? You look terribly ill. Here, sit down. Let me get you something." Dumbledore conjured coffee and a plate of sandwiches, insisting that Snape eat and drink before asking or answering any questions. The food helped, and Snape began to feel that his brain was working again.

"There. That's better. You're looking more like your old self already. Do you need to see Pomfrey? Did Riddle give you a bad time last night?"

"Bad time? No, I don't think so." Then it started coming back to him. "Something went terribly wrong last night, and we lost the whole upper echelon. Everybody. Except Bella — he brought Bella back. They're all gone. To Azkaban. That's why he put me in charge."

Dumbledore's silence was the silence of a man watching as his ball nears the cup at the end of a ninety-foot putt. "In charge?" he prompted after a moment.

"All the Secret-Keepers are gone. We have to close down the branches . . . headquarters . . . and disperse all over Britain. I've been coordinating that. I . . . Bella works for me now."

"Do you know all the places where your people are dispersing to? Where your next headquarters will be?"

"Yes, but . . ." Snape stopped and stared at Dumbledore in horror. "You can't. You can't take them out. He'll know it's me. He'll kill me. He'll do worse than kill me. Only three of us know — him, Bella, and me. You can't do this to me!" Snape rose to his feet as he spoke looking around him for a way out of the room, out of the whole situation.

"Easy Severus. Easy. I see you are distraught from the events of the last couple of days. I assure you I shall do nothing that would increase the danger you are in. Sit. Sit down. Good. Now, I have a question I must ask you, nothing about Riddle or your headquarters, so do collect yourself, please."

Snape took several deep breaths and nodded.

"Excellent. Now, do you know where Professor Umbridge is? Harry says he last saw her in the forest, in the company of several of the centaurs."

"Umbridge . . . Yes, she's still with them. They consider her a renegade for challenging the lead mare, and they're holding her until McGonagall returns."

"Ah. I should be able to handle that."

"Professor? What happened last night? The Dark Lord's people have been taken to Azkaban, and Bella said one of . . . our people was 'lost.' He didn't give more details, and I couldn't ask him or Bella."

"I thought you knew. Harry and his friends went to the Department of Mysteries and were trapped by Death Eaters. There was a fight in which the students performed very well, then members of the Order arrived. We suffered injuries, but . . . Sirius Black was killed. The prophecy was destroyed. Riddle will never hear it."

"Killed? Sirius Black was killed?"

"I am afraid so."

"He . . . I . . . He should have stayed at Grimmauld Place. It was the logical thing to do. I told him . . ."

"Yes, I know. Lupin told me you'd talked to him and suggested he stay away from the Ministry."

"He wouldn't listen. He had to help Potter."

"That is correct. No one could dissuade him."

Snape sat for awhile, looking at his hands. "Who killed him?"

"Bella Lestrage."

"I see." They were silent for a few moments. "Headmaster, do you need me for anything else? I am really very tired."

"That is all right, Severus. You get some sleep. I have a couple of things I have to do now, in any case. We can talk again tomorrow."

Dumbledore left, and Snape returned to his bedroom.

He looked into the window at the little dog. 'I want it, Mum,' he said, but his mother cuffed him. 'They make you weak,' she said. 'Anyone who's ever owned one became weak.' Toby came out then with the puppy in his arms. 'Every boy needs one, 'Leen,' he said. 'You just got to beat 'em now and again.' Eileen struggled to keep the dog away, even though Hagrid was fighting against her, and in the end Eileen won. Toby gave the dog to Sirius.

He had to get to the fifth floor because Umbridge moved his Potions class to the fifth floor on account of the OWLs. The staircases kept shifting, though, and he knew he was hours late. There was a boat to take him across the swamp, rowed by Filch, but halfway across he realized it was really Lily. 'You were supposed to bring me a puppy,' she said, so he told her Sirius had it. 'Well if you can't give it to me, maybe he can give it to Harry,' she replied.

The boat landed, and he had to get out because his arm hurt. There was a metal detector at the door into headquarters, searching for the dogs that everyone was trying to bring in. He didn't have a dog, so he got through all right, but they stopped Sirius and sent him to Azkaban because of the dog.

He was standing in front of Imperial College. 'You can't get in without a dog,' they told him. He was desperate, because Phina was already inside, cradling a little black puppy dog in her arms. 'It's easy,' she called to him, 'just relax and open your mouth a little and let it happen.' Just then Sirius came up, and he was holding a dog, too. Sirius gave the dog to Potter, then walked into the college and kissed Phina on the forehead. Toby closed the doors. 'You're not qualified,' was the last thing he said.

Snape lay staring up at where the ceiling would be if it were light enough to see the ceiling. *It must be after midnight. Maybe around two in the morning.* He was most intensely aware of his bitter disappointment, as fresh now as the day he first realized he would never enter Imperial College. Then snippets of the dream came back to him, and he tried to assign a rational explanation to the image of Phina and Sirius entering a scientific college when neither knew the least thing about real science.

That was when Snape remembered that Sirius Black was dead — he had a vague recollection that it was Dumbledore who'd told him this. Black was dead. He should be happy, but he wasn't. Instead he felt empty. He closed his eyes and conjured the image of Black's face, so raw with passion and violence. So much like Bella's face, yet so different.

No, he wasn't happy that Black was dead. He didn't feel anything. Just empty. The feeling you get when someone tells you about a car that crashed

into a ditch without the driver having a chance to step on the brake. That feeling. Powerless. Empty.

Bella. It was her fault. She'd killed Phina by accident, and now Snape was certain she'd killed Black on purpose. Her own cousin. Not that blood meant anything to Bella, not unless it was flowing across the pavement.

Reckoning that he'd had somewhere close to eight hours' sleep, and no longer tired, Snape rose and dressed, then slipped along silent corridors to the entrance hall and thence outside. He was heading for the steeper paths that fringed the cliff face and led down to the lake shore. The newly crescent moon was gone now, leaving the world starlit and treacherous, but Snape's night vision was good, and he knew the way well.

Lily's rock was there, an unchanging beacon in a turbulent world. Snape settled on the grass beside it, as he'd done so many times, and watched the stars.

Did I love you, Lily? Sirius saw love as his willingness to face danger for your son. Maybe, back then when the world was young, and you were still alive, I saw danger in the same way. Even last year, when I left this place with the future veiled and uncertain, I still felt a little of the magic of danger — as if I could touch you again when the stakes were high enough. The magic's gone now. I guess as we get older, pain and fear become more real. The only rock I have to cling to now is duty, and sometimes that seems weak and brittle. It would help if I knew I loved you. I suppose if you have to ask the question, the answer is no.

So in the end, Sirius was the one, of all of us, the most blessed. He met his fate with clear, open eyes, untroubled by doubt. He knew why he died, and he knew it was worthwhile. Was that how you died? Clear eyed, untroubled by doubt? I have so many doubts, and my vision is blurred.

Dawn came early to the northern sky, for the solstice had crept up on them while Snape sorted through files in Malfoy's office a scant twenty-four hours earlier. Meditation is for the night hours, for solitude and the company of the stars. With daylight come labor and duty.

Snape rose and brushed grass blades and sand from his robes. Then he walked quietly up the steep path to the castle, almost ready for whatever the day would bring.

One of Snape's first tasks was to invite into his office the children of the Death Eaters who had been taken to Azkaban. Draco Malfoy and Vincent Crabbe were predictably accompanied by Gregory Goyle, while Theodore Nott stood a little apart from them. All of them were aware of what had

happened, and Snape felt a little guilty about not speaking with them the previous afternoon, as soon as he returned from Croydon.

“Don’t worry too much about your fathers,” Snape assured them. With these four he didn’t have to hide his dual life. They already knew. “The Dark Lord has indicated to me that Azkaban has lost its dementors. I’m not privy to the details, but they seem to have abandoned the Ministry and returned to him.”

Nott began to tremble with relief, and Goyle put a hand on Crabbe’s shoulder. Malfoy remained unmoving, though the tight lines of his face relaxed a little.

“What you do now,” Snape continued, “is stay here. This is the most secure place until we find out how the Ministry is reacting to what happened. The whole organization is . . . busy — you will understand that I can’t give you details — and the rest of your families will be able to attend to their duties better if they know you’re safe.”

“Can’t we help?” insisted Malfoy. “Can’t we do something?”

“No. It’s been the Dark Lord’s wish since last June that we remain under cover. That order is still in effect. The best way you can obey it is to act normally and give our enemies no opening to attack us until we’re ready. Do you understand?”

They nodded. It was the first time that Snape had spoken to them directly of the Dark Lord, and even Malfoy seemed impressed and willing to follow orders.

Breakfast was like entering a different world. The Great Hall was in an uproar, a condition caused by the end of exams, the approaching end of the school year, the removal of Umbridge, and the triumphant return of Dumbledore, who once again presided over the meal from his seat at the high table. As soon as Snape entered the Hall, Dumbledore beckoned him over.

“Thank you for your information yesterday. You will be pleased — well, maybe not pleased, but at least interested — to know that Dolores Umbridge is safe with Madam Pomfrey. It will be some time before she is in any condition to bother us further.”

“That is good news, Headmaster. What about Hagrid?”

“He should be back later today. He’ll have some explaining to do. Did the centaurs mention to you that there was a strange presence in the forest?”

“They did. A moving mountain, or something like that. What’s it got to do with Hagrid?”

"His brother, or rather half-brother, it would appear. Hagrid has been trying to civilize him."

"I see. We have a giant on the grounds. You wouldn't be planning to put a nesting pair of dragons here as well, would you?"

"It is a thought, Severus."

Snape apparated to Croydon early in the afternoon. Most of the offices had been cleared out, and the movement in the corridors seemed more orderly than the day before, probably because everyone now knew that they had somewhere to go.

After clearing the next step with the Dark Lord, Snape began the process of signing out the different departments, first getting from each a complete inventory of what they were taking and then giving instructions on how they should maintain cover, and how they would be contacted when it was time.

By evening Bella and Yaxley were back. The last of the departments was checking out, and the skeleton demolition crew was removing partitions and returning the old building to its previous state. The only things that hadn't been taken out were Malfoy's files and the crates and boxes in the laboratory.

The four of them, Snape, Bella, Pettigrew, and Yaxley, appeared for the last time before the Dark Lord in that interview chamber. Snape presented the Dark Lord with the lists of safe destinations, who staffed them, and with what supplies.

"You have done well. Now find us a new center. We shall contact you to learn of your progress."

"Lord, how may we contact you at need?"

"You may not. What we shall do now is not for you to share. You will go to safe places, perform your tasks, and wait for our call."

"Lord," squeaked Pettigrew, "I have no place to go."

"Severus, you will provide a hiding place for Wormtail. Wormtail, you will assist Severus in any way he requires of you."

"Yes, Lord," both replied.

The Dark Lord was gone, and Snape was saddled with Pettigrew. Together they made their way out to the front entrance. "Wait here," Snape said, and went upstairs without waiting for a response.

One of the demolition crew followed Snape into the laboratory. "We've held off on this room until you approved it," he said. "We didn't want to damage anything."

"Thank you. I'll only be a moment. Do you think you might wait outside until I call you?"

The workman nodded and left, though Snape had the suspicion that he was deeply curious.

What happened next had been carefully prepared that morning by himself and Professor Flitwick. First, the boxes containing the bottles and jars of chemicals and potions ingredients were set to one side. They would remain as they were. It was the boxes of cauldrons and of glassware, of beakers and test tubes, that had to be reduced. That, and most of the equipment. The bulk, rather than the weight, was the problem.

Snape opened the first box of beakers and began using a shrinking spell of Flitwick's. The first beaker kept its size and was lined with a thin layer of special padding. Another beaker was reduced just enough to fit inside the first, and also lined. Successively smaller beakers nested into the first ones until he had seven condensed into the space of one. Then Snape began another nesting group. In this way, he reduced fourteen boxes of various containers down to two. Each box was seven times heavier, but not inordinately heavy.

The mistake many wizards made was to try to make things too small. The concentration of weight over a tiny amount of area tended to crash through floors and demolish staircases. By limiting the scale of reduction, and concentrating especially on boxes of empty vessels that contained mostly air, Snape was able to condense thirty-five cases into eleven. These he bound together and moved downstairs with a levitation spell.

"You can take out the lab now," he told the workman as he left.

Downstairs Snape deposited the cases next to Pettigrew. "Watch these," he ordered, and went next to Malfoy's old office. This was a totally different problem, since it was almost impossible to reduce a mass of paper to any appreciable extent and still have it light enough to transport.

Instead, Snape shredded the paper into boxes. It took up less space, and became illegible in the process. Later the individual sheets could be reconstituted with another spell. It was a combination that Flitwick was particularly proud of. Snape left the file cabinets for the demolition crew.

Rejoining Pettigrew, Snape directed the moving of seventeen boxes out of headquarters and apparated with the first seven to his home in Lancashire. Then he returned to Croydon, where he first checked the progress of the demolition, then joined Pettigrew to apparate together with the remaining ten boxes.

Although returned to its original state, headquarters remained invisible to the general public, since its Secret-Keeper was imprisoned in Azkaban and could not undo the Fidelius Charm.

Once home, there was the problem of Pettigrew. Snape deposited him in the front room, then moved all the boxes to the storeroom next to his own bedroom. He then locked the room with powerful charms. Pettigrew, having spent most of the last fifteen years as a rat in a schoolboy's pocket, was generally proficient in elementary spells, but deficient in advanced ones. Snape was still taking no chances.

Returning downstairs, Snape faced Pettigrew. It was the closest contact the two had ever had in their lives. "I do hope you realize how I feel about this situation."

Pettigrew nodded, swiping his nose with a finger, for all the world like a giant rat cleaning its whiskers. "You don't want me. I'm intruding."

"Just so we understand each other. The hardest part will be the first week, since I have to be at Hogwarts. After that it'll get easier. One, you never leave this house except in my company. There are things about this muggle community you don't know, and a false step could ruin us. Two, you don't go upstairs. I find you've been snooping around in my home, and I'll take you down to the Royal Artillery practice range, have you blown to smithereens, and tell the Dark Lord it was an accident. Got it?"

Snape conjured a cot. "This is your bed. If you prefer, you can use the sofa. There's an extensive library that you have full permission to read. It might do you good. Food will be in the kitchen. I'll try to get back once a day to see that everything's going smoothly. This situation will last for one week. Think you can handle it?"

Pettigrew nodded again, somehow contriving to look more like a rat than ever. Trying to remember that this was not Pettigrew's fault, Snape apparated back to Hogwarts.

The next day was Sunday and, after having slept in, eaten a leisurely breakfast, spent an inordinate amount of time playing cribbage with Flitwick, and retired just before lunch to his office, Snape was once again headed for the Great Hall. The luxury of having two uninterrupted meals in a row was almost too much to bear.

It was also too much to hope for. Stepping out of the dungeons into the entrance hall, Snape was presented with the tableau of Potter, wand drawn, threatening Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, all of them wandless, though Malfoy's hand was near his robes.

Does this boy never stop? "Potter!" Snape yelled, freezing all four. "What are you doing, Potter?"

The answer was blatantly defiant. "I'm trying to decide what curse to use on Malfoy, sir."

The boy's had a rough week. Treat it like a normal infraction of the rules... "Put that wand away at once. Ten points from Gryff... Ah, I see there are no longer any points left in the Gryffindor hourglass to take away. In that case, Potter, we will simply have to..."

"Add some more?" McGonagall stood in the doorway.

Potter was forgotten at the sound of the well-loved voice. Snape moved forward to take her hand. "Professor McGonagall! Out of St. Mungo's, I see!"

"Yes, Professor Snape, I'm quite as good as new." She then thrust forward her carpetbag and cape. "You two — Crabbe — Goyle — here. Take these up to my office for me."

Having deftly removed two of the students, McGonagall turned to Snape, laughter just barely playing at the corners of her mouth. "Right then. Well, I think Potter and his friends ought to have fifty points apiece for alerting the world to the return of... You-Know-Who! What say you, Professor Snape?"

"What?" It merely countered Umbridge's depredations, but Snape protested for form's sake. "Oh — well — I suppose..."

"So that's fifty each for Potter, the two Weasleys, Longbottom, and Miss Granger."

Snape raised his eyebrows in mock disbelief.

"Oh — and fifty for Miss Lovegood, I suppose," said McGonagall. "Now, you wanted to take ten from Mr. Potter, I think, Professor Snape — so there we are..." The colored baubles moved from section to section of the house hourglasses. "Well, Potter, Malfoy, I think you ought to be outside on a glorious day like this." And with that the confrontation was over, Potter heading out the front door, and Malfoy back to the Slytherin common room.

"How are you, you old tigress you?" asked Snape as the students vanished from the entrance hall. "Is St. Mungo's still standing?"

"It was when I departed. I thought I might leave it there, just in case I scraped a knee or got a splinter from a student's wand."

Snape offered McGonagall his arm, and together they went in to lunch.

The year ended, as it always did, with the feast at the end of the week. Snape, who had visited Spinner's End faithfully every day, was thoughtful enough to take some of the food back to Pettigrew so that he could celebrate, too. Beyond that, Snape had no idea what he was going to do with the man while waiting for the Dark Lord's summons. Unless, of course, he found a

way to quiz Pettigrew about the events leading up to the disaster at Godric's hollow.

The morning after the feast, the students boarded the Hogwarts Express and returned to King's Cross Station. The teachers, breathing great sighs of relief, straightened their rooms, locked their doors, and went home for the all too brief holiday. This time their departure was tinged by worry about what the future would bring, with the confirmation that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was once again on the loose, but freedom from school was freedom from school, and little could spoil the holiday atmosphere.

Snape expected no vacation. First and foremost, he was now living with Peter Pettigrew, a damper on any occasion. Then, he was expecting the Dark Lord's summons at any time, and had to work to find a new headquarters building before that happened. Finally, Dumbledore had asked him to be on twenty-four hour call. The headmaster implied that he would be searching for something dangerous, and he depended on Snape to be ready to assist him.

So the vacation that was no vacation started, with the Dark Lord in hiding, and Snape more powerful and at the same time more vulnerable than he'd ever been in his life. He was not looking forward to the next school year.

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - S I X

NARROWING OPTIONS

SUNDAY, JUNE 30, 1996 (THE DAY BEFORE THE FULL MOON)

Severus Snape sat comfortably in his own room in his own home sipping a cup of tea and poring over the stacks of personnel files he'd brought from Death Eater headquarters in Croydon. At first he was fascinated by the wealth of detail — personal histories, family members, habits, skills and observed talents, and current assignment. Then he became even more intrigued by what wasn't there, or rather who wasn't there.

There was no file on Lucius Malfoy. Neither was there a file on Bella Lestrangle or, for that matter, on Snape himself. No first or second rank Death Eater, and few in the third rank, had a file. As near as he could tell, it was a question of access to the Dark Lord. Those who spoke directly to the Dark Lord retained their privacy. The rank and file were under the microscope.

A few, a very few, did not list a current assignment. The whereabouts of Fenrir Greyback, for example, was curiously unknown. The same for the Carrows, Gibbon, and Rowle. Several possible causes for this anomaly occurred to Snape, but his favorite theory was that they were on some sort of special assignment for the Dark Lord.

Noise from downstairs brought Snape back to his immediate surroundings and to the hour. Poor Peter Pettigrew was about to learn that his holiday was over, and that the time for work had arrived. The most important commission that the Dark Lord had given Snape was the location of a new headquarters building, and he was due in Birmingham that morning to meet with Bella Lestrangle and Nigel Yaxley on that very matter.

Descending the narrow staircase that replaced the original and opened through a moveable bookcase directly into the sitting room, Snape looked around for Pettigrew. The clatter of dishes led him into the kitchen in the rear

of the house. Pettigrew looked up somewhat apologetically as Snape walked in.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” he said. “I just have to get this thing working.”

“I told you it doesn’t work. There’s no gas supplied to the house. No gas, no electricity . . . You have to cook it on the grate. Or use magic.”

Pettigrew’s talents as a cook made it easy to remember that he’d spent twelve years as a rat living in a student’s pocket. Snape found a Victorian toast holder, placed a piece of bread in it and handed it to Pettigrew.

“Hold this near the coals, not too close or you’ll burn it, and keep turning it until both sides are evenly toasted.” Snape himself took a frying pan and set it heating on the grate to fry eggs. It was definitely not Hogwarts fare, but Snape usually didn’t mind. Sharing it with Pettigrew was a bit of a burden, however, since Pettigrew tended to either grovel or whine about everything.

“I’m grateful that you’re so knowledgeable about these muggle technologies. Toast in wire baskets, I wouldn’t have guessed.”

Snape shook his head, choosing not to reply. Instead he commented on the day’s work. “We’re going to meet Lestrangle and Yaxley this morning. We have a headquarters to find. How much do you know about buying real estate?”

Not much, it appeared, so Snape tried to give Pettigrew a crash course on square footage, load-bearing walls, electrical wiring, and plumbing, but it was a lost cause. “Just be sure I get to see it before you sign a contract for anything,” he said finally.

It was time. Leaving the small house for the area yard in the rear, Snape and Pettigrew looked around, then apparated to the side of the nursery in car park nine at Aston University. There Bella and Yaxley met them a few minutes later.

“Why here?” Bella asked, looking around.

“A place very few people are likely to be at midmorning on the last Sunday in June,” replied Snape. “We didn’t want to apparate into a crowd.”

They found a coffee shop not far away, where Snape took out a map and a list of wards and street addresses.

“What we’re looking for is an older building in one of the less prosperous wards where fewer people will pay attention to us. There’s a lot of the old brick terraced housing left. The optimum would be an entire terrace. We could gut the interior and make one large office area, while it would still look like individual dwellings from the street. You can work together as a group,

or you can split up and look individually. No strong-arm tactics, though. Subtle.”

“What do you mean, ‘you?’ Aren’t you coming with us?” Bella asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“I have other work to do.”

“How many masters do you serve?”

Yaxley and Pettigrew were suddenly still, watching Snape and Bella carefully, not about to take sides.

“Do you doubt my loyalty?” Snape asked quietly.

“Maybe someone should.”

“I’ll tell the Dark Lord you question his judgment. I’m not the one who requested this position.”

Bella was silent. The other two began to breathe again. Then Bella spoke up once more. “How do we know you aren’t trying to manipulate us into moving where we can be attacked?”

Snape shut down, cold and dangerous. “If we weren’t surrounded by muggles, I’d take you out right now. Say the word, and you and I can apparate to the Grampians for a little duel.”

It was Bella who backed down. “I just meant that you’re an unknown. We don’t know how far we should follow you because you haven’t proven yourself yet.”

“Then let me reassure you. If I wanted to manipulate the location of headquarters, I wouldn’t be leaving you here to do the choosing. I’d be selecting it myself. But I’m assuming you’ll have found a place in the next few days, so I have to be organizing the moving in of equipment and personnel so the Dark Lord doesn’t have to be kept waiting. Would you rather be doing that while I’m looking for the building?”

Bella shook her head, and the challenge was beaten back. After circling possibly fruitful locations on the map, Snape apparated back to his home.

That evening Pettigrew was tired and whining about the tribulations of the day. “...and she kept insisting that we could cast Imperius curses and force the estate agents to sell at a discount, and she wanted to turn a couple of tenants into cockroaches. If we have to work with her, we’ll never find a new location.”

“You can always work around her. It’s a matter of negating her influence. You’ve done it before.”

Pettigrew stared at Snape. “When did I ever ...?”

“Oh, not with Lestrage. With her cousin Sirius. You had everyone believing for twelve years that he blew you up, not the other way around. You even fooled Dumbledore. Surely someone who could fool Dumbledore could handle Bella Lestrage.”

“Well, maybe. That was a rather good setup.”

“I’ve always wanted to ask — how did you do it?”

“It was really simple. Sirius didn’t have the explosion spell, I did. Since I knew when it would go off, I could transform and get out at the right moment. I just had to cut off a finger and leave it there for everyone to believe I was dead. The biggest problem was the timing.”

“I see. Ingenious.”

The next day passed much the same, with Snape joining the other three from time to time to check out buildings that had some promise. That evening they found the perfect location, in a ward somewhat east of the city center. The next day they bought it.

The row of houses was in poor condition, its brick still obscured by more than half a century of coal smoke that all the intervening clean air acts couldn’t wash away. The company that owned it was delighted to get such a high offer for the dilapidated buildings, since some meddling do-gooder had requested the property be given historical landmark status, and until the years of paperwork were gotten through it couldn’t be sold to a modern developer.

Only two of the units were occupied — poor working families that were equally delighted to have their leases bought out for enough money to allow them to move somewhere better, something arranged that very day. Moving was handled by a local Death Eater crew that didn’t have to disturb the neighborhood with things like vans. The rest of the units were in such poor condition that they’d been boarded up. The appropriate distribution of carefully selected mind spells and honest to goodness real muggle money allowed all the formalities of vacating and purchasing to be accomplished at once, since somehow everyone was under the impression that the deal had been in progress for weeks instead of being worked out in one day. The muggles were left with the memory that everything had proceeded quite normally.

Bella had to be banned from the negotiations, however, since she insisted on using words like squalor and hovel, and was generally not inclined to be diplomatic.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 3, 1996

Snape was summoned the following morning to the Dark Lord. The place was a northern heath, vacant of everything for miles around except stone walls and sheep.

"You have found us a home."

"Yes, Lord. We await only your permission to perform the secrecy spells."

"You will not do so. We shall come ourself to attend to the spell. We shall be our own Secret-Keeper."

"Yes, Lord. When that is done, we can begin the renovations." Snape paused. "Lord, if I may be bold..."

"Speak."

"Lord, the location takes up a significant amount of space, and there will be considerable movement in and out. I've been working on modifications to the spell that will allow an outer shell to remain visible at the lowest level of consciousness. People will know something is there but never have any reason to notice it." Snape took a folded piece of parchment from his robes. "If my Lord would condescend to..."

The Dark Lord received the parchment. "We will look at it," he said.

Bella had refused to set foot inside until the renovation was complete, so Snape, Yaxley, and Pettigrew cleaned things up in preparation for the Dark Lord. They couldn't begin any demolition or rebuilding until the property was shielded from notice by neighboring eyes.

An advance guard apparated in to the 'new' headquarters building that evening to secure the place for the Dark Lord's arrival. Snape was a little surprised to see who accompanied the Dark Lord—Gibbon, Greyback, Amycus, Alecto, and Rowle. Snape was curious as to when they'd returned from wherever they'd been, but he was not to have his curiosity satisfied, since he and his two lieutenants were ordered out. They were not to observe either the arrival of the Dark Lord, or the spell that was performed.

It was quite late, and the area was quiet and sleeping, when suddenly the headquarters building disappeared. There was a sense of some kind of wall that concealed the end of the block—if pressed, Snape would have called it boardings around a construction site—but nothing that would allow entry. Gibbon appeared out of nowhere with a bundle of small, folded note papers, handing one each to Snape, Yaxley, and Pettigrew, and giving the rest of the bundle into Snape's keeping.

"Here's a list of the people you give them to. There's one each. One of

them doesn't get a note, or the wrong person gets a note, and heads will roll. The Dark Lord has to approve everyone who gets access. No stray passes lying around. He wants to move in by noon tomorrow."

Snape nodded in understanding. They'd have to work all night. Gibbon disappeared. Snape and his lieutenants apparated to Snape's home where he gave them safe house locations of everyone on the Dark Lord's list with instructions to have them meet on the street outside headquarters in half an hour to start the rebuilding. Then Snape returned to Birmingham with blueprints. Opening and reading his own note, he watched as the building reformed, then he entered and began setting up for his work crews.

THURSDAY, JULY 4, 1996

By eleven o'clock the next morning, the work was done. The interior of the entire terrace had been gutted, except for the upper floor itself. Snape had been a little nervous about the load-bearing pillars and beams that replaced the walls, but careful monitoring had ensured that they were properly placed. An underground area had been added as well, the excavated dirt being disposed of by sprinkling it over the Lake District and Snowdonia National Park.

Much of the underground area was taken up by an arena that could be used for conferences, demonstrations, combat training, or punishment. The interview chamber was on the other end of the building, connected to the entrance by a staircase. There were also several holding pens and cells. The ground floor was offices. Field Operations had the largest space, while smaller rooms were designated for Recruitment, Disinformation, Intelligence, Accounting, and so forth. The supplies that were used on a daily basis were also stored there, and there was a reference library.

The upper floor contained more storerooms, the clinic, a cafeteria (since the Dark Lord preferred his servants to eat and socialize on the premises rather than among the general population), and Snape's laboratory. Two of the original bedrooms were retained next to the cafeteria as small dormitories for Death Eaters who had to stay at headquarters longer than a day.

The Dark Lord arrived at noon, and entered for the first and only time through the front door. Snape, Yaxley, and Pettigrew gave him a tour of the premises, after which he retired to the interview chamber, where he would oversee the arrangement of his own personal space.

Shortly thereafter, Snape was summoned to the interview chamber. In the center was a small table, on which was a box filled with the folded pieces of note paper. Each note had the name of a Death Eater written on it.

"You have done well. Malfoy always praised your organizational skills, with some justification it appears. You will now start bringing our people and supplies in. You will be called again later in the afternoon. Act quickly. We begin operations as soon as possible."

Orders went out together with the individual notes, and soon Death Eaters were appearing in with boxes, crates, and furniture. The back area yards were designated as service entry points to keep the mass movement off the street. As each Death Eater arrived, he or she was told the office they were assigned to. Bella came in the middle of all the movement and was shown her new Field Operations office. She was less critical than Snape had dared hope for.

At two o'clock, Snape, Bella, Yaxley, and Pettigrew were in the interview chamber.

"Our first target is the Ministry of Magic. Tonight."

"Lord," said Snape, "we are not yet at full strength. Wouldn't it be wiser to wait?"

"Silence. What you offer would be good advice at another time, but for now you are too cautious. Listen . . . The Ministry served us well for a year, keeping our presence hidden while we regrouped. Now they think to weaken us by making our presence as public as they can. We shall teach them that they cannot control us this way. We shall control the Ministry, and if they resist, we shall make this confrontation so public that the Ministry will be overwhelmed by it. Tonight the Minister of Magic will be ordered to resign his position in my favor. He will, of course, refuse. Then we shall broadcast our presence in such a way that the whole of Britain, wizard and muggle alike, will tremble in fear of us. Fudge will be toppled, as will each of his successors, until the Ministry falls into our hands like ripe fruit."

"Lord," said Bella, "my department is ready to do your bidding."

"You will not be called on. The operation is already under way, and its coordination rests with another."

"Is it wise, Lord, to entrust too much to one pair of hands?"

"You are anxious, Bella, to redeem yourself. This is commendable, but the time is not yet ripe. Let others prove themselves; your opportunity will come later. Severus, you know what we shall need. Coordinate with the clinic, and be certain that all eventualities have been planned for. You may go."

In the corridor, Bella turned to confront Snape. "You think your star is going to eclipse mine, don't you? Well don't get too comfortable up there. I'm already climbing back, and my credentials are better than yours."

Snape didn't think it was necessary to inform Bella that he was not the one coordinating whatever it was. He checked the progress of the restaffing of headquarters, then apparated home and started ferrying in his lab equipment and Malfoy's files, which he stored in the laboratory.

Lancashire seemed a good place from which to send Dumbledore a patronus, it being out of the way and not watched, and on one of his trips Snape took a moment to do so. This was the first time he had conjured a patronus since contacting Sirius Black about Potter's vision, and when he went out onto the moors, he thought what he was doing would be fairly routine. It was not.

The incantation "*Expecto Patronum!*" this time produced no silvery fox, but a delicate, prancing doe. Snape stared at it, dumbfounded. *Where did that come from? What's happening to me if I can't even be consistent with a patronus?* The question of why the fox had metamorphosed into a doe was quickly shut behind a mental door, for there was a more urgent problem to deal with—that of getting word to Dumbledore. For some reason, Snape was reluctant to let the headmaster know of the change in his patronus.

In the end, though, there was no other course. Snape owned no owl, and there was no way he could communicate by floo network, for even had Pettigrew not been in his home, the house was not connected. Luckily the patronus carried his voice, which Dumbledore would recognize. Again conjuring the patronus, Snape sent the doe speeding northward. 'Ministry being blackmailed. Highly public attack planned. No information yet on what, where, or when.'

That accomplished, Snape returned to the job of moving his equipment to Birmingham. At the end of the day, he apparated to his home and the unpleasant prospect of spending another evening with Pettigrew. Just before that last trip, however, he took a moment to review the day's surprise. *Do I know anyone with a deer patronus?* he thought. *Potter has a stag. Could that mean that his father's patronus was also a stag?*

The thoughts were quickly locked away again. It was best not to pursue that line of logic. Not if he still wanted to be able to maintain an impenetrable facade before the Dark Lord.

FRIDAY, JULY 5, 1996

The next day around the lunch hour, Snape left setting up his laboratory to grab a bite to eat in the cafeteria. It was fairly full, but there were still a few small tables that were empty. Snape, preferring to eat alone anyway, chose one in a corner where few would see him. He was there when Greyback came in with Gibbon.

"Ah-ooo!" howled Greyback. "Set 'em up and let me knock 'em back. I felt it today! If you told me yesterday a bunch of steel girders and concrete pylons would hit my gut like tearing out a throat, I'd of thought you was crazy, but watching those cars hit the water . . . Blood rush!"

Gibbon tossed a couple of galleons to the servers. "Something a lot stronger than tea for everyone! We struck a blow for the Dark Lord today that they'll hear all over Britain. Let's see the Ministry hush this one up!"

People had left their tables and were crowding around the two, eager for information. Through the babble of voices punctuated by Greyback's howls, Snape realized they were talking about a catastrophe, a bridge that collapsed and spilled muggle cars into the river below. "Where?" he asked, and other voices picked up the question. "Where?"

"Brockdale! Broke apart like a house of cards! We'll teach those muggles to fear us!"

Snape toasted the success with the others, but left as soon as he could without being obvious. Leaving through the service entrance, he slipped out of the area yard and down the block to send a patronus. 'Death Eaters claim to have brought down Brockdale Bridge. Do you have any news of bridge collapse? Do not reply, it could be dangerous.' Then he slipped back into headquarters.

The evening news was full of the Brockdale disaster. No one, from engineers to government officials, could explain how a bridge barely ten years old could suddenly part in the middle as if a giant had snapped it in two. Snape bought an evening newspaper and took it home with him to Lancashire.

"Do you think Fudge will step down?" Pettigrew asked as he glanced over Snape's paper. "Who would be Minister then?"

"I don't know. I doubt they'll ask Dumbledore again — he wouldn't take the post anyway. The only one I can think of is Bones, head of Law Enforcement. I doubt the Dark Lord would like the trade. She'd be a lot harder to work with or around than Fudge."

It turned out the Dark Lord wouldn't have to face that prospect. The

very next day, Amelia Bones was found murdered in her own home. The discovery was made by muggle police, and the rumor at headquarters was that the Dark Lord's squad had told them of the killing to ensure that it hit the muggle news before the Ministry could move to stop the story.

Dumbledore's patronus greeted Snape outside his home. 'Come this evening. We need to talk.' Snape told Pettigrew he was going out, not particularly liking the little man's curious stare. There was nothing Pettigrew could discover in the house while he was gone, but Snape didn't like having his movements monitored.

* * *

"You've heard of the Bones murder?"

"It and the Brockdale Bridge are the talk of headquarters. There's a feeling of euphoria permeating the whole building."

Dumbledore poured the mead and handed a glass to Snape. "I have something for you to do. You have to arrange another murder."

Snape choked on the mead. When he stopped coughing, he said, "Why would you think I'd agree to something like that?"

"Hear me out. Things are changing fast. I have some tasks to perform that will be dangerous, even life threatening. The Order cannot afford to lose its Secret-Keeper — it would place everyone in grave danger. I have to perform a spell to switch Secret-Keepers."

"That wouldn't be safe either," Snape said. "Any other person would be vulnerable to attack and be forced to divulge the secret."

"Not if Riddle was convinced that the person was already dead."

"I see. This murder would be a cover story to protect the new Secret-Keeper. Has someone already been chosen?"

"Yes. Emmeline Vance."

SUNDAY, JULY 7, 1996

Rain lashed the street outside Snape's home as he and Pettigrew prepared to apparate to Birmingham. It was no brief summer squall, but a driving downpour whose force would have been more appropriate in some southerly latitude.

Birmingham was being pounded by the same storm, only further south from Lancashire the wind was stronger. The two wizards hurried into headquarters where they found Bella and Yaxley waiting. All four had an interview that morning, and as they turned to the stairs leading down, Snape caught a glimpse of Bella raising her eyebrows in question, but not to him. To Pettigrew? It was one more thing to worry about.

"You see around you the labor of our servants," the Dark Lord informed them with some pride. "No action by the Ministry could conceal a work that spreads its force over all of England."

"Lord, where did it strike first?" Snape asked.

"Cornwall and Devon, where its effects are enhanced by some friends our servants brought with them from far northern lands. Friends our good servant Macnair enlisted to our cause. Our excellent servant Macnair, before the poor judgment of others took him from us."

"If my Lord will permit," Snape began diffidently, "I have acquired some information about that . . . incident."

"What information? Speak."

"The name of the enemy who witnessed the arrival of Potter and his friends at the Ministry of Magic, and who alerted the Order and Dumbledore to the presence of our people."

The Dark Lord looked coldly at Bella, Yaxley, and Pettigrew. "You will leave us, and wait to be called again." When they had left the room, he said to Snape, "Continue."

"Her name is Emmeline Vance, a witch who's basically a common errand runner for the Order. A person of little importance until she witnessed the arrival at the Ministry."

"She shall be punished for interfering. You may . . ."

"Lord, forgive me. May I speak?"

"You are not wont to be so forward. Speak then."

"It is your will that terror spread through Britain, among wizard and muggle alike, but after the execution of Amelia Bones, the Ministry might

be more prepared than ever to hush something up. You have the opportunity to make this so public that the Ministry will be helpless to respond.”

“You intrigue us. How?”

“Dumbledore is trying to establish contacts with the muggle government. Early tomorrow morning, Vance will be apparating into St. James Park near Birdcage Walk to meet with someone from the Home Office in Queen Anne’s Gate. That’s right by the Treasury, the Foreign Office, and Number Ten Downing Street. A public attack there, a bombing perhaps, would be impossible to conceal.”

“Do you know the time of this meeting?”

“Very early, about five o’clock, before there are many people on the street to see her come in. There would be some, of course — London streets are never empty — so if they challenge her, everyone would know who it was. Everyone who matters, of course.”

“Does your laboratory contain explosives?”

“I can prepare them this afternoon.”

“Do so. Mention this to no one. Secrecy is of the utmost importance.”

“Yes, Lord.”

Snape was allowed to leave the Dark Lord’s presence and return to the setting up of his laboratory. Around noon, he went to the cafeteria for a bite to eat and a moment’s relaxation. He’d just taken his first sip of tea and was about to start on a chicken salad sandwich when the room was rocked by what felt like an explosion.

All around, Death Eaters leapt to their feet, crying out to each other, “What was that? What happened?” Snape was already across the room and heading down the stairs, knowing where his own place was in an emergency. On the way he ran into the messenger who was looking for him.

“He wants you, sir. He wants you now. You’d better hurry. He’s furious.”

“Furious at me?”

“No, sir. It happened shortly after Mrs. Malfoy was admitted.”

Snape raced to the interview room where he was admitted to the terrible spectacle of both Bella and Narcissa being punished by a Dark Lord more wrathful than Snape had ever seen him. The sound of Narcissa’s screams cut him deeply, and Snape needed all his strength to appear indifferent to her suffering.

Dropping to his knees at the edge of the circle of light that delineated the punishment area, Snape said, “Lord, you have sent for me.” He, too, was hit instantly with a Cruciatus curse, and collapsed on the floor in pain. Luckily

his was warning rather than punishment, and the curse was lifted almost immediately. Breathing heavily, Snape struggled back onto his knees.

"You will tell us," the Dark Lord shrieked in rage, "of the destruction of our property at Hogwarts! And you will answer for your failure to impart this information to us earlier! Speak at once, or join these two wretches!"

The images of the diary that Dumbledore suspected of being a horcrux lay buried deep in the recesses of Snape's brain and did not surface. "Lord," he gasped, "I know of no property of yours that was destroyed at the school. I never . . ." Pain hit again, and Snape was forced to stop.

"You know nothing of the opening of the Chamber of Secrets? Nothing of a enchanted object that completed this great work?" The Dark Lord's ire was so great that froth speckled his lips, and spat his words into the quivering air of the interview chamber.

"Lord, I understood there was a book, a sort of a journal, that was used, but that it was yours . . . It bore the name of a student . . ."

"And was it destroyed?"

"Yes, Lord."

"By whom?"

"By the Potter boy."

"How!"

"With the fang of a basilisk."

"Such would have indeed destroyed it." A wave of the Dark Lord's wand released the two women, who lay whimpering on the floor. "We are aware at whose door to place blame in this matter. You may go now, Severus. What follows here does not concern you. Yet."

Snape rose and hurriedly returned to his laboratory, all thought of tea and chicken salad erased from his mind.

Later, Snape was again summoned into the Dark Lord's presence. "Tell us of young Malfoy," was the command.

"He is both loyal and eager to prove himself," Snape responded. "That is how his parents have raised him."

The Dark Lord turned to contemplate Snape, the red eyes and slitted nostrils more serpentine than ever in the dimness of the interview chamber. Snape wondered briefly if bright light hurt the Dark Lord's eyes, for though he used it for the display of punishment and large meetings, individual consultations tended to be in semidarkness.

"Do you seek to shield those who betray us?" The question was a menacing hiss.

Snape dropped at once to his knees. "I know of no betrayal, Lord. Poor judgment, perhaps, in an overzealous attempt to serve your memory, but nothing..."

"You would do well to be more careful of your own position."

Snape was silent.

"We will assign the boy a task to demonstrate the dedication of his family to us. The task is to be accomplished at Hogwarts. The failure of the boy is the failure of the family. If you are right, he will be eager to prove himself. Yet payment must be exacted for the injury they have caused us. It will be amusing."

In the pause that followed, Snape ventured, "What must I do, Lord?"

"You are our eyes and ears at Hogwarts. Be aware that the boy will have a mission to fulfill. Do not stand in his way. Go so far as to remove obstacles if necessary," The red eyes narrowed to black slits. "He cannot succeed. Our great enemies do not fall so easily." The Dark Lord turned his back on Snape and moved away. "Still," he mused, "there is the possibility of luck which we cannot discount... You are dismissed, Severus."

Rising quickly, Snape left the interview chamber. He wanted to contact Dumbledore at once, but restrained himself. Whatever Draco had been given to do, would be done at Hogwarts. It was only the beginning of July. They had time. On his return to Lancashire that evening, Snape sent a patronus northward.

The following morning, shortly after five, a tall, older woman wearing a green cape was driven by a group of ruffians into Guards Road near Birdcage Walk. The early traffic screeched to a halt as the men surrounded her, taunting her. One of them yelled, "You'll never cross the Dark Lord again, Vance!" and then an explosion sent everyone scurrying for cover. When the dust settled, there was blood everywhere, a hole in the roadway, and the burning remnants of the green cape. The attackers were gone. Surprisingly, the force of the explosion had been narrow, and there were no other injuries.

TUESDAY, JULY 9, 1996

The muggle government was under siege, not by the Dark Lord but by the muggle press. Four sensational stories in a row, culminating in a brutal attack around the corner from Number Ten with no suspects despite its having taken place in full view of commuters and security guards, were rocking

the nation. Reporters vied with one another over the top spot in the headlines — new revelations about the construction of the Brockdale Bridge, calls for environmental commissions to revisit the repercussions of global warming, or speculations as to Emmeline Vance's terrorist connections.

The wizarding world was in an uproar as well, with *The Daily Prophet* putting out extra editions on the tragedies and trying to tie every traffic accident in Britain to Death Eater activity. Pressure was mounting on the Ministry of Magic like a tidal wave, and on Tuesday, Cornelius Fudge resigned as Minister of Magic. His successor was Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Aurors and a subordinate of Amelia Bones until her murder. It was the death of Bones that had suddenly thrust Scrimgeour into the limelight.

Birmingham was electrified with a sense of importance and purpose. It was clear now that the yearlong wait was going to culminate in the triumph of the Dark Lord, and departments began to engage in a friendly competition to provide him with the next creative action against the stability and order of Britain.

Snape was hit with requisitions from all sides for Polyjuice Potion ("I don't care what your department head told you — it takes a month to make"), Veritaserum (ditto) and a wide variety of poisons and explosives. Starting Monday morning, he was in the laboratory for thirty-six hours straight just setting up the cauldrons and getting the brews started. Not until Tuesday evening was he able to apparate back to Lancashire in the hopes of getting a few hours rest.

He'd barely arrived outside his front door, however, when he was accosted by a glimmering little silver cloud — Dumbledore's phoenix. '*Come at once. I need you*' was all it said. Since Dumbledore had promised he would not send a patronus to Birmingham, Snape had no way of knowing how long it had been waiting for him, or how urgent the matter was. Just as he apparated, he happened to glance at the window of his house. Pettigrew was peeking through the curtains.

Dumbledore sat collapsed in his office, his head resting on the desk, arms stretched in front of him, still conscious but sinking fast. Snape turned toward the door at once. "I'll get Madam Pomfrey," he said.

"No, Severus. Not Poppy. Should not be involved . . . You. You can treat it . . . hand."

Dumbledore's right hand was smoking, smoldering, the stench of burning flesh searing Snape's nostrils. The scorching was clearly moving into the

wrist, slowly and inexorably, like a steady flow of lava, the black crust concealing but not blocking the progress of the fire within. Snape immediately began a low chant over Dumbledore's hand and arm, swelling the tissues in the still sound flesh to block the progress of the fiery poison. Then he rose, uncertain what he was dealing with, but able to focus first on the symptoms.

"Lower the shields," Snape said. "I'm apparating to my office." Once there, he began pulling jars and bottles from the shelves, returning to Dumbledore with an armload of equipment and ingredients,

Burning, like charring, rather than poison or an acid burn. And the necrosis is progressive, so it's virulent. He put a small cup of potion to Dumbledore's lips, "This first one will induce your body to produce more blood." Another tiny cup followed. "Don't be alarmed. This will slow your heart. If the circulation is retarded a bit it may slow the process of consumption and give us more time."

Dumbledore was drifting into a comatose state, something that Snape desired. Pulling back the headmaster's sleeve, Snape made an incision around the lower arm, just above the wrist, cauterizing capillaries as he went. Here the flesh was still good, and Snape wanted to keep it that way. If it meant cutting off Dumbledore's hand, he would do it, though he hoped he wouldn't have to go that far.

Quickly, carefully, Snape began by clamping the vein, so that clean blood could go into the hand, but infected blood would not be taken into the healthy tissue. Then he started cutting away diseased tissue, making sure that no tiny trace of necrosis remained above his incision. He was relieved to see that the bone looked normal. The spell attacked flesh only. That meant that it might be contained if it was deprived of new flesh to attack.

Even as he worked to stem the corruption, Snape realized that Dumbledore could not have been waiting for him long. The speed with which the damage from the curse progressed was such that if Snape had not arrived when he did, it would have been impossible to save the headmaster. Now at least — now that the damage had been blocked, however temporarily — Snape had time to discover what he was dealing with. On Dumbledore's desk lay a golden ring with a heavy black stone, broken and disfigured, and the sword of Godric Gryffindor.

Snape approached the ring with intense curiosity. It was clearly the cursed item that had so badly injured Dumbledore, though whether the damage to it indicated that the curse was gone or not remained to be seen. He began a

series of complex spells to determine what curse had enchanted the ring, and whether or not it remained.

In terms of medical skill, there was never any question but that Madam Pomfrey was by far a better healer than Snape was, but there were three things about Snape that Pomfrey prized as invaluable tools. The first was his modest but health-oriented legilimens ability. The second was his knowledge of muggle techniques. The third was his expertise in dark arts. Seldom were the talents of healing and dark arts combined in one person, but Snape combined them. Understanding lent efficacy to his spells and guided Pomfrey in hers.

Snape had never before seen the curse that empowered the ring, but he recognized its genetic trace. The dark arts were constantly evolving and shifting but, like organic evolution, each new development was the offspring of something that preceded it. This particular spell, powerful as it was, was the lineal descendant of a medieval scorching spell originally intended to render books unreadable. It had been adapted to flesh and enhanced over the centuries.

So now, knowing the composition of the spell, Snape began a frantic combination of different soothing and cooling medications, of purifying agents and restoratives. After what seemed hours, but was in fact a much shorter time, he could tell that the strength of the curse was no longer spreading. What remained of skin and flesh, rather than burning, was cooling and drying, withered and black, but now at least stable.

Snape took a needle and pierced the vein on the uninjured side of the clamp, then examined the blood he withdrew. It appeared whole and good. A similar sample from the damaged tissue was not good. The curse still operated, and though for the moment it was confined to the hand, it would eventually break forth again. The good news was that the ring had released its curse once for all and could now be handled safely by anyone.

Easing the clamp off Dumbledore's vein and making sure circulation was steady, Snape then set to medicating the open area with ointments that promoted healing and the regeneration of tissue. The hand would remain withered and black for the rest of Dumbledore's life. Unfortunately, though Dumbledore's body was, for the moment, essentially healthy, Snape feared that the 'rest' of Dumbledore's life would not be long.

When the hand and arm were finally bandaged, Snape tipped a goblet of thick golden potion down Dumbledore's throat. After a moment the headmaster stirred. He blinked at Snape a couple of times, then smiled.

If it was meant to be a disarming smile, it didn't work. "Why did you put on that ring?" Snape demanded. "It carries a curse. Surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

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

"Tempted by what?" It was insupportable. A few hours wait to have the ring tested and Dumbledore could have worn it with impunity. As it was, he'd jeopardized everything for... Snape didn't know what for. "It's a miracle you managed to return here! That ring... carried a curse of extraordinary power!"

Dumbledore smiled again, an embarrassed smile that asked for forgiveness, which Snape was not prepared to grant. "To contain it is all we can hope for!" Snape practically screamed in his frustration and fury. "I've trapped the curse in one hand for the time being..."

"You have done very well, Severus."

Dumbledore was looking into Snape's eyes, and Snape allowed the contact. *Don't pat me on the head and patronize me! If I hadn't arrived when I did, you'd be dead by now! You're still going to die, you know!*

"How long do you think I have?"

"I can't tell. Maybe a year. There's no halting such a spell forever. It's the sort of curse that strengthens over time."

"I am fortunate that I have you, Severus. But really, this makes matters much more straightforward. I refer, of course, to the plan Riddle is revolving around me. His plan to have poor Draco murder me."

Snape sat in the chair on the other side of Dumbledore's desk, facing the headmaster. He was dumbfounded. As far as he was concerned, Dumbledore's recklessness had rendered Draco's task moot. A glimmering of the headmaster's meaning was beginning to form in his brain.

Since Dumbledore now made it very clear with a shake of his head and a raised hand that he would not discuss his transgressions with the ring any further, Snape let the topic shift. "I don't think the Dark Lord expects Draco to succeed. This is punishment for Lucius's 'failures.' Slow torture for Draco's parents while they watch him fail and pay the price for their mistakes."

"A death sentence for both Draco and me," Dumbledore observed. "And you're the natural one to complete the job once Draco fails, no?"

The Dark Lord had not said so, nor had Snape left the interview chamber with that thought, but now Dumbledore's suggestion had, as it often did, planted a seed in Snape's brain. "That could be the Dark Lord's plan," he said.

"Riddle foresees a moment when he no longer needs a spy at Hogwarts."

It was hard to tell if this was a question or a statement. Snape looked into Dumbledore's eyes, and a previously unthought thought surfaced in his mind. "He hopes to take over soon at Hogwarts, I believe."

"If he does, you must promise to do all in your power to protect the students." At Snape's nod, Dumbledore continued. "Good. First, you must discover Draco's plans. He will be frightened and therefore dangerous. Guide him. He trusts you."

"Less now than before, I fear. He may blame me for taking his father's place."

"Still, we must try. He may accidentally strike at others while aiming at me. In the end, of course, there is only one possibility of saving him from Riddle's anger."

"You're going to let him kill you?"

"Of course not. I am going to let you kill me."

Over and above the quantity of arguments Snape wanted to muster against this insane idea there rose a deep and powerful anger that Dumbledore could have the arrogance and sense of domination over him to even suggest this plan. Snape's resentment spilled out in sarcasm. "Would you like me to do it now? Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I can wait. I am certain we shall know when the time comes. It will, at any rate, be within the year." He contemplated his black, withered hand.

The words appeased none of Snape's anger. Dumbledore was still presuming too much, asking too much. "If that's the case, why not let Draco do it and gain favor with the Dark Lord?"

"No," Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "The boy's soul is still whole. I do not wish it ripped apart because of me."

"I see you have no such concern for my soul."

"Severus, we are talking about a difference in intent. Draco will be trying to murder me as Riddle's agent. You will be freeing me from pain and slow death. If, as we think likely, Riddle plans to attack Hogwarts soon, it may also be from possible torment and humiliation. Both Greyback and Bella like to play with their food before they eat it."

Their eyes met, Snape locking down automatically. He nodded as if in agreement, and Dumbledore took it as such, but the headmaster seemed to have seen something that disturbed him, for his countenance became

sad. "Thank you, Severus. But tell me now, how have you felt about recent events?"

"Felt?" Snape asked, puzzled. "There's been nothing to feel."

"Surely the news about Amelia and Rufus must have touched you somewhere."

Dumbledore's words hit a wall. From the moment Snape had learned of the death of Amelia Bones, he had locked away every memory of the judge who had treated him with kindness and fairness during his trial as a Death Eater fifteen years earlier. There was no point in wallowing in sentiment. In Snape's position, such thoughts and feelings were dangerous. "I assure you, Headmaster," he said, rising now as if to leave, "there has been nothing to touch. Now, I really must return home. It's getting late."

"There were other things I wished to speak with you about," Dumbledore said, motioning for Snape to sit again. "The sudden alteration in the form of your patronus, for example. It did take me somewhat by surprise."

"I have no idea how or why that happened."

"You know of no one who has that patronus?"

"No. But then I haven't had the opportunity to see . . . Why do you think it reflects the patronus of someone else?"

"No reason." Dumbledore coughed slightly. "Do you think I might have some water?"

Snape stood and filled a glass from a pitcher in the office. He watched Dumbledore for a while, then said, "If I may ask, what were you . . .?"

"No, you may not. The fewer details you know, the better. Suffice it to say that we removed Emmeline from outside interference in time."

"Then you've already performed the new Fidelius spell?"

The silence stretched out. Then Dumbledore said, "Let me ask you a question. Did it ever occur to you to inform me of the whereabouts of your new headquarters before Riddle performed the Fidelius Charm there?"

Snape opened his mouth, closed it again, looked into the fireplace and then at his hands, then said, "It wouldn't have done any good. You couldn't have remembered."

"Not the exact location, no. But at least the general area. Even the city would have been helpful."

"You don't trust me."

"A man I have just summoned to my side in the last extremity to save me from imminent death. Severus, how can you think I do not trust you?"

"You don't want me to know . . ."

"It is just that in the last year I have become aware of a side of you I always subconsciously — well, consciously too — knew existed, but never had to take into account before. It appears that when you are focusing on a task that requires organization or analysis, well frankly Severus, you become so absorbed in the performance of the task that you tend to forget — let us be honest here — you tend to forget which side you are on."

"I know which side I'm on, sir."

"Yes, when faced with the direct choice. But really, if it had been Riddle who summoned you to care for a cursed hand, would your actions have been any different?"

"No, but that's not a fair example."

"Isn't it? This summer you were given a complex organizational task, on a far grander scale than you were given when you first came here to teach at the age of what? twenty-one? I would say that you devoted every ounce of your energy to the task, probably forgetting to eat or sleep, until it was accomplished — in about half the time that a normal person could reasonably have been expected to do the same thing. Your single-mindedness is astounding. It is that which inclines me to believe that you should know only what you have to know. Who knows what task Riddle may give you next?"

"You don't trust me."

"Not in everything, no. Only in what is most important."

It was late when Snape finally returned home. Apparating into the front yard, he was once again aware that Pettigrew was watching from behind a curtain.

I would do the same in his position, though I guarantee I would be more subtle about it. But he's playing me off against Bella. I can't let him get away with that.

On Wednesday, when Snape and Pettigrew apparated to Birmingham, Bella was standing near the entrance looking her old self again. She once again raised her eyebrows, and then went upstairs toward the cafeteria. After a moment, Pettigrew followed. *They don't even try to hide it. It's a bit like being hit with a sledgehammer.* Snape asked for a meeting with the Dark Lord.

"You have a request."

"Yes, Lord. Now that we have a headquarters building, would it be possible to allow Pettigrew to live here? That way he would always be where he could serve you."

"You will explain why you do not wish Wormtail to stay in your home."

"Lord, he is immensely irritating. He whines and complains and tries to

ingratiate himself, and he has no conversational skills. I believe he's prying into my private affairs. He snores. And the house is very small."

The Dark Lord chuckled. It was a strange sound. "Yet I still wish him to assist you in one or two matters. Nonetheless, it would not be good for him to have free access to your home after you return full-time to Hogwarts. At the beginning of August, he will leave you."

"Thank you, Lord."

As Snape walked into the cafeteria, Pettigrew rose and left. Bella beckoned Snape over to the empty seat. A server brought more tea.

"Join me, please. We never have a chance just to chat."

"You're doing a lot of chatting this morning."

"I'm only just beginning to realize how much I missed during all those years in Azkaban. I've been so busy the last six months, I forgot that other people had fourteen years worth of living while I was gone. I mean, puppy dog, that's two-fifths of your whole life."

"And you've retained your math skills all this time."

"So sweet. So kind. Do you know what I learned this morning? I learned that rats have eyes, ears, and memories. Isn't that fun? And that rats who go to school with young wizards attend classes in their pockets. And run around at night."

"How fascinating for you, Bella. A rat's eye view of Hogwarts. You could sell tickets."

"I hear you and McGonagall bet on Quidditch matches. And you taught Flitwick some card game with a board and pegs. And you played jokes on a puffed-up idiot named Lockhart."

"Are you reaching a point, or do you just like to live vicariously through me?"

"How do you do it, puppy dog? How do you change your skin so easily? How do you live and work with those people, year after year, and then turn your back on them as if they're nothing more than strangers to you? Or do you?"

"Are you questioning my loyalty? Maybe we should take this conversation to the Dark Lord right now." Snape started to rise, but Bella put a hand on his arm.

"Don't run away. Is it true that the Dark Lord had to punish you last year for using occlumency against him?"

"If I had used occlumency against the Dark Lord, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you right now."

"Then he did punish you."

"Didn't Macnair give you all the particulars?"

"Macnair didn't share all his tender moments with me, no. Do you miss her, puppy dog? No, I guess you wouldn't. I've learned other things, sad things. No wife, no children, no family . . . no special friends . . . I kidded you about being a monk back in January, but it turns out it was no more than the truth. You're like a machine. No skin to change. How easily would you sell me out?"

"Dearest Bella . . . I live for the day when the Dark Lord gives me that order. Now if you will excuse me. I think I've played pincushion quite enough for one morning."

Snape went immediately to his laboratory to work. There would be plenty of time later to discuss this matter with Pettigrew.

About half an hour later, Snape went to Accounting with a requisition for more supplies. It was a simple, routine matter, except that as he was returning to his laboratory, he ran into Pettigrew coming up from the subterranean area where the interview chamber was. Pettigrew avoided Snape's gaze and scurried down a corridor out of sight.

That evening, back at home, Snape hustled Pettigrew into the kitchen and shoved him into one of the chairs. "Sit down, Wormtail. We're going to have a little chat. You've been spying on me, haven't you, Wormtail. Telling tales out of school. You need to be taught not to do that, Wormtail."

"But . . . but the Dark Lord . . . he summoned . . ."

"I'm not talking about the Dark Lord. I'm talking about Lestrangle. What have you told her? I hope nothing more interesting than the decor of the sitting room."

"She . . . wanted to know where you went."

"And you told her Birmingham like a good little rat, didn't you?" Snape was staring down into Pettigrew's eyes, and saw his mind suddenly shift to Hogwarts at the question. *No discipline here at all. The demonstration mind for Legilimency 101.*

"Of course. Of course. Where else would you go?" Pettigrew was shaking now.

"You need to be taught not to meddle in my affairs. What are you afraid of, Wormtail?"

Pettigrew's mind flashed the picture, crisp and clear. Snape let a smile twist his mouth. "I heard your former master had the same little problem. So

did one of my dorm mates back in first year. You remember the late lamented Evan Rosier. A positive phobia. Pity he had so much trouble with them.”

Snape pulled Pettigrew to his feet and marched him through the sitting room, up the stairs, and into the usually locked front bedroom. “This was my parents’ room. It’s yours for the rest of your stay. Normally I would consider you unfit to pass the doorway, but I don’t want to mess things up downstairs. And if anyone would appreciate the situation, it would be my father.”

He bound Pettigrew to the bed and intoned “*Petrificus Imperfectus*,” allowing small movements, but preventing Pettigrew from leaving the bed or even turning over. Just as he closed and locked the door, Snape pointed his wand at the ceiling. “*Arachnes*,” he said calmly, then “Good night, Wormtail. Pleasant dreams. Your wakeup call will be at five.”

The spiders were small and harmless, some of them web spinners and some burrowers. The burrowers had a fondness for nestling under clothing. The spinners found Pettigrew’s nose and ears perfect anchor points for their threads.

THURSDAY, JULY 11, 1996

It was a very much subdued Pettigrew who apparated to Birmingham with Snape the following day. Snape kept him near, stirring potions in the laboratory. At noon they went together to the cafeteria for lunch. Glancing down the staircase towards the main entrance, Snape was not surprised to see Narcissa and Draco Malfoy follow Bella through the door. They took the stairs to the right and down to the interview chamber.

Until two days before, Snape hadn’t seen Narcissa in years, and then it was hardly the same Narcissa. Looking down at her now, he was reminded of the first grand dinner party he’d ever seen, peeking through the railings at the color and wealth that swirled below him, and how enchanted he’d been by the Snow Queen, the only gentle person in the whole household. *And was it you, sweet lady, who located my grandmother for the Death Eaters, visiting Nana’s house with a request for potions so that they’d know where to set the attack?*

Angry with himself for his sudden suspicious bitterness, angry with Pettigrew and Bella for putting him in this position, Snape guided Pettigrew to a table and ordered a light lunch. They ate in silence. Snape hoped to see Narcissa on her way out, but was disappointed.

It was late when the two were finally able to apparate back to Snape's home. Wanting to relax a bit, Snape ordered Pettigrew to his new quarters upstairs, while he himself settled in the sitting room with a cup of tea to read. Around midnight he was surprised to hear a knock on the front door.

Crossing the room and opening the door just a crack, Snape found himself face to face with the shining radiance of Narcissa Malfoy, the shorter, darker Bellatrix a pace behind. "Narcissa! What a pleasant surprise!"

"Severus," she murmured, her voice tense, "May I speak to you? It's urgent."

"But of course." He opened the door wider to allow both of them inside.

Bella swept past Snape with only the most cursory of greetings, so clearly this was Narcissa's visit. Bella must have come under protest, or out of fear. He waved the two women to the sofa. Narcissa accepted his hospitality; Bella stood behind her sister like a bodyguard. Snape returned to the armchair where he'd been reading, Bella's attitude reminding him of his own in Sirius Black's house.

"So, what can I do for you?"

"We... we are alone, aren't we?" Both women were watching him, and so strong was Narcissa's anxiety that Snape could pick it up without trying. Bella's hostility radiated like a nuclear meltdown.

"Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail's here, but we're not counting vermin, are we?" With a lazy flick of his wand, Snape opened the stair panel behind which he knew Pettigrew was hiding. The one he watched was Bella. *She doesn't want him here either. This isn't about me.* "As you have clearly realized, Wormtail, we have guests." Pettigrew started to greet the women, but Snape cut him off. "Wormtail will get us drinks if you'd like them, and then he will return to his bedroom."

"I am not your servant!"

"Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me."

Pettigrew tried to protest, and ended up bringing glasses and a bottle of wine, then retreating to the stairs. Snape poured, then raised his own glass in a toast to the Dark Lord. Bella was caught, forced to accept his hospitality and drink his wine. He refilled the glasses.

"Severus," Narcissa blurted out, "I'm sorry to come here like this, but I had to see you. I think you are the only one who can help me..."

Sensing rather than hearing Pettigrew's presence, Snape cast a percussive spell that sent him scurrying back upstairs. "My apologies. He has lately

taken to listening at doors. I don't know what he means by it..." He was rewarded by the reddening of Bella's throat and face. "You were saying, Narcissa?"

"Severus, I know I ought not to be here, I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but..."

Bella interrupted abruptly, "Then you ought to hold your tongue! Particularly in present company!"

Snape realized he was closing down as if preparing for a fight. Whatever drove Narcissa Malfoy to his home after midnight, it frightened Bella Le-strange. There wasn't much that frightened Bella—she wasn't perceptive enough. *I think I'm going to find out what this afternoon's interview was about without even trying.*

"Present company? And what am I to understand by that, Bellatrix?"

"That I don't trust you, Snape, as you very well know!" At Bella's words, Narcissa covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

The blatant, unqualified statement was a surprise, especially given the shift in their relative status over the last month. Either Bella was suddenly more confident, or she feared what Narcissa would say more than she feared a fight with Snape for the Dark Lord's favor. Bella's challenge allowed a brief moment of eye contact, during which Snape wished he was a more gifted legilimens. *No, not so confident. This is for Narcissa.* He affected calm, leaning back in the chair.

"Narcissa, I think we ought to hear what Bellatrix is bursting to say; it will save tedious interruptions. Well, continue, Bellatrix. Why is it that you do not trust me?"

"A hundred reasons!" Bella's glass slammed down on the table as she moved to confront Snape. "Where to start! Where were you when the Dark Lord fell? Why did you never make any attempt to find him when he vanished? What have you been doing all these years that you've lived in Dumbledore's pocket? Why did you stop the Dark Lord procuring the Philosopher's Stone? Why did you not return at once when the Dark Lord was reborn? Where were you a few weeks ago when we battled to retrieve the prophecy for the Dark Lord? And why, Snape, is Harry Potter still alive, when you have had him at your mercy for five years?"

My, you have been busy in the last six months. Those questions didn't originate in Azkaban. The first two you'd ask of any Death Eater, but who told you about the Philosopher's Stone, Pettigrew, or the Dark Lord himself? And how many other Death Eaters are asking the same questions behind my back?

Narcissa was unreadable, her eyes still covered by her hands. Bella broadcast defiance, anger, and suspicion. Whatever Snape answered would travel all through headquarters before noon. He settled more comfortably in the armchair and allowed a sarcastic smile to play around his mouth.

“Before I answer you . . . Do you really think that the Dark Lord has not asked me each and every one of those questions? And do you really think that, had I not been able to give satisfactory answers, I would be sitting here talking to you?”

“I know he believes you, but . . .” Uncertainty flickered in Bella’s eyes. *Good. Pettigrew hasn’t told her everything — he may not realize it’s important. Now if I can keep her off balance and him scared . . .*

“You think he is mistaken? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished legimens the world has ever seen?”

Bella was retreating now — Snape could see it in her eyes — unprepared for the accusation that she herself was showing disloyalty. He began to recite the carefully prepared justifications he’d shown to the Dark Lord a year earlier, the night of his return to the Death Eaters, how he’d remained at his post gathering information.

“You ask why I did not attempt to find him when he vanished. For the same reason that Avery, Yaxley, the Carrows, Greyback, Lucius and many others did not attempt to find him . . .” Avery was to remind Bella that those who rose high could also fall through errors of judgment. The middle group now stood near the Dark Lord. To attack Snape was to attack them. And Lucius’s name was for Narcissa, to remind her that what was good for Bella was not always good for her. Point by point, he went through Bella’s list.

“But what use have you been? What useful information have we had from you?” Bella demanded.

Got you, Bella. Now we undermine Narcissa’s faith in you. “My information has been conveyed directly to the Dark Lord. If he chooses not to share it with you . . .”

“He shares everything with me! He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful . . .”

That’s what Barty Crouch said. To how many has the Dark Lord said the same thing? He also called you a faithless servant, if I recall. “Does he? Does he still, after the fiasco at the Ministry?”

“That was not my fault! The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious . . . if Lucius hadn’t . . .”

Finally, Narcissa removed her hands from her face. "Don't you dare blame my husband!"

'In the past' is a telling phrase. It means 'not now.' And I have separated Narcissa from you. Snape was conciliatory, "There is no point apportioning blame. What is done, is done."

They sparred over his role with the Order of the Phoenix, then Bella turned to the issue of Potter.

"Have you discussed this matter with the Dark Lord?" Snape asked.

"He . . . lately we . . . I am asking you, Snape!"

Another admission that Bella was not so high in the Dark Lord's favor as she pretended. Snape glanced at Narcissa, still glaring furiously at her sister. He then spoke of his disdain for Potter and the deep trust of Dumbledore — a bit of a fabrication, but Bella didn't need to know of Dumbledore's doubts. In the silence that followed, Snape turned to Narcissa.

"Now . . . you came to ask me for help?"

Narcissa's eyes welled with tears. "Yes, Severus. I think you are the only one who can help me, I have nowhere else to turn. Lucius is in jail and . . . the Dark Lord has forbidden me to speak of it. He wishes none to know of the plan. It is very . . . secret. But . . ."

Narcissa closed her eyes. Frustrated, Snape had to back down, wishing again that his legilimency skills were better. "If he has forbidden it, you ought not to speak. The Dark Lord's word is law."

It wasn't the response the sisters were expecting. Narcissa gasped in dismay, while Bella looked immensely pleased. "There!" she told Narcissa. "Even Snape says so. You were told not to talk, so hold your silence!"

Now, more than ever, Snape wanted to be sure of what drove Narcissa to his house in the dead of night — what he could do to help her that no one else could, not even Bella. So far as he knew, he had only one advantage in influence over the others — Hogwarts. The only connection she had with the school was Draco. This had to be about Draco's task, a chance to find out if Dumbledore's surmise was correct.

Snape rose and went to the window where his gaze was hidden from both sisters. He'd never had any indication that either one could read him, but he was taking no chances. Dumbledore had demanded a service of Snape, but only because of Draco's task. If the task was other than what Dumbledore suspected, the requested service did not have to be performed. The one way to get more information now was to play along, to divulge that the Dark Lord had confided in him.

If the Dark Lord hears of this... but I see no other way. Not if I'm to learn anything. Lowering the curtain, Snape turned back to the sisters. It was a great risk, but Snape wagered that he knew enough about Bella's impetuosity and Cissa's sentimentality to know that this encounter was a family matter, and neither of them would breathe a word of it to anyone, not even the Dark Lord.

Taking a deep breath he said, "It so happens that I know of the plan. I am one of the few the Dark Lord has told. Nevertheless, had I not been in on the secret, Narcissa, you would have been guilty of great treachery to the Dark Lord." *That should suffice to keep both of you quiet.*

Narcissa sighed with relief. "I thought you must know about it! He trusts you so, Severus..."

Bella was not so easy to convince. "You know about the plan? *You* know?"

Ignoring the insulting tone of voice, Snape replied, "Certainly. But what help do you require, Narcissa? If you are imagining I can persuade the Dark Lord to change his mind, I am afraid there is no hope, none at all."

Narcissa began to weep. "Severus... my son... my only son." The childless Bella had no qualms about mentioning honor and duty, and Draco's eagerness to prove himself, while Narcissa thought only of his youth and of the danger. And of the fearful probability that Draco's death was a punishment for Lucius.

Snape remembered Draco's eager, desperate face in June as he pleaded, "Can't we help? Can't we do something?" *Why would the Dark Lord single out Malfoy for such punishment when Bella was there, too? I'd bet anything her vicious temper was more responsible for the disaster than Malfoy's poor planning... Unless Bella lied to the Dark Lord about her role, and now feels guilty for the repercussions Narcissa must face...* Then Snape recalled the Dark Lord's anger over the fate of the diary.

Narcissa's eyes showed only her terrible fear for her son. Unable to read deeper, Snape looked away, trying to decide the best course of action. To stall for time he said, "If Draco succeeds he will be honored above all others."

"But he won't succeed! How can he, when the Dark Lord himself..." Narcissa froze, realizing the enormity of her words. Snape shifted his gaze from woman to woman, knowing the apprehension on Bella's face was reflected in his own. They were talking treason.

Narcissa was babbling, "I only meant... nobody has yet... Severus, please... You are... always... Draco's favorite... Lucius's friend... the Dark Lord's favorite... speak to him... persuade him..."

Forcing himself to be calm and cold, Snape replied, "The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it . . . Yes, the Dark Lord is angry, Narcissa, very angry indeed."

"Then I am right . . . he wants him to be killed trying!" Narcissa flung herself at him, begging, pleading that he remove this cup from Draco, convince the Dark Lord, take the task onto himself . . . The power of her grief washed through Snape, and though he tried to talk to her reasonably, he was being overcome by memories — of Narcissa, distraught at the thought of being separated from Lucius, so joyful on the muggle underground because she was meeting him — of the baby in Snape's own arms, the tiny baby with the perfect fingernails — of Draco, raised in the Dark Lord's service, the heir to a dying world of blood status and privilege, so proud of being a Seeker, frantically trying to claw his way out from under the shadow of Harry Potter . . .

Narcissa collapsed, sobbing, "My only son . . . my only son . . ." while Bella screeched, "If I had sons . . ."

Silently cursing his own weakness, Snape dragged Narcissa to her feet and guided her to the sofa. He poured her another glass of wine, thinking all the while of the smile that would cross Dumbledore's face at the knowledge that Draco's mother was reinforcing Dumbledore's request. "Narcissa, that's enough. Drink this. Listen to me. It might be possible . . . for me to help Draco."

She held her breath, as if suspended between despair and joy. "Severus . . . oh, Severus . . . you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?"

"I can try." It was the only honest promise he could make.

Then she was on her knees to him, kissing his hand. "If you are there to protect him . . . Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?"

Snape stared down at her, not certain how he had reached this moment. His brain was screaming danger, but it battled against Narcissa's radiant hope. *I can't do this. I can't bind myself to this. I have other promises to keep — not just to Dumbledore . . . to Lily . . .*

Bella's wild laughter broke through. "Aren't you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he'll try, I'm sure . . . The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action . . . oh, on the Dark Lord's orders, of course!"

It was like cold water thrown in his face. Snape was suddenly keenly aware of the importance of learning exactly what Draco's task was. *If I refuse the Vow and prove Bella right, I'll never again be in a position where Narcissa*

will confide in me. My only link to the Dark Lord's real plans for Draco — and Hogwarts — will be broken. I doubt I can find out tonight — they think I already know. But if Draco knows I'm sworn to protect him, I may be able to find out from him... I'm his head of house. Protecting him is no more than I would do anyway.

His eyes never wavering from Narcissa's, Snape said, "Certainly. I shall make the Unbreakable Vow. Perhaps your sister will consent to be our Bonded."

They knelt facing each other, right hands joined. Bella stood gaping, as if she couldn't believe this was happening. "You will need your wand, Bellatrix. And you will need to move a little closer." Speechless, Bella obeyed.

Narcissa began the ritual. "Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes?"

"I will." The first red link of the binding chain spurted from Bella's wand.

"And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?"

"I will." Another fiery link formed around their hands.

"And should it prove necessary..." The first alarm went off in Snape's brain. The chasm was opening in front of him. "...if it seems Draco will fail..." He wanted to pull away, knowing before she said it what would be asked of him. Wanted to, but didn't. "...will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"

The choice was clear — ignorance and safety, or knowledge and the possibility of death. *But only if it's a task I can't perform. It may well be Dumbledore is wrong and I can do this thing. Oh, McGonagall, if you knew the wager I was making tonight!* The world was bright, the colors sharp and clear, and the Snow Queen's face glowed in the candlelight. Life burned more fiercely in the shadow of death, when you risked everything on one roll of the dice...

"I will," said Snape, and Bella sealed the vow with a third ribbon of fire. In the recesses of Snape's mind, Dumbledore face appeared, and he was laughing.

* * *

Dumbledore listened in silence to Snape's account of the event. When it was done, he shook his head sadly. "I would have wished that it had not reached so irrevocable a point. I cannot afford to lose you. Still, you were there, and no one is in a better position to evaluate the situation than you are."

"And here I thought you would be pleased." The irony in Snape's tone carried a note of humor. "If you're right about the task, you know, then Narcissa's practically guaranteed that you'll get your wish. If it was just you . . . but when it's a choice between your life and mine, you don't stand a chance."

"If I am right. But that raises another concern, Severus. What if I am wrong and Draco's mission involves something that I do not wish you to do? Was there no clue at all to confirm what this task is?"

"Plenty of clues, but none that give us definite answers. It has something to do with Hogwarts. That's the only place Draco and I have in common. Narcissa said nothing about going anywhere else. Then it's something the Dark Lord has tried to do and failed. That narrows it down considerably. And yet it's something that a sixteen-year-old boy thinks he can accomplish. Bella was clear, Draco's excited by the prospect, and Narcissa confirmed it. Granted Draco thinks he can do almost anything at first hearing. It's only later that his feet start getting cold. But it can't be an utter impossibility." Snape paused. "I did have one thought."

"Which was?"

"His task might be to kidnap Potter. Draco would most definitely enjoy the prospect of that one. And it's something the Dark Lord was ultimately unsuccessful at."

"It may be to kill him. Something else Riddle failed to do. The amount of protection surrounding Harry could explain Narcissa's fear for her son's life. But what would you do in that case if Draco fails?"

"I'm not going to speculate on 'what ifs.' Everything depends on the precise nature of the task. The first thing I'll do, when I have time, is borrow that pensieve of yours again."

"Why Severus, whatever for?"

"To study the Vow. An Unbreakable Vow means exactly what the words say it means, no more and no less. What one party is thinking is irrelevant. If it isn't spoken, it isn't part of the Vow. If it is spoken, it is part. At one point Narcissa said, 'to the best of your ability.' Now there's a loophole a mile wide. I need to know that Vow inside out and backwards."

Dumbledore smiled. "That's my Severus. No raging against fate, no wallowing in self-pity. Just work the problem."

Snape grimaced. "I wish you wouldn't use words like 'wallow' when you're talking about me. There's a certain distastefulness . . ."

"Harry will be reasonably safe soon." Dumbledore continued. "That was

arranged before this all happened. Which reminds me. There is another matter that you need to be aware of. I am in the process of recruiting and hiring a teacher to fill a vacant position. I hope to have accomplished it by tomorrow — no, it is nearly sunrise — by tonight.”

“The Dark Arts professor? I already knew about that; it isn’t news.”

“Alas, no, Severus. I have a Dark Arts professor. It seems that what I am lacking is an instructor in Potions.” Dumbledore’s brow furrowed in concern. “Is something wrong, Severus? I thought you would be pleased.”

Snape looked down at his hands. In any other year he would have been pleased, but now there was a dreadful sense of finality to the news, coming as it did with the increase in the Dark Lord’s power, the Unbreakable Vow, and the certainty of Dumbledore’s death through the action of the curse in any case. He looked up at Dumbledore with something close to a smile, rueful and ironic. “I guess that means I’m not going to last out the year either.”

“I prefer to think that we shall finally break the jinx.”

“The funny part is that a little over an hour ago I was telling Bella that one of the proofs of my loyalty to the Dark Lord was that you didn’t quite trust me enough to give me the job. What am I going to tell her now?”

“You will have to be creative, I suppose.”

“Who are you going to get for Potions?”

“For some time I have been toying with the idea of bringing Professor Slughorn out of retirement . . . Why Severus, do you not like Professor Slughorn?”

“You want the whole list?”

“Just the highlights.”

“You’re serious.” Snape started numbering points on his fingers. “He never did anything about the hazing in Slytherin house. He never once acknowledged the quality of my Potions work . . .”

“He told me Lily was one of his best pupils.”

“We used to study together. She was very good.”

“But you helped her rather than the other way around.”

Snape didn’t respond, continuing instead with his list. “He never defended us to you or McGonagall when Gryffindor attacked us. He ignored everyone who was neither rich nor popular. He left a mess in his classroom and office. He left practically no stocks on the shelves, and no information about the curriculum . . .”

“In other words, he effectively destroyed your life.”

“Now you’re making fun of me.”

“Would it be better if Slughorn did not use your office and private room? He would probably like the Dark Arts office. It is warmer and gets more light. I think I would prefer you away from the general population anyway, and it is closer to Slytherin house.”

“That would be very nice, Headmaster. Thank you.”

Dumbledore paused before speaking again. “There are one or two other points. I do not wish to alarm Horace by taking him into our confidence regarding Riddle, but his position at Hogwarts will be rather like Sibyll Trelawney’s. That I wish to have you in Dark Arts assists me in this.”

Snape waited for the rest, but it was not forthcoming. “So I’m to look out for him, but not know why. It’s that old trust thing.”

The comment was ignored. “The other point is that I may be calling on your expertise in dark magic again as I did on Tuesday. Should something occur involving curses or evil enchantments, there must be no confusion among the staff. The one in charge of the matter is the Dark Arts professor. They will have to rely on you.”

The next couple of weeks were actually rather pleasant. The Dark Lord’s squad continued its raids, though on a less spectacular scale, but that didn’t directly affect Snape’s life. Bella retreated from her attacks, adopting a policy of ignoring him altogether. Pettigrew stopped spying and tried to avoid Snape as much as possible. Snape was already organizing the Dark Arts curriculum, and was looking forward to returning to Hogwarts. Each of the key areas of concern in his life was locked into a separate compartment in his brain, and when he was focusing on the upcoming school year, no thought of Draco or of Death Eaters disturbed Snape’s concentration.

Near the end of July, Dumbledore asked him to come to Hogwarts again.

“There have been two kidnappings, Severus. Do you know anything about them?”

The news was a surprise. “No. I’m not Field Operations. They don’t discuss their business outside the department. Who was it?”

“Ollivander and Fortescue. Fortescue may have been taken from his shop. The place looks as if there had been a fight. Ollivander has simply vanished. No Dark Mark was placed over Diagon Alley, so it looks like kidnapping. I should like to know why.”

“Ollivander for the wands, perhaps. I can’t think of anything special about Fortescue. Except . . . My very first assignment, years ago, was to identify likely recruits among the students shopping in Diagon Alley. I pretended I was looking for tutoring work and used to spend a lot of time around the

ice cream parlor. Did you know Fortescue was quite the expert on medieval history?"

"Indeed? I did not know. That is most interesting. I may need you to do some research for me."

"What sort of research, sir?"

Instead of answering, Dumbledore asked a question. "Did your parents tell you children's stories when you were a boy?"

"Do you mean like 'Cinderella' and 'The Ugly Duckling'?" Storytelling was not something my father would have wanted for me."

"I was thinking more of the stories from your mother's side of the family. Beedle the Bard, for example."

"Never heard of him."

"Indeed? That may actually work in our favor, Severus. You will have no preconceptions." And that was all Dumbledore would say at that time.

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - S E V E N

M U L T I P L Y I N G D A N G E R S

THURSDAY, AUGUST 1, 1996 (TWO DAYS AFTER THE FULL MOON)

What kind of research? was a question that would have to wait until later. For the time being, Snape was hectically busy preparing a full stock of potions — as many as the shelves would hold in the clinic, the laboratory, and field operations — against the time when he could not be at headquarters every day. Then, most suddenly, it was the first of August. Pettigrew went back to Birmingham on a continuous basis, and Snape locked his home in Lancashire to take up more or less permanent residence at Hogwarts for yet another school year.

“Ohio!” called a voice behind him as Snape apparated into the edge of Hogsmeade. It was a most familiar gruff voice. “Strasstree! Aloha! Dog! and . . . well, I can’t pronounce it anyway. Tell me the languages or go to Azkaban.”

“Good morning, Moody. Nothing like tradition, is there? Is this a little like ‘Do not pass GO, do not collect two hundred dollars?’”

“No idea what you’re talking about. I have a bet that you can tell me the languages.”

“They’re greetings. Ohiyo is Japanese. I presume you mean Zdravstui, which is Russian. Aloha is Hawaiian, and Dag, if memory serves, is Dutch. Do you win the bet or lose it, and I thought you had no vacancies in Azkaban.”

“We’re chock-a-block in Azkaban, but tradition’s got to be observed. And you just won me a pocketful of galleons. Hang on . . . the last one was Boaker Tove. D’ you know that one?”

“Hebrew,” said Snape, and Moody waved as he disappeared.

Breakfast was under way in the Great Hall, and Slughorn was already there next to Dumbledore. A wave of Dumbledore’s hand brought Snape

over. "Horace is delighted to have the Dark Arts office and living quarters. He would like to take over the classroom today. Would that be a problem?"

Snape hesitated. *Of course there's a problem. That's my space. I need time to vacate.* But he couldn't say that to Dumbledore with Slughorn sitting there. "No problem at all, Headmaster. I need to clear out a couple of personal things, but that won't delay the move."

"Excellent. The Dark Arts room is just waiting for you to move in."

Snape left breakfast a few minutes before everyone else and went directly to the Potions classroom. He'd been there fifteen years, and a certain amount of private files, supplies, and equipment had made their way into the room. He could hear the rest of the group break up in the Great Hall—there was little time to waste.

"*Peculiaris!*" Snape said with a wave of his wand, making everything that belonged to him invisible to other eyes. It theoretically made everything that belonged to another person invisible to him, but Snape was not concerned about this aspect of the spell. He'd been in this room for fifteen years. Everything in it was either common school property or his personal belongings. Now he could remove what was his own at leisure, without disturbing Slughorn or allowing him to see it.

* * *

"And here is the list of supplies that were in the room at the end of the last term, and a preliminary list of things I thought I would order at the beginning of this year. This folder has an inventory of all the equipment that I'm transferring to you, and..."

"Snape, you have got to be the most meticulous Potions master it's ever been my fortune, good or bad, to run across. For the work you're saving me, I thank you."

Snape nodded in response to Slughorn's comment, choosing to treat it, despite the tone, as praise. *It's a good thing you know nothing about modern psychology because if you'd used the word 'anal,' I swear I'd have struck you.*

"I still have one or two things in the room, so if you'd wait until tomorrow to change the locks, I'd appreciate it."

"Not a problem, not a problem. Just let me know when you're finished..."

It only took Snape a few trips, while Slughorn was closeted with Dumbledore, to remove all his private possessions from the room. He then removed

the Peculiaris spell. The classroom was now entirely Slughorn's, and none of his own responsibility.

And then, without warning, Slughorn was gone.

"Do not worry, Severus. He will be back with us at the beginning of September. He has some things to attend to, and wishes to ride up with the students on the train. You, after all, are acquainted with them all except for the first years. He knows none of them yet."

"What about the eyes?"

"Eyes?"

"Newt eyes . . . spider eyes . . . the potions ingredients. They're coming in later this month and have to be . . ."

"Oh. Well, I am sure that you could handle it . . . in the spirit of collegiality . . ."

"Son of a witch!" Snape exploded in fury. "Now he expects me to do his job as well as my own! I swear I'm leaving the eyes out on the lawn to putrefy! I am not taking on his duties so that he can network with the rich and potentially famous!"

"Now, now, Severus. We are talking about school property and school money. I am certain that your basic professionalism . . ."

"Will be totally eclipsed by my mean-spirited pettiness. Store your own eyes."

In the end, of course, Snape received, inventoried and stored all the potions ingredients that arrived that month for Horace Slughorn. *And he's getting a bill for it, too.*

During the month Snape also made several trips to Birmingham where, no longer chained to his laboratory, he was able to catch up on gossip. There he heard details of the last moments of Igor Karkaroff ('Boring, really. Had the gracelessness to commit suicide. They put up the Dark Mark anyway.'), the attack on Emmeline Vance ('Ran out into the middle of traffic like a sheep. Better for the squad. More publicity.'), and the surprise induction of Draco Malfoy into the ranks of the Death Eaters ('Just honorary I'm told. The boy has to prove himself first.')

All of this was shared with Dumbledore, who was chiefly concerned about Malfoy.

"Nobody's said anything about a task," Snape said over a glass of mead in Dumbledore's office. "I really think only the immediate family knows. My personal feeling is still that it has to do with kidnapping Potter, after which the Dark Lord will kill him. That's what he failed to do last year."

"It does seem nearly as likely as my idea. We shall have to keep a close eye on Harry, and not let him be put into a vulnerable position. Just in case."

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1996 (TWO DAYS BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER MOON)

Then it was the first of September, and the whole staff was prepared for the arrival of the Express. Tables were laid, decorations set up, the house-elves were outdoing themselves, and the teachers were anxiously awaiting the first of the carriages. Snape was looking forward to the moment when Slughorn would start taking care of his own work.

At first the confusion and chaos of the arrival seemed perfectly routine. The heads of houses were out on the lawn shepherding their charges into the Great Hall, and everything was proceeding normally. Then McGonagall cornered Snape. "The others are here, but Harry's missing."

"What?"

"The Weasleys, Granger, Longbottom . . . they're all here. Potter's missing."

"That's odd. Do the others seem worried or upset?"

"That's the strangest part. They don't seem to care."

Another line of carriages disgorged its passengers. Slughorn was there, and elbowed his way majestically into the Hall. Snape looked quickly around, counting sixth year students. "Malfoy isn't here either. We should tell Dumbledore."

Just then another carriage pulled up on the lawn, and Malfoy stepped out, seeming quite pleased with himself. McGonagall had to meet the first years, so Snape pulled Sprout aside and whispered, "Tell Dumbledore Potter hasn't arrived yet." Then the lawn suddenly cleared of students and professors as everyone entered the castle for the feast.

Snape stayed outside, hesitating in the cool night air. Just as he was about to go in and advise Dumbledore to initiate a search, a sleek silver patronus approached him from the north. It was a patronus Snape didn't recognize, a little like Lupin's but distinct. Then Tonks's voice spoke in his brain. "Come on down to the gate, luv. I got Harry."

Relieved, Snape went into the Great Hall to tell Dumbledore that Potter was safe. Then, picking up a lantern from the entrance hall, he hurried down the hill to the gate. The defenses were less stringent than usual because of the carriages coming onto the grounds, and he was able to open the gates without special permission from Dumbledore. Neither Potter nor Tonks tried to hide

their disappointment at seeing him. Potter had blood on his face, but his attitude was one of defiance and outright hatred, as if Snape was responsible for the situation. Tonks offered no explanation, nor did she seem concerned about the blood.

“Well, well, well,” Snape said, “Nice of you to turn up, Potter, although you have evidently decided that the wearing of school robes would detract from your appearance.”

“I couldn’t change, I didn’t have my . . .”

Potter was lying. Students changed into robes long before the train pulled into Hogsmeade and their luggage was taken. Besides, he was holding his invisibility cloak. Something else had happened that Potter was concealing — he’d probably been where he ought not to have been. Snape looked past him at Tonks, whose hostile demeanor was undisguised.

“There is no need to wait, Nymphadora. Potter is quite . . . safe in my hands.”

“I meant Hagrid to get the message,” she replied flatly.

You send a nonspecific patronus to the castle, then because I happen to be the one to receive it, you insult me to my face in front of a student. Suddenly the meaning of the strange patronus became clear. I wonder what kind of tales Lupin is telling you — specially tailored to cultivate your sympathy, of course. Snape began locking the gates again.

“Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead. And incidentally, I was interested to see your new patronus. I think you were better off with the old one. The new one looks weak.”

Snape started back up the hill as Potter took his leave of Tonks. The boy was projecting — positively radiating hatred. Snape tried to ignore it, but he was baffled why Potter and Tonks would both act as if he had somehow caused whatever had happened. His own dislike of Potter intensified, and he started to prod, hoping that Potter would lose control and blurt out an explanation.

“Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think. And, let me see, another twenty for your muggle attire. You know, I don’t believe any house has ever been in negative figures this early in the term: We haven’t even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter. I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you? And with no flying car available you decided that bursting into the Great Hall halfway through the feast ought to create a dramatic effect.”

Potter didn't rise to the bait. They arrived at the castle and paused outside the Great Hall. Potter made a movement towards his cloak, but Snape stopped him. "No cloak. You can walk in so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I'm sure."

Instantly, Potter turned and marched across the Hall to the far side where the Gryffindor table was. Snape watched him, then went up to the staff table to find that the main meal had not yet been cleared away, and that he was at least able to get something to eat. At the Slytherin table, Malfoy was telling some kind of story involving hitting himself in the nose. *Is Malfoy the reason Potter was late? Does this have something to do with Malfoy's task? But if that's so, why does Malfoy think it so funny that Potter's here?*

Dumbledore had risen and was giving his usual opening term speech. The school reacted in surprise to the news that Slughorn would teach Potions, and with greater shock to the information that Snape himself would teach Dark Arts. Potter, obnoxious little toad that he was, even screamed out "No!" at the top of his lungs at the announcement. *And if it had been any other student, or any other professor for that matter, the offender would be immediately taken from the Hall and placed on detention, but I notice neither Dumbledore nor McGonagall seems to regard his behavior as anything but perfectly acceptable.*

The sense of injustice that had sprung to life during Snape's encounter with Tonks and Potter was now expanding into bitterness directed against nearly everyone in the hall. The students' tables buzzed with chatter that Snape knew was about him, and that Dumbledore did nothing to stop, merely waiting patiently until it died down of its own accord. After an admonition to be vigilant and report anything suspicious, and to respect the curfew, Dumbledore sent the students to their dormitories.

With the other heads of houses, Snape spent some time in the Hall getting the students to move. When they'd finally cleared everyone out, and the crowd in the entrance hall was noticeably thinning, Snape heard Dumbledore call his name.

"Yes, Headmaster," he replied, hoping this would not take long. He was suddenly very tired.

Dumbledore steered him back into the Hall where it was more private. "I hope there is nothing causing discord among us," he said calmly. "I understand that you and Nymphadora exchanged words."

"I was under the impression that words were a normal part of a conversation."

"You know what I mean. Did you say something that Nymphadora might have found hurtful?"

"Before or after she told me I had no business being there?"

"Ah," said Dumbledore quietly. "I see there is more here than I at first suspected."

"And while she was complaining about my behavior, did she happen to explain what delayed Potter on the train?"

"No. I was rather hoping you could tell me that."

"Neither Potter nor Tonks felt that any explanation was due to me. They both acted as if my presence was somehow insulting to both of them. I should have left the gate locked."

"Now Severus... They have both been through a rather stressful time. Nymphadora was injured in the fight at the Ministry. She's been in St. Mungo's. And Harry... well, we older folks often do not realize how hard it must be on a person as young as Harry to lose someone so close to him... Severus?"

Snape was staring down at his hands, fascinated by the fact that the tips of his fingers were trembling beyond his control. It was a moment before he realized that Dumbledore had stopped talking. "I'm sorry, Headmaster. You were saying?"

"No, Severus. I am the one who is sorry. That was unforgivably thoughtless of me. You contain your feelings so well that I sometimes forget... You must have been about the same age, younger... and of course the last year..." Dumbledore studied Snape's face for a moment. "Have you found your loophole?"

"Sir? I thought we were talking about Potter and Tonks."

"Stress sometimes breaks out in the most unpredictable directions... You will pardon me for referring to something personal... but you do have quite a bit to preoccupy you at the moment."

"It had something to do with Malfoy."

"Harry's late arrival?"

"He had his invisibility cloak, and Malfoy was sharing something with his friends about damage to a nose. Potter had blood on his face. Malfoy knows why Potter was late, but Potter doesn't want to accuse Malfoy of anything. That means Potter was where he shouldn't have been, and he got caught. Tonks must have found him."

"That would seem logical. Now, tell me about loopholes."

Snape sat on the edge of the Slytherin table. "There are three parts to the

Vow. The first is that I watch over Draco as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes. It's meaningless, since no other action was requested besides watching. The second part, to protect him from harm, contains the phrase 'to the best of your ability' which means that if I try to protect him, but don't succeed because of the circumstances, the Vow has been fulfilled. It's the last part that's tricky. The phrase 'should it prove necessary' was extended to include 'if it seems Draco will fail.' Seems to whom, to me or to Draco? And what's the time frame? If none was specified in the task, it might seem to me that he could succeed during the next ten years. There's even the possibility that no Vow was actually taken on the third part since it referred to a specific task that only one of the parties was able to visualize. Though I don't think I want to risk my life on that being the case."

"So there might be loopholes, but none so certain that we can assume they are there."

"Exactly."

"You will have to find out exactly what it is Draco is supposed to do."

"That will depend to a great extent on Draco."

"I have taken up too much of your time, Severus. You need to get some sleep. I shall try, as much as possible, to reduce the sources of stress."

It was, all things considered, a better end to the day than Snape had been expecting. The bitterness he'd felt against Dumbledore had now abated, and he felt again that he had someone to talk to. Closing off the conversation from his conscious mind, Snape reviewed the following day's plans. For the first time, he was going to be teaching something other than Potions, at least to Hogwarts students. *In some ways, it may be similar to the defense lessons I give the Death Eaters.* The irony of that thought contained a certain symmetry that Snape found pleasing. He slept well that night.

The next day's second lesson was with the sixth year NEWT level students. The classes at this level tended to be smaller, and there was more of a mix of the houses. Snape had found at once that the first floor Dark Arts room made him uncomfortable, and he'd changed it.

First and foremost, he did not like the excessive light. After fifteen years teaching in the dungeon Potions room, the tall windows made Snape feel vulnerable, exposed to danger. In addition, he could not teach sitting at a desk or podium—he had to move around. If he was standing next to the windows, the students wouldn't be able to see his face. He'd be a backlit silhouette. Curtains now covered those windows, and the students' desks were lit by chandeliers.

The other major change was to rid the room of every trace of Dolores Umbridge. Gone were the lace and the flower arrangements, to be replaced by classic prints and woodcuts of different aspects of the Dark Arts, both as teaching aids and as a reminder to the students that what they were studying was of vital importance in a suddenly dangerous world.

Snape, in fact, had three major priorities for the year, the first being the need to impart to the students how dangerous their opponent was and how important to learn to defend themselves. The second was to show them the attraction of the Dark Arts, for no one followed them with the intention of becoming a slave. No, the Dark Arts seduced, entranced, and lured their victims into a quicksand from which it was nearly impossible to escape. It was impossible to battle them effectively unless you understood the attraction. The third priority was to show them the need to cooperate, to band together. One person alone was almost certain to be defeated.

Just before the beginning of class, Snape opened the door and allowed the students assembled outside to enter, a little surprised at how many there were. When they'd settled down, which happened rather quickly, he began.

"I have not asked you to take out your books. I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention. You have had five teachers in this subject so far, I believe. Naturally, these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion, I am surprised so many of you scraped an OWL in this subject. I shall be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the NEWT work, which will be much more advanced.

"The Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible..." *Very much like the classical Hydra, which even the hero Hercules was unable to battle alone, but we shall cover that later.*

As he spoke, Snape moved around the class, pointing out illustrations of the effects of certain dark spells and answering questions. It was his first task, however, to introduce the subject of nonverbal spells. McGonagall and Flitwick would both build on what he taught, but the initial lesson was usual dealt with in Dark Arts. "What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?" Snape asked the class.

Granger's hand shot immediately into the air. The rest of the class sat like lumps, conditioned over the past five years into laziness, knowing that the compulsive Granger would do all their work for them. *I'm going to start*

calling on students who don't raise their hands, just to keep everyone on their toes. Maybe beginning tomorrow.

Granger typically gave a memorized textbook answer, which Snape expanded on. "Not all wizards can do this, of course; it is a question of concentration and mind power which some lack." Waves of raw emotion hit Snape as they had the evening before, and he glanced over at Potter and then away. *You may actually turn out to be rather good at this, since it requires the exact opposite talent from occlumency. I wish I knew why you're laboring so hard to let me know you don't like me, though.*

The class split into pairs, given the assignment of trying to cast minor nonverbal jinxes at each other, with the recipient of the jinx trying to repel it nonverbally. The first attempts went about as expected, with most of the students unsuccessful at doing either, only one Slytherin, one Gryffindor, and two Ravenclaws managing it.

Potter was paired, as usual, with Weasley, with the result that Potter was getting no chance to practice at all. Instead of giving up and at least allowing Potter to try, Weasley insisted on straining until his face turned purple while Potter stood idly doing nothing. Exasperated, Snape moved to intervene.

"Pathetic, Weasley. Here . . . let me show you . . ."

Turning towards Potter in order to demonstrate the technique to Weasley, Snape was hit suddenly with a resoundingly verbal "*Protego!*" that slammed him back against a desk. As the rest of the class stopped their assignment to watch, Snape forced himself to remember Dumbledore's instructions to treat Potter with kid gloves.

"Do you remember me telling you we are practicing nonverbal spells, Potter?"

"Yes," was Potter's curt reply.

"Yes, sir," Snape reminded him.

"There's no need to call me 'sir,' Professor."

* * *

"You cannot let him get away with that! It's bad enough that he spends every moment near me projecting violent, hate-filled thoughts, knowing that I can pick them up, but to attack me physically — which I intended to overlook because of the lesson — and then defy me in my own classroom in front of other students — you can't let him get away with that! And if it were any other teacher in this school, you wouldn't!"

"Severus, please try to calm down. There are special circumstances here..."

"That don't apply to Susan Bones, despite her loss, and wouldn't apply to Malfoy or Crabbe if the outcome of that fight had been different, and would also never apply to Flitwick or Trelawney! Just to Potter — and just to me!" Snape suddenly became icily cold. "You want me to resign. Is that what this is all about?"

"Good heavens, no! You of all people are the one I need most to have around me. Please do not think like that."

"Then why did you cancel his detention?"

"That may have been hasty and unthinking on my part. Let us consider it postponed. I do need to confer with Harry, and it needs to be Saturday. Is that better?"

"Yes, sir."

"Clearly not."

"Take him out of my class, sir. Or tell him to stop projecting. One of these days he may come up behind me, and I'm not going to realize it's him, and then you will have a problem."

"I am certain that you are in much better control of your reactions than that." Dumbledore regarded Snape for a moment. "I seem to recall you were quite depressed for a while about your parents' deaths."

"Yes, and I lay in bed staring at the wall for days and days. I don't recall wandering the school mentally threatening my teachers with bodily harm."

"I had thought not to tell you, because I considered it a private matter of Harry's, but I see that it concerns you immediately and intimately... Severus, Harry holds you personally responsible for Sirius Black's death."

The nature of the revelation was so unexpected and bizarre that for a minute or two Snape was unable to respond. Then, "I hope you tried to disabuse him of that notion."

"I did, but without success. He believes you deliberately incited Sirius to go to the Ministry knowing and hoping that he would be killed."

"I tried to talk him out of it."

"I know. Remus told me. Harry believes that you did so in a way that would make Sirius feel you were calling him a coward, and that he was goaded into fighting. And that you are pleased by Sirius's death."

"Then he's more of a fool than I thought, on all counts. Nothing I said would ever goad Sirius into anything except beating me up. And I never wanted anyone dead." Snape stared down at his hands. "Anyone who knew

the smallest thing about Sirius would know that the moment he heard a friend of his was in danger . . . How can Potter even imagine he would have to be goaded? If there's anybody outside of Bella Lestrage or the Dark Lord himself who's responsible for Sirius's death it's . . ." Snape paused, then looked up again at Dumbledore. "I see. That's the special circumstance."

"It is a lot for a young man to bear. All at once like that."

"He'll have to face it some time. He'll have to accept the consequences of his own decisions and actions some time."

"I am hoping that it will come to him gradually, and that he works it out himself."

"Meanwhile I get to be whipping boy."

"It may work to our advantage."

"How?"

"If ever the three of you face each other — you, Harry, and Tom — all Harry will give up about you is that he hates you, and that you were working to destroy Tom's enemies. It could buy you time."

"As long as Potter doesn't kill me first."

"I think I can give you reasonable assurance that that will not be a problem. Now, since I have you here, I did have a couple of things I was hoping you could research for me."

"I remember. About Fortescue."

"Do you know anything about families named Peverell and Gaunt?"

"No. Well, John of Gaunt, of course. Character in Shakespeare's play Richard II. Speaks the great lines —

*This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
... This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.*

"It makes a lot of sense when you remember it was written just seven years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada."

Dumbledore was watching Snape with an expression of wondrous amazement. "Spanish Armada? Who was this John of Gaunt?"

“Younger son of Edward III. His son, grandson, and great-grandson were kings. If you count the illegitimate children’s descendants, all our kings and queens since come from him, including the present one. His grandson Humphrey married a witch.”

“Ah! A witch family named Gaunt?”

“No! The House of Lancaster. Gaunt — Ghent in Belgium — was where John was born. Only Shakespeare thought that people called him that after infancy. And Humphrey never had children. At least not legitimate children. The witch was his mistress before she became his second wife, so there might be something there. Also covered by Shakespeare in . . . ‘Henry VI, part one.’”

“And all those years you kept popping down to the theatre in London, I thought it was a waste of time. How wrong I was. Do you think you could check on wizarding families called Gaunt and Peverell? Families important enough to be landed gentry at one time.”

“Anything else?”

“Founders of Hogwarts — known artifacts whether believed to still exist or not. And anything connected with the occult or prophecy that Riddle might use to symbolically connect things belonging to any of these people.”

“You never ask for anything small, do you?”

“I have great confidence in your resourcefulness. By the way, I take it you are no longer going . . . wherever . . . on Saturdays.”

“No. Fridays and Sundays, though not both every week. This week I’m going down on Friday. How did you know?”

“You scheduled Harry’s detention for Saturday evening. And . . . wherever . . . is south of here. Because you are going down.”

“Sir, there’s almost nothing north of here.”

“Do not tell the people of Inverness that. They have a perfectly delightful town, not to mention a world-famous monster . . . And Severus . . . ?”

“Headmaster?”

“Do try to remember about Harry.”

“I’ll do my best, sir. As soon as he finishes his detention, I’ll try to ignore his presence.”

“Thank you, Severus.”

Friday evening after supper, Snape apparated to Birmingham and, after signing in, went straight to his laboratory to check on the requisitions that had accumulated in the week that he was gone. Headquarters was peaceful, the laboratory quiet and orderly, and Snape found himself wishing he could

be there every day, far from the chaos and misguided malice of the adolescent world.

Yaxley came up around eight-thirty to see if Snape wanted to join him for tea. There were a fair number of employees in the cafeteria, but one in particular caught Yaxley's eye. "Watch this," he whispered to Snape, nodding towards a corner and a short wizard with mousey hair sitting there alone. Then turning to the stairs and speaking to empty air, Yaxley said in a fairly normal tone of voice, "Bella! My you're looking well tonight. Care to join us?"

The wizard leapt up so fast that his chair fell over and tea sloshed out of his raised cup all down the front of his robes. Gathering his things helter-skelter, he rushed out of the cafeteria through the clinic and was gone. The others at their tables chuckled softly.

"Who was that?" Snape asked, smiling slightly as he and Yaxley settled at another table.

"Bennett. Used to be at the Cardiff office. Good with memory charms but not much else."

"Sounds like someone I know. What's between him and Bella?"

"Came in on Tuesday with a little lacquered box that had the picture of a greyhound embossed on the lid. Very nice work, but not anything really expensive. Bella had a royal fit! Insisted it was hers and that Bennett was a thief. We had to restrain her from cursing him then and there. He kept saying he bought it from a street peddler. She wants thumbscrews. He's been avoiding her ever since."

"Hard to believe, a street peddler selling Black family possessions. I guess if I were Bella, I'd be angry, too."

"She's looking for the peddler. Apparently he had other things—silverware, cups, scattered items of jewelry... Lucky for him Bennett has no idea who he was."

"How's Bella doing otherwise?"

"Slitting her own throat. She's out to bring you down. Thinks you've elbowed your way in above your proper station. Even went so far as to insinuate that a half-blood—no offense intended—wasn't fit to advise the Dark Lord. Now she wants to check the backgrounds of all the people who seemed relieved when that tactic didn't work. She insists they're 'passing' as pure-bloods. Personnel isn't cooperating, though. They don't want the Dark Lord angry at them."

"I leave for a week and the entire place goes to perdition in a hand basket."

A messenger appeared at the door, looked around, and came over to Snape and Yaxley. "Excuse me, sir. He wants to see you."

A grin spread over Yaxley's heavy features at the respectfulness of the tone. "Looks like I'm in the right camp," he said as Snape rose from the table and headed for the interview room.

"Tell us of Slughorn."

"Fatter than ever. As conceited as ever. Still looking for anyone whose connections can get him perquisites."

"Is he closeted with Dumbledore? Is this why he has been brought back?"

"Quite the contrary, they seldom speak. He came briefly in August, left again, returned only with the students on the train, and seems frustrated that Dumbledore won't pay more attention to him. I have the feeling that Dumbledore's had trouble finding instructors. He could get no one for the Dark Arts position, and only Slughorn for any position. Slughorn can't teach anything but Potions, so Dumbledore was forced to move me into Dark Arts."

"Yes, that information pleased us. It is of great strategic benefit. Do not create any suspicion as to your motives or allegiances. We must see that you remain there for a while. In the long run it may be one of our most valuable assets."

"Thank you, Lord."

"Has Slughorn attempted to curry your favor?"

"No, Lord. I have no family connections and am not important enough."

"If he should move to bring you into his circle, you will accept his invitations. You will gain his confidence and get him to trust you."

"Yes, Lord."

Snape didn't return to Hogwarts that night, instead working late at headquarters and then apparating home to Lancashire. There he went through his own extensive library, and the next morning apparated to London to check out several muggle shops that catered to the occult and to hobbies.

Divination was a branch of magic that Snape usually had no patience with, and he certainly didn't want anyone in the wizarding world to think he'd suddenly developed an interest. In any case, many of the divinatory arts were just as well-known to muggles as they were to wizards, and muggles were more inclined to actually analyze what they were doing. Thus he avoided Diagon Alley and the area of Charing Cross Road where the Leaky Cauldron was to concentrate on large bookstores and quaint little shops, and generally pick up several good books and tips on the way.

He also purchased two decks of tarot cards. One was the Rider-Waite-Smith deck that provided the symbolism for most of the others, and the second was a reproduction of an 18th century French deck. Late that afternoon, after studying the decks for several hours, he returned to Hogwarts.

Arriving early to supper, Snape slipped into the seat next to Dumbledore's, forcing Slughorn to move further down. When Dumbledore arrived, Snape laid a card in front of him.

"What is this, Severus?"

"Beautiful, isn't it. It's the two of cups."

"What does it mean?"

"Love. Friendship. Partnership. The Union of Souls."

"It does not sound like Tom."

"Ah, but it also means the reconciling of differences and the merging of opposites. Look at the center symbols. It has three of the four houses of Hogwarts. The lion's head is joined to the eagle's wings. Fire and air merged and sharing a role. The physicality of Gryffindor and the mentality of Ravenclaw. The snakes are Slytherin of course, which would leave Hufflepuff represented by cups if we wanted to draw out the symbolism. So the earth of Hufflepuff becomes the water of the tarot. Slytherin would transform from water to earth, and Gryffindor and Ravenclaw could reverse as well."

"Why did you choose this one?"

"It's the only one where most of the house symbols are on the same card. He tends to see symbolism on the surface rather than digging deep. Look at this one." Snape took back the two and laid down the Magician. "The guide, the leader, the beginning of a new order, the One who merges the energy of heaven and earth. Also the only one with all the symbols of the suits on it: Wands, Swords, Cups, and Coins. And there's a snake, the Worm Ouroboros, the symbol of eternity. And the lemniscate, the symbol of infinity. So if we look at the two of cups and the Magician together, the cup is Hufflepuff, making the coin Slytherin. If Gryffindor and Ravenclaw also switch, then Gryffindor is the sword, and Ravenclaw is the wand. Tell me if this makes any sense to you, because I'm just fooling around with the symbols."

"Actually, it does. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. The original card was much less flattering. The magician was originally a charlatan, a mountebank, trickster, and con artist who deceived by slight of hand. The symbols were just the props of his trade, no eternity or infinity. But the lemniscate was sort of there. It was a large, floppy hat."

"That give us a lot of potential items, does it not?"

"Swords, cups, money, anything inscribed with a pentacle, wands, staffs, snakes, the caduceus — pendants, rings, or anything shaped like or inscribed with any of the above — and hats. Shall I continue with this line of investigation, or are you quite fed up?"

"By all means continue, Severus. It has given me much to think about."

"What exactly am I looking for, sir?"

"Best you not know. That way your insight is not overly restricted or influenced by preconceptions."

Snape collected his cards and went to his own place at the table, allowing a greatly relieved Slughorn to move next to Dumbledore. Since he and Dumbledore had spoken below the level of a whisper, no one in the hall would have heard them. Only McGonagall had a chance to see the cards, but she was talking to Sprout. There are times when actions performed in the midst of a crowd can be the most private.

For the next few days, Snape was reasonably content. There is a lot to be said for reasonable contentedness. By the end of the week, of course, reality set in, propelled by Horace Slughorn.

"We have an entire shipment — a case lot — of flobberworms. Someone has to store them."

"I am sorry, Minerva, I'm not the Potions instructor anymore. Have you spoken to Professor Slughorn about this?"

"Of course I have!" McGonagall seemed positively apoplectic. "He says I should put the crate in the fountain court until he has the time!"

"Then maybe you should."

"Severus Snape, you irritating young whippersnapper! You may think that the loss of two hundred sixty-three galleons worth of flobberworms is nothing, but I assure you . . ."

"I'll take care of it, Minerva."

It was shortly thereafter that both salvation and retribution entered in the unexpected person of a Gryffindor student named Demelza Robins. She conveyed a message from Slughorn himself requesting that one Harry Potter be released from detention in order to attend a Slughorn *soirée* that evening.

Load me with your work and then ask for favors? And not even have the courtesy to come yourself? It was with great pleasure that Snape sent back word to Slughorn that Potter would not be excused — he would be helping to sort and store Slughorn's flobberworms.

“Oh,” said Snape as Robins turned to go, “and we have plenty of protective gloves. Let Potter know he doesn’t have to bring his own.”

The same Saturday, after he and Potter finished with the flobberworms, Snape apparated to Lancashire. Following an exquisitely pleasant evening home alone, Snape retired to bed, slept in, and then planned his Sunday over a leisurely breakfast.

The point was, of course, that everything was closed on Sundays—the Public Record Office, National Archives, and Family Records Centre at the top of the list. It was the simplest of maneuvers for Snape to apparate in, disable the motion sensors and cameras, and have the entirety of British public records to himself.

Snape, never having been moved to investigate his own family, was forced to stumble his way through the morass of records. One of the first things he discovered was that Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff were not family names. They, in fact, preceded most family names by about three to four hundred years, and noble family names by a century. The surnames of the famous founders of Hogwarts were nicknames only, not necessarily received from parents, nor necessarily passed on to offspring.

Another shock was that the word ‘ancient’ when applied to Rome and Greece meant a period over two thousand years in the past, but when applied to British families meant anything prior to the Restoration of Charles II in 1660.

Which, of course, explains why today there are no wizarding families that bear the names of the founders. And any actual genealogical connection is based on hearsay. Someone told the visitors in 1667 that family tradition maintained a direct link to Godric Gryffindor over sixteen generations. But the actual documentary proof is a tad lacking.

By the end of a long and trying day, Snape had only a few unsatisfactory pieces of information: that Humphrey, grandson of John of Gaunt had, around 1434, married his former mistress Eleanor Cobham, daughter of Reynold Cobham, son of Reynold Cobham of Kent, subsequent to which her witch identity had been revealed, and that around a hundred years earlier Sir Hugh Peverell of Devonshire had married Elizabeth Cobham, daughter of John Cobham of Devonshire, son of James Cobham of Hoo, Kent.

It was the only connection between the name Gaunt and Peverell that Snape was to find for quite some time.

That evening Snape apparated early to headquarters so that he could sneak in a dinner at a local Pakistani restaurant. He then spent the rest of

his time with potions and medicines before he had to apparate back to Hogwarts.

On Monday morning, Snape stopped Dumbledore in the entrance hall. Something had been nagging at him for a week, and he'd remembered what it was.

"Can we speak outside for a moment, Headmaster?"

When they were far enough out onto the lawn that they could not be overheard, Snape stopped. Speaking of the headquarters of the Order wasn't possible in a crowd, however quiet one tried to be.

"Is Grimmauld Place secure, sir?"

"I believe it is. Is there a reason you might think otherwise?"

"One of our people bought a knickknack from a peddler, and Bella claimed it was a family possession. It didn't occur to me earlier, but now I wonder if the things he was selling came out of headquarters. I really don't think we should use the building anymore in any case..."

"Why not?"

"Everybody knows where it is. All the upper echelon used to visit the house socially, and Bella would like to move in now that Sirius is dead. The fact that none of them can any longer find the actual building is a dead giveaway. That means that anyone inside is safe, but people arriving and departing are not. They even tried to kidnap Sirius in the square outside, remember? And now, if someone has access to go in and steal things..." Snape suddenly had to suppress an image of Phina's face that rose unbidden at the memory of the botched operation. He turned to look down the hill.

"I recall, Severus. The information is valuable and the advice sound, as always. I shall keep the matter under consideration. No decision about the place has yet been made. Thank you."

* * *

Dumbledore was now gone most of the time. It made little difference to the day-to-day running of the school, which proceeded normally, although there were a few oddities that stood out. One was that Slughorn seemed to feel that Potter was an excellent Potions student.

"Wonderful boy. Takes after his mother in that, I'd say. Seems to have an instinctive grasp of the subject." Slughorn accepted a cup of tea from Sprout in the teachers' staff room.

"I don't recall your ever mentioning Potter's talent, Severus," said Sprout.

"He never dignified to reveal it to me. Are those pumpkin-chocolate chip cookies? May I?"

"Will you look at the sky! There's a storm brewing, I'm sure. Pity that tomorrow's the Hogsmeade outing. The poor students will be drenched. And frozen."

"I notice, Pomona, that you have no such sympathy for me, who must also be out in the wet and the cold shepherding them."

"You're going into Hogsmeade, Severus?" Slughorn commented. "What an excellent opportunity to chat with the students in a relaxed, social atmosphere!"

"Right, Professor. I'm going to chat. Never pass up an opportunity to chat with students, I say."

Sprout was fizzing into her tea, but Slughorn seemed to take Snape's words seriously. "I know this is an imposition on your own enjoyment of the day, Severus, but would you be willing to trade duties with me? I'm supposed to stay here and supervise the first and second years. It's been a while since I was able to visit Hogsmeade."

"I don't know . . . That trip to Hogsmeade means a lot to me. I am so looking forward to discussing the upcoming Quidditch season with Ron Weasley over butterbeers . . ."

Snape would have continued and extorted a favor from Slughorn, but Sprout was turning purple, a phenomenon that would soon tip Slughorn off to what he was doing. Better to concede defeat gracefully than to be caught in a subterfuge.

"But it is your first trip in what . . . fifteen years? Far be it from me to spoil the day for you. I would be happy to exchange the duty and let you go into Hogsmeade tomorrow."

Which was why Snape was still in the Great Hall the following afternoon, finishing a leisurely game of cribbage with Flitwick, when Hagrid burst into the entrance hall and charged up the staircase to the hospital with a student in his arms, bellowing at the top of his lungs, "Snape! Someone get Snape up to Pomfrey! She's been cursed!"

Snape was up and out of the Great Hall in an instant, taking the stairs two at a time to catch up with Hagrid. The student, Bell from Gryffindor, was levitating and convulsing, her body racked with strange spasms that made it difficult for Pomfrey and Hagrid to hold her down and strap her to a bed where they would be able to treat her more easily.

"What caused it?" was Snape's first question.

"Don't know," said Hagrid. "Couple of students was running for the castle as I were going down the hill. They grabbed me and took me to her. She were like this there in the road."

"How high?"

"'Bout six feet."

"Point of contact?"

"Hand, seems like."

Pomfrey was already stripping off the girl's gloves, and Snape seized a tourniquet from the supply cabinet. The contact point was a small spot of skin that was exposed by a hole in the glove. The spot itself was already mortifying, and purple streaks were spreading from it through the capillary system and into the veins of the hand and arm. Snape wrapped the tourniquet near the elbow and tightened it.

"Will that work?" Pomfrey asked. "It looks like it's already spread through her body."

"Nervous system first. That's causing the convulsions." Snape was putting on protective gloves and selecting a tiny knife and a small basin from the instrument drawer. "Now it's entering the bloodstream. That'll kill her. Lucky it was just a small spot, or it would've spread too quickly to stop. She'd already be dead."

As he talked, Snape lanced the contact point and allowed the contaminated blood to flow into the basin. "Get gloves on yourselves. No one comes near this basin that isn't protected. We're going to have to destroy it, the knife, and the gloves before we're finished. Get St. Mungo's. I can only administer first aid. They have the equipment and medicine to treat her. Hagrid, hold this basin."

Hagrid monitored the seepage of blood from Bell's hand while Snape took his wand and began a low chant around the area of the wrist. McGonagall entered the hospital then, and Pomfrey, having already passed on the medical particulars, turned over to her the business of admitting a team from St. Mungo's, while she helped Snape with the chanting to slow the progress of the poison.

The team arrived and took Bell to London. One of the medics also took the basin of blood to be analyzed, sealing it in a gelatin-like substance to avoid any accidents in transit.

"Will you be needing the thing that caused it?" McGonagall asked. "I have it here."

"No, Professor," the medic answered. "We've got what we need. We're

a hospital. The artifact analysis should be done by the Ministry. We'll be mentioning in our report that it's here."

The first thing the Hogwarts staff did was place the knife and the gloves in a special metal box built through the wall of the hospital wing and incinerate them. Then they put the small bundle McGonagall carried into a small wooden container to ensure none of them touched it.

"How did you get it?"

"The other students gave it to me. I'll be taking statements from all of them as to what happened." McGonagall looked simultaneously angry and frightened.

"At least they had the sense not to try to touch it." Snape gingerly unwrapped the cloth that held the object. It was a necklace. A beautiful necklace of gold and opals. "I know this. It's been for sale at Borgin and Burke's for years. It was still there this summer."

"And what, laddie, were you doing in a place like that this summer?"

"A fine expert in Dark Arts I'd be if I didn't visit Knockturn Alley from time to time. It's a constantly changing market. You have to know what's out there. This one's killed before."

"How do you know?"

"It said so on the sign in the shop. It'd already killed nineteen muggles, or something like that. It cost a huge amount of money, too. Fifteen hundred galleons."

"Why would someone rich enough to buy it want to hurt someone like Katie Bell?" Pomfrey looked around at the other three, clearly mystified.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "The other students said she was going to give it to someone in the castle. They thought perhaps she was under an Imperius curse."

The room seemed suddenly cold to Snape. "Who were the other students?" he asked.

"Potter, Weasley, and Granger."

"They were close enough to witness this?"

"To hear the conversation between Katie and Leanne just before Katie touched the necklace."

"So Bell would probably have seen them, too?"

"Certainly."

"Minerva, when is Professor Dumbledore coming back? I need to talk to him."

"I assume you've already spoken at some length with Professor McGonagall." Snape said as he walked later into Dumbledore's office.

"And with Madam Pomfrey, yes. Madam Pomfrey is, incidentally, extremely pleased that you have the Dark Arts position. She respects your expertise and feels that you respect hers."

"That is kind of her. It's hard to be familiar with Madam Pomfrey's skill over a period of two and a half decades and not be in awe of her."

"Now what is your assessment of these recent events, Severus?"

"I refuse to kill you."

"Severus?"

"Not only that, I refuse to kill anyone right now."

"I beg your pardon? I mean I am pleased to hear that but . . ." The sight of Snape's raised hand had its effect, and Dumbledore was silent for a moment.

Snape sighed, then walked over to the cabinet where Dumbledore kept his mead and poured himself a glass. "There's a question answered," he said.

"You know one of the most irritating things about you is that you assume others should know what you are thinking. What question has been answered?"

"The Vow. Malfoy has a task to perform that is so immense that the Dark Lord himself has failed at it, and so dangerous that Narcissa is sure that the Dark Lord intends him to die. We knew it wasn't information gathering. It had to be kidnapping, or murder, or something similar. I'll agree it's murder now, because the necklace was intended to kill. There couldn't be a misunderstanding because it was advertised as a killing necklace in Borgin and Burke's.

"I know the objections, sir. How can we be certain it was Malfoy? Yet the chances of two different people having expensive and powerful plots to harm or kill someone in Hogwarts at the same time is extremely small. I know Malfoy was in the castle under detention. He found some way around it.

"I think it's clear now that Malfoy is under orders to kill someone at Hogwarts. He purchased the necklace and arranged a way that a totally innocent student could be placed under an Imperius curse to deliver the necklace to its victim. His plan was foiled because his unaware agent accidentally touched the necklace and was cursed herself.

"The intended victim could not have been Potter. Potter was a few yards from Bell on the road back to Hogwarts, and she could have given it to him there. She didn't. She didn't care that he was there. Who else at Hogwarts

has the Dark Lord himself tried and failed to kill? You. The necklace was intended for you. Much as I hate to admit it, you were right all along. Malfoy's mission is to kill you."

Dumbledore nodded in acknowledgment of the analysis, but waited patiently for more. Snape, too, waited, then continued when it was clear Dumbledore wished to hear everything before commenting.

"The third part of the Unbreakable Vow," Snape continued, "is that I would carry out the deed that Draco failed to accomplish. Well, he's failed to accomplish it, and I've announced that I will not fulfill it, and I'm still alive. I would say there's reason to suspect we do have a loophole here."

"Excellent. Very nicely analyzed. I must admit that I am relieved to have it confirmed that I am the target. Better me than another teacher or student. So he has tried and failed, and you are still alive. Maybe this means that Draco has a time frame in which to complete his task. When his time expires, then you die. Maybe it means that as long as Draco still believes he can succeed, we have not reached the point of 'fail.' You need to watch out for yourself. This could jump out at you at any moment."

"Whatever the loophole may be, Headmaster, I am quite certain on one point. I'm not going to kill you to complete Malfoy's task."

"You have already agreed to it for quite different reasons. I fail to see how the possibility of helping Draco would cause you to change your mind. I would feel more comfortable if you would agree to abide by my assessment of the situation should we come to a point where immediate decision is necessary."

"Are you asking for an Unbreakable Vow?"

"I would never ask for such a thing."

"Then I agree to abide by your decision."

The following day, Snape left word for Malfoy that he wanted to speak with him in Snape's office at lunch time. Malfoy didn't appear. Instead he sent a message via Crabbe to the effect that he was not feeling well and had gone to the hospital wing to have Madam Pomfrey look at him. Knowing that Malfoy would do precisely that, Snape didn't even bother to check.

Whether his illness is real or a ruse is irrelevant. He'd find out that I didn't trust him and do his best to avoid me even more. Best wait until there's a pattern he can't deny. Assuming, of course, that he continues to avoid me.

At Birmingham, Bella started to get pushy. During Snape's Sunday trip down, she spied him in the cafeteria having tea and a scone in a corner, and

slipped into the seat across from him. "You used to be a friend of my cousin Regulus, didn't you?"

"We were schoolmates. And colleagues. Do you think it's wise to bring this up here?"

"Ancient history, puppy dog. Did you ever visit him at home?"

"Someone like me? Knowing your aunt as well as you must, you can't possibly think I'd be welcome there."

"You could have passed for pureblood if Regulus was willing to lie for you. Come now, you must have known something of his family, his home life . . . What was the address of that house now? It seems to have slipped my mind."

"I'm sure I couldn't say."

"And I'd be willing to bet galleons to knuts that's the literal truth. You couldn't — not even if you wanted to. You couldn't say. You couldn't draw it on a map. You couldn't take me there. And that, puppy dog, is the most valuable piece of information I've ever gotten from you."

"Come now Bella, do you think I've forgotten the little side action you initiated back before summer started? None of this is new."

"Oh, yes. Poor Phina. Poor, poor Phina. Do you think about her, puppy dog? Do you lie awake at night whispering her name into your pillow? Do you regret those hours you might have spent with her and didn't?"

"Do you have a point?"

"Someone is stealing what belongs to me. Stealing it out of that house — my house. Under the circumstances, I think I'm justified in thinking this someone works for Dumbledore. Your precious headmaster abets thieves. Now, Mr. Spy-in-the-Enemy's-Camp, I know you can't tell me where, but you can certainly tell me who. And if you can't, the Dark Lord may be interested in learning why not. After all, what possible reason would you have for concealing that name . . . unless it was a question of your own personal loyalty?"

"I don't know who it is, Bella."

"Find out."

Bella rose to leave. Just as she stepped away, she turned to face Snape again, as if remembering something that was of marginal importance. "Oh, yes. Leave my nephew alone. He has enough to worry about without being harassed by you."

"I believe his mother is still his legal guardian. Only her wishes and instructions carry any weight with the school."

"I'm not talking about the school. I'm talking about you."

"Are you contemplating taking this issue before the Dark Lord as well?"

Bella glared at Snape, snarling in anger. Then she swept out of the room, leaving him to ponder the dilemma she'd given him.

She can't go to the Dark Lord about Draco without revealing Narcissa's indiscretion. But she can undermine me with this theft business. Something else to discuss with Dumbledore.

* * *

"Do you think this could seriously compromise your position?" Dumbledore sat calmly at his desk as Snape poked, prodded, and manipulated his right hand. "How does it look?"

"As well as could be expected, I suppose, considering the power of the curse still affecting it. Your fingers wiggle, you feel pinpricks, heat, and cold. The neural system is still there—both sensory and motor control. And the good thing about the tissue damage..."

"It is quite comforting to know there is something good about it."

"Yes. Well, the good thing is that the tissue, for all its blackened appearance, doesn't seem to be dead. It's been four months, and it hasn't sloughed off. It'll never be what it was before you behaved in such a foolish manner, but I'm beginning to think you might have more than a year left. I certainly am not going to number the days until your demise."

"I look forward to living a while longer then, in anticipation of the day when..." Dumbledore chuckled. "I will be able to play the violin?"

Snape glared at Dumbledore. "If you think I'm biting on that one, you're sadly mistaken."

"That is the trouble with wizards who have muggle experience. They have heard all the jokes. Now Arthur Weasley would have walked right into it without the slightest suspicion... What about my other question?"

"It depends on how desperate or angry Bella gets. The names of people who go into headquarters aren't covered by the Fidelius Charm, so finding out the name is a performable task. The Dark Lord will believe that I didn't want to accommodate or take orders from Bella, but he would not accept that I couldn't give him a name if he asked for it."

"And if I were Riddle, I would assume that pure curiosity would lead you to investigate, even if you did not already know. So if you could not tell him when asked, it would be a grave matter."

“Very appropriate choice of words.”

“Not intentional, I assure you. When do you go south next?”

“Saturday. After the Quidditch match. I’m doing some more research, and I’ll go to headquarters Sunday.”

There was a long pause as Snape watched Dumbledore deliberate. Finally, “If you were trying to find out the name for curiosity’s sake, how would you go about it?”

“Logically,” Snape replied, “methodically. Like everything else.”

“I suggest you do that, then. I do not think it would be right for me to give you the name. The person in question has gone into hiding. I shall get word out that it may become more dangerous.”

“Thank you, Headmaster.”

* * *

A she-wolf with bubble gum-pink fur loped along Oxford street in the rain singing, ‘I feel pretty, oh so pretty...’ She stopped when she saw him. ‘Do you feel pretty, too?’ When he was silent, she added, ‘It’s on the application form, you know.’

He shook his head. ‘I’ve never been pretty.’

‘Not be,’ the she-wolf laughed, ‘feel. You have to feel. Feel pretty. Who’s the pretty girl in the mirror there...’ She turned to continue down Cromwell Road, which he recognized because the Natural History Museum was to the left. ‘You can apply now,’ she said in parting. ‘They left you a puppy.’

There was a little pen of puppies outside Imperial College, and he stood in the queue waiting his turn. Everyone, it seemed, wanted a puppy, and he was afraid they would all be given away before he got to the front of the queue. ‘Name?’ they asked him when he finally made it.

‘Russ,’ he replied.

They handed him a puppy with russet fur, which he carried gingerly to the doors into the college. ‘Name?’ he was again asked.

‘Russ.’

‘Not you. The puppy.’

‘I don’t know its name,’ he admitted.

‘You can’t bring it in if you don’t know its name.’

He looked around to see if there was anyone who could help him. Sirius was there, inside the doors, and beside him was a delicate silver doe. ‘Do you know the name?’ he called.

'What will you give me if I tell you?' Sirius called back.

'Anything.'

'Then it must be valuable.'

Sirius was suddenly gone and Snape was staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, breathing hard as if he'd been running. *Nymphadora's patronus has changed to a wolf. Is that because she's fallen in love with Remus? Potter's patronus is a stag. Was that his father's, too? Does that mean the doe is...? But if so, why now? I don't feel any...*

He stopped, pushing the thought behind locks and wards, for the voice of the bubble gum-pink wolf echoed in his brain — *You have to feel. It's on the application form, you know.*

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - E I G H T

ANSWERS AND MORE QUESTIONS

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 1996 (MOON AT LAST QUARTER)

The first Saturday in November dawned chill but sunny, with the pale, cold sun of the north as winter neared. Perfect Quidditch weather. Everything seemed normal as Snape made his way to the Slytherin changing room. The new announcer was Smith from Hufflepuff. *I thought he was one of Hufflepuff's Chasers. Who's going to announce when Hufflepuff plays? Well, at least it should be more pleasant than having to listen to a blatantly partisan Gryffindor announcer.*

Then the Slytherin team came into the changing room, and Snape's eyes widened in surprise. He was expecting the new Chaser, since Vaisey 'd been injured in practice the day before, but now Malfoy wasn't there either. "Why the change in lineup?" he asked quietly, and Urquhart, the new team captain, shrugged.

"Malfoy's sick today. We just replaced him with Harper."

"Very well. You should clear it with me ahead of time, though. I'm going up to the castle to see if Malfoy's all right. You have a good game. Keep Weasley off balance and Potter away from the Snitch and we should be fine. Good luck."

For some reason, Snape knew that Malfoy wasn't really sick, so he wasn't surprised that the only Slytherin player in the hospital wing was Vaisey. He then hurried down to Slytherin house, but Malfoy was in neither the common room nor his own dormitory. Worried now, Snape started a search of the whole castle, certain that Malfoy was taking advantage of the fact that everyone was watching the game to further his own plans with regard to the Dark Lord's task.

There was no sign of Malfoy anywhere on the grounds. Snape started back to the Quidditch pitch just as the cheers and screams of the crowd announced that the game was over. He hurried down the hill, passing Filch going the other way. A moment later he saw Malfoy near the Slytherin stands. *What's he doing out here?*

Before he could speak to Malfoy, Snape was distracted by a crash and the sound of splintering wood. He made for the scene immediately, to find that one of the Gryffindor players had crashed into the announcer's booth. Smith had fallen with the impact and lay on the ground, covered by wood. Sprout had hurried over as well. McGonagall was headed onto the field to accost the guilty party.

Snape sent another Hufflepuff team member, up the hill to alert Madam Pomfrey while Sprout attended to her fallen student. Smith was dazed, and had received several cuts in the fall. It also looked as if he would develop some bad bruises.

Sprout was livid. "Idiot Gryffindors! If she doesn't take at least fifty points from them and put that crazy fool on a month of detention, I'm going to Dumbledore! That house is a menace to the whole school!"

Flitwick came over then to see if he could help. Together the three teachers got Smith onto a stretcher and started to move him away from the pitch. McGonagall joined them, and Sprout turned on her to vent her wrath.

"When are you going to start controlling those hooligans of yours! They could have killed him, crashing into the booth like that! I've half a mind to demand that Gryffindor be disqualified for the whole season. Blatant, unwarranted, vicious, irresponsible..."

"I am so sorry, Pomona. I'm afraid she was upset by his announcing. She felt it was unfair to the team and especially to her brother."

The other three teachers regarded McGonagall in silence for a moment. Finally Flitwick spoke up. "So now they know how we felt all those years with Lee Jordan announcing. I don't recall that anyone on our teams ever attacked Jordan."

Snape nodded in agreement. "You have to admit, Minerva, Gryffindor is the most violent house in the school. None of the other houses resort to physical attacks with either the frequency or the brutality of Gryffindor. You lost your Seeker and both your Beaters last year because of violence."

McGonagall seemed surprised at the unity of the other three heads of houses. "That was Umbridge trying to..."

"No, Minerva," said Flitwick. "That was Potter and the Weasley twins

responding to heckling by beating up Malfoy. They need to learn that you react to words with words, not with fists, and not by endangering lives and health.”

Looking over at the stretcher, which Sprout was again moving up the hill, McGonagall nodded. “I’ve already taken the points from them. The girl will go on detention for a while. I hope the boy is all right.”

“I think it’s all minor damage,” said Snape, “though I’ll feel better after Pomfrey’s had a look at him.”

It was only at supper that Snape realized he’d been so distracted that he’d forgotten to ask Malfoy where he’d been and why he couldn’t play. *It will have to wait until Monday, I suppose.*

As soon as the crowd of students began to leave the Great Hall, and the teachers made sure that no one from Hufflepuff was going to take issue with the behavior of Gryffindor and start a fight, Snape returned to his office to gather a few things and then leave for Lancashire.

Once again, it was a very enjoyable evening. Snape browsed through his great-grandfather’s collection of grimoires and histories, looking for every mention of specific artifacts and noting them down. He was particularly interested in the items that corresponded to those on the tarot card, but did not overlook the possibility that his assessment had been in error.

Snape also made a list of everyone he could recall having met at Twelve Grimmauld Place. If the Dark Lord was going to ask him for a name, he wanted to be sure he could at least narrow the list down, to show he’d been working on the problem. When he concentrated on the first couple of times he’d ever gone to the house, it suddenly hit him, and he was surprised he hadn’t thought of it at once.

Mundungus Fletcher. He’s a member of the Order. If anyone in that group is a thief by vocation, it’s Mundungus. You’d better hope Mr. Fletcher, that the Dark Lord never asks, because yours is the name I’ll have to give him. Pay attention to Dumbledore’s warnings, and stay hidden.

The next morning, Snape again apparated to various archives around the country, looking for anything that might tie families to artifacts and anyone to the names Gaunt and Peverell. He didn’t bother with anything recent, assuming Dumbledore had that already covered, focusing instead on the earlier information — nearer to the time of the founders themselves.

It was a thoroughly confusing day. Snape spent hours trying to make sense of all the Williams, Hughs, Roberts, Adelizas and Margarets, not helped by the fact that the documents were mutually contradictory. Or maybe it was

just gaps in the records that made it look contradictory. Nothing profitable had come out of the day.

The one thing that attracted Snape was the coat of arms said to belong to Peverell of Nottingham and Peverell of Devon. Looking remarkably like the arms of the Earls of Chester, it had three gold sheaves of wheat on a blue background, surmounted by a horizontal gold bar.

What was intriguing was that the bundled wheat sheaves reminded Snape of the sign hanging outside the ‘Three Broomsticks’ inn in Hogsmeade, as if the wheat was intended to represent broom heads, or the brooms intended to be sheaves.

There was not time to think about it now, however, since he was due at headquarters. Folding a copy he’d made of the shield and putting it in a pocket, Snape apparated to Birmingham.

The laboratory was a mess. Cupboards and drawers were open and their contents disarranged. The cabinets had been emptied and refilled haphazardly. Beakers were disordered as if shoved aside in a search. Yaxley appeared right behind Snape, clearly having watched for his arrival. “Bella,” was all he said.

Without a word, Snape turned and rushed downstairs, putting in a request to speak with the Dark Lord and waiting, angry and agitated, in the antechamber. After a few minutes, Bella joined him. They did not greet each other. Half an hour later, they were admitted.

“You have a complaint, Potions master.”

“Lord, my laboratory has been invaded and my work ruined. Ingredients and materials are scattered all over the place . . .”

“Is anything missing?”

“I don’t know, Lord. I’ll have to do a full inventory. It will take hours.”

“How has your work been ruined.”

“Potions were brewing that should not have been disturbed. Temperatures that needed to be exactly maintained dropped. The potions are ruined, I can tell by the colors. Why was this permitted?”

Snape gasped as pain suddenly licked the edges of his brain. “Do you question our orders?”

“No, Lord.”

“Our head of Field Operations expressed concern that there was an area within this building that was accessible to only one person. She had cause to believe there were things brewing there that had not been authorized. We permitted the security sweep.”

“Did she find anything unauthorized, Lord?” Snape looked directly at Bella as he asked the question.

“No, she did not.”

“Lord, I have several weeks of work that has to be redone. Some of it was for the clinic, to use specifically with field operatives that are injured. Will Field Operations now accuse me of withholding medicines they need for a cause that was beyond my control?”

It was Bella’s turn to gasp, and she quickly replied, “No, Lord. We won’t hold him responsible.”

“Lord, give me permission to seal the laboratory so that only I can enter.”

“How will you do this?”

“I don’t know yet. I need to experiment with shielding. Lord, I would bring the spell to you before using it.”

Bella burst out angrily, “That means no one would have access while he’s at Hogwarts! What if we need the things inside?”

“What if Yaxley could also enter, and could control the shielding?”

“You have our permission.”

A few minutes later Snape told Yaxley what they had to do. Yaxley was skeptical. “How do you make a shield only two people can go through?”

“I don’t know, but I need to try.” *If Hogwarts can do it with owls, I can do it here.*

* * *

Snape sat in a comfortable chair in Dumbledore’s office, staring into a goblet of mead.

“The problem is, none of it fits. The whole story of the founding of Hogwarts is unraveling in a morass of anachronisms. I was always told, at least by the teachers here, that Hogwarts was around a thousand years old—more now—but I don’t see how that’s possible. Did you know that ‘slithering’ was Anglo-Saxon for ‘cruel man,’ but that Salazar is a surname from northwest Spain that didn’t exist until several centuries later?”

“I can appreciate where that would hamper your research.”

“I thought maybe it could be a later corruption of a similar-sounding name, so I even managed to find out that Sal-asaru is Anglo-Saxon for rope or necklace of hazelwort, and since hazelwort is also called snakeroot, it seemed appropriate, but that really is stretching things.”

“I see . . .”

"And then it's almost impossible to tell when the other two families, Peverell and Gaunt, enter the picture. If the thousand years is true, then the castle could have been started as early as Malcolm I or as late as Kenneth II here in Scotland, which in England would be anywhere from the reign of Edmund I to Ethelred the Unready. But even Ethelred died a good half century before the Conquest."

"And this is important because..."

"Both Peverell and Gaunt become established under William the Conqueror. Peverell is from western Normandy and Gaunt from Belgium. How they may have married into the families of any of the founders has so far escaped my investigations."

"Ah, well. Not a lot to go on."

"Rowena Ravenclaw is an interesting one. 'Hraefn-clawu' means not only raven claw, but crab claw as well, so I'm also taking the tarot card of the Moon and the sign of Cancer into consideration. She came up with the idea of a constantly changing floor plan, you know. If there was any place in the castle that continuously changed, it would probably have been initiated by her. Do you know of such a place?"

"I may have heard of one. I shall have to check it out."

"It would help if I knew what I was looking for..."

"Ah, Severus. If we always knew what we would find, life would become very dull."

"I just want to go in the right direction."

"You are doing quite well, actually."

Snape glared at Dumbledore for a moment. "There is an unrelated problem. I need to know how you let the owls in."

"Through the defenses? The shields are calibrated to their bio-signs."

"Which are isolated how?"

"Well, until the early 1990s we used a crude physiological calibration, but now we employ a non-Mendelian DNA sequence..."

Snape rolled his eyes ceilingwards. "Sir, how do you know so much and so little at the same time?"

"I beg your pardon?" Dumbledore peered over his glasses.

"We adjust the shields using mitochondrial DNA, but you don't know who John of Gaunt was."

"I look into what is useful to me at the moment. I do not need John of Gaunt on a day to day basis. I need DNA. You have no idea how long it took us to discover that muggle scientists already had the information we

needed to adjust the shields. This is why I need you. You have a background in muggle knowledge that will help you find these things faster. I would never have thought to look for Kenneth II or Ethelred the Unready.”

“Remind me again. What do you need?”

“Artifacts and other trivia about the founders, and their relationship to other families, especially Gaunt and Peverell.”

“I’ll keep looking.”

The DNA part was relatively easy. Genetics was one of the things that had fascinated Snape as a schoolboy, and he’d kept up on its advances over the years. Yaxley wasn’t too sure about taking tissue scrapings from inside his mouth, but relaxed when Snape showed him it was just a little swab that didn’t hurt at all.

The tests took a few weeks, but with a mind spell or two they were at least at the head of the line. Meanwhile the two started testing ways to calibrate a shield.

With the permission of the Dark Lord, they did most of the testing in Snape’s own home, using the back storage area/potions lab. It was smaller than the one at headquarters, but otherwise similar, being also on an upper floor. The shield had to surround the room, but allow others to work unhindered in adjacent areas.

Snape realized immediately that there was more than DNA involved. Owls didn’t wear clothing. Whoever passed through the shield had to do so fully clothed and possibly carrying items. Recalibrating was a cumbersome business that required them to remove the entire shield and replace it.

“If we do that, we might just as well have a simple shield that we raise and lower at need, but I don’t want that. I want one where I can enter the lab and the person walking beside me can’t.”

Yaxley nodded, knowing full well who the person walking beside Snape was likely to be, and not wanting her around either. “Tossing something through the door isn’t likely to hurt much, is it?” he asked.

“Not unless it’s a bomb, in which case we’d have a lot more to worry about than a laboratory.”

“So we can let objects through, just not people or spells?”

That, of course, made the task easier. Snape regarded Yaxley for a moment. “Why did they remove you from the Cardiff branch anyway?”

“Bella convinced the Dark Lord that my heart wasn’t in the work. The numbers supported her interpretation. Besides, they wanted something to

give to Rabastan, and he wanted Glasgow. Nott was willing to support Bella against Malfoy, so they moved me out and him in.”

“The sons aren’t friendly at Hogwarts. Now I know why.”

“You never were very involved in the politics of headquarters, were you? Always up at Hogwarts, or messing around in the lab, or giving defense lessons. You taught me back in the old days. Just a boy you were then.”

“I hope it did you some good.”

“Got me out of a tight spot so I wasn’t around when Bella was looking for a team to go after the Longbottoms. I didn’t have a chance before to thank you for that.”

“Don’t mention it. Glad I could be of help.”

With regard to his outside research, Snape decided to concentrate on the family of Hugh Peverell of Devon. Devon was, after all, the home county of a high percentage of Britain’s wizards. Ottery St. Catchpole was in Devon, home of Weasleys, Lovegoods, and a plethora of others. Godric’s Hollow itself was not far from them. Devon seemed a likely candidate for further study.

November passed slowly, a frustrating and fragmented month. At headquarters, Snape was constantly busy in the laboratory as Field Operations kept up a steady series of attacks across the Midlands. Bella was in her stride now, ringing up success after success in a string of small but tactically valuable raids against the Dark Lord’s enemies. The Ministry under Scrimgeour seemed powerless to respond. *The Daily Prophet* announced arrests, and brought great glee to headquarters in doing so, for none of the named arrestees were actually Death Eaters. The fact that the failures came during the watch of Scrimgeour, a man Snape disliked intensely, was the only good thing about it.

Recruitment was up, too. More and more of the marginal wizard families, those who had never benefited from the policies of the Ministry and who resented the prosperity of their muggle neighbors, were coming into the Dark Lord’s ranks. Enough, in fact to form new cells in Hampshire and Leicestershire.

This turned out to be a good thing on a personal level because the Dark Lord sent Fenrir Greyback out to proselytize among the werewolves. Lunches in the cafeteria were much more pleasant without the prospect of Greyback’s loud, crude voice or the wet-dog scent that permeated the air where he was.

Life at Hogwarts was something of a juggling act, as Snape was doing

the jobs of one and a half professors. The Dark Arts curriculum had not been taught properly since . . . Snape hated to admit it, but not since Quirrell had taught the course. The students Snape inherited from Lockhart, Lupin, Crouch, and Umbridge were a spotty group across the board — very knowledgeable about some things and woefully deficient in others. Snape frequently had to go back to the very basics, even with his NEWT classes, in order to proceed with the course material.

Then there was Slughorn, who was continually asking Snape to do something for him. Slughorn seemed to feel that the fact that Snape remained in the office near the Potions classroom meant that Snape was Slughorn's errand boy. Snape was repeatedly promising himself that he would fling the next request back into Slughorn's face, but then he would watch the enormous Potions master huff and puff up the stairs to his own rooms and would relent. *If I made him do all his own work, he'd have a heart attack within a week.*

Meanwhile his other research led Snape to stories of swords and hats, of belts, capes, rings, wands, lockets, bracelets, gloves, books, and furniture. Most of the claims of authenticity of these reputed artifacts of the founders had already been proven false, but others were still possible. Snape deeply regretted that Ollivander was not available, for if anyone knew the whereabouts of the founders' wands it was him. And Fortescue's knowledge of medieval history would have been invaluable. Dumbledore was of no assistance either, for Dumbledore was absent from Hogwarts most of the time now.

The most disturbing thing, however, were the thoughts that seemed to bubble up, unbidden, from the depths of Snape's mind. Thoughts about Phina and Sirius and Potter, but mostly thoughts about Lily.

It has to be her patronus. It has to be. 'Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs.' Everyone thought they were just silly nicknames, but they were the animagus forms. Lupin's a werewolf, Pettigrew's a rat, Sirius was a dog . . . prongs are the antlers of a stag, and Potter's patronus is a stag, so that would have been James's patronus, too. If Lily's was a doe, it must mean her feelings for James . . . Whenever he reached this point, Snape began to shut down automatically. The dangers of walking that path were too great, and Snape was beginning to hate the form his patronus had taken.

The other train of thought was equally distressing. Why now? Nothing in his relationship to Lily's memory had changed. The dream voice of the pink she-wolf taunted him — *'Not be. Feel! I don't want to feel. Everyone I feel something for dies. Not only can't I stop it, I'm the one that makes it happen. I*

took Narcissa to Nana's home. I gave the prophecy to the Dark Lord. I told Sirius of my suspicions about Potter's destination . . . Snape forced himself to think of Sirius's face in the green flames that night. It's all right. I didn't want him dead. At least I don't bear that burden. It's because Sirius felt things too strongly. This 'love' is a dangerous thing.

There was one thing he could do for the memory of Lily and Sirius. It was a thing he'd promised Dumbledore long before, under duress — a duty, a charge, a commitment made by the living to the dead that their deaths not be in vain. He could watch over the boy they'd both loved, however unknowing and ungrateful that boy would be about it. Whatever else happened, Snape would see to it that Harry Potter survived.

Then December came, cold and snowy. The DNA results came back, allowing Snape and Yaxley do the final work on the shields, which Snape planned to present to the Dark Lord and then install over the Christmas break.

At Hogwarts Snape now worried about the behavior of Malfoy, who was letting his class work slide in all his subjects, and was disappearing for long stretches of time. Occasionally Snape saw him down by the gates with Filch and wondered if Filch was letting the boy out to visit Hogsmeade, but since Snape never saw Malfoy enter or leave, he didn't confront either of them about it.

Malfoy continued to avoid conferences with Snape. From time to time he'd be summoned to Snape's office, and always found a reason not to go. Normally Snape would have forced the issue, but knowing that Malfoy reported everything to Bella made him cautious. He didn't want her to accuse him again of harassing her nephew, and so Snape waited patiently for the chance to catch Malfoy where they could talk privately.

As the term neared its end, Snape received an invitation to Slughorn's Christmas party. He could think of only two reasons why he'd been invited — because Slughorn invited all the teachers, and because Snape had to be kept happy so that he would continue to handle the Potions supplies.

Large parties were a bore. In all his life, Snape had only been to one big party that was fun — on the night he became a Death Eater. Considering how that had worked out over the years, it was probably a good thing that there'd been no other fun parties.

It was rather interesting seeing who among the students had been invited. Potter, of course, and Granger . . . *Does she remind you of Lily, Professor?* . . . but no Malfoy. The perils of having a father in Azkaban. A few years ago,

when Lucius was on the Board of Governors for Hogwarts, Malfoy'd have been on the top of the list. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

Slughorn's office was garishly done up as a Bedouin sheik's tent, and the guests from outside included a Who's Who of former students. Authors, musicians, a vampire . . . *Was he a student, too, or just a friend of a friend?*

Passing through the throng, Snape caught a snippet of Slughorn's booming conversation. "...a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sibyll — why even Severus —" and suddenly he was seized and pulled resisting into the little group. Slughorn had clearly already had a tad too much to drink, and threw a beefy arm around Snape's shoulders.

"Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus! I was just talking about Harry's exceptional potion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!"

A tiny suspicion suddenly raised its head above the level of subconscious thought, for this wasn't the first time Slughorn had mentioned Potter's hitherto undiscovered talents. Snape eyed the boy speculatively. "Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all."

"Well, then, it's natural ability! You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death — never had a student produce finer on a first attempt. I don't think even you, Severus . . ."

"Really?" Snape knew that Slughorn had never truly noticed his potions ability, and he also knew, having experimented with the Draught of Living Death at the age of twelve and having noted his improvements in his mother's old Potions text, that no one had ever equaled him. Except Lily, of course, after he taught her how to do it . . .

Potter was reciting his courses in response to Slughorn's questioning. "All the subjects required, in short, for an auror," Snape said, allowing sarcasm into his voice. *One who jumps to the wrong conclusions and arrests all the wrong people as a result. You'll do very well in the Ministry.* It was gratifying to note that his promise to keep Potter alive did not carry with it the obligation to like the boy.

The conversation floated on to other things, and Snape was looking for escape, when Filch dragged Malfoy into the room. Malfoy insisted he was trying to gatecrash, but Snape suddenly knew he'd been out of the Slytherin dormitories for other reasons. The gate crashing was a cover. *Idiot boy! And why is Filch salivating over the prospect of disciplining Malfoy? Maybe they aren't working together after all.*

Slughorn allowed Malfoy to stay, but as the boy began to flatter the professor shamelessly, Snape realized he now had an opportunity to talk to Malfoy where he couldn't make excuses or escape. "I'd like a word with you, Draco," he said suddenly.

Slughorn protested. "Oh, now, Severus, it's Christmas, don't be too hard..."

"I'm his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be. Follow me, Draco."

It was a matter of a moment to find an empty classroom and push Malfoy into it. He pulled the boy over to a desk near the door and pointed to it. "Sit down, Draco. We need to talk." Malfoy did as he was told. Snape himself sat on the desk across from it.

"Now, Draco, you and I need to have that little chat."

Malfoy looked sullenly at the floor. His attitude was irritating and disrespectful. Snape went directly to the point.

"I have been trying to speak with you ever since that little fiasco with the cursed necklace back in October. If I had known you were planning anything so stupid, so liable to both fail and be detected, I would not have allowed you to proceed. What you are attempting is too important, your success too vital to your whole family... You cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled..."

"I didn't have anything to do with it, all right?"

"I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it."

"Who suspects me?" In his anger, Malfoy looked directly at Snape, who took advantage of the eye contact to try reading him. "For the last time," Malfoy insisted, "I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must've had an enemy no one knows about — don't look at me like that! I know what you're doing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work — I can stop you!"

And he was right. Snape's somewhat limited legilimens ability was running into crude but effective blocks. Crude because they were so obvious. Effective because he couldn't get past them. "Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you occlumency, I see." *And the fact that she's willing to risk the Dark Lord's wrath is very telling.* "What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?" *Shall I tell you what he does to people he suspects of trying to control what he can see?*

"I'm not trying to conceal anything from him, I just don't want you butting in!"

Why have you decided to go into Bella's camp? Don't you know she and your father are enemies? Or have you decided that you don't want a father who gets himself thrown into Azkaban? Watch out, Draco. No one is as close to the Dark Lord as Bella claims to be.

"So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? Had anybody else failed to come to my office when I told them repeatedly to be there, Draco..."

"So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!"

Is that an accusation that you believe me to be working for Dumbledore? Dear Bella's influence again. "You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things."

"You'd better stop telling me to come to your office then!"

"Listen to me. I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco..."

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then, because I don't need your protection! It's my job, and I'm doing it, I've got a plan, it's just taking a bit longer than I thought it would!"

He's beginning to crack. Things aren't going well, and he's scared. "What is your plan?"

"It's none of your business!"

"If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you..."

"I've got all the assistance I need, thanks, I'm not alone!"

"You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the extreme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup, these are elementary mistakes..."

"I would've had Crabbe and Goyle with me if you hadn't put them in detention!"

"Keep your voice down! If your friends intend to pass their Dark Arts OWL this time around, they will need to work a little harder..."

"What does it matter? ... it's all just a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us need protecting against the Dark Arts..."

"It is an act crucial to success... Where would I have been all these years if I had not known how to act? If you are placing your reliance in assistants like Crabbe and Goyle..."

"I've got other people on my side, better people!"

"Then why not confide in me, and I can..."

"I know what you're up to! You want to steal my glory!"

"You are speaking like a child! I understand your father's imprisonment has upset you, but . . ."

Then Malfoy was stomping angrily out of the room. Snape watched him go in frustration, wondering what else he could have done to get Malfoy to talk to him. Then he slipped quietly into the empty corridor and headed for Dumbledore's office, for Dumbledore had returned in time for Christmas.

"He won't admit to the necklace business, and he won't accept my help. Bella's got him believing that I work for you."

"Well, you do."

Snape just glared at Dumbledore. "He hasn't given up, and he refuses help. So it's probably Malfoy's assessment that he's failed that drives the Vow. He's very frightened, so he may be coming up on some kind of a deadline. He did let slip that something's taking longer than it should."

"Poor Draco. He's going home for the Christmas break. I hope that he returns to us whole and healthy in January."

"If anything happens to him, it'll be all over headquarters in a heartbeat. I'll try to watch out for him."

"You have to. You took a Vow."

"To the best of my ability. I just love loopholes."

Christmas break started, and two days after Christmas Snape and Yaxley were ready to present their shield to the Dark Lord for his approval. They arrived to a somber and subdued headquarters.

"I don't think you want to go down there," the clerk at the sign-in desk said when the two started for the stairs.

"Why not?" Snape was suddenly apprehensive.

"Bit of unpleasantness. I wouldn't be related to the Malfoys for all the firewhisky in Scotland."

Downstairs they found Bella in the antechamber. She looked sick. A few minutes later the door was opened by a messenger who seemed surprised to see Snape. "He wants you now. All of you. How did you . . .?"

Snape shook his head as the three of them entered the interview chamber. All was dark except for the circle of light where Draco knelt, clutching his stomach. Narcissa was lying on the floor moaning. Bella started at once for her, but Snape seized her arm, trying to communicate wordlessly that her action wouldn't help her sister.

"Ah . . ." the Dark Lord's voice hissed across the room. "A trio of faithless servants. We honor them with our trust, and they all betray us."

"Lord," Bella cried, "I am your most faithful servant. I'd never betray you!" She collapsed writhing on the floor.

"Have you protestations as well, Potions master?"

"Lord, I am weak and ignorant. If I have failed you, I deserve to be punished."

"Do you speak of Hogwarts to this other servant?"

"No, Lord. It is not part of his tasks."

"Nigel, you will go. This does not concern you after all." Yaxley bowed and left in silence, not glancing at Snape as he went.

Muscle cramps spasmed through Snape's stomach and legs, felling him to his knees, and searing fire flared in his right arm so that he cried out.

"What is your job, Potions master?"

"To make potions and medicines for your servants," Snape gasped, "to train them in defense, and to report to you what goes on at Hogwarts and within the Order of the Phoenix."

"And it did not occur to you that we might wish to know that Dumbledore had been injured."

There was no good answer. Understanding now why the Dark Lord targeted his right arm with flame, Snape closed his eyes and gave himself up to the pain.

Awareness returned slowly. Snape had no idea how many minutes the torment had lasted, but Bella, Narcissa, and Draco hadn't moved. Draco looked as if he were about to be sick.

"Rise, son of a dishonored house."

Draco clambered to his feet, sweat beading his forehead. "Yes, Lord," he stammered.

"Twice you have failed, and our patience wears thin. You know what you must do."

"Yes, Lord."

"Take these worthless women and leave our presence."

Draco helped his mother and aunt to rise, and the three of them left the interview chamber. Snape lay very still, not daring to move.

"Kneel and face us, Potions master."

His arm still burning with pain, Snape struggled into a kneeling position and obediently made eye contact with the Dark Lord. After a moment he was released from the probe.

"When did Dumbledore receive this injury?"

"I don't know, Lord."

"It was not the cause for which you were summoned to him in July."

"No, Lord."

"Had he already been injured at that time?"

Not knowing which answer would be more acceptable, yet not daring to hesitate, Snape said, "No, Lord."

"When you saw him again in August, had he been injured?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Rise. You will speak of this to none. When you return to Hogwarts, remember that young Malfoy has a task. It is not for you to know what it is. You will see that no one hinders him."

"Yes, Lord." There was silence. "Lord, forgive my boldness, but there was another task."

"Speak."

"Yaxley and I have finished the shielding that we promised you. We came today to present it to you."

"Send for Yaxley."

* * *

"I swear I don't know how you do it. You take that kind of punishment, and then you talk calmly of routine business as if nothing had happened."

"I was not calm. I've no idea what gives you that impression."

"Maybe it's the quiet voice, the steady hands, and the attention to minute detail." Yaxley chuckled. "Macnair had some fascinating theories about you, you know."

"Macnair's an idiot."

"I don't know. You take it so much in stride. By the way, thank you."

"For what?"

"Keeping me out of it."

"You weren't involved."

"Others would love to cast blame randomly. You don't. Thank you."

Just at the end of the Christmas break, Snape was called once more into the presence of the Dark Lord. Anger frosted the air, and Snape braced himself for more punishment.

"We have asked you before about Slughorn. Does Dumbledore treat him with honor? Is he consulted and sought after for counsel?"

"No, Lord. Dumbledore still pays little attention to him. He is not given any special place or honor."

"We wish to interview him, but Dumbledore keeps him from us. Does he ever leave Hogwarts?"

"He went at least once into Hogsmeade, Lord."

"Advise us should he do so again."

"Yes, Lord."

Snape had been away from Hogwarts for most of the Christmas break, something he hadn't done for years. It felt almost like September when he returned, rather than January, because he'd been gone so long. He went up to the seventh floor immediately to see Dumbledore, but the headmaster was once again away from Hogwarts.

Descending the stairs again to the dungeons, Snape paused on the fifth floor. *The library. Here I've been poring over muggle books and never bothered to check the Hogwarts library. I wonder...*

The students who'd gone home for the break were arriving the next day, and the library was thus empty. Snape glanced briefly at the history section, realized he had no idea where genealogical material, if any, might be shelved, and went looking for the librarian, Madam Pince. She steered him toward a far aisle where students seldom went, the works there being neither necessary for classes nor in any way forbidden.

As the librarian turned to go, Snape remembered something Dumbledore had said months earlier. "Madam Pince," he asked, "would you happen to have something on Beedle the Bard?"

Pince gave him a strange look, then returned after a few minutes with two books which Snape added to the four he was taking from the family history section. In those few minutes, all Snape's attention had shifted from her, Beedle, or anyone else, for on the little flap of parchment glued onto the inside cover of one book, the flap on which the identity of borrowers was recorded, Snape had noticed a familiar name: T. Riddle.

Gathering up the books, six in all, Snape hurried to his office in the dungeons.

Once in the dungeon rooms, Snape settled himself in his reading chair in the bedroom with the books piled on the small table beside him. He took the book that the Dark Lord had borrowed as a student and stood it on its spine in his lap, then gently allowed the book to fall open of its own accord. Knowing the Dark Lord, Snape imagined he would study a valued text over and over again. If there had been one place where it had been kept open for long periods of time, the book might open again to that spot where the spine was now weaker.

It did. It opened to a section with several pages of family tree charts covering about ten generations between 1400 and 1700. The charts detailed the intermarriages between a number of families from the counties of Stafford, Warwick, Worcester, Hereford, and Shropshire. There were names Snape recognized, and names he didn't, wizarding families having predictably died out and been replaced by muggle-born families in a regular progression over the decades.

It amused Snape to scan through these charts, and in doing so he noticed a number of tiny penciled ticks that followed certain bloodlines through the generations, multiplying ancestors as it went. *Could these have been made by the Dark Lord as a teenager?* Snape wondered, having no trouble imagining the muggle-raised Riddle using a pencil without a second thought, especially to make marks in a library book. One line led to the marriage in 1396 of Percival Pudsey to Serpentina Woolcroft. It was not the bride's name alone that caught Snape's attention, but also the tiny snake printed next to her name. Miss Woolcroft was believed to be a descendant of Salazar Slytherin.

So there really may be evidence that the Dark Lord is Slytherin's heir. I wonder how clear-cut that actually is. An hour's study convinced Snape that it was not clear-cut at all. Slytherin's family had died out in the male line long before 1400, and the number of families descending through any one of several female lines was large. Taking into account the uncertainty of birth dates and the frequent marriage of distant cousins to combine previously separate lines, it was impossible to tell which of the many families claiming descent from Slytherin could possibly be called his 'heir.' *Not that there's anything to inherit,* Snape thought. *Parseltongue seems to be it. Definitely not land or money.*

Having exhausted that part of the pedigree, Snape tried another. This led, to his great surprise, to the name Peverell in Somerset around the year 1250. *And here I'd given up finding any wizarding families named Peverell.*

Peverell had turned out not to be a Norman name, but a Normanization of a Welsh nickname. It was first used by the stepfather of an illegitimate son of William the Conqueror. That particular family had also died out in the male line, though later families with the same name strove to find a connection. *Probably just a similar nickname, but everyone wants to have royal blood, even if out of wedlock.* None had any claim to wizarding blood, though, until now.

Following the line through names like Dionysius, Archaeus, and Cadmus, Snape stopped in shock at Hamo. Hamo Peverell was half-brother to

the son of the Conqueror, but he didn't have any children. Snape got up and searched for his notes. His memory was not at fault. The Conqueror's mistress had married Ranulph of Whittington, known as Peverell, and by him had three sons — Hamo, William, and Payne. Hamo had left his lands to his brother William, and therefore most people assumed he had no children. But what if he was a wizard? A muggle-born wizard who had to flee from his society because of his affliction? It was interesting to speculate on, but as there was still no connection between Peverell and the Founders, Snape put it aside.

Next Snape followed the little pencil marks down into 18th century charts and got another surprise. A female descendant of Percival Pudsey, one Mehitable Chaffinch, married a man named Lorenzo Gaunt of Yorkshire in 1746. There was a pencil mark by this name.

Peverell and Gaunt. Dumbledore told me to find artifacts, not ancestors of the Dark Lord. Will this be a surprise to him, or does he know this already? Except for Serpentina Woolcroft, there was no other link to the Founders.

Snape then turned to *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and was disappointed to find it was nothing but children's stories. There were magical pots, enchanted fountains, crystal caskets . . . Snape didn't even read the stories, he just skimmed through them. The only interesting thing was the invisibility cloak. *I bet Moody uses his to hide from Death whenever he can.* He chuckled, and tossed the book aside.

The last book was a critical analysis of the Bard's stories, and Snape was flipping idly through the pages, not really wanting to read it, when a name caught his eye. Peverell. The brothers who tried to cheat death were named Peverell. Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus Peverell, to be exact. The three names rang a bell. Snape returned to the genealogies to find they were the grandsons of Hamo Peverell, and were young men at the time of the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Maud.

Well, well. Gaunt, Peverell, Salazar Slytherin, and the Dark Lord, all wrapped up in Beedle the Bard. But I'll be hanged if I have a clue what it all means.

Snape had to leave the dungeons then, and hurry upstairs, for Dumbledore had returned to Hogwarts. He put the afternoon's work in another part of his brain for there were more important things to discuss.

"You are not happy, Severus. I hope your stay down south was not too unpleasant." Dumbledore sounded both official and familiar at the same time.

"I want to know why I learn more about what you're doing from the

Dark Lord than from you.” Snape stood by the window, staring out at the winter stars.

“Direct and to the point. What do you believe Riddle has told you about my activities?”

“You misled me about why I got the Dark Arts job. You didn’t want me as the Dark Arts teacher, you wanted Slughorn on the staff. Slughorn knows something that the Dark Lord doesn’t want you to know. You brought him in to keep him safe, but the only thing he can teach is Potions, so you kicked me out of the job, or halfway out of the job—I still have to do most of the administrative work. I got Dark Arts because you didn’t have any place else to put me.”

“True to some extent, but not true that I didn’t want you for Dark Arts. You will potentially be very useful to me there.”

“Potentially? I thought I was useful to you in July.”

“You were. And you will be useful to me again.”

“By the way, he knows something happened in July. He knows your arm was injured, he knows more or less when it happened, and he considers it significant. It seemed to be the occasion for his bringing up his displeasure at not being able to ‘interview’ Slughorn.”

“Well, I suppose it was only a matter of time. Has he yet connected any of this with the diary that was destroyed? And why did he want to interview Professor Slughorn?”

“I don’t know. The diary was why he was so angry with the Malfoys this summer. That seems to have been much more important to him than Slughorn. The diary was his horcrux.” In the ensuing silence, realization began to dawn in Snape. He turned to Dumbledore, horrified. “The ring was a horcrux, too!”

“I fear so.”

“But you only make one . . . He can’t have split . . . How many do you think there are?”

“I am not going to say. It is best you not know. Is Draco all right?”

Snape’s gaze returned to the night sky. “He was punished, but not too badly. The Dark Lord wanted to frighten him, though, so his mother and Bella were punished more. The Dark Lord said he’d failed twice. We know about the necklace, but that means there’s something else, maybe another cursed item, floating around the castle. We need to be alert.”

There was the soft sound of robes sweeping the floor, then Dumbledore

stood behind Snape and laid a hand gently on his shoulder. “And you? Are you all right?”

“I know what your arm felt like that night. It was my own fault; I should have told him long ago. About your arm, I mean. I forget sometimes that Hogwarts is in the same universe as headquarters, and that students can tell their parents . . .”

“I am deeply grateful you did not tell him. It gave me several more months in which to track down information that I might not have gotten otherwise. I grieve that you had to pay for it.”

Snape ignored the apology. “I have officially been told that Malfoy has a task, but still not what it is. I’m to keep people from hindering him. I’m to tell the Dark Lord if Slughorn ever sets foot out of Hogwarts. Keep him locked up — he’s a potential kidnap victim. And I’m going to report every move you make.”

“I would expect no less.”

“There’s more.” Snape paused, but Dumbledore waited quietly. “The Dark Lord accused Draco of failing — failing — twice. The Vow was not activated. Either the Dark Lord used the word without meaning absolute failure, or it isn’t the Dark Lord’s view of the matter that counts. I knew that Draco was still working on something just before the Christmas break, and I assume that it was the second failure, so I’d guess it’s Draco’s idea of what constitutes failure that counts. I intend to give him moral support and urge him to perseverance at every opportunity.”

Dumbledore smiled. “I would join you, but as it appears I am to be the victim . . . What of your other pursuits?”

“The Founder artifact business is entertaining. Did you know that there are three shawls of Helga Hufflepuff still in existence, but that two of them were woven from the wool of Saxon Merino sheep, a breed that didn’t exist until 1765? Or that a piece supposedly of Slytherin’s jewelry was offered for sale at a market in Leeds in 1762, bid on by one customer, and then bought at a lower price by another who claimed to be Slytherin’s heir and terrified the owner into accommodating him by speaking Parseltongue? Or that the glove reputed to be Gryffindor’s was manufactured in Newcastle in 1725? Or that Ravenclaw’s measuring spoon was shown in 1833 to have been manufactured in China in 1154 BC?”

“Is there anything, Severus,” Dumbledore asked, “that you have found to be true?”

Snape shrugged. “There seem to have been actual families of Gaunt and

Peverell in the wizarding world. What's more, they're mentioned together in a book in the Hogwarts library. A book that someone thought interesting enough to want to mark the connection in pencil. One of the borrowers was T. Riddle, though there's no proof he was the same person who made the marks. I imagine he would have been more fascinated by the line descending from Serpentina Woolcroft."

"Let me guess," said Dumbledore with a smile. "A descendant of Slytherin's."

"Bingo," Snape replied. "But that's the only link to a Founder, and there aren't any relics or artifacts associated with her."

"I wonder," Dumbledore mused, "if he was aware of the legends surrounding the family."

"You're not talking about Mother Goose, are you?" Snape's attempt to stifle a laugh produced a sound more like a snort.

"Mother Goose?" Dumbledore eyed him quizzically. "Is that another wizarding family you have found?"

"They're children's rhymes," Snape explained. "Things babies learn at their mother's knee. Humpty Dumpty and Little Miss Muffet."

"I thought you did not know any children's stories."

"I said my parents never told me any. That doesn't mean I couldn't learn about them later. We got a few in school. And from Disney, of course."

"Of course," responded Dumbledore, for all the world as if he understood the reference. "What Mother Goose stories are we talking about?"

"Beedle the Bard. I can't believe you sent me to look up children's stories. But there is a connection to the Peverell family. It seems the characters in one story are supposed to have been three of the descendants of Hamo Peverell."

"And which story would that be?"

"You know perfectly well which story," Snape glared at the headmaster. Then his mouth twitched in a near smile. "I wonder if that's how Moody's managed to cheat Death all these years. One of his invisibility cloaks is a Hallow. Or maybe that's why the Dark Lord kidnapped Ollivander — because Ollivander's got the Elder Wand in his shop disguised as a display item."

Dumbledore's silence at this remark made Snape turn to face him, suspecting him of hiding something. "Do you think the Dark Lord knows about the Hallows? That he may have turned a thing he thought was one of them into a horcrux?"

"It is a possibility," Dumbledore said, "Though I remind you that Riddle would be much like you in that he is unlikely to have heard wizarding

children's stories when he was young, and therefore may never have heard of the Hallows at all. I do like your tying them in to the kidnappings, however. That is an intriguing angle. Was there anything else that you uncovered?"

To Snape the tone sounded as if suddenly he was about to be dismissed. He still had the feeling that Dumbledore was withholding information from him. "No, sir," he replied.

"Well then, I believe we may have exhausted that line of inquiry for the moment. Keep in mind what you have learned. It may be valuable someday."

With that, the interview was over. *But if what he wanted me to know was the content of a children's tale*, Snape thought on the way down to his rooms in the dungeon, *why didn't he just tell me? Why make me do all that research? What might he still be hiding?*

The following Sunday evening, immediately upon arriving at Birmingham, Snape put in a request to speak to the Dark Lord. He'd no sooner gotten up to his laboratory than a messenger came with the summons, and he hurried down to the interview chamber. *I don't know if this is the right thing to do or not, but I can't risk his learning about this later from someone else.*

"It is well that you have news for us," the Dark Lord told him, motioning Snape not to kneel. "We would have sent for you in any case. Tell us this news."

"Lord, it is a small matter. Dumbledore is seeking information about a wide number of ancient items, legendary artifacts. Some may never have existed outside the imagination of the story tellers, but he wishes them checked."

"Are there any in particular that he singles out for notice?"

"Yes, Lord. Items from the stories of Beedle the Bard. The tale of the three brothers. He even wishes information on the family that the brothers were said to have belonged to..."

"Yes, we know of this story. So, it is of interest to Dumbledore. He is a fool, but it is good to know in what direction his mind turns. Tell us, does Dumbledore speak of the disappearance of Ollivander?"

It was a moment pregnant with promise, that the Dark Lord should mention what Snape and Dumbledore had so recently discussed themselves. Snape's face remained bland as he answered. "He mentioned it in passing at the time. I haven't heard him talk about it since."

"Does he refer to the founders of Hogwarts, asking questions about their history?"

Snape was suddenly aware of the beating of his own heart. Pits opened

on either side of him, danger and death swirled in the air around him, but now — now he had a chance to learn what the Dark Lord was thinking and planning. The dim light of the chamber glowed brighter, and every detail of the room stood out with the clarity of Venetian glass as he rolled the dice.

“Yes, Lord, he has. He’s asked about possessions and artifacts of theirs as well.”

“He grows troublesome. He will learn, though, that he is not as wise as he believes.”

“Tell me, Lord, what must I do if he asks again?”

“He must not suspect you. You will assist him to the best of your ability. If you should discover what he seeks, or if he should tell you what he has found, you will report it to us instantly.”

“And if he doesn’t share it with me?”

“Then he does not share it. It will make little difference in the end.”

* * *

Snape once again paced the breadth of the carpet in Dumbledore’s office, a caged beast whose movements were those of frustration rather than strength. “You don’t understand, sir. He already knew you were looking for these things. He could be planning some kind of a trap!”

“Well,” said Dumbledore complacently, “this may complicate things a bit. I shall definitely have to proceed with more caution. Meanwhile, you will do as both your masters command and find out as much as you can about the . . .”

“No. Sir.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I will not help you in this. You’d actually walk right into whatever he’s planning for you and get yourself killed. I won’t be party to this. I won’t do any more research for you.”

“And here I thought that having Tom and I in agreement about your job would make things easier for you. You can please both of us without subterfuge.”

“No. I will not help you kill yourself.”

Dumbledore watched Snape for a moment, his expression hardening. “You have a very poor opinion of my abilities if you think that Riddle can take me so easily after I’ve been forewarned. I assure you that I am not going to walk right into anything without employing proper precautions. Now, you have been working on tracing all the reputed artifacts . . .”

"No. I won't do it."

"Severus, I have not known you to refuse to follow my instructions before. This is becoming tedious."

"No, sir. It's becoming dangerous. I'm not going to lose you. What'll you do? Send me to Azkaban?"

"Professor Snape, you will continue to assist me in the research I have requested from you."

"It isn't in my job description. You can't make me."

"I can dismiss you from the school."

"I think I could explain that to the Dark Lord's satisfaction."

It was a stalemate. Dumbledore turned away, his anger seeming to simmer just under the surface. "You have a class in ten minutes, Professor. I suggest you not be derelict in that duty as well."

Snape left the office without another word, his own anger at Dumbledore's stubbornness just beginning to seethe like a poison brewing in his veins.

Thursday evening after supper, Dumbledore paused on his way out of the Great Hall and turned to face the staff table. The message was clear, delivered and received in a fraction of a second. *I would appreciate it if you would come to my office this evening. Say, around eight?*

The atmosphere in the room was much more relaxed than it had been when Snape last left, and Dumbledore handed him a goblet of mead as he entered, raising his own glass and smiling slightly as he proposed, "Confusion to the enemy."

"That I can drink to," replied Snape, joining him. He then waited for Dumbledore to begin.

"Yes," said Dumbledore after a moment. "We ended our last meeting on such a sour note that I thought we might discuss those points on which we are in agreement. Shall we sit down?" He moved two chairs in front of the fire and Snape, seeing no reason not to, settled into one of them. The warmth was welcome on a cold January night.

"Now," Dumbledore continued, "I should like to be sure that we are acting in unison with regard to Draco. Draco must be protected."

"I'm pleased to see you're still concerned about the boy."

"Severus, I am concerned about all my students. With some, I confess, it is easier than with others. Goyle, for example. The way he stands with his hands hanging down and his mouth slightly open . . . Not funny? No, I

imagine not. I have never been good with spontaneous humor. But Draco, now. Draco is rather easy to feel concerned about.”

“I am . . . both pleased and surprised to hear you say so.”

“Surprised? How so?”

“There has from the beginning been something of an antagonism between him and . . . Potter.”

“Oh, and you suspected that I would see things more from Harry’s point of view. Has it really seemed to you that I have played favorites?”

“There are times when it has been blatant. I still haven’t forgiven you about the House Cup at the end of their first year.”

Dumbledore frowned, then let it pass. “Draco is bright, ambitious, loyal, hardworking, suffers from an overbearing father, and would be a sweet boy if given half a chance. He craves affection, but has had to live his schooldays under the shadow of the popularity of Harry. He does somewhat remind me of you.”

“I think that’s stretching it a little, sir.”

“Really? Well, I try. In any case, Draco deserves a future, and I do not wish to see his chances destroyed by having his soul split due to a murder.”

“There, sir, we are in agreement.”

“I am glad. You will see, therefore, why it is necessary, should it come to it, that you take Draco’s task from him and accomplish it yourself.”

“Why don’t we just take the opportunity away from Draco and leave the task incomplete?”

“You seem not to comprehend, Severus. I am concerned about all my students, past as well as present. There is the matter of the Vow.”

“No, sir. I don’t think you’re really thinking about me. You’re thinking of sacrificing yourself so that I can stay alive, but that’s not thinking about me, it’s thinking about yourself.”

“Well I am flummoxed! How can that be thinking about myself?”

“You don’t want to have to live with the guilt of my death.”

“I would not be guilty. I did not make an Unbreakable Vow.”

“No, I did. And I’m the one who has to accept the consequences of that action. We have to protect Draco, on that we agree. And you have to stay alive to fight the Dark Lord. We’re in this quandary because of something I did, ergo I should face the consequences.”

“Severus, I am an old man. You are young and still have . . .”

“Why are you worried about Draco splitting his soul, but you’re not worried about me splitting mine?”

The silence lengthened in the tower office as Dumbledore and Snape stared at each other in the glow of the fire. At last Dumbledore rose and refilled the goblets of mead.

"You have never killed anyone?" Dumbledore stood now by the mantle, staring into the fire.

"If I had, I would have told you. Surely you knew that?"

"You told me so much. I did not want to pry further. You'd been a Death Eater for some years..."

"The Dark Lord has always preferred specialists. I was recruited for potions and spells. And later for defense training. I wasn't allowed on field assignments because... Do you remember my grandmother?"

"Constantina Rossendale was a grand lady. Such a tragic death. Yes, you told me about that."

"So... I wasn't allowed on field assignments."

"You present me with a great problem."

"I don't think so. We let events unfold. We try to protect Malfoy. I don't kill you, and whatever happens, happens."

"It is not a satisfactory solution."

"It is to me." Snape stared into his again empty goblet, then rose and refilled it himself. He was beginning to feel rather mellow. "Besides, you haven't considered what my life would be like if I did what you wanted."

"You would have a life."

"That's a matter of opinion. Let's assume first that no one knew it was me that killed you. Without you to spy on, I would have no excuse to give the Dark Lord for remaining at Hogwarts. Potter would poison the rest of the Order against me, and I'd be forced to stay at headquarters doing the Dark Lord's bidding with no one on the outside to turn to. I see suicide as a viable alternative, which would make your sacrifice meaningless.

"On the other hand, if it were known that I killed you it would be worse. Everyone outside the Death Eater organization would be after me. Can you see me trying to explain to Potter and Moody that I did it on your orders? Give me a break. Once again, suicide becomes a highly attractive alternative. Do you really want that?"

"I do not want you dead. Not under any circumstances, and certainly not because of a Vow."

"Are you certain of how the Vow will operate?"

"No. Especially since you took the Vow unaware of its terms. Vows are tricky. I cannot predict how this one will operate."

"All the more reason not to jump the gun. I may not have to do anything. And the worst scenario in that case is still better than the best scenario if we follow your plan."

Dumbledore agreed not to press the issue, and Snape returned to his duties somewhat lighter of heart. He did no more research for Dumbledore, but supplied the Dark Lord with most of the details of what he'd already done. The Dark Lord listened to the litany of artifacts, confirmed or spurious, of shawls and rings, of capes and gloves, with calm detachment. "Is there nothing more?" he asked at the end.

"Some rumored to have once existed, but now lost forever," Snape replied, and gave the Dark Lord that list as well, at the end of which the Dark Lord seemed pleased. Snape was dismissed to continue with his regular assignments in the lab, where Yaxley now assisted him on a regular basis.

Gradually, Snape was beginning to realize what an excellent partner Yaxley was. Neither of the two was overly ambitious, and neither was fanatical about being a Death Eater. There was no conspiracy, just a tacit mutual agreement not to discuss certain things. Above all there was a common sense that they would watch each other's back up to a point, and the point was understood. It was a comfortable relationship, insofar as anything at headquarters could be said to be comfortable.

At Hogwarts, life continued normally, though Malfoy persisted in withholding details of what he was doing from Snape. Things were, in fact, so distressingly normal, that the upcoming annual apparition lessons on the first of February were something to look forward to.

Rain fell sadly from the gray sky that Saturday, turning the lawn into mud and dissolving the last of the snow. Snape and McGonagall stood at her first floor window staring out at the dreary weather.

"Well, it won't be the first time we had apparition lessons in the Great Hall," McGonagall sighed.

"In some ways it's more fun in the Hall, where they all have to be crowded together more. It concentrates the action. Not that there'll be much on the first day."

"You sound like you're going to the circus!"

"In a way I am," replied Snape, keeping a perfectly straight face. "You have no idea who I'm hoping is going to splinch today, or how."

"You wicked man! Are you actually planning to gloat over Gryffindor's gaffes?"

"Did you do that on purpose, or was it serendipitous?"

“What are you talking about, dear lad?”

“Let’s see . . . I may not gloat over Gryffindor’s gaffes, but I may rejoice over Ravenclaw’s ruptures.”

Through her laughter, McGonagall managed, “Savor Slytherin’s splinching! Now let’s see you do H!”

The letter H proved more difficult, and they made their way downstairs tossing possibilities back and forth.

“Honor . . .”

“Too respectful. Hilariate.”

“There’s no such word as hilariate!”

“Aha! Howl over Hufflepuff’s haplessness!”

The sixth years were milling around in the Great Hall, unsure what to do, as the four Heads of Houses entered behind Wilkie Twycross. Just as they were passing through the door, Snape whispered to McGonagall, “Stephen Cornfoot’s ears,” with the result that she looked particularly cross and out-of-sorts as she struggled desperately to stifle her giggles.

As Twycross began to introduce himself, McGonagall found focus in the disciplining of two students who were softly conferring in the back of the crowd, the only two whose eyes were not on the apparition instructor. “Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!”

Snape’s glance went at once to the movement as Malfoy and Crabbe separated. Two Death Eater children with fathers in Azkaban. *Have you been foolish enough to share your mission with Crabbe, or does fear of the Dark Lord keep you secretive?* It was a momentary thought, as the apparition lessons began in earnest.

Snape, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout began to separate and line up their students by houses, with Snape between McGonagall and Flitwick. There was a moment when Potter and Malfoy started posturing like rival peacocks, but the professors quickly got them into line.

Destination! Determination! Deliberation! Every year the professors heard the same speech. Every year the beginning students twirled stupidly in their efforts to apparate the few inches to the hoops set before them. Watching the irritating, lazy students he struggled hardest to teach stagger dizzily around the Hall was one of the high points of Snape’s year. Externally he was stern and unmoved. Internally he was laughing.

“What was your worst splinch?” McGonagall asked as it became increasingly clear that there were no apparating geniuses in the crowd.

“I never splinched,” Snape replied.

“Never? That’s hard to believe.”

“My mother taught me to apparate when I was nine. I spent my first couple of lessons here pretending I didn’t know what to do so that no one would find out.”

“But that’s illeg...” McGonagall started to protest, but at that moment Susan Bones splinched. It was a bad splinch — her entire left leg — and the girl was going into shock. Snape, McGonagall, and Flitwick all rushed to assist Sprout in reuniting the girl and getting her up to Madam Pomfrey. Splinching like that was rare, but needed to be addressed immediately or the emotional trauma could keep a person from ever trying to apparate again.

In the excitement, Snape’s and McGonagall’s conversation was forgotten, and the lesson soon ended.

C H A P T E R F I F T Y - N I N E

EVADING THE INEVITABLE

The new shields for the laboratory worked perfectly. Neither Snape nor Yaxley even had to think about them, passing through the doorway as if there were nothing there, but everyone else soon became very wary of them. Aside from blocking any entrance or casual penetration, the shields gave a mild but uncomfortable electric shock. Messengers from the Dark Lord learned to stand well away and call out to Snape or Yaxley if either of the two was wanted.

Snape also noticed that he could ‘see’ the shield. Although itself invisible, the shield affected the quality of the air visible on the other side, producing a faint shimmer. When he mentioned this to Yaxley, he got a quizzical look in response, though later that day Yaxley admitted he could see it, too. They spoke of it to no one else.

Near the end of February, Snape was called to the interview chamber.

“Dumbledore gets no closer to his goal.”

“I don’t know, Lord. He doesn’t confide in me about everything. There’s no one to whom he reveals everything.”

“But he has investigated both the Gaunt and the Peverell families. And the legends of Salazar Slytherin.”

“Lord, he has.”

“Then he must be nearing a conclusion. How goes it with young Malfoy.”

“He’s seldom seen in the castle. There’s somewhere he goes to work on his task. I don’t know where it is, but I know he’s conscientious about the job you’ve given him to do. It’s a great honor for one so young to be entrusted with his Lord’s work, a great honor for the family. His father would be proud...”

“Silence.” Pain flickered and spiked on the edges of feeling. The chamber grew suddenly chill. “Do not speak for that worthless traitor. He was given

charge of that which was ours, and chose to use it for his own ends. He will understand before he dies what it is to lose what does not belong to him, and how far our arm stretches in vengeance. He will learn in Azkaban of the destruction of the last of his house.”

Snape felt the blood drain from his face and limbs, and grew suddenly faint as realization dawned. “Forgive me, Lord. It is not my place to know everything, but you have charged me to see that young Malfoy works unhindered. Is it your design that he fail in his task?”

The Dark Lord laughed, high and cold. “No, Severus. It is our intention that he succeed, and that he fall in the midst of his success. See that Malfoy is not hindered. When he faces the task, you will understand.”

“Yes, Lord.”

To all appearances, Snape was calm as he left the chamber, but appearances can be deceptive. The equation upon which Dumbledore was constructing his plans was inaccurate. Draco’s downfall was to come with success, not failure, and if Snape took Draco’s task from him, the Dark Lord would be . . . displeased. The future was looking worse and worse all the time.

There had been a time during the last three years when the mental communication between Snape and Dumbledore had proceeded with the measured pace of spoken conversation, but that time was long past. When they wished, their eyes could meet and the words flash with the speed of thought, whole messages conveyed back and forth in a few seconds. The experience was not comfortable for Snape, since it required maintaining eye contact with Dumbledore, something he was not always willing to do.

Now, the weight of his new knowledge burdening him with worry and fear, Snape caught Dumbledore’s eye on the way to his seat at breakfast the following morning.

The situation is not what we thought. I have to talk to you.

Now? Or at lunch time when we will be less obvious?

Lunch will do. It’s important, not urgent.

The exchange had lasted the space of two heartbeats.

* * *

“Don’t you see, sir, that if I perform Malfoy’s task, neither of us will have anywhere to go? The Order will be after us, the Dark Lord will be after us, and you won’t be there to protect us. At least if you’re alive, you can protect

Malfoy here at Hogwarts. How can I watch over Malfoy if I have nowhere to go that's safe?"

They were walking out on the lawn while the rest of the school ate lunch in the Great Hall. Snape had stopped at the edge of the cliff and was looking down at the lake. Dumbledore stood a little behind him. "As you said, the situation has changed. There are still so many variables and unknowns that I do not wish as yet to rule out any scenarios, but this information requires careful consideration."

Snape didn't move, didn't allow their eyes to meet. "You'll pardon me, sir, but it's ruled out one or two for me."

"I must ask you not to be so hasty concerning what you will and what you will not permit yourself to do. I need to think about this. Let us speak again when I have reviewed the options. In a day or two?"

"Yes, Lord."

Snape turned and reentered the building, not looking at Dumbledore, not wanting to see his face, or his eyes . . .

By Thursday evening, Snape was as nervous and irritable as he'd ever been in his life. He was going down to Birmingham Friday night, wouldn't be back until Saturday supper, and was giving up hope of being able to talk to Dumbledore again before that happened. To make matters worse, in his hypersensitive mood he was intensely aware of the actions of people around him — people he'd only allowed on the edges of his consciousness for several months now.

Take Slughorn, for example. Was it Snape's imagination, or did the old fool seem to be wary, even nervous around Potter? For a couple of weeks, Snape had been vaguely aware that Slughorn was more attentive to the behavior of the students than before, constantly glancing around the Hall, but today at supper, Snape realized that it was the Gryffindor table, the spot where Potter and his friends sat, that attracted most of Slughorn's attention. And Potter was watching . . .

Snape's eyes darted to his left in time to catch a look between Potter and Dumbledore that set him seething again. *There's something between them that involves Slughorn. I . . . I told Dumbledore that the Dark Lord was interested in Slughorn, but it's Potter that Dumbledore entrusts with his confidences! How much more is he keeping from me? How much is he telling Potter about me? Is this why Potter is so belligerent, so defiant this year? Because Dumbledore tells him everything!*

As soon as supper was over, Snape headed out of the castle and down to the lake shore to try to calm down.

About fifteen minutes later, the very obvious sound of someone moving through the fringe of trees let Snape know he'd been followed. He sent another stone skipping across the water, not needing to turn around to know it was Dumbledore.

"I would be delighted if you could teach me to do that. I do not believe I have ever seen another wizard make rocks bounce on the water like that."

"Lily taught me. It's a muggle skill. Haven't I told you that before? Besides, Hagrid can do it."

"Perhaps. Some things skip my mind. Come, walk with me nearer to the forest where we cannot be seen from the castle."

There were things Snape wanted to say, but the thing that burst from him was not what he'd planned. "What are you doing with Potter, all these evenings you're closeted together?"

"I spend time with Harry because I have things to discuss with him, information I must give him before it is too late. Information for him to do what he needs to do."

"You trust him more than you trust me."

"Let us say I prefer not to put all my secrets in one basket. Especially a basket that dangles on Riddle's arm." Dumbledore raised a hand at Snape's protest. "I do not underestimate the constant danger you are in, Severus. Considering the risks, I trust you with more than I would ever trust anyone else."

"But Potter? Incapable of occlumency, a mediocre magician who has a direct connection to the Dark Lord's mind..."

"Riddle has had a taste of what truly sharing Harry's mind means. He will not try to possess Harry again. His soul cannot bear close contact with a soul like Harry's. Like a tongue on frozen steel. Like flesh in flame..."

Snape turned away from Dumbledore, trying to force the image of Potter's arrogant, sneering face from intruding into his mind. "We were talking of minds, not souls."

"In the case of Harry and Riddle, to speak of one is to speak of the other."

Snape didn't respond, nor did he turn to see the pitying look in Dumbledore's eyes.

"But it was not of their souls that I came to talk to you, Severus. It was yours. I have deliberated, and it seems to me that in some things you are right."

"I'm astounded. Overwhelmed."

“Do not be cheeky, or I shall subtract points from your house. I have considered that there are some circumstances in which it might be better to leave Draco’s task unfulfilled. I have also considered your accusation that I do not care about the state of your soul, and found it to be inaccurate. I care very much. I do not think the splitting of a soul is at issue here.”

“I would dearly like to know your reasoning about that, since it’s my soul we’re talking about.”

“I believe that the state of the soul at the time of killing is of vital importance. It is the intent, the malice, that splits the soul. Thus, if the killing is done without malice, at the request of the victim for example, then the soul is not split.”

“And I would have no problem about your acting in accordance with that belief if it were your soul we were talking about. Since it’s mine, however, permit me to be skeptical.”

“I think we should prepare for a variety of scenarios. There is always the possibility, for instance, that I may die first of the curse that still infects my hand, thus negating the Vow entirely. Under those circumstances you would, of course, look after Draco.”

“Of course. Though it’s looking more and more as if the curse is waning.”

Dumbledore ignored the observation. “I should like you to investigate certain other things for me. Do not look at me like that — it has nothing to do with Gaunts or Peverells. I should like you, in the privacy of your own home, to investigate spells involving resurrection or resuscitation . . .”

“You’re not fooling me like this! Not this easily! There is no such thing as a spell that resurrects from the dead, and I’m not killing you on your assurance that there is!”

“Shh. Keep your voice down please, Severus. I also want you to investigate any and all spells and potions that mimic death. Anything, in short, that would help us fool Riddle into believing his wishes had been carried out. And I mean for Malfoy as well as for me. Remember Emmeline Vance.”

“But if both of you survive, what of the Vow?”

Dumbledore peered at Snape over his glasses. “You yourself said you preferred the idea of your death due to the Vow to my death due to your action. Are you backing down?” When Snape didn’t answer, he continued. “Of course, these cannot be the only scenarios. You must also agree that if the situation warrants, and my death is truly required, you will abide by my assessment of the circumstances and do as I request.”

Snape spun on Dumbledore in fury. “Now the truth comes out! This

was all a blind to lead me by the nose back to the same old solution. Forget the near-death potions and the resuscitation spells! What we really want is for gullible old Snape to agree to kill you when you ask him to! Because gullible old Snape always does what Dumbledore asks! Well maybe you take too much for granted. Maybe I don't want to do it anymore! Maybe this obedient little donkey has finally been given too much, and he's going to kick over the traces! Get someone else to do your work!"

"You will not speak to me in that tone. I am asking nothing new. You have already consented, or have you forgotten? You gave me your word, Severus!"

When Snape refused to answer, allowing the mutiny in his heart to reflect on his face, Dumbledore sighed. "Come to my office tonight at eleven, Severus. You will never again complain that I have no confidence in you."

It was a confidence Snape would have given anything not to share. He listened in horror as Dumbledore, eyes closed as if to shut light from the dark truth, told him that a fragment of the Dark Lord lodged in Potter—that Potter was a horcrux that would have to be destroyed if the Dark Lord was to be defeated. By the time Dumbledore opened his eyes again, Snape had reached critical mass.

"You've kept him alive only so he can die at the right moment!"

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

It was a viciously low blow, and Snape's voice turned to ice in reply. "Lately, only those I couldn't save." He rose. He was already facing the door. "You used me!"

"Meaning?"

"I've spied for you, lied for you, gone into mortal danger for you, all to keep Lily's son alive . . . I believed it was for Lily! But you! You've been raising him like a pig for slaughter!"

Striding forward, Snape left the office without another word, slamming the door behind him with all the force in his body.

* * *

Snape stood poised at the top of the narrow path that led along the cliff face to the lake's edge and Lily's rock, with no recollection of his descent down the staircases of Hogwarts or his passage out through the great oaken doors into the night. Automatically he stepped forward onto the path, then stopped, rage throbbing in his veins with the savage beat of his pounding

heart. He didn't want to talk to Lily. The last thing at that moment that he wanted to do was talk to Lily. He wanted... he wanted to smash Dumbledore's face into a brick wall and scrape the smirk off it. He wanted to tear Hogwarts down, stone by stone with his bare hands. He wanted to wipe the entire wizarding world off the face of the earth with one cataclysmic spell...

Turning his back, literally and figuratively, on Hogwarts castle, Snape sped down the hill toward the gate, miraculously keeping his feet on the narrow road in the darkness. The gate with its boar guardians was the doorway to freedom, but it was his jailor, too. Snape didn't care. Not slowing his pace, he threw himself against the bars and, to his surprise, it opened and released him into Hogsmeade.

It was only at that moment that the fury burning in Snape began to reform itself into thought, for he glanced back over his shoulder at the towers of the castle where the light still glowed in Dumbledore's office.

So, you're going to let me out... let me run wild a bit... let me work through it and calm down... Snape's wand slipped from his sleeve into his hand and he raised it in defiance, sending a tightly focused pulse straight at the light, and felt a bitter satisfaction when the faraway pane shattered at the blow.

Take care the next time you ask me to kill you, you evil, sadistic, manipulative old ogre. You're going to get your wish. Snape looked around at the quiet village and disappeared.

Wind and rain lashed the cliffs of Cornwall and whipped the sea into a froth far below where the water pounded against the rocks. Snape stood there, feet on the very edge of stone, the gale tearing at his hair and clothing, stinging his face with salt spray, and stared down into the turmoil of earth, air, and water, where they came together with such violence. If a bolt of lightning had struck at that moment, adding fire to its sister elements, he would have flung himself from the pinnacle to join them, with no Hagrid behind this time to pull him back from the brink.

Guilt had come full circle. At nineteen, afraid of pain, afraid of death, he'd bought his own life with a few repeated words whose import was unknown to him, and had thereby destroyed the sole thing he had left to treasure. Life had ended that October night, but he'd been spared to fulfill a duty, a duty he'd accepted as the only road to salvation that remained, to preserve the one piece of Lily that hadn't died—James Potter's son. To fulfill that duty he'd accepted the pain, accepted the constant companionship of death, accepted the submergence of his own will into that of Dumbledore, and for what? So

that now that remaining piece of Lily could die, too. Die at Dumbledore's whim and for Dumbledore's purposes. And it was his, Snape's, fault. All his fault. Punishment had crouched waiting for him for over fifteen years. And Dumbledore had known all along. Had known and watched and laughed all those years. Gullible old Snape. Dumbledore's little donkey.

Snape hated Dumbledore with every fiber of his being.

But what if Dumbledore was thwarted? What if he wagered on the dumb donkey's obedience and was himself fooled? Snape could take Lily's Potter son and spirit him away where neither Dumbledore nor the Dark Lord would ever find the boy. Remove him from the game. Let the two power-mad sorcerers finish the war between them with no help from the donkeys or the swine...

There swam before Snape's inner vision the image of the Dark Lord's serpentine face and crimson eyes. No, that was not the way. To preserve Harry was to preserve the Dark Lord. No matter how desperately Snape tried to stave off the inevitable, it could not be escaped. There was no salvation. There had never been the possibility of salvation. All of it ashes, ashes strewn by the wind.

With a sigh that was also a sob, Snape accepted the inevitable and gazed in longing at the beckoning rocks.

That was when the new road opened before him. He blinked, then blinked again. There was something he could snatch from destruction, something he could cheat the Dark Lord of, and not because of Dumbledore. Because he himself wanted to do it. He could save Draco. The Snow Queen's son. Narcissa's boy.

It was only a straw, but Snape grasped it. Grasped it and returned with it to Hogwarts where for all of Friday he steadfastly refused to look at Dumbledore. He had been deprived of one hope, he would seize another. No matter what fate demanded of Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy would be spared.

Friday evening at headquarters might have been quite pleasant. Bella was not there, nor did the Dark Lord wish an interview. Snape was left alone with peacefully bubbling cauldrons and the calm precision of chemistry. He himself was neither peaceful nor calm.

He doesn't care what happens to me. All that hogwash about not losing me to the Vow was a con game. I tell him I'll be punished for usurping Draco's task, and he doesn't care. He's going to force me to defy the Dark Lord's wishes and remove himself as my protector at the same time. At the very least, the Dark Lord will believe I'm more loyal to Malfoy than to him. Narcissa will be in trouble,

too. Would Bella risk her neck for me? No. Would she risk her neck for Narcissa and Draco? Maybe. What if Bella is already targeted for destruction like Draco? Probably not. She had nothing to do with losing the diary.

Insurmountable problem number one is the dark mark. If I run, he can summon me, he can punish me, he can find me. How can I remove the mark from my arm? From Draco's arm, too. Even if Draco resists.

Snape removed his jacket, rolled up the sleeve, and examined the brand. Just defacing it wouldn't be enough. It would have to be cut or burned out. *I wonder how deeply it penetrates into the flesh? What if the only way to get rid of it is to amputate the arm?*

Rolling the sleeve back down, Snape returned to his work, carefully and steadily decanting a batch of newly made Wakefulness Potion into small bottles that could be carried in a pocket.

Where would I go? I'd have to take Narcissa — I couldn't leave her to face the Dark Lord alone. He'd send operatives to my home and the Malfoy mansion before anything else. The amount of time we'd have before that would be minimal. And neither Narcissa nor Draco would want to go. They wouldn't believe me. I'd have to stun them.

Get Narcissa. Go somewhere to remove the dark marks. Go to a preplanned safe house. With two angry and hostile wizards. Dumbledore's the classic chief executive. All grandiose ideas but none of the logistics of making it work. Can't he see how much easier it would be just to keep Draco and Narcissa at Hogwarts? But then he'd have to be alive.

This might be easier if I had someone here at headquarters...

Snape finished up with his potions, put on his jacket, and went to the cafeteria. Yaxley was sitting at a table by a window reading *The Daily Prophet*. Snape casually walked over but didn't sit down.

"Have you eaten yet?" Snape asked.

"No. Want to join me?"

"Ever try fish and chips and a pint in a pub?"

Yaxley glanced around, but no one was watching or listening to them. Then he looked up at Snape and mouthed the word 'Muggles?'

"You have to know the enemy."

"I'm game. Food here's tasteless anyway. Lead on."

After giving Yaxley the appropriate muggle clothing, the two left headquarters into the chill of Friday evening in working class Birmingham on the last day of February. Normally Snape would have looked for something a bit

more upscale, but with Yaxley he was quite willing to brave rowdy neighborhood pubs. Yaxley looked like a prizefighter, massive, fierce, and brutal, and he was the type who'd love the noise and atmosphere, and maybe even a fist fight.

The two found a likely place with a free booth in a corner, where they ordered muggle food and beer. A group on the other side of the room had a dart game going, and the level of noise from talking was so high that Snape and Yaxley had to raise their voices just to hear each other.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you because I need backup. I'll be honest. Knowing about this could get you into trouble, so I can't tell you everything. I have a task, but I can't guarantee I'll be in the right place at the right time to do it. Being at Hogwarts all the time makes it harder. If I had someone helping me prepare, and covering for me without looking like he was covering for me, it would make things easier. If you don't want to hear any more, just say so and I stop now."

Yaxley shoveled another bite of food into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "Sounds interesting," he said after a moment.

Snape took a deep breath. "It involves Lucius's son Draco, and when it happens we may be moving fast."

After their talk, and considerably more food for Yaxley, who turned out to love fish and chips as much as Snape had as a boy, the two departed Birmingham for their own homes. Snape needed to start his new line of research for Dumbledore, and also work on a safe place to hide from the Dark Lord should it come to that. Yaxley was checking into short-term safe spots, Snape not having told him that going underground might be permanent.

One of Snape's first decisions was that any place of long-term refuge would have to be outside Britain. He himself had been to northern France and Holland, but no farther. The Dark Lord had been as far as Albania. But the Dark Lord had a very insular, Eurocentric mentality. There were places in the world he would simply not think of.

Australia, for example. Or most of Latin America. The fact that Draco and Narcissa were so clearly of northern European extraction did limit Snape's choices. They couldn't go anywhere where they would stand out and be noticeable. Snape's dark coloring might be able to pass for a variety of nationalities, but not the icy blondness of the Malfoys.

Canada? The United States? Uruguay? South Africa? Siberia? New Zealand? I suppose we'd have to go somewhere where they speak English. I really can't imagine Narcissa learning Spanish... And a large metropolitan area — somewhere

easy to get lost in a crowd. How could I keep Draco away from a local wizarding community? The longer Snape thought about it, the more hopeless the problem seemed.

The next morning he started thinking about it again. Large cities in other parts of the world... *New York is out. If he ever thinks of America, it'll be of New York. Toronto or Minneapolis... Could we take the cold winters? Better that than too much heat. Seattle or Vancouver... maybe. I don't really know very much about them.*

Then Snape reached a point where he was telling himself the whole thing was pointless anyway since they'd never survive long enough to get out of Britain. That was when he started looking for resuscitation spells.

By mid-afternoon, having had quite enough research for one day, Snape returned to Hogwarts — to a Hogwarts that was fluttering with the news that Ron Weasley had nearly died from drinking poisoned wine.

"And where were you, I'd like to know?" McGonagall demanded. "You might have been of some use helping the poor boy."

"From what I understand, Minerva, the most important step was taken by Potter before anyone could be notified. Though how that boy thought to use a bezoar, much less knew where to find one at that moment, is beyond me. Besides, it was ordinary poison, meaning it wasn't some dark, cursed thing. Madam Pomfrey is at least as capable as I am in dealing with poison cases."

Talking to Dumbledore later, Snape was more interested in a different aspect of the case. "That was the second attempt the Dark Lord referred to. He must have been expecting to hear of your demise on Christmas Day after having partaken of your gift."

"It would so seem. I understand why Draco continues to attack me, but I deeply regret that these deadly presents continue to wind up in the hands of students."

"We could just incarcerate him and keep him incommunicado."

"Which would result in Draco's failure and the invoking of your Vow. No, Draco is not actually attacking the students. He is trying to attack me. Maybe I should make myself more available to him."

"Maybe we could send the two of you to a desert island and let you duke it out there."

"Duke it out?"

"Fisticuffs. Your reach being so much longer than Draco's, it'd be a sure thing."

"You are not taking this seriously enough."

"Sir, with all due respect, maybe you're not taking it seriously enough. Draco could actually kill someone. He's almost done it twice now."

"It is a quandary. The Heads of Houses will have to instruct their students to be especially vigilant, and perhaps there should be a ban on gift-giving as well, as we have no way of knowing who may be placed under an Imperius curse next."

Snape rose to leave the office.

"By the way, Severus, have you managed to find out anything on those other topics."

"Winters in Seattle are warmer than winters in Minneapolis."

"I beg your pardon."

"Vancouver might be nice. I'm also thinking about Vancouver. That's assuming we survive the crossing of the Atlantic."

"Hmmm. Well, do what you can."

"Yes, sir."

The next day was Sunday, a day of leisurely mornings and long conversations. Snape contrived to sit beside Slughorn at breakfast.

"I hear you were instrumental in saving young Weasley from death, Professor. Wasn't it your bezoar that arrested the initial penetration of the poison?"

"Well, that's right! It was my bezoar! Though I give young Harry full credit for remembering I might be carrying it. It was my bezoar."

"I was away from the school that day, so I'm afraid I missed a lot. How did he know you were carrying a bezoar?"

"Well, he brought it up himself in Potions the first of the year. We were doing Golpalott's Third Law and Harry produced a bezoar as the solution." Slughorn suddenly slapped Snape on the back in a hearty display of camaraderie that was not received in the same spirit it was given. "Gad, it made me feel young again! Do you know his mother pulled the identical stunt for the identical lesson! What an intuitive grasp of potions that girl had, and the boy's got it, too."

Except she didn't, professor. Oh, she was good, but she wasn't that good. That was the day we started talking again, when she couldn't make her antidotes, and I told her to show you a bezoar. But where would Potter get the same idea?

Snape finished his breakfast as quickly as possible and hurried down to his office. The idea had flashed across his mind once before, at Slughorn's Christmas party with the mention of the Draught of Living Death, but then he'd

been sidetracked. Now he checked cupboards, cabinets, and shelves, looking through stacks of manuals and recipe books, not finding what he was looking for.

At lunch Snape once again sought out Slughorn. "Did I leave some books in your room when I packed up? Manuals and things?"

"I don't think so. Just some used textbooks."

"Mind if I check?"

Slughorn unlocked the classroom door and waved lazily toward the cabinet. "Bottom shelf."

The book with its familiar cover was there. Snape didn't want to draw attention to it by taking it, since he had no reason to keep Potions texts in his office. Instead he moved the books aside as if looking for other things. "No one's been in here all year then?"

"No one. Had to loan out a couple of books to students who got Es on their OWLs, but they gave them back when they got their own copies."

Snape stared down at the book, then casually opened it. The half-century-old cover bound a brand new text. Someone had ripped the cover off the book to disguise the fact that he was using another student's notes to help him with his work. And Snape knew who the someone was. The one who'd read and followed the instruction Snape had written to his mother twenty years earlier: *Just shove a bezoar down their throats.*

That left two problems, problems that Snape wrestled with for some time. First, of course, should he take the book away from Potter? But then Potter would know that it was his book and, considering Potter's attitude towards him and the fact that there were some nasty little curses in the margins, might start spreading tales. So far no one, to Snape's knowledge, had been lifted into the air with a Levicorpus, so it seemed Potter wasn't using the hexes. Snape decided to wait for an opportunity to take the book when his own connection to it would be less obvious.

The second problem was more of a mystery. Snape knew he'd checked that cabinet and every other cabinet when he moved out of the classroom. He hadn't been thinking of the book because he hadn't used it for so long, but if he'd seen it, he'd have taken it with him. It was, after all, his personal property, his mother's book, and something he wanted to stay out of Slughorn's hands. Why hadn't he seen it?

It had to be the Peculiaris spell. That would mean that the book was not Snape's property. *The connection from my mother to me is clear. She gave it to me, and in any case when she died all her possessions became mine. Could she*

have purchased a used book, and the original owner is still considered to have possession? Or could it mean that in some way ownership has passed from me to someone else? Not necessarily Potter, since the Peculiaris spell was cast before it was loaned to him. To whom does the book belong?

It was a question whose solution would have to wait for a while — one among many and by no means the most important.

The next weekend, Snape went down to Birmingham on the Friday again. This time Yaxley came looking for him.

“What else can you get in one of those pubs?”

“Traditional English food. Bangers and mash, steak and kidney pie, Yorkshire pudding. Nowadays they serve almost anything, so I suppose chicken Kiev and falafel, too.”

“Good. I’m starved. What say we go out to eat?”

“You’re going to have to wait. I’ve got a bundle of orders to fill that’ll take me at least two hours.”

“Anything I can help with?”

It was a question that had never occurred to Snape before, but he didn’t see why not. Not having an idea of how capable Yaxley was with potions, Snape set him to some easy mixing at first. Yaxley turned out to be an acceptable potions maker. Not extraordinary, but acceptable.

“What’s your regular job around here, anyway?” Snape asked as they were straightening up the mixing area, washing the beakers, and making sure the cauldrons were simmering properly.

Yaxley gave him a funny look. “You’ve got to be the least curious person at headquarters,” he said. “Bella never could figure out why the Dark Lord wanted you to be his spy at Hogwarts. She can’t imagine you hunting down bits of information.”

“There’s not a lot to learn at Hogwarts. It’s chiefly keeping an eye on Dumbledore. Besides, I was wanted for the potions and spells. That’s why they recruited me. The Hogwarts job was a bonus.”

“Me — for my looks, I guess. I scare lots of people. I came in at the same time as a bunch of mates. All at once. Pledged ourselves on the same day. You’d ’ve been a kid in school still when that happened. Got my big chance at Cardiff, but didn’t do such a good job. Now I float around, mostly supplies or helping out in personnel. I’d normally be out in the field, but Bella doesn’t want me.”

Snape nodded in understanding. If that was the case, he could use Yaxley with the potions, especially during the week. Maybe with defense training,

too, if there was ever another class. As it was, his job today had taken a little over half the time he anticipated because of two pairs of hands.

While they finished up in the lab and got ready to leave, Snape's thoughts went back to his own initiation into the Death Eaters. *If I'd known then what I know now, I wouldn't have been so eager to be a part of this 'family.'* It seems so long ago, *pledging...*

'All I have and all I am are yours.'

Snape stopped, stunned. Was that when it happened? Had he indeed given everything to the Dark Lord, including the copy of *Advanced Potion Making*? The ramifications of that idea were astounding. It meant that the Dark Lord owned the possessions of every Death Eater in Britain, at least of every Death Eater who'd made that particular vow. It would include Snape's own home and Lucius Malfoy's mansion, and yet...

At no time had Snape ever heard that the Dark Lord laid claim to those things. It would never have occurred to Snape himself that the words could be taken literally had it not been for the episode with his book. Could it be, if it were true, that the Dark Lord was also unaware of the transfer that had taken place?

Filing the thought in the back of his mind, Snape left headquarters with Yaxley for a pleasant evening at the pub they'd visited the week before, where they discussed, among other things, possible locations for safe houses in Britain.

* * *

"This is a most interesting development, if true." Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of his chest. "Are you sure?"

"That the few items in the classroom that I owned before I became a Death Eater became invisible to me after I performed the *Peculiaris* spell, but that things I acquired later did not? Reasonably sure. I haven't figured out a way to test it with other people's things, so at the moment it's just a hypothesis. I wouldn't want to check with mine using any kind of spell that might alert the Dark Lord. Which means at the moment it remains a hypothesis."

"We must study ways to use this to our advantage... You returned early. May I take it you did not go to your home in Lancashire?"

"I thought you might be interested in hearing about this right away."

“A correct assumption. May I suggest, however, that you go to Lancashire now? I do want you to work on that other research I requested, and you might experiment with your things in the house to see which of them vanish from your sight as well.”

“If I’m right, it would pretty much be the whole house and everything in it. I don’t have a lot there that’s new.”

“That would be a most amazing sight to see. I look forward to your description of it.”

Snape departed Hogwarts immediately and spent the rest of the night and most of Saturday in Lancashire, with the result that he missed seeing Potter hit in the head with a Beater’s bat by his own Keeper at the Quidditch match that day.

Instead of a Quidditch game, Snape spent part of Saturday looking into tetrodotoxins, saxitoxins, and a variety of other neurotoxins. The whole matter of simulating death was a fairly easy problem, requiring only great care in matching the minute amounts of poison to the general health and body mass of the ‘victim.’

Likewise resuscitation, the revival of the apparently dead, was a relatively easy process. One merely had to know the cause of the cataleptic or paralytic state and use the proper methods. The difficult part was resurrection, the revival of one actually dead.

Most of the texts in Snape’s possession agreed that it was impossible to resurrect the dead. Just one reference contradicted this consensus, citing a spell that could only be cast by the person responsible for the death and claiming to have been successful in 50% of the cases. The major drawback was that in 100% of the half dozen recorded attempts to cast this spell, the spell caster had died. *I think I won’t even mention this one to Dumbledore. He’d be sure to try to talk me into it.*

The following weekend, Snape went to Birmingham on the Sunday evening and had the unpleasant experience of running into Bella Lestrangle and Fenrir Greyback at the entrance to headquarters.

“Why puppy dog! How lovely to see you! I see your little shield is working nicely.”

“It is indeed, Bellatrix. Were you trying to break in again?”

“You’re mistaking me for some of Dumbledore’s people. He’s the one who consorts with thieves, as we’ve just been mentioning to the Dark Lord. Birds of a feather, you know.”

Snape thought about this as he went to check the week's list of requisitions and was therefore not surprised to receive the summons to the interview chamber.

"You have access to the headquarters of Dumbledore's Order."

"Only if I'm called to a meeting, Lord. Though I can go to the place, I have no keys or spells to unlock the doors. I have to be admitted."

"This is unfortunate. Still, it may be a minor point. One of the Order has been stealing the possessions of the Black family. Do you know who it is?"

Not wanting the Dark Lord to know that he had the answer prepared, Snape paused as if to reflect. "There is only one I can think of, Lord. One member of the Order is, in fact, a petty thief and fencer of stolen goods. His name is Mundungus Fletcher."

"You may return to your work."

Yaxley was in the cafeteria where Greyback and the Carrows had opened a bottle of firewhisky and were becoming obnoxious.

"Just think," Greyback was howling, "a whole generation of little wolfings to do the Lord's bidding! Where's the best place to 'recruit' them? Where do they congregate in a mass? Hey, Professor! How many little recruits you got up there in Scotland? If I get my work done down here before next weekend, I may pop up north and check them out!"

"Do you want to go out for a pint?" Snape asked Yaxley quietly. "The atmosphere here is less than wholesome."

"I'm with you."

The clerk at the sign-in table was used by now to seeing the two leave for the pub. "Enjoy your evening," he said automatically.

Once in the pub, Snape waited a decent amount of time, then excused himself to go to the men's room. There he opened the small window and released a patronus with a message for Dumbledore: *Get Mundungus Fletcher somewhere safe. The Dark Lord is looking for him and possibly for anyone who purchased things from him.*

Snape then returned to the booth and spent the next hour discussing safe houses with Yaxley. They were narrowing it down to York, Sheffield, or Oxford.

* * *

"What do you mean, the students are going to Hogsmeade next Sunday? It's the full moon. What if Greyback does attack?"

"Now Severus, it is only the sixth years who will be seventeen before the apparition tests on the twenty-first of next month. Do not worry, they will be well guarded and will be back on the grounds before moonrise. By the way, have you seen this morning's *Prophet*? Your work is mentioned in it."

Taking the newspaper from Dumbledore, Snape scanned it quickly. At first he saw nothing, then noticed the article that said Mundungus Fletcher had been arrested. "That was fast."

"I try not to waste time when Riddle is looking for someone. I wish I knew why he targeted Octavius Pepper."

"Who is Pepper?" Snape looked at the paper again. "Why would they take him?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. He isn't anyone very important. Adequate in his studies, but no more."

"If I hear anything, I'll tell you. I have a class now."

"Thank you, Severus."

The last student into the class by a measurable amount of time was Potter, who burst through the door and rushed to his desk drawing all eyes to him in the back of the room. *Probably his intention.*

"Late again, Potter? Ten points from Gryffindor." *More if I manage to catch you with my book.* "Before we start, I want your dementor essays..." Snape collected them with a wave of his wand. "And I hope for your sakes they are better than the tripe I had to endure on resisting the Imperius Curse. Now if you will all open your books to page... What is it, Mr. Finnigan?"

Finnigan lowered the hand he'd been wildly waving in the air. "Sir, I've been wondering, how do you tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost? Because there was something in the paper about an Inferius..."

I do not want to think about Mundungus Fletcher this morning. I do not want to think about anyone who forces me to send off a patronus two blocks from headquarters... "No, there wasn't."

"But sir, I heard people talking..."

"If you had actually read the article in question, Mr. Finnigan, you would have known that the so-called Inferius was nothing but a smelly sneak thief by the name of Mundungus Fletcher."

Potter immediately began whispering to Weasley and Granger, probably about Fletcher. *If one of the other students overhears what they're saying and realizes they all know Fletcher it could compromise the Order. Has that boy no sense at all?* Snape cut the conversation short. "But Potter seems to have a

lot to say on the subject. Let us ask Potter how we would tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost.”

Caught off guard, Potter stammered, “Er . . . well . . . ghosts are transparent . . .”

Snape cringed slightly, then took a deep breath. “Oh, very good. Yes, it is easy to see that nearly six years of magical education have not been wasted on you, Potter. Ghosts are transparent.” This from the boy who took an Outstanding in his Dark Arts OWL.

Potter plunged ahead. “Yeah. Ghosts are transparent, but Inferi are dead bodies, aren’t they? So they’d be solid . . .”

“A five-year-old could have told us as much. The Inferius is a corpse that has been reanimated by a Dark wizard’s spells. It is not alive, it is merely used like a puppet to do the wizard’s bidding. A ghost, as I trust that you are all aware by now, is the imprint of a departed soul left upon the earth . . . and of course, as Potter so wisely tells, transparent.”

Then Weasley broke into the exchange with another distillation of wisdom. “Well, what Harry said is the most useful if we’re trying to tell them apart! When we come face-to-face with one down a dark alley, we’re going to be having a shufti to see if it’s solid, aren’t we, we’re not going to be asking, ‘Excuse me, are you the imprint of a departed soul?’”

A determination one could make in a fraction of a second, but you didn’t say that to add information, you said it to get a laugh. Laugh at this . . . “Another ten points from Gryffindor. I would expect nothing more sophisticated from you, Ronald Weasley, the boy so solid he cannot apparate half an inch across a room. Now open your books to page two hundred thirteen and read the first two paragraphs on the Cruciatus curse . . .”

The rest of the class was focused and on task, neither Potter nor Weasley apparently willing to make greater fools of themselves than they already had.

As it turned out, there was no trouble the following Sunday when the older sixth year students went to Hogsmeade for their extra apparation lessons. Snape had gone to Birmingham on Friday and returned on Saturday just to be available as a chaperone, but he needn’t have bothered. The day was, in fact, completely uneventful.

The following week was hectic as students wrapped up reports and projects for the term, and then it was the Easter break, and the school emptied, students scattering to all corners of Britain to pass the next three weeks with their families.

Snape got permission from Dumbledore to spend more time during the

break at his home or in Birmingham, one of the things he wanted to do being to set up the safe house with Yaxley. They decided on Oxford as so full of tourists, students, and professors, many of whom might be wearing academic robes at any time, that he and Malfoy would be less conspicuous should they have to run quickly with no time to prepare.

They found a tiny apartment in the upper rear of a nineteenth century brick building on Cornmarket Street. Mind spells made it easy to lease the two small rooms, after which Snape and Yaxley shielded them as they'd done with the laboratory.

A couple of beds, a table, some chairs, tins and boxes of nonperishable food, a hot plate, dishes and utensils were all the furnishing the place needed. Snape then began moving in certain tools, including some basic potions ingredients and equipment, medicines, bandages, a set of surgical knives, and a small brazier with charcoal and a pair of instruments that resembled branding irons.

These last caused Yaxley to raise his eyebrows. "Looks like you're planning a party," was all he said.

They roamed Oxford for a few days, giving Snape the chance to visit Blackwell's bookstore as well as a couple of places that specialized in rare books, one of which was clearly run by an old wizard who treated them very well the moment he sniffed out that they weren't muggles.

Yaxley had never been to Oxford before, so Snape kindly played the role of tour guide, and generally played it straight — except for managing to convince Yaxley that Martyrs' Memorial really was the spire of an underground church that happened to stick up out of the pavement due to an earthquake. Since that was the only joke he played, Snape felt he'd been rather restrained and that he deserved his very own martyr's crown.

Before they left Oxford, Snape and Yaxley experimented with apparating into the new safe house. They had no problem, but Snape was worried about traveling with Draco. He told Yaxley that he might send down a tissue sample for DNA analysis, and Yaxley promised to adjust the shields.

All in all, it was an extremely pleasant week. The rest of Snape's time at headquarters was spent working on potions, conducting a small self-defense class to train some of Bella's new people, and in general avoiding Bella and Greyback. Reports were coming in of attacks, especially on children, that Snape found highly disturbing.

Meanwhile, Snape continued his research and amassed an impressive collection of potions and spells that would mimic death and aid in the resusci-

tation of a person near death or in a comatose or paralyzed state. He'd still found no other resurrection spells.

Dumbledore also went through a series of scenarios in which simultaneous spells might be cast, one verbal and one nonverbal. The fact that the Unforgivable curses had little or no power if said without intent aided this scheming immensely.

As soon as the Easter break ended, the older sixth years took their apparation tests. Granger passed hers, one of the few to do so on the first try. Neither Malfoy nor Potter was old enough to take the test.

For the next couple of weeks everything moved so smoothly that Snape was beginning to wonder if all the worries of the previous months had been for nothing. There was no further attempt by Malfoy on Dumbledore's life, nor very much of an attempt at anything, truth be told. The boy kept to himself most of the time. Headquarters was quiet, and the students at Hogwarts were beginning to realize that there were less than six weeks to go before exams. The fifth and seventh years were madly studying for OWLs and NEWTs, and Hogwarts basked in peace.

It was therefore a total shock to be leaving Dumbledore's office by the seventh-floor exit in the middle of the second week in May and hear from the floor below the sound of a girl's voice screaming, "Murder! Murder in the bathroom! Murder!"

It took but a few seconds for Snape to reach the sixth floor bathroom. What he encountered there was horrific.

There was blood everywhere. In the midst of a pool of blood and water, Malfoy lay on his back in shock, his body quivering as his hands struggled feebly to staunch the flow of blood from massive gashes in his face and chest. Potter knelt next to him, splattered with Malfoy's blood, himself too panicky to do anything but stare.

Snape knew the spell, the curse he'd invented himself and then retreated from when he witnessed its effect on bushes and a tree. He'd never used it against another human being until he'd learned to control it with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, and he'd never taught it to anyone. Now Potter had pulled Sectumsempra from a book that should not have left the bottom shelf of its cabinet, and Malfoy was dying.

His reaction the immediate one of a natural healer—take care of what most needs care—Snape pushed Potter aside without a thought and knelt beside Malfoy, his wand already in his hand. Quickly he began one of the

chants his grandmother had taught him so many years ago. The blood began to clot, and its flow was stemmed.

His body rocking slightly to the rhythm of the chant, Snape projected some of his own energy, his own life force, into the knitting of sliced tissue, and the terrible gashes began to heal. Only then did Snape wipe some of the blood from Malfoy's face, concerned about the degree of shock the boy might suffer if he became aware enough to register the quantity of blood.

Another sequence of chanting, and Malfoy was whole enough to move. *I have to get him out of here, out before he looks around and realizes that this is his own blood.* Speaking in a low, soothing, matter-of-fact tone, he murmured, "You need the hospital wing. There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that . . . Come . . ."

On his feet now, Malfoy was able to walk to the door. Only then did Snape remember the other boy, the one who was not slashed and bleeding. Turning at the door, he tried to control the fury in his voice as he said, "And you, Potter . . . You wait here for me."

Downstairs in the hospital wing, Snape tried to convey to Madam Pomfrey the seriousness of Malfoy's loss of blood without dwelling too much on the viciousness of the attack or the identity of the attacker. Luckily the two of them had a professional relationship of deep mutual trust, and she accepted that he had sound reasons for not going into detail.

Snape then returned to the sixth floor bathroom, where Potter was still waiting for him, though he'd expected nothing less. The ghost whose screams had alerted him was still there, now obviously enjoying the situation. "Go," Snape told her, and she left.

"I didn't mean it to happen," Potter protested at once. "I didn't know what that spell did."

An Outstanding in Dark Arts, and he blindly uses spells of whose effects he is ignorant. What does this boy use for brains? Well, Mr. Potter, it so happens I know where you got that one. "Apparently I underestimated you, Potter. Who would have thought you knew such Dark Magic? Who taught you that spell?" *Careful, Severus. This has to develop naturally. Gad! Why didn't I take that book away from him at once?*

"I . . . read about it somewhere."

"Where?" *Should I be pleased or angry that your ability to lie is so pathetic? What happens if you face the Dark Lord?*

"It was . . . a library book. I can't remember what it was call . . ."

"Liar." Potter had given him the excuse he needed, and both of them

knew what would happen next. Snape focused on Potter's mind and called for books. The image of the sixth year text swam to the surface of Potter's thoughts with an ease that was discouraging. *I worked with you for weeks on this and you can't hide the title of a book from me for thirty seconds? What a waste of time.*

The green eyes stared back into Snape's and this time they were not Lily's eyes, and it was not James's face. It was Harry's face and Harry's eyes, and Harry had been stupid enough to nearly kill a schoolmate because of carelessness that would shame a first year student.

"Bring my your schoolbag," Snape ordered in disgust, "and all of your schoolbooks. All of them. Bring them to me here. Now."

Potter returned gasping for breath as if he'd been running, and yet the amount of time he'd taken to go up one floor to Gryffindor Tower, up to his dormitory, and back down was what he'd need to calmly walk the distance. Snape already knew something was wrong before he silently held out his hand and received the schoolbag.

Each book was taken out and examined in silence, and in all that time Potter never once asked how Malfoy was. The last book was the Potions text with its deceptively new cover. Snape examined the outside, opened the cover, and flipped through the pages. It was, in fact, a new text — not his old book at all.

"This is your copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, is it, Potter?"

"Yes."

"You're quite sure of that, are you, Potter?"

"Yes."

"This is the copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* that you purchased from Flourish and Blotts?"

"Yes."

I have given you three opportunities to tell the truth. You have refused all of them. "Then why does it have the name 'Roonil Wazlib' written inside the front cover?"

The boy brazened it out to the end. "That's my nickname."

"Your nickname."

"Yeah . . . that's what my friends call me."

"I understand what a nickname is." Snape didn't really need to make eye contact to guess that R. W. was Ronald Weasley under any misspelling of the name, but he drew a fleeting image out of Potter anyway so that there would be no doubt between the two of them. Then Potter looked away.

"Do you know what I think, Potter?" said Snape after a pause. "I think that you are a liar and a cheat and that you deserve detention with me every Saturday until the end of the term. What do you think, Potter?"

Potter continued to look down. "I... I don't agree, sir."

So now, facing punishment, you finally condescend to call me 'sir.' "Well, we shall see how you feel after your detentions. Ten o'clock Saturday morning, Potter. My office."

"But sir... Quidditch... the last match of the..."

James surfaces at last. You cheat your way through the whole school year, seriously injure another student, about whom you have yet to inquire, nearly commit murder, and all is to be forgiven because you play Quidditch... Not this time. Snape's voice became even more quiet. "Ten o'clock. Poor Gryffindor... fourth place this year, I fear..." *Which will teach you to place a sport above the life and health of another person.*

Leaving Potter in the bathroom, Snape went immediately to McGonagall's office to inform her that he'd imposed detention on one of her students and why. She was horrified. "Is the boy all right?" was her instant reaction.

"He'll be fine. Another minute or two and he wouldn't have been. That's the truly frightening part, and Potter doesn't seem to get it. No one else came near that bathroom all the time I was there. No one else would have heard that ghost screaming. If I'd left Dumbledore's office five minutes earlier or later — Draco'd have died. Potter doesn't care."

"Well, he'll be hearing from me, and then he'll care. And you'd better get cleaned up or you'll be frightening the students."

Snape looked down at his robes and realized that they were soaked with drying, crusted blood from where he'd knelt to heal Malfoy. With a tired sigh he rose and left McGonagall to go downstairs to the dungeons and his office. He met no one on the way, since the whole school was now at supper.

It was only after he was alone that it came to him. He didn't have to invent a reason to collect a tissue sample from Draco for the DNA analysis. Very carefully, Snape scraped fragments of the crusted blood into a vial, labeled it for Yaxley, and sent it by owl to Birmingham to help calibrate the shields of the safe house in Oxford.

Snape and McGonagall went together to speak to Dumbledore, who'd already received Madam Pomfrey's report. Malfoy was on his way to a complete recovery, so the main problem was now Potter.

"I don't know where he could have gotten a spell like that," McGonagall insisted. "There's nothing like it in any book in the school."

"I would not say that, Minerva. There are many cutting spells that are mildly similar. I will agree that I have not before seen one quite so ruthless in its operation."

Taking a deep breath, Snape said, "He got it from me." He then went on to explain all about his mother's Potions book.

Dumbledore peered over his glasses. "I do not recall any student during your years here who was rushed to Madam Pomfrey bleeding to death."

"I never used it on anyone. Not at full strength. I tried it on a sapling and destroyed it. Then I spent months learning how to control it."

"And where is this book now?"

Snape and McGonagall looked at each other. "We don't know," she admitted. "He's hidden it. But Headmaster, what is most distressing is that Potter shows no remorse for his deed. He hasn't expressed any concern about Malfoy at all. Not to me at any rate."

"This is gravely disturbing to me as well. There may at the moment be other pressures affecting Harry that impair his moral judgment. We must gently coax him to an understanding of the seriousness of his action. Meanwhile," Dumbledore peered at Snape again, "there is a book somewhere in this castle containing every spell, jinx, curse, and hex you ever cast as a student. If I should mention it to Professor Flitwick, he would not rest until he found it. That knowledge has been a dream of his for two decades."

McGonagall teased Snape with the specter of an inquisitive Flitwick all the way down seven flights of stairs until she finally left him for her own office.

* * *

The first and foremost advantage of having Potter do detention from mid-morning to mid-afternoon on Saturday was that Snape had an excuse not to attend the Quidditch match. Beyond that, he was at first at a loss as to what task to assign Potter. There were, unfortunately, no Potions materials that needed cleaning or sorting.

It was Filch who approached Snape, the story of Potter's transgression having spread quickly through the school. While all of the teachers sympathized with Snape and commiserated with him on having to deal with a traumatic situation, Filch actually came forward with work that needed to be done.

What it amounted to was school archives. Filch was responsible for keeping a file on student misdemeanors and punishments, and someone had to go through the boxes being sure that all the carefully lettered cards were still legible and in good condition.

It was a treasure trove. Snape spent a whole evening perusing the cards in one box, remembering when Evan Rosier had sprayed the Ravenclaw table with toad spawn in retaliation for having been locked in a broom closet on the morning of an important Charms presentation, or when Rabastan Lestrange had booby trapped a flagstone in front of the entrance to Hufflepuff house after the Hufflepuffs had celebrated a Quidditch victory by scrawling lewd graffiti all over the outer walls of Slytherin. It made Snape feel young again.

Interestingly enough, his own name appeared seldom, and then for minor infractions. Snape attributed this to the fact that he was always retaliating, never initiating, that he took special precautions to cover his tracks, and that his own transgressions were usually overshadowed by the enormities of others.

Two names that appeared continually, though, were Sirius Black and James Potter. They were the ones who bounced Wilkes down three flights of stairs, and covered the entire surface of the Dark Arts room in treacle? As he read card after card, Snape wondered where the two of them ever found time to study.

It was a perfect assignment for Potter. Potter was just as full of himself as James had been, and just as careless of the rights of others. Potter might even improve if brought face to face with the crimes of his father and Sirius Black. Snape decided to start Potter on a box that he, Snape, had not looked at yet. The dust and cobwebs were evidence that the cards had not been tampered with, and Potter would have no choice but to accept the reality of his father's and godfather's characters.

For the next couple of weeks the world was normal. Outside the walls of Hogwarts, Bella's field operations team continued with dementor and werewolf attacks, but inside it was all OWLs, NEWTs, and end of term exams. Snape had no more planning he could do for Draco since he'd finally worked out an escape route that took him from Oxford to Wiltshire, and from there to Paris.

Everyone who ran from the Dark Lord went north. Snape would go the other direction, from Paris to Bordeaux, Madrid, Rabat, the Canaries, and the Cape Verde Islands. Then came the longest and most difficult jump across the Atlantic to Fortaleza on the Brazilian coast. From there in easy

stages, through Brazil to Trinidad and the Caribbean Islands, to the United States. The final destination, at least for a while, was Denver, Colorado.

That was assuming they could get out of Britain, of course. Snape was still hoping it wouldn't be necessary, that Dumbledore would see the necessity of staying in charge.

Then, the first week in June, Dumbledore sent for Snape right after supper.

"I need you to be available tonight."

"Available?"

"Where someone can find you instantly. Preferably in your office."

"I don't understand." In reality it was more a question of not wanting to understand, for Dumbledore's request was sudden, and took Snape somewhat off guard.

"I have a task to perform tonight. I may be in need of assistance when I return. I do not know how late it will be. Expect something along the lines of what happened last July."

"Sir, could you at least tell me..."

"No, Severus, I am afraid I could not. There are things you should not know unless there are no alternatives. Be ready for any kind of dark spell or potion."

"You're walking into a trap. The Dark Lord..."

"Just be ready, Severus."

"Yes... Sir."

Back in his office, Snape pulled out books and ingredients, trying to foresee all eventualities and possibilities. Not knowing if the headmaster would be able to come all the way up the hill to the dungeon, he had a kit ready with those items most frequently used.

Then, as the twilight deepened, a thought flashed across his brain. Grabbing an item from a jar in a cabinet, he rushed up the stairs to Dumbledore's office, but the headmaster had already left. Inquiring of the Bloody Baron in the entry hall, Snape learned that he'd headed down to Hogsmeade, and that Potter was with him.

Returning to his office, Snape looked at the bezoar in his hand and cursed himself for not having thought of it earlier. *Ah well. Maybe he won't need it.*

Then began the long wait. Once, around ten o'clock, he went out into the corridor for a bit of air and to move around a bit, and caught a glimpse of Granger and Lovegood, who for some reason were loitering in the passage

and fled at his appearance, but otherwise Snape waited at his desk for the message that would tell him Dumbledore had returned.

Snape never got that message. Instead, around midnight, he got Professor Flitwick pounding on his office door and screaming, "Severus! Severus! Come at once! There are Death Eaters in the castle, Severus! Come at once!"

Snape flung open the office door, and Professor Flitwick practically fell into the room. "Upstairs, seventh floor, we need you up there," Flitwick gasped, and suddenly for Snape the world was moving in slow motion.

Flitwick! Why didn't we talk about the others? What if Dumbledore tells me to do something, and Flitwick tries to stop me? What if Flitwick is injured in the fighting? What if those silly girls outside are injured in the fighting? What if he tries to stop me from obeying Dumbledore?

In a flash, Snape drew his wand and cast a Stupefying charm on Flitwick. Simple and crude, but highly effective.

Rushing out of the room, Snape ordered Granger and Lovegood inside his office to take care of Flitwick. Three birds with one stone. Then he ran for the entrance hall.

Seven flights of stairs. Snape was still young, but not that young. He forced himself to move, two steps at a time, though adrenaline surging into his system quickly made the physical exertion easier. *Seventh floor! How could Death Eaters have made it to the seventh floor? How could they have made it into the castle?*

The chaos on the seventh floor registered briefly. A spell made the area dark and the people hard to see, but he recognized a few. *Bella's people. Please don't let me find Bella here, too.* What struck Snape with the force of a blow was the shimmering of light at the staircase to the Astronomy Tower. *It's been shielded. By Yaxley. What the hell is Yaxley doing here?*

McGonagall was there, Lupin, Tonks, the two Weasleys and Longbottom. Killing curses were ricocheting off the walls, propelled by field operatives, and Snape managed to deflect one that nearly hit both himself and the Weasley girl. Then he was at the staircase, through the shield, and heading to the top of the Astronomy Tower.

Just as he neared the door, Snape heard Greyback's harsh snarl.

"I'll do it."

"I said no!" Yaxley yelled, and there was the sound of a stunning spell.

"Draco!" screeched a woman's voice, Alecto Carrow's, "do it or stand aside so one of us..."

And then Snape was through the door and standing once again on the Astronomy Tower, gasping for breath and taking everything in — Dumbledore wilting against the far parapet, Malfoy right in front of him, two brooms — so Potter was surely there as well, wrapped in his invisibility cloak. To Snape's right were Greyback, Alecto and Amycus Carrow and... Yaxley. Snape stared at him for a second, until Dumbledore's voice recalled him.

"Severus..."

His gaze snapping instantly to Dumbledore, Snape shoved Malfoy aside to get better eye contact. Once again the messages passed with the speed of thought.

Do not speak. Listen. There was a trap. Take this memory. Analyze it later. Now get them out of the school. They will follow if they think you are with them. Appear to kill me. Throw me from the tower so they cannot examine my body. I shall do the rest.

No! That will kill you!

You swore. Obey me. Fenrir intends to attack the students. I want no more deaths. Throw me from the tower and get them out now! Protect Draco.

No...

Do not worry. I shall do the rest.

Looking past Snape's right shoulder, Dumbledore suddenly spoke aloud. "Severus... please..."

Hating the Dark Lord, hating himself, hating Dumbledore, Snape raised his wand. "*Avada Kedavra*," he intoned, and as green flame left the wand he thought *Levicorpus*. Even as the flame struck, Dumbledore's body was lifted into the air, hung suspended for a second then, with the nonverbal *Liberacorpus*, plunged to the earth three hundred feet below.

The other Death Eaters stared at Snape in astonishment, shocked that the quiet lab technician could suddenly turn into a cold-blooded killer. Alecto's eyes were gleaming; she would follow him anywhere.

"Out of here, quickly," Snape commanded, seizing Malfoy and hustling him through the door and down the stairs without waiting to see whether the others followed. He knew they would. A wave of his wand and a silent command removed the shield.

Behind him feet clattered down the staircase. In front of him the fight still raged, but it was now clear that the Death Eaters controlled most of the area and were pushing the defenders back. The reinforcements from the tower would tip whatever balance was left unless Snape could make them break off the fight and leave.

"We have what we came for!" he yelled at them. "Merton! Wood! Head for the stairs. Greyback! Leave that and follow me! It's over, time to go!" Then, still pushing Malfoy ahead of him, Snape raced for the stairs himself. They had to get to where they could apparate. *What if the defenses are still up? How do we get out?*

Down the stairs, out the door, past the form on the grass that Snape's brain refused to identify, across the lawn — Snape was tiring now, only fear spurring him forward. Figures sprinted past him in the night, whooping and yelling as Hagrid charged out of his hut to intercept them. Snape couldn't stop. His sole concern now was Malfoy.

As they ran for the perimeter, Snape pointed his wand and the heavy gates began to swing open. *The defenses are down. Did Dumbledore do that now, or did he leave them open when he came in on the broom?* There was no time to ponder. Safety lay on the other side.

A sudden shaft of red light shot past Snape's head. Screaming, "Run, Draco!" Snape whirled to cover the boy's retreat — only to find himself face to face with Potter. *Not you. Not you. Not now.*

Potter's mind was forming the Cruciatus curse — Snape knocked him down before he could say the word. Beyond Potter, Hagrid's hut burst into flames, illuminating the scene with a hellish, dancing light. Potter tried again, and again Snape saw the curse before Potter could say it and parried it with ease.

Fool! Why do you waste time with curses you don't know how to use? Fight your enemies with your strongest weapons, not your weakest! "No Unforgivable curses from you, Potter! You haven't got the nerve or the ability . . ." A binding spell came next, and Snape blocked that one, too.

"Fight back!" Potter screamed. "Fight back, you cowardly . . ."

"Coward, did you call me, Potter? Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one — what would you call him, I wonder?"

Next came a stunning spell. Someone needed to teach Potter how to duel. "Blocked again and again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter." Silhouettes loomed against the lurid flames, forms Snape recognized as Merton and the Carrows. "Now come!" Snape yelled at them. "It is time to be gone, before the Ministry turns up . . ."

Yet Merton was not to be deflected. He hit Potter from behind with a Cruciatus curse, but as the boy fell writhing on the grass, Snape screamed, "No!" and blasted Merton's wand from his hand. "Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord . . . we are to leave him! Go! Go!"

Miraculously, they believed him and obeyed, thundering past toward the gate where Draco already waited on the edge of safety, unable to disapparate alone. Potter staggered to his feet, his face distorted with hatred. The spell that Snape tossed aside this time was Sectumsempra. Potter tried again — “*Levi-*”

“No, Potter!” It was the spell used to throw Dumbledore from the tower. Slamming Potter with an Impedimenta, Snape advanced on the now wandless boy in rage. “You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them . . . I, the ‘Half-Blood Prince.’ And you’d turn my inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you? I don’t think so.”

Potter made a grab for his wand, but Snape saw it coming. “No,” he said, and flipped the wand beyond reach.

The world was awash with darkness and flame, hell brought to life in a waking nightmare to torment the vision of souls already damned. In that nightmare, Severus Snape stared down at the darker mass that was the boy who had been the cause of all of this destruction.

“Kill me, then. Kill me like you killed him, you coward . . .” Potter yelled at him.

His once safe world shattered, his only refuge destroyed, torment and death waiting beyond the gate, Snape cracked. “Don’t call me coward!” he screamed, and lashed out at Potter in fury.

What might have happened then he would never know, for Hagrid’s hippogriff swooped down in Potter’s defense, slashing at Snape’s face and arm. Breaking away, Snape ran for the gate, grabbed Draco, and disapparated . . .

C H A P T E R S I X T Y

SEEKING REFUGE

Snape and Draco arrived, in the dim light of the moon rising in its last quarter, at the foot of a long, curving driveway that led yew-lined through iron gates to the shadowy hulk of a great mansion. Snape dragged the terrified Draco to the gates.

“Open them!” he demanded.

Draco obeyed, raising his hand as the wrought iron barrier swung wide in recognition. His grip on Draco not relaxing for an instant, Snape hauled the boy through the gates and along the drive, fear bordering on panic giving urgency to his actions. The two had gone only a short distance along the gravel path when the sound of running feet approached out of the darkness.

“Draco! Draco!” Narcissa’s voice, desperate with fright, came to them from a little distance ahead.

“Here, mother!” Draco cried. “Over here!”

“Oh, thank God! Thank God!” Narcissa appeared before them, shimmering in the moonlight, to seize Draco in a fierce embrace. “Severus! What has happened?”

“Draco can tell you,” Snape replied, haste clipping his voice to little more than a whisper. “I must go. Now. Whatever happens, be obedient. Be loyal. It’s your only defense.” The mark on his left arm was already burning. Delay would be fatal. “Goodbye,” was all there was time for, and then Snape ran back to the gate, into the lane, and apparated to the Dark Lord.

Hands grabbed him roughly at the entrance to headquarters, binding him, taking his wand, shoving him rudely down the stairs and along the corridor to the interview chamber. Snape didn’t resist; his brain was now frantically sorting thoughts, trying to be ready for any question, any accusation, any demand . . . He was pushed into the tiny circle of light, unable to use his arms for balance, and fell forward, sprawling on his stomach, his head striking the floor with a dizzying thud. He lay very, very still . . . waiting.

"Where is the boy?" came the high, cold voice. "Where is young Malfoy?"

"With his mother," Snape gasped in reply.

"Why did you not bring him here to me?"

"I didn't want him to witness my punishment."

"Concern for the boy, or concern for your pride?"

"I'm his teacher. You may want me to be his teacher again. If you wish him to see this, he can be brought."

"Why will you be punished?"

"For disobedience."

"Indeed," said the Dark Lord.

The pain started in the pit of Snape's stomach, twisting and wrenching, till it seemed his body was full of malevolent serpents battling to escape through his flesh. He writhed on the floor in agony, his mouth and throat clamped shut by a silencing spell so that he was unable to scream. He shook in helpless convulsions, and then it was over. The pain receded, and Snape lay still again, whimpering on the floor.

"You knew the task was Draco's."

"Yes, Lord." Snape forced his mouth to move, forced the words out.

"You knew, and yet you usurped it for your own glory."

"No, Lord." Pain struck again, blinding fire melting his very bones. This time Snape did scream.

The pain abated, and the cold voice spoke again. "You contradict us?"

"Lord," Snape sobbed, "I did usurp the task, but for hatred's sake, not for glory." Around them a collective gasp revealed the presence of an audience of Death Eaters outside the circle of light.

"Hatred? Of Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Lord. When I came out on that tower and saw him, heard him taunting Draco and your loyal servants . . . Lord, I could not control myself. I lashed out in anger . . . and I killed him."

The Dark Lord was silent for a moment. Then, "Bring him to kneel before us," he said.

The hands that grasped Snape's bound arms were not gentle, nor were they as rough in their treatment as before. His handlers had clearly decided it was wise to be neutral. They dragged him forward and settled him on his knees before the Dark Lord, who cupped Snape's face in his hands, thumbs raising the eyelids to force contact.

"Show us," he demanded.

It was, mercifully, a scene that Snape could show in its entirety: his rush to the top of the tower, the circle of Death Eaters around Dumbledore, Dumbledore's plea, and the sudden, spontaneous movement of hand and wand that had destroyed the Dark Lord's great enemy.

"It is good," said the Dark Lord. "Others have shown us the same. Unbind him. Allow him to stand."

Snape stood shakily, rubbing his sore arms and twisted shoulders. He knew he would have bruises on his face from striking the floor, but now at least it seemed he would live. His nerves were strung taut, waiting for the questions.

"So, he is dead."

"Yes, Lord."

"And it was witnessed only by those loyal to us."

"Yes, Lord. I don't think anyone else knew that Dumbledore was on the tower." Snape locked away the knowledge of two broomsticks and an invisibility cloak. There was no reason why he would know about them and he could easily claim ignorance.

"Excellent. Then we may strike now while the enemy is in confusion. Amycus, Alecto, fetch the cabinet here. We are going to Hogwarts."

Snape felt his heart stop beating. He looked about at the circle of Death Eaters as the light grew around his punishment circle. "Cabinet, Lord?"

"So Draco did not tell you. He obeyed us and kept his secrets. It seems we have reason to be pleased with him after all. Severus, there is a Vanishing Cabinet in Hogwarts that is now linked to one in our possession, Mr. Borgin having been persuaded this evening to part with it. From here we may step directly onto the seventh floor of the castle and take over the school."

Snape's brain was racing, but he could think of no way out of the predicament. The twin of the familiar black and gold cabinet was brought into the interview chamber. The Dark Lord smiled. "Amycus, you know the way. You may lead us through."

The lumpy, misshapen Death Eater grinned hideously as he crossed the room to the cabinet, opened the door, and stepped inside. Everyone in the room watched eagerly, but nothing happened.

Amycus stepped out again. "It ain't working!" he exclaimed.

The Dark Lord's anger was not restrained, and Amycus dropped to the floor, twisting in pain. "Fenrir," commanded the Dark Lord. "Get into the cabinet."

One by one, each of the Death Eaters present, including Snape, tried the

Vanishing Cabinet, but none was able to transport. "What has happened?" the Dark Lord demanded, his eyes sweeping the room and resting finally on Snape.

"Did anyone see your servants leave the cabinet the first time?" Snape asked.

"No," Fenrir growled after getting a nod from the Dark Lord. "We came out into a storeroom, and the Malfoy brat had a Hand of Glory."

"Did any of your servants fail to return?"

That caused a stir. "Gibbon was killed," Alecto admitted at last. "We don't know where Yaxley is."

"Yaxley was on the tower," said Snape, saying a silent prayer for the welfare of a man he had come to appreciate. "He should have followed us down. My guess is that they realized, or were told, how your servants entered last time, and have disabled the other cabinet."

Fenrir growled at this, but Alecto sidled a little closer to Snape. The mood in the chamber had swung around, especially since Snape, alone of the assembled Death Eaters, was patently innocent of this last blunder. Alecto seemed grateful that someone had provided a reason for failure that deflected the Dark Lord's wrath away from her and her brother.

"Well, well," interposed a new voice, a sultry, deceptively pleasant voice. "So puppy dog is still coming up with answers, even when he..."

"Silence, Bella," said the Dark Lord. "We did not request your opinion. Severus, do you accuse Yaxley of treason, or of cowardice?"

"No, Lord. I believe him loyal to you. But Hogwarts has supplies of Veritaserum, and Yaxley might have had no choice."

Nods around the circle showed the general appreciation of this theory, as it blamed none and even managed to shield the unfortunate Yaxley. Bella, aware of a slackening in her support, pouted and contented herself with glaring at Snape. He himself had no illusions about the fact that she was biding her time.

"Yes," intoned the Dark Lord. "That may be. Go now, all of you. We shall inform you when we have need of you."

They filed out, none daring yet to talk to Snape, but nodding and giving him weak smiles as they separated. Only Bella hung around to chat.

"So you just killed Albus Dumbledore," she said with mock appreciation. "You could have knocked me over with a feather. You could tell even he was pleased, though he couldn't overlook the disobedience. I'll bet Dumbledore didn't look so saintly and calm after a fall like that."

"I don't know," said Snape. "I didn't hang around to look."

"Cleared out as fast as you could, eh?"

"I'd be a fool not to."

"And foolishness is something I'd never accuse you of."

"I think I'll go lie down. It's been a long night." Snape started for the stairs.

"Where will you sleep, puppy dog? You don't have rooms here, you can't go back to Hogwarts, and how soon will it be before they're all over your little hovel in that filthy town?"

Up until that point, Snape had been so concerned about surviving the Dark Lord's wrath that he'd given no thought to anything else, pushing it back into the furthest recesses of his mind. But now, at Bella's prodding, the full import of what had happened that night returned with the force of a sledgehammer. He could never go back. He pushed the thought behind a door and affected calm. "There are emergency quarters for just this kind of situation. Upstairs near the infirmary. I'll use them for the time being."

"Sleep tight," Bella said as he left her and wearily climbed the stairs.

Once in the room, Snape had trouble settling his thoughts, though he knew he had to get some rest or he would never have the strength or the sharpness to continue. *I've known for a year it would come to this. I've had a year to get ready. It was what he wanted. Why can't I accept that and live with it?* It wasn't that simple, though. It would never be that simple. *We weren't ready. For all the talking, arguing, and planning, we weren't ready. When it came right down to that moment, it happened too fast. What am I going to do now?*

Knowing that sleep was impossible, at least for now, Snape lay staring at the ceiling of the little bedroom trying to put his thoughts into some kind of order.

Do I regret what I did tonight? I regret, I resent, having been forced to do it, but do I regret having obeyed him? There, at least, Snape could honestly say no. He did not regret having obeyed Dumbledore. The result of his obedience was catastrophic. The result of disobedience would have been worse. Dumbledore still dead, himself dead, Potter probably dead, members of the Order dead, the cabinet pathway to Hogwarts open, Greyback and the Carrows loose in the dormitories of the houses attacking students... It would have been much worse.

The other question returned — *What am I going to do now?* only this time it was focused on the right place. *Dumbledore never told me everything. Worse, he never told Potter everything. The only one who knows what Potter has to do*

when he faces the Dark Lord is me, but I can't tell it to Potter. Even at the best of times, Potter would never believe me. Now that he watched me kill Dumbledore, he'll be even less likely to. Dear Harry, the man who blasted your mentor off the Astronomy Tower is now asking you to passively allow the Dark Lord to kill you. I know the reception that idea will meet with!

And what about here? My greatest value to the Dark Lord was as a spy. I'm no longer a spy, I have no information to give him. All I'm fit for is slave labor in the potions laboratory and self defense lessons. Even if Potter would believe me, how am I ever going to get out of here to tell him?

After a while though, exhaustion won, and Snape drifted into an uneasy sleep.

* * *

"Here, boy!" she called, her loved voice sultry and enticing. "Want to go for a walk? Does Mommy's puppy dog want to go for a walk?"

He ran to her, quivering with excitement, unable to control his wiggling and squirming as he yearned for the door while she patiently fitted him with collar and leash. "There now, all ready. Let's go play a nice game of fetch."

The grass was green and cool, and she had so many toys for him to chase and return to her — balls and sticks and magical birds. After a while she pulled another out of her pocket, a thin, straight stick with a long white beard and half-moon spectacles. "Here you go, boy. See if you can bring this one back to Mommy." And she threw it for him, calling out "Fetch!" as her arm went forward.

But the stick didn't want to be caught. It swirled through the air while he chased it, teasing him, evading him, luring him away from the grass and from her while she cried, "Puppy dog, come back! Come back! You don't belong to that old thing, you belong to me!"

The house was ancient and decrepit, full of dust and strange things crawling under the carpets. "Mongrel!" a fierce voice screamed at him as he entered, still looking for the stick. "Filthy dog, dirtying the rugs! Wanting to sit on decent people's furniture. Get out, you cur!" He almost turned and left, but he had to fetch the stick.

He sniffed through the different rooms, but the stick was hiding. A hand parted a veil over one of the pictures, and a sneering voice said, "You housebroken yet, Sniffellus? Or do I have to lay down newspaper?" He tried to escape the voice in the painting, but it followed him all over the house, upstairs and down,

flitting from frame to frame. "I don't want you in my house, Sniffellus. I don't care what the stick says."

Then he saw the stick. It was in a painting now, too, a painting of a pig on a cliff. And then it was gone. He tried to enter the painting, but it closed around him like jaws, biting, enfolding, suffocating...

Snape jerked awake to discover that the blanket had twisted over his face giving him the suffocating feeling that had awakened him. He glanced around the room, remembering where he was and why. A feeling of despair washed through him, and then he thought of the dream.

Grimmauld Place, he thought. The Order never uses it anymore. Kreacher's working at Hogwarts. I might be able to get in and out safely. Maybe there's something there that'll give me an idea of what Dumbledore would want me to do now.

It was around noon. Snape thought about his options, then decided to see if he could just walk out the door. The clerk on duty pushed the ledger book toward him and handed him a quill to sign out.

"What are my restrictions?" Snape asked.

"Didn't know you had any," said the clerk, checking his registers just to be sure. "Nope. You're clear." He frowned and fingered the quill. "You think he might want to find you, sudden like?"

"It's possible," said Snape.

"Where're you planning to go, and for how long?"

"Just getting some air, so some place where there are no wizards. Maybe the Zoo. I can be back immediately if he calls."

And that was it. That simple. Snape walked out of headquarters, into a sheltered doorway, and apparated to within a few streets of Grimmauld Place. A short walk, a few unlocking spells, and then he opened the door and stepped inside. The house was deserted, the air inside it heavy and oppressive with age and mold. It was utterly silent. Snape slipped quietly past the niche where Mrs. Black's portrait hung, tripping over an umbrella stand that he caught before it made any noise. She didn't wake up, and he was relieved. He wanted it to stay silent.

Not knowing where to look or what he was looking for was a problem, but Snape had had enough experience with his dreams to know that one part of his mind was trying to say something important to another part of his mind, and this house had something to do with it.

He started downstairs in the kitchen, then worked his way up to drawing room and parlor. On the way he opened drawers and cupboards, sifted

through papers and examined trinkets. He had no idea what he would find, only that when he found it, he would know.

The next place was the bedrooms upstairs. He paused at the first landing, a voice in the back of his brain telling him that Regulus had once mentioned being in a bedroom on the top floor. He decided to try there first, then do the bedrooms on the first landing.

Sirius's room was a shock and a revelation. Motorcycles, Quidditch, and girls seemed to occupy most of his thoughts as a teenager. The place was a riot of posters and photographs with a handful of books and a few papers. Snape began to check all the books, shaking them to see if they contained loose bits of paper between the pages. That was how he found the letter.

It fluttered, both pages of it, from the book in Snape's hand. He bent to retrieve it from the floor and recognized the handwriting instantly. It was like a punch in the stomach. He held a letter to Sirius Black in his hands, a letter that ended with the words 'Love, Lily.' He couldn't breathe. His legs buckled under him and he slipped down awkwardly to his knees on the floor.

After a moment, Snape's breathing returned and his pulse began to slow. He was finally able to focus on the fact that the piece of paper in his hand said something about Grindelwald. It was beginning to sink in that maybe this was not a love letter. That realization made him want to see the rest. The first page had drifted under a chair, and there was a photograph.

It was a thank-you note. Thank you, Sirius, for the birthday present you sent to Harry. Short but chatty, it spoke of Harry's delight with his gift, James's frustration at being pent up, tea with Bathilda Bagshot, and even some news of Dumbledore. Just a simple, friendly, thank-you note.

Grief rose up then for all the little things that Snape could never have. He had said goodbye to Lily on their last day at Hogwarts and had never after been privileged to see or speak to her. Never owned a single photograph of her or heard her light news of tea and birthday presents. Instead he had been led blindfolded into a building in London and had a brand burned into his arm, and all chance at tea and birthday presents ended. He had tried. He had risked death for her, suffered pain for her — it was not enough. She had died not knowing the things he was doing, and today he continued doing them, and she would still never know.

It was with some shock that Snape realized he was crying. That brought him up short in panic and dread. What if the Dark Lord wanted him now? Now while he wallowed in grief and heartbreak. There was no way at this moment that he could completely cover his emotions, and the Dark Lord

would read them and know, and everything that had been sacrificed to Lily would from that moment be worthless.

But he couldn't give them up. Having found these precious mementos, he could not force himself to give them up. They belonged to Sirius, but Sirius was dead and no longer needed them. Snape needed them and, remembering his last conversation with Sirius, he sincerely doubted that Sirius would object. The page with the word 'love' and Lily's signature he folded and put into his robes. The picture was of Harry, James, and a laughing Lily. He tore off the image of Lily and tucked it away, too, letting the rest of the picture fall to the floor.

Now Snape began to hurry. He was no longer sure how long he'd been gone from headquarters, and how much time he had before his absence became overlong. He made a quick check of Regulus's room, then hurried downstairs to the bedrooms on the first landing, rummaging in wardrobes and pulling away bed linens. He was interrupted.

"Hey! What are you doing here? This is my family's house, you ruffian!"

Snape jumped, wand instantly in hand, his back to a wall. There was no one there. He glanced around, knowing he was not alone, expecting attack at any moment.

"You sneak thief! You're as bad as that Fletcher person, coming into this house to rob us blind!"

This time Snape got the direction of the voice and looked over to the side of the room. The remonstrations were coming from a portrait of Phineas Nigellus. Carefully he put his wand away. "I'm not stealing," he said. "I'm looking for something."

"A likely story," Nigellus huffed. "What?"

"I don't know. I'll know when I find it."

"Wait a minute..." The portrait was peering at him. "Aren't you the Potions instructor? You are! Wait here, son. Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back." And the portrait walked into the right side of its frame, already calling as it disappeared, "Albus! Albus! I think I found him — the one you want to talk to."

Snape froze, a great sense of release and hope beginning to flood through him. *The portraits! The portraits of the headmasters! Of course. He's still here. Part of him is still here!*

Nigellus returned after a few minutes and Snape demanded, "Where's Dumbledore?"

"Don't talk to me in that tone, young man! Dumbledore can't come here.

There's no portrait of him in this house. He does want to talk to you, though. Now listen carefully. His funeral's on Sunday morning. Everyone will be out of the castle. You are to come to the acting headmistress's office on Sunday morning because then you'll be able to talk. Do you understand?"

Snape nodded. "Oh yes, I understand. Tell him I'll be there. I'll definitely be there."

Nigellus left his portrait to return to Hogwarts, and Snape started to straighten the room a little, knowing that he'd found what he'd been looking for. He felt suddenly so buoyant that he was not paying enough attention to the sounds of the house. It came therefore as another great shock when he again heard, "What are you doing here?" Only this time he recognized the voice.

Wand in hand, Severus spun, knowing himself ambushed and unlikely to get off a spell. He found himself with a wand pointed directly at his heart, a wand held firmly in the hand of Alastor Moody.

"You got a lot of nerve coming here," Moody said.

"Don't be too hasty," said Snape, lowering his wand and placing it on the bed, then stepping away from it, hands raised, palms open. "You might not have all the facts yet."

"Let's see if I do," Moody grunted. "Did you kill Albus Dumbledore last night?"

"Yes," Snape replied quietly.

"Seems to me like I got my facts. Can't think of any I'm missing. There's a lot of people want you dead, you know, and while I might not be right at the top of the list, I'm not very far down."

"What are you going to do?"

"The thought had occurred to me to take you to Hogwarts, string you up by your thumbs in Dumbledore's office, and let Harry practice his Unforgivables on you. He's beginning to express a fondness for the Cruciatus curse. I'd be worried if I were you."

"You haven't thought of any more questions?"

Moody cocked his head to one side and let his enchanted eye examine Snape. "Why'd you do it?" he asked finally.

"Dumbledore ordered me to."

Moody barked a short, harsh laugh. "You got to come up with something better than that, Snapey old boy. That's not going to buy you one minute..."

"He also says you have to bring... What do think you're doing?" The

portrait voice of Phineas Nigellus rang through the room. "Put that wand down this instant! Albus needs that boy!"

"Who are you?" Moody thundered.

"Who am I? I'll have you know I am Phineas Nigellus, former Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and emissary from Albus Dumbledore to this young man here."

"I don't believe you, you lying Slytherin sneak!"

Nigellus drew himself up in righteous indignation. "We shall see about that!" and he stormed out of his portrait.

A moment later he was back again. "On the day Albus rescued your sorry hide from Barty Crouch Jr.," he announced, "the first thing you said when you woke up in hospital was 'Constant Vigilance,' and Albus told you that sounded pretty foolish coming from a man who let a second rate wizard catch him with his pants down."

There was a moment of silence, then, "Where's Albus?" Moody shouted. "You tell him from me that it's a cheap trick to pretend to be dead and let other people take the fall for it."

"Albus," said Nigellus with great dignity, "cannot leave his portrait in the acting headmistress's office because there is no portrait of him in this house. Now control your temper."

That stopped Moody cold. "You're talking about his portrait in the office? Then he is dead. But you said..."

"He wishes to speak with this young man on Sunday, during the funeral. There is, I take it, unfinished business, and it is the young man's duty to respond and follow instructions. Albus says he has been quite dependable so far."

Moody looked at Snape. "Put your hands down. I'd appreciate it, though, if you let me have a look, and don't go slamming every door you got."

Snape nodded and stood quite still, his eyes open and fixed on the door. Moody came and stood in front of him, the enchanted eye whirling in his head. It wasn't easy to stand passively and allow himself to be probed, but at least this time Snape didn't have to concentrate on what to hide and what to reveal. He just forced himself to stay open, though it was hard.

After several minutes, Moody backed away. "Damn, boyo, I wouldn't have your job for all the tea... He did that to you after you killed Dumbledore?"

"You don't disobey."

"You handed him what he wanted on a platter!"

"You don't disobey. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back. He might send for me, and I want to be able to come when he calls."

"You got any reason you want to come back here?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Snape was puzzled.

"It's just that Fidelius Charms are tricky things, and Moldywart might get ideas that you can lead him places you couldn't lead him before. I want to booby-trap this place against you." At Snape's look of dismay, Moody shrugged. "Look at it this way. You'll have an ironclad reason for not being able to bring him here."

Nothing bad came of Snape's excursion, for the Dark Lord seemed not to have desired to speak to him during all the time he was out, and so never inquired as to his whereabouts. Nor did Bella. Snape was unsure what to make of this, whether it meant he was trusted, or that when the Dark Lord didn't need him, he didn't spare him so much as a thought. In any case, over the next couple of days Snape went out to wander about on more than one occasion, hoping that Sunday morning his foray into the world would meet with no suspicion whatsoever.

It did not. The funeral was at ten o'clock, and by nine Snape was inching his way through the low, narrow tunnel between the Shrieking Shack and the Whomping Willow. At the entrance to the Willow, he looked around carefully, checking particularly that there was no one on the hill. All were, apparently inside. Near the lake, chairs had already been set out for the crowds of mourners.

Slipping from the base of the Willow, Snape scurried into the Forbidden Forest. There he moved north, keeping well in from the edge of the trees, until he was past Hagrid's hut. Then he waited.

He didn't have long to wait. Shortly after nine thirty, the procession started down from the castle. Professor McGonagall led the staff, all in dress robes. The guests from the Ministry of Magic came next, then the students, and then the rest — parents, friends, well-wishers. It took them half an hour to descend the hill and take their places.

When he was certain no one was looking in his direction, Snape left his place of concealment and headed up the hill. The castle was deserted, and Snape's footsteps echoed in the silence. He took the stairs two at a time. On the seventh floor, the gargoyle sentinel let him up the staircase without a password.

Headmasters and headmistresses slumbered peacefully in the dim office. Even though it was what he sought, Snape still felt a pang of shock when he

saw Dumbledore's portrait behind the desk — McGonagall's desk now. He coughed slightly. The portrait opened his eyes and looked at Snape.

"Ah, Severus. Punctual as usual, I see," and the sound of the familiar voice lifted Snape's heart as few things had in many long years.

"Yes, Headmaster. You wanted me."

"Indeed. First and foremost, I wanted to thank you for acting your part so splendidly a few days ago. It was hard for you, I know, and yet I also knew that in the moment of crisis you would do what was necessary."

"Thank you, sir."

"Time is brief, Severus, so I must get quickly to the point. Has Voldemort . . . Oh, I am sorry. Has Riddle filled you in on his plans?"

"No, sir."

"Pity. Listen carefully. Harry has been asked to cooperate and give information both by Professor McGonagall and by Rufus Scrimgeour. He has refused. This means he will be alone through most of his trials, but it also means that what happens in the Ministry or here at this school will have limited power to affect him or alter his course. This is a good thing."

"Sir, if I recall, his course is to die."

"His course is to bring about the defeat of Vol . . . of Riddle. Do not lose sight of that, Severus."

Snape contemplated the portrait for a moment. "Sir," he asked, "why did you want to talk to me? How does my being here right now help this cause? Do you think I can still pass information on to you?"

"That, unfortunately, will depend upon the course of events. I am a former headmaster, and as such I am bound to assist the current headmaster. Right now it seems I have a great deal of freedom because there is no current headmaster. The Board of Governors should get around to choosing one in July or August."

"What about Professor McGonagall? Doesn't she count?"

"Well yes, of course Minerva counts, but she is not the headmistress. She is acting, but not confirmed. It is a different relationship."

"It doesn't solve anything," Snape muttered. "As soon as there's a new headmaster, I won't be able to see you anymore. Come to think of it, unless there's another funeral to empty the building, I won't ever be able to see you again."

"Which is exactly the position you thought you were in a few days ago. At least this way I was able to express my gratitude. Now, you must go before the ceremony breaks up. No one must see you here. Oh, and before you go, there

was a much more important reason for you to come. There is something in the desk drawer for you.”

A little while later, Snape was back in the Forbidden Forest waiting for a chance to reenter the Whomping Willow. Tucked into his robes was a locket containing a miniature portrait of Dumbledore.

Within a few days it was clear that something was happening at headquarters, and that whatever it was, was on a strict need-to-know basis. Bella was licking her whiskers like a cat on a constant diet of cream, and on June tenth Snape got the list of potions for Operations and the Infirmary. Suddenly everyone had a task. Suddenly headquarters was humming like a well-oiled machine. Suddenly Snape could no longer get out.

“What do you mean, restricted?” he demanded of the clerk with the ledger.

“Sorry, sir. You’re down as residing here. Personnel that reside here can’t come and go.”

“So the fact that I sleep in a miserable cot on the second floor means I’m less trustworthy?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. I just have your name on the list.”

Snape stormed away, his anger as much an act for the benefit of the clerk as anything. Internally he was scared. Back in his laboratory, for the first time, he took out the locket with its miniature portrait while inside headquarters. Up until this point he had only used it outside.

Dumbledore appeared within a minute. “Yes, Severus . . .” he began, then looked around. “So this is where you work. Do you think this is wise?”

“Sir, they’re restricting our movements. Those outside are being told to stay home. Those inside aren’t being allowed out. He’s done this before. Something’s happening.”

“When did he do this before?”

“Almost a year and a half ago. When Bella and the others escaped from Azkaban.”

“Dear Lord,” said Dumbledore, “he’s making his move. I’ll see who I can alert. You put this thing away and lie low. If there’s anyone we can’t afford to lose right now, it’s you.”

‘Lie low’ was an order Snape could cheerfully obey. For the next two days he was the perfect little potions brewer. In the evening of the second day, a messenger came to the laboratory with an order to report to the interview chamber. He went at once.

The chamber was crowded. The first person Snape noticed was Bella, her

face radiant with pride, and with joy. The second person he noticed was Rodolphus, hanging on his wife's arm, trying to kiss as much of her in as short a time as he possibly could. Locking down his sudden horror, Snape looked around.

Rookwood, Nott, Mulciber, Jugson, Avery, they were all there. Once again, a mass escape had been engineered from Azkaban. The only good thing was that for once Bella was ignoring Snape entirely. Her attention was all for her husband.

"Well, well," whispered a voice at Snape's ear. "So the Potions professor is still with us. Haven't slipped yet, Severus, or were you saving yourself for me?"

Snape turned to find himself face to face, eye to eye, with Walden Macnair. He feigned a lighthearted attitude. "Welcome back, Macnair. The dungeons haven't been the same without you."

"Have you been keeping them for me? My portrait on the wall and the chains all polished? How devoted. How touching."

"I don't know about polishing chains. I did leave you a gift, though. A Devil's Snare, right next to your desk. Don't move it now before it flowers. Bad luck you know."

Macnair grinned. "Always my best interests at heart. There was a rumor . . . Did I hear correctly that you burnt your bridges and will be gracing us with your company on a daily basis?"

Snape paused, the not-quite-a-smile frozen on his lips. Now, more than anything, he longed to be able to return to the safety of Hogwarts. "That will depend on the Dark Lord and what he wants me to do. You know that Macnair. Not even you take precedence."

"Such loyalty. Such devotion. To place duty above self like that. I'm going to make a plea to the Dark Lord to allow you some much needed diversion. To allow us both some much needed diversion. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

And if I ever find myself alone in a room with you, I'll commit suicide. Snape thought, but openly to Macnair said, "Don't get your hopes up. He has plans. None of us is getting in the way of his plans."

"Pity," said Macnair. "And I was so looking forward to this."

Much later that evening, Snape again risked taking out the miniature in its locket. When Dumbledore appeared, he said, "It was true. They're all out of Azkaban."

"So far as I know," replied Dumbledore, "it has not hit the news yet. It will be very interesting if it never does. How are you doing?"

"Walden Macnair is after me again."

"You poor boy," said Dumbledore, though Snape suspected he was grinning internally. "We must assist you as best as we can."

There was no mention in *The Daily Prophet* the next day of the Azkaban breakout. There was, however, a tiny notice that Snape's former colleague, the Muggle Studies teacher Professor Burbage, had resigned from Hogwarts. Of more interest was a lengthy memorial piece on Dumbledore written by Elphias Doge.

I didn't know Dumbledore and Doge were the same age, Snape thought, and then paused to ponder which of the two he'd assumed was the elder. He couldn't answer the question, but it brought up a new question. Why is it that so many pureblood witches and wizards either die very young or live to be very old? It does seem to be the half-bloods and muggle-borns who have the more stable life span. The Dark Lord is what? in his seventies? Of course, with the Horcrux business, he hardly counts as an example.

A messenger stuck his head into the laboratory. "He wants you," was all he said, but Snape was out of the laboratory and heading for the interview chamber in a flash.

This day, the chamber contained a long table, and looked for all the world like a conference room. Snape stopped in the doorway and stared around, uncertain where to go. The others already in the room apparently felt the same reticence. The massive chair at the table's head was clearly for the Dark Lord, but it would be a foolish Death Eater who presumed to guess who would sit at his right hand. Except, of course . . .

Bella strode into the chamber, her heavy-lidded eyes glittering and her raven hair falling in waves around her shoulders. Behind her came Rodolphus and Rabastan. She went directly to the place of honor and sat there, Rodolphus next to her on her right, and Rabastan to the left of the Dark Lord's seat. Snape raised his eyebrows slightly in surprise. He rather hoped the Dark Lord would take her down a peg for her presumption.

Then the Dark Lord was in their midst. Bella and the LeStrange brothers rose, and all bowed to him as he took his seat at the head of the table. Bella resumed her seat, but as Rodolphus and Rabastan moved to do the same, the Dark Lord stretched out a long, thin hand.

"No," he said quietly, and there was menace in his cold voice. "We think not." He motioned to the others. "Augustus, here beside us. Severus next to

Bella. The rest it matters not except . . . Lucius.” Malfoy stepped forward, his face waxy and his eyes frightened. “You,” the high voice went on, “will sit next to Augustus, for we may have need of you.”

The sharp, soft hiss next to him told Snape that Bella did not like this arrangement at all, but she held her tongue. With a tight smile around his thin lips, the Dark Lord surveyed them all, his crimson gaze resting on each in turn, his lieutenants arrayed around him, free from prison at last.

“We are now poised,” said the Dark Lord, “to take command in the wizarding world. One obstacle, the old fool Dumbledore, has been removed from our path thanks to the actions of our good servant Severus.”

The Death Eaters glanced at each other. They had, those just out of Azkaban, all heard of this, but so far only as a rumor. It was something else again to have it confirmed by the Dark Lord himself. Snape looked down at his hands, not wanting at this moment to meet anyone’s eyes.

“We must now,” the Dark Lord continued, “concentrate on the acquisition of power and an unassailable position. We must control the Ministry of Magic. The Minister of Magic must obey us. Augustus?”

Rookwood cleared his throat. “The new Minister is Rufus Scrimgeour. He seems to have taken over a year ago from Cornelius Fudge after we, well . . . Yes. Scrimgeour comes from Law Enforcement. He was Head Auror before he became Minister and he’s . . . well, he’s about as stubborn and bullheaded as they come, and . . .”

Snape was beginning to feel sorry for Rookwood, having to report on a situation that came into existence only after he went to Azkaban. Rookwood was clearly foundering.

“Will he obey us?” the Dark Lord asked.

“No,” said Rookwood. “And he can resist Imperius curses.”

“Then he will die,” said the Dark Lord. “Who will replace him?”

Rookwood glanced around, sweat beading his forehead. “Usually the Head of Magical Law Enforcement is next in line for the post,” he said. “That would be . . .” he looked down at a small piece of paper that he pulled from his robes, “Pius Thicknesse.”

“What of him? Can we control him?”

“It would be easier. He doesn’t have Scrimgeour’s strength of will.”

“You will begin to work on it. Next, the control of information. Rabastan?”

“We’re working on infiltrating the *Prophet* and other news sources, Lord,” Bella’s brother-in-law replied. “Two bits of excellent news. There has been

no general statement or release of the information that Severus here was connected to the death of Dumbledore. There's a rumor that the Potter boy is accusing him, but that information is confined to a limited number of people."

"What say you, Severus?" the Dark Lord asked. "Could you return to Hogwarts?"

"Lord," Snape replied. "There were many who saw me that night. Senior members of the staff and members of the Order of the Phoenix saw me go up to the tower and saw me return with young Malfoy. Even if this rumor is not general public knowledge, these people would have to be taken into account before I could go back."

The Dark Lord returned to Rabastan Lestrangle. "What is the second piece of good news?"

"The Skeeter woman is doing an exposé on Dumbledore. Soon his name will be discredited again, together with all his unwizardlike ideas."

"Excellent. If it turns out so, she will be rewarded. Lucius."

"Lord," responded Malfoy, and his voice trembled.

"You were once on the Board of Governors of Hogwarts. What now will happen there?"

"Lord, there is no hierarchical ascension to the position of Headmaster. While it is true that Professor McGonagall, as Deputy Headmistress, is now Acting Headmistress, it is not automatic that the permanent position will go to her. The Board will meet this month to discuss the matter and propose candidates, who must be examined and interviewed. The results will be reported back to the Board at its July meeting. They'll then review the candidates and confirm a new Headmaster in August. Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall is in charge."

"What chance is there that we could put one of our own people into this position?"

"Small to none, sir. The candidates must have academic credentials and teaching experience."

All eyes turned to Snape, who shook his head. "Even the Hogwarts Board of Governors would be reluctant to replace a dead headmaster with the man who killed him," he said.

The Dark Lord drew in a deep breath through his slits of nostrils. "Still, it would be to our advantage to have our own servant in the position. So much easier to control the parents when you control the children. And we

could eliminate the poisonous courses that have been weakening our world. We shall make this one of our goals. Severus . . .”

“Yes, Lord.”

“What of the headquarters of this Order of the Phoenix now that Dumbledore is dead? Are its defenses weakened?”

“I don’t know, Lord. I haven’t tried.” It was the first out and out lie that Snape had told the Dark Lord since his return to headquarters, but the Dark Lord did not notice. Instead he turned his head to look at Snape.

“You will try,” he said.

“Yes, Lord,” Snape replied.

Snape’s attempt to get into 12 Grimmauld Place was a spectacular failure. With Dumbledore dead and the charm unraveling, he was able to take a small group of Death Eaters to the little square, but when he walked up to the house and tried an unlocking spell, he was slammed by several curses at once.

Knocked off his feet by a stunner, he was unable to respond to the Confundus, the Tongue-Tying, and the Obliviate curses that followed, all administered by an apparition resembling the long-decaying corpse of Albus Dumbledore. The Death Eaters in the square watched in horror, then rushed forward to pull him away, and apparated with him back to the Dark Lord’s headquarters.

“Meant just for him,” Snape heard the healer in the Infirmary say as he slowly wakened. “I’d say it was adjusted to respond to his body and no one else’s. Powerful little combination. There’ll probably be an echo of it left in the house for a long time to come.”

Snape opened his eyes. His tongue felt like it was twice its normal size and made of concrete. Sparks were dancing in front of his eyes, and when he tried to remember his own name, a bomb went off in his medulla oblongata that made him feel like the back of his head had just come into forceful contact with a Patton tank. His heart started racing, and he leaned over the side of the bed and began to vomit.

“Now, now,” said the healer brusquely. “We can’t have that.” He began a low chant, and soon Snape was feeling about twenty-five percent human again.

The upside of all this discomfort was that Snape could no longer remember the location of 12 Grimmauld Place. He couldn’t find it, he couldn’t visualize it, and of course he couldn’t take anyone else to it. The Death Eaters who’d been with him could go back to the square, but they couldn’t see the house.

Miserable as he felt for several days, Snape had to admit that Moody 'd done a fair job with the protective curses at Grimmauld Place.

At the end of June, they got Yaxley back. By this time Bella's Operations department was targeting lower level operatives and clerks of Law Enforcement, and all they had to do was stamp his release papers. A new guard on the evening shift simply followed orders, and Yaxley was back at headquarters.

Yaxley, with his newfound understanding of the inside workings of Law Enforcement and its personnel, was put in charge of recruitment, with a special emphasis on the Ministry itself.

As July neared the end of its first week, the Dark Lord sent for Snape. They were alone in the interview chamber, where light spread around them in a wide arc. Snape was allowed to stand.

"Tell me again, potions master, the old magic that protects the boy, when does it end?"

"When he comes of age, on his seventeenth birthday."

"The dying day of this month."

"Yes, Lord."

"We shall take him then, he and those muggles he lives with. They will make good sport for us."

"Forgive me, Lord, but it's more likely they'll move him somewhere more protected before then."

"Who will move him, and where? There is more than one who would be the master of the Chosen One." The Dark Lord's sneer was almost a snarl. "If the Ministry pulls one way, and this Order pulls the other, they may well tear the boy in two and spare us the trouble."

"If Potter has his way, it will be the Order, not the Ministry. He has no love for the Ministry, and will flout its authority."

"You know this for a fact?"

"Yes, Lord. It has been so for at least two years, when the Ministry was calling him a liar and wanted to expel him from Hogwarts for defending himself from dementors. It got worse when the Umbridge woman attempted to undermine Dumbledore and has never improved."

"So our control over the Ministry would give us no advantage in dealing with Potter."

"No, Lord."

"Why did you not tell us this before?"

Snape froze, his heart beginning to hammer in his ears. And yet he had not been ordered to his knees or tickled with the promise of pain. Perhaps,

this once, it was only a question. “Forgive me, Lord. I thought, in my ignorance, that you wished control of the Ministry for its own sake. And the topic of Potter didn’t come up at the last meeting.”

“It is unfortunate you no longer gather information from either the Order or from Hogwarts.”

“Then I have failed you, Lord?” Snape modulated his voice carefully to reflect the combination of disappointment and fear he wanted the Dark Lord to think he felt. The truth was, he was becoming more and more puzzled by the moment. If the Dark Lord was displeased, why was he — Snape — still standing and free from pain?

“Do you retain any contact that might be a source of intelligence for either of these institutions?”

Snape’s mind raced through images of people. *Who can I name that I can protect from harm?* The Dark Lord waited with unusual patience. Finally Snape said, “Yes, Lord. There may be one who could inform me of the doings of the Order. But he’s shift, a coward, and quick to run. The others don’t trust him, so he would only be valuable if handled gently at a distance. As long as he himself remains unaware of our interest as we pluck his knowledge, he may be good for much — at least about their outside operations. But bring anyone heavy-handed into it, and we lose him.”

The Dark Lord chuckled. “Bella will never learn his name. Who is this unlikely spy?”

“You already know of him. He’s the thief named Mundungus Fletcher who was arrested briefly this spring. The Order only uses him for routine work, but he’d probably be a party to plans to move the Potter boy.”

“Very good, Severus. We had not believed you had failed us. You will cultivate this Fletcher, and you will inform us, and us alone, until we instruct you to inform others. We shall not remind Bella of the disappearance of her property.”

“Yes, Lord.” Snape thought again. “Lord, it would be better if I were in London. It is where he chiefly operates. Would you permit me to draw funds and reside outside for a week or two?”

“Yes, Severus. You have our permission.”

Snape drew per diem from Operations, to Bella’s great indignation, and apparated to London. Once settled in rooms in Chelsea (he was supplementing the Operations money from his own bank account), he shut himself in and took out Dumbledore’s portrait.

Dumbledore's appreciation was evident. "Riddle has a more upscale establishment than I imagined," he said, looking around the comfortable bedroom.

"I'm in Chelsea," Snape admitted. "I've done a bad thing."

"And he punished you by sending you to Chelsea? He is slipping."

"No, sir. The two are only marginally connected. I suggested something to him, and he ordered me to proceed, and I just thought I would like to stay in Chelsea, but it's still bad."

"Very well, Severus, if I must be your father confessor, you may tell me what you did."

"I told the Dark Lord I could get information from Mundungus Fletcher."

"Well, that is not necessarily truthful, but I do not know that I would characterize it as bad. Not wise, certainly. Not for you at any rate. Have you planned your escape route?"

Snape twisted his mouth ruefully. "He said it was 'unfortunate' I couldn't gather information anymore. Then he asked if I still had contacts. To say no at that particular moment could have been . . . unpleasant. I need to get something from Fletcher."

"What is Riddle interested in, specifically?"

"Plans for moving Potter before the end of the month."

"Dear me. Maybe you were right after all. This is rather bad. How soon do you need this information?"

"No deadline. Well, before they make the actual move, naturally. Of course, I could always tell him Fletcher wasn't in on the plans."

"True, and you may have to. Above all, we must keep Harry safe."

Three days later, the situation had changed completely. When Snape looked at his small portrait, Dumbledore was already there. "Severus, what organizations are they targeting for Imperius curses?"

"The Ministry, all levels, the *Prophet* . . ."

"The Board of Governors for Hogwarts?" Dumbledore was not really asking a question.

"No, I didn't . . . Wait. Lucius Malfoy did explain to the Dark Lord the procedure for selecting a new headmaster. He seemed interested, and not too concerned about things like credentials."

"Three members of the Board have just proposed Amycus Carrow."

"That's ridiculous!"

"I agree," Dumbledore said, "but if the Board confirms him, even under the Imperius curse, then he will be the current headmaster of Hogwarts. All of us, Nigellus, Dippet, me, would be constrained to assist him in any way we could."

Snape sat back. Outside his window was a quiet, peaceful street, sunlit in the July afternoon. A tenuous and illusive peace. "What are we going to do?" he asked the portrait.

"Severus, why did the Board members not propose your name?"

"I'm not sure, sir. It seemed to be on everyone's mind at the meeting — that I was a possibility, I mean — but I've been away from headquarters for a few days . . . Maybe because of you . . . what I did . . . it wouldn't be tenable."

"Normally I would agree. The situation is bizarre. But we must at all costs ensure that the post does not go to a real Death Eater, or I shall no longer be able to maneuver. Worse, I may have to give information to Riddle. Could you return to your headquarters and lobby for the job?"

Snape shook his head. "How am I supposed to explain how I know about Carrow's nomination? There has to be another way."

Dumbledore disappeared for a moment. When he returned, he looked irritated. "You need to come to Hogwarts again, Severus. I shall see if I can get Alastor as well, but we need to keep it small and close. Minerva is having violent hysterics right now, but by this evening she will probably have calmed down. Let no one else see you."

Snape closed the locket on the now empty portrait. He felt sick. Amycus Carrow in charge of Hogwarts? In charge of what was left of Dumbledore? Disaster piled on disaster, and if the Dark Lord called now, Snape had nothing to give him. He had not yet spoken to Mundungus Fletcher.

Snape reached Hogwarts shortly before nine o'clock that evening and once again made his way through the tunnel to the Whomping Willow. This time he had only to worry about Hagrid since neither students nor staff were in the school in July. The sun had still an hour to go before setting, so Snape was wary as he circled through the forest around Hagrid's hut, hoping the gamekeeper wouldn't accidentally look toward the hill while he was climbing it. He made it through safely, and even managed to avoid ghosts and poltergeist on the way up to the gargoyle staircase on the seventh floor.

The passage to the Acting Headmistress's office was open and waiting for him.

The only people in the office were Professor McGonagall and Alastor Moody, who had clearly been talking and now lapsed into silence as he

entered. McGonagall stood, turned her back on him without a word, and walked across the circular room to look down from the window onto the lake below. Moody leaned forward, hands on knees and a scowl on his face, but said nothing. Dumbledore slumbered in his portrait.

Snape paused on the threshold, uncertain how to proceed. Seconds ticked into minutes, but neither of the other two invited him to enter or sit down. Neither spoke a word. When the wait became painful, Snape said, "Excuse me, I seem to have mistaken the appointment. I'll not trouble you further," and himself turned to go back down the stairs.

Dumbledore stirred. "Come back, Severus, please. None of us must act too hastily now. There is far too much at stake."

Snape paused. "Did you explain the situation, or are we going into this cold?" he asked.

The portrait Dumbledore sighed, "I have told Minerva the events of the night on the tower. I understand that you have shown Alastor what transpired there. There is a certain reluctance..."

"Reluctance!" McGonagall exploded, wheeling to face into the room. "I'd like a bit more reluctance when he aims killing curses at old and trusted friends! How hard was it for ye, Snape? From the ease ye got that curse off, I'll be wagering ye 'd had some practice. Could ye do for me as smoothly?"

Moody was already on his feet, and Dumbledore had risen in his portrait with a crisp "Minerva!" Snape stood rigid in the doorway, every vestige of color drained from his face, black eyes locked and sealed. He was trembling.

"Minerva, I have explained that I requested..."

McGonagall didn't allow Dumbledore to finish. "And he should ha' refused! He should ha' fought back! D' ye no understand, Albus? Ye dinna know what would ha' happened! Maybe ye ha' the right o' it and ye would ha' died anyway, but maybe he'd ha' taken them by surprise and ye 'd still be with us. Ye dinna know! But he took tha' chance away, now didn't he, and now none o' us will ever know, and ye'll ne'er come back! But tha's the way of it when killin's been the answer before, so simple to let it be the answer again! I'll no work with a murderer!" She spun again to the view of the lake, her back stiff with anger and grief.

Snape's pallor began to crimson now, points of color appearing in his cheeks as rage rose in him, rage against McGonagall, rage against Dumbledore, rage against fate.

"How dare you," he hissed. "How dare you look down on me from the safety of your fortified tower and the luxury of six weeks of hindsight and

tell me what I should have done with two seconds to decide and an order to obey. In case you hadn't noticed, we're still fighting a war. Maybe I should have died on the tower with Dumbledore, but then I'd miss the pleasure of watching you take orders from Amycus Carrow . . ."

"Severus!" Dumbledore thundered. "Both of you! Silence!" In the deceptive calm that followed, his voice became gentler. "Alastor, please sit down. Severus, come into the room as well, and sit, it does not matter where. Minerva, I beg of you . . . This was not Severus's decision to make. He was in a difficult position, but the decision was mine. Because of his sacrifice, Hogwarts is still safe, Harry is still alive . . ."

"Sacrifice!" McGonagall advanced into the center of the room, an avenging fury. "What sacrifice did he make but to cushion his nest with . . . with . . . Voldemort!" And her face glowed with cruel satisfaction when Snape winced and clutched his arm.

"Professor McGonagall." Moody finally spoke. "I think you should know that Professor Snape's reception by Voldemort was not pleasant. He was punished . . ."

"Good!" McGonagall spat out. "There is some justice in the world, then."

Dumbledore started to speak again, but Moody raised a hand to silence him. He walked over to where Snape still stood defensively in the doorway. "Severus," he said, gruff but with an underlying gentleness, "there is no one among us who has a job as difficult as yours. We all live in danger, but at least our paths are wide, straight, and well lit. If any one of us dies, we die knowing that our sacrifice was recognized by others. Your paths are narrow and twisted, dark and hidden, and if you go, all the people you died to save 'll vilify your name. I couldn't do that, boyo. I don't have the courage to do what you do."

Moody faced McGonagall across the room. "I won't tell you to give up your anger. You've got to deal with it on your own. But as I understand it, this lad's going back into the lion's den tonight, and there're some things we need to discuss. You owe him at least the courtesy of sitting in the same room and hearing what we have to say."

"Now," continued Moody after McGonagall and Snape were both seated. "What's this about Amycus Carrow?"

Dumbledore explained what he believed to be the result of combined Imperius and Confundus spells while McGonagall listened aghast. "How could they ever get away with proposing a known Death Eater," she exclaimed at

last, “even if some of the members of the Board are Imperiused and Confunded?”

“He isn’t a known Death Eater,” Snape said quietly. “Not him, and not his sister Alecko. When the Dark Lord fell the first time, they escaped the roundup, and no one ever implicated them. Not only were they never found guilty, they were never tried. In fact, they were never accused. Never been to Azkaban, never been in a Ministry holding pen . . . They have a cleaner record than I do.”

“Oh,” said McGonagall sharply. “I see. Then the Ministry must be warned that they and the Board are targets for Imperius curses. They must take steps.”

“They know, Minerva,” said Moody. “But these spells can be very subtle. You don’t know who to trust. I’d bet my life they’ll never put an Imperius on old Rufus, but I wouldn’t trust anyone around him. Rufus is our best bet. He’s strong, independent, hates Death Eaters . . . As long as he controls the Ministry, I think you’re safe from the Board and Mr. Carrow. Wish he could get along with Harry, though.”

“We need contingency plans,” said Dumbledore. “If we reach the point where we no longer trust the Ministry, we have to be sure Riddle—that’s Severus’s Dark Lord, Minerva. We do try to avoid distressing Severus unnecessarily—doesn’t get control of this office. If he can put someone like Carrow in here, Hogwarts is doomed. Every student and every staff member will be in danger. In that contingency, we would need someone Riddle thinks he controls, but who is really ours.”

“So,” said McGonagall acidly, glaring at Snape, “that’s where you come in.”

“Yes, Minerva, that is where Severus comes in. While the Ministry is safe, we wait for the Board to make its choice. If the Ministry falls, we must be sure the choice is Severus rather than Amicus. It is a delicate operation, and I fear there is a possibility that some of us may get hurt.”

“Us?” Moody raised his eyebrows.

“It was a collective pronoun, Alastor. I still feel part of things you know. The one person we must keep safe at all costs, at the cost of every single other person if necessary, is Harry Potter. Severus, what will assure your status?”

“Information,” Snape replied immediately.

“And what information does Riddle want above all else?”

“Information about when Potter is leaving his uncle’s house.”

"Then we must be prepared to provide him with that information if it becomes necessary."

"Hold on!" Moody was on his feet now. "How does that save Harry?"

"We will arrange to protect Harry," Dumbledore assured him, "but we must also protect Hogwarts. We must be prepared, as a last resort, to give Riddle the information he wants."

"And if that isn't enough?" Snape asked. "Or if your plan goes awry?"

"We must take that risk. Not to take it if we have to is to surrender everything. Alastor, what are the plans for moving Harry from the Dursley house?"

Dumbledore's request was greeted with stunned silence from all three. Then Snape rose and faced the portrait behind McGonagall's desk. "I don't want this information," he said. "I don't want the Dark Lord to have it."

"Severus," said Dumbledore, and it was a measure of his fear that he forgot Snape's mark, "if it becomes necessary, you will have to give Voldemort the correct date of Harry's departure from his aunt and uncle's. Not to do so will raise suspicion, when Voldemort believes you so well informed. However, you must plant the idea of decoys; that, I think, ought to ensure Harry's safety. Try Confunding Mundungus Fletcher. And Severus, if you are forced to take part in the chase, be sure to act your part convincingly . . . I am counting on you to remain in Lord Voldemort's good books as long as possible, or Hogwarts will be left to the mercy of the Carrows. Now, Alastor, what is the plan."

"Why Fletcher?" Moody asked. "Why don't I suggest decoys?"

"Because Severus has already told Riddle he can get information from Fletcher. If anyone is questioned about this in the future, it will be clear that Fletcher was, indeed, the source of his information."

Moody grunted. "The twenty-sixth," he said. "We're moving him Saturday the twenty-sixth at nightfall. We're getting the Dursleys out earlier in the day."

"There you are," Dumbledore told Snape. "Prepare your Mundungus cover, but don't say anything to Riddle unless we are unable to avoid it."

C H A P T E R S I X T Y - O N E

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Snape did return to the lion's den that evening. Taken straight to the Dark Lord, he reported on his task.

"Fletcher frequents certain taverns south of the Thames. I'm going to try to contact him tomorrow evening and start cultivating him. It may take a few days to build up his confidence in me enough to start pumping him for information."

"Do not let it take too long," the Dark Lord warned. "We should not like over-caution to defeat us of our victory."

Snape did indeed locate Mundungus Fletcher in a nondescript tavern and, after a moment of consternation on Fletcher's part, bought him a pint. The Confundus charm was fairly easy after that, except that Snape had to concentrate to be sure Fletcher understood.

"You will suggest to the Order of the Phoenix that they use decoys," Snape planted in Fletcher's brain. "Polyjuice Potion. Identical Potters. It is the only thing that might work. You will forget that I have suggested this. You will present it as your own idea. You understand?"

"I understand," Fletcher murmured, and Snape left him to his pint.

After that came the waiting. Nothing much happened for a week and a half except that the Death Eater debate over blood purity became a public topic. On the sixteenth, while enjoying a cup of coffee in a Chelsea shop, Snape noticed in the *Prophet*, which he had concealed behind a copy of the *Guardian*, that his erstwhile colleague, Professor Burbage, had written a rather impassioned plea for tolerance and wizard/muggle cooperation. The thought *I wonder if she knows how brave that is?* flitted through his mind, and then the article was forgotten.

On the twenty-first, it hit. That evening the locket Snape carried began to vibrate, and he opened it as soon as he could find a guarded spot. "Severus,"

said the tiny portrait of Dumbledore, “you must act at once. Law Enforcement is taken. We got a report two hours ago that Pius Thicknesse began acting strangely during the afternoon, and now our informant has disappeared. We can only assume that Thicknesse has been Imperiused. Moody is trying to contact Scrimgeour, but no success so far. It is imperative that you move now to secure your position.”

Snape apparated at once to headquarters only to find that the Dark Lord was not there. “You,” the register clerk said, looking relieved. “I’m supposed to contact you. There’s a meeting — he just called for it now, not ten minutes ago — at the Malfoy mansion, and he wants you . . .” Even as they spoke, the mark on Snape’s left arm began to tingle.

The sun had already set and the moon, ripe in the third day of its cycle of fullness, was rising, when Snape apparated to the lane that ran next to the grounds of the Malfoy mansion in Wiltshire. The ‘pop’ of his appearance was echoed by another ‘pop,’ and Snape let his wand slip into his hand from the loop in his sleeve, knowing that the other wizard was drawing his wand, too. They paused, and in the moonlight Snape recognized Yaxley. He put his wand away.

“News?” Yaxley asked.

“The best,” Snape replied, not one hundred percent certain he’d understood the question. Was Yaxley referring to Snape’s news or the Dark Lord’s news?

“Thought I might be late,” Yaxley confided as they approached the driveway. “It was a little trickier than I expected. But I hope he’ll be satisfied. You sound confident that your reception will be good.”

Snape contented himself with a nod. As they approached the iron gates, Yaxley raised his arm in salute, and Snape did likewise, realizing the gates had been calibrated to recognize the marks on their arms. The wrought-iron barrier shimmered and let them pass.

Yaxley was clearly more nervous than he wanted to admit, for he suddenly whipped out his wand and pointed it — straight at an albino peacock — then laughed a little at his own jumpiness. “He always did himself well, Lucius. Peacocks . . .” In the stillness, Snape could hear the trickle of a fountain.

The wheels and gears were spinning in Snape’s brain, trying to cover every possibility. Yaxley was in charge of Ministry recruitment, so his presence might have something to do with Thicknesse. But then why was Yaxley worried about being late? Wouldn’t he have been one of the first there? *Conf-*

dence, Severus. Above all you must show confidence. If this isn't about Thicknesse, it could be about anything. Don't let the sharks smell blood in the water.

The two men crossed the darkened entry hall and paused before a heavy wooden door. Then Snape reached forward, turned the bronze handle, and they entered.

A split second of overwhelming shock and fear, and then Snape mustered every ounce of control he possessed to maintain the look of calm that had been on his face when he entered the room, the crowded room where every person was watching him and his reactions. He did not look to the center of the room again. Affecting indifference, he waited until the Dark Lord should speak his name. And he tried to lock from his mind the images of the friendly cheerful face of the woman whose body now hung suspended head down from the ceiling above the long meeting table, the woman who for the past ten years had been a coworker, a colleague — the former Hogwarts Professor of Muggle Studies, Charity Burbage.

“Yaxley. Snape. You are very nearly late.” The serpentine face shone in the moonlight that now floated through the high windows. The cold, high voice beckoned, no more than the barest hint of a threat behind it. The long, thin hand pointed to the chair on the Dark Lord’s right. “Severus, here. Yaxley — beside Dolohov.” Then, looking directly at Snape, the Dark Lord said, “So?”

What game is this? Snape thought. He summoned me last. I was meant to arrive late. Even Yaxley knew he should have arrived earlier. Is this about Potter? Or about the Ministry? Or am I being tested now that he's captured Charity? Henry VIII honored those he was about to execute — is that why I sit at his right hand? Snape kept his face blank and cold.

“My Lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, at nightfall.” It was news. The others at the table shifted and stirred. Snape noticed Draco Malfoy in the middle of them, under the suspended form of the woman who had never taught him. *The boy must be terrified.*

What came next was not unexpected. Murmuring “Saturday . . . at nightfall,” the Dark Lord fixed his red eyes on Snape’s black ones and probed, probed deeply and intrusively, and Snape almost defiantly gave him the comfortable rooms in Chelsea and the coffee shop. He also gave him Mundungus Fletcher, but not Dumbledore, Moody, or McGonagall, nor the plan to have multiple Harrys, and the Dark Lord did not see the omission.

“Good. Very good. And this information comes . . .”

“... from the source we discussed,” said Snape. *But you knew that. Yet you chose to demonstrate to everyone at this table that I share confidences with you not shared by anyone else. Does this honor reassure or terrify me?*

Yaxley seemed suddenly to realize he was losing his chance. “My Lord,” he said, leaning forward, “I’ve heard differently. Dawlish, the auror, let slip that Potter won’t be moved until the thirtieth, the night before the boy turns seventeen.”

Snape allowed himself to smile, a sign of confidence for the benefit of the others. “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.”

Yaxley pushed onward. “I assure you, my Lord, Dawlish seemed quite certain.”

Relieved beyond measure at the opening Yaxley had unintentionally given him, Snape replied, “If he has been Confunded, naturally he is certain. 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?” joked one of the wizards, and though others echoed his jibe with smirks and giggles, Snape marveled at his courage — or foolishness.

Yaxley would not be still. “My Lord, Dawlish believes an entire party of aurors will be used to transfer the boy...” The Dark Lord stopped him.

“Where are they going to hide the boy next?” he inquired of Snape, and Snape knew the largest barrier had been crossed, for he was being addressed as the expert in the matter. Beyond him Professor Burbage swung, unconscious and helpless, but to notice her now was to court death and the destruction of all hope.

“At the home of one of the Order. The place, according to the source, has been given every protection that the Order and Ministry together could provide. I think that there is little chance of taking him once he is there, my Lord, unless, of course, the Ministry has fallen before next Saturday, which might give us the opportunity to discover and undo enough of the enchantments to break through the rest.”

The Dark Lord looked down the table. On his command, Yaxley confirmed Dumbledore’s suspicions about Pius Thicknesse, spoke of isolating Scrimgeour within the Ministry as the next step in taking over, and added information about the Department of Magical Transport that Snape would

pass on at the earliest opportunity. Information that also gave Snape a way to strengthen his position with the Dark Lord.

“The Order is eschewing any form of transport that is controlled or regulated by the Ministry; they mistrust everything to do with the place,” Snape told the Dark Lord, and the Dark Lord accepted the statement as true and was pleased. He himself, he told the company, would be there that night to capture Harry Potter.

That was not good news. If the Dark Lord intended to battle the Order in person on the twenty-sixth, then Snape would have no choice but to be there, a prospect with several disadvantages, not the least being the possibility of his own death, ending Dumbledore’s plans to protect Hogwarts and any chance of passing his information on to Potter about battling the Dark Lord. And, though he did not intend to harm any of his former colleagues, he was sure that in the confusion of a battle he might have to fight Lupin, or Moody, and while Moody knew, Lupin did not, and Snape would have to fight in earnest. Too, the Order would see him in the Death Eater army, and would know Potter’s story to be true—regardless of what the *Prophet* might say—that he, Snape, had indeed killed Dumbledore.

And the Dark Lord was also telling the assembled company that he would have to kill Harry Potter personally.

Snape glanced quickly at Greyback, the Carrows, and Yaxley. Who else had been at Hogwarts that night? Rowle? He fervently hoped they didn’t put two and two together and wonder why he, Snape, had told them that same thing nearly two months before the Dark Lord made his decision known.

Two things happened next, both of them shocking though in different ways. The first was a scream, a wailing, that came up through the very floorboards. Snape did not jump or startle as the others did. Being locked down as tightly as he was gave him an advantage there. The Dark Lord sent Pettigrew to silence this second prisoner.

The next was that the Dark Lord demanded Lucius Malfoy’s wand, saying he would use it to battle Potter. It was painful to watch the once-proud Malfoy forced to surrender his only weapon and submit to sneers against his loyalty like a disobedient child. *He will humiliate me the same way if ever I fall from grace.*

The great snake Nagini had entered the room (or had it been watching all the time from the shadows?) and slithered its way to its master. Snape was suddenly, if possible, more alert. *Something is happening. He’s leading up to something. It’s like a play. The first important business, the first act, is over, and*

here we have a humorous interlude before beginning the second act. Is this about Charity — is it about me, after all?

It unfolded as if scripted — the impugning of the Malfoy family's devotion and then Bella, predictable, dependable Bella, jumping into the fray to defend the loyalty of her house only to be slapped down with the news that her house had been defiled by the admission of a werewolf into the family. *Blood purity. This is about blood purity. But why is he taunting Bella? No one doubts her loyalty. Why humiliate Bella?*

And then it came, the theme of the second act — “Many of our oldest family trees become a little diseased over time. You must prune yours, must you not, to keep it healthy? Cut away those parts that threaten the health of the rest . . . cut away the canker . . . only those of the true blood remain . . .”

Snape knew. He knew why he'd been informed last to arrive last, knew why the body of Charity Burbage hung over the table, feared that the unseen, wailing prisoner might also be a colleague, a friend — the second act was about him. Snape was being tried, and could not be found wanting.

What had not been sealed before was sealed now. No feeling, no emotion, no hesitation, could be allowed to surface. Snape shut himself utterly down, as cold now as the man testing him. With a tiny movement of Malfoy's wand, the Dark Lord brought Charity Burbage back to consciousness.

“Do you recognize our guest, Severus?” the Dark Lord asked, as all eyes turned to the hanging, twisting prisoner. All eyes but the Dark Lord's, who was staring fixedly, calculatingly, at Snape.

Before Snape could answer, Charity blinked, focused, and recognized him. “Severus! Help me!” she cried as she slowly revolved in her bonds above him.

I cannot help you. I cannot pity you. I cannot feel the smallest spark of sympathy for you, for he would know instantly. I must find within myself some moment of cold satisfaction to offer up to him, and you must die alone. May it at least be quick. Snape forced himself to gaze coolly at Charity. “Ah, yes,” he replied, and left it at that.

“For those of you who do not know,” the Dark Lord said, “we are joined here tonight by Charity Burbage who, until recently, taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry . . . taught the children of witches and wizards all about muggles . . . how they are no different from us . . .”

There were taunts and laughs from around the table now as almost all eyes were on the despairing Charity, who again pleaded, “Severus . . . please . . . please . . .” Almost all eyes, but not those of Draco Malfoy, who kept his

locked on the surface of the table, nor those of Bella Lestrange, who was now staring at Snape, too. And not those of the Dark Lord, who continued to scrutinize Snape's impassive face with unwavering attention as he detailed Charity's 'crimes.'

Charity was weeping now, her pleas silenced, her fate sealed. Snape watched her, icy and calm. The Dark Lord raised his newly acquired wand, hissed, "*Avada Kedavra*," and Charity's body was allowed to fall to the table. Her ordeal was over.

But not Snape's, not quite, for now the Dark Lord stroked the great snake and murmured, "Dinner, Nagini," and Snape continued to watch, still icy and calm, as Nagini coiled its way to Charity's body, seized her in its powerful jaws, and dragged her from the room. Then he turned in his seat to meet the Dark Lord's red eyes.

"Am I just, Severus?" the Dark Lord whispered, and Snape knew he was meant to be aware of the probe.

"Such should be the fate of all who share her traitorous views. She was a disgrace to the name of witch."

The Dark Lord searched deeply and found no contradiction. He smiled and finally released Snape, addressing the whole group. "Our plans near fruition. The Ministry is under siege, and will soon be ours. The Potter boy will fall into our hands Saturday night. One bastion remains, and it will be ours within the month." He gestured toward Snape. "Tonight I would have you meet and congratulate the next headmaster of Hogwarts."

The hubbub that greeted this announcement almost drowned Bella's anguished cry of "No!" Witches and wizards pressed forward to shake Snape's hand in a general air of celebration. Snape did not celebrate. No smile touched his lips. He was sealed, locked down, and no feeling, no emotion surfaced to mar the impassiveness of his features. No emotion at all.

After the meeting, Snape requested and received permission to return to Chelsea and resume contact with Mundungus Fletcher just in case the plans of the Order changed. He apparated into the Chelsea bedroom and stood there, absolutely still, for several minutes. He had to contact Dumbledore, but struggled for the words to explain what had just happened. Deciding finally that the words would come of themselves once he began talking, he took the locket with its miniature portrait out of his desk drawer. He had not taken it to the meeting, lest it be discovered.

Dumbledore appeared at once. "You are safe," he said, clearly pleased. "What news?"

"Sir, you were correct about Pius Thicknesse. He has been Imperiused. They are planning to control everyone around Minister Scrimgeour first, and then make their move."

"And what else?" asked Dumbledore, a note of suspicion now in his voice.

"The Dark Lord has decided that the best person to propose for Hogwarts would be me."

"Severus, what is wrong? What has happened?"

"I don't understand, sir. Why are you concerned?"

"I have not seen you locked down this tightly since . . . Severus, I have never seen you locked down quite this tightly. What happened?"

Snape stared into the portrait. Then, his voice cold and withdrawn, he said, "Charity Burbage is dead."

"Merlin! Did you have to watch it?"

"Sir, what would be the point of encompassing such a death and then not avail yourself of the strategic value of having others watch?"

"Severus! Severus, listen to me! I want you to come to Hogwarts at once!"

"That would be unwise, sir. It could jeopardize all our plans."

"I am going to contact Alastor . . ."

"Also unwise, sir. Such contact, if it became known, would make my position highly unstable."

"Severus . . ."

Snape closed the locket and placed it back in the desk drawer. Then he removed his shoes and lay down, fully clothed, on top of the bed, his hands folded lightly above his stomach, one ankle crossed over the other. He lay there for some time, eyes open but not really seeing the ceiling above him. There were no images floating in his brain to distress him. He had taken care of that.

I cannot lower my guard. He can come at any time of day or night, and I have to be ready. I'll never be able to lower my guard again.

Snape rested, unmoving, through the night, but he did not sleep.

Saturday afternoon found Snape back at headquarters, where he reported to Operations along with the rest who'd been assigned to accompany the Dark Lord.

"What's this?" he asked Bella, examining the piece of cloth she thrust into his hands.

"Hood," she replied. "Standard issue." Then she looked at him with something close to disgust. "You've never gone out into the field, have you? Pathetic."

"Never. My services were needed elsewhere. Why the hoods?"

"To hide our identities. It's more frightening to be faced by an anonymous force than by people you know from other contexts."

"Less likely to be turned over to the aurors, too."

"Are you questioning my courage?"

"No, of course not. Why ever would I do that?" *And yet*, Snape thought as he fingered the hood, *it does solve one of my problems. With this on, the members of the Order won't be able to identify me. It will make the Hogwarts business easier to deal with.*

They apparated, about thirty of them with the Dark Lord, to Little Whinging in Surrey. There, above the Dursley residence, they were stopped by a force like a wall surrounding the house. The Dark Lord motioned to Snape, and he went at once to his lord's side.

"Why can we not enter?" the Dark Lord inquired, and his tone said that he was not pleased.

Snape looked around at the wide circle of Death Eaters, and then down at the house far below them. "It is not yet Potter's seventeenth birthday," he said. "Prior to that, I believe the protection only ceases the moment he ceases calling the house home. That can't happen until he actually leaves it. At least that is my understanding. Dumbledore never totally confided in me about this aspect of it."

"So we wait, and if you are right, we shall be able to attack after he leaves."

"I believe so, my Lord."

They waited. The sun had set around nine o'clock and the moon would not rise until after midnight. The only light came from the street lamps and the windows of the row upon row of identical houses. Minute after minute ticked by, and Snape could see that some of the others glanced at him, knowing who he was even under the hood, maybe from the unfamiliar and slightly awkward way he sat on his broom. *They suspect I've given them false information. I pray that they're wrong.*

Then they were engulfed by a roar, and Hagrid appeared in their midst astride a motorcycle with a sidecar in which sat Harry Potter. But before anyone could move, others appeared as well — on brooms, but also on thestrals, and everywhere there were Harry Potters. There was a moment's pause as each side recovered from the shock, and then the members of the Order were scattering, speeding for the different points of the compass, and the circle of Death Eaters was forced to split up as well, to give chase.

Snape paused for a second to choose. He was fairly sure that Hagrid would

guard the real Harry, for Hagrid was immune to a wide variety of curses and the sidecar was extra protection. The Dark Lord, on the other hand, focused at once on Moody, and though Snape would have liked to watch the back of the only member of the Order who could protect him from the others, he did not want to be near the Dark Lord where the need to show his zeal would be greatest. He chose instead to follow Lupin, and watch Lupin's back. Even though Lupin had never watched his.

They sped upward into the night, and Lupin's 'Harry' feinted and dodged with a familiar skill. *A Quidditch player*, Snape thought. *Who might that be? A Weasley? Charlie, Fred, George, and Ron all played Quidditch. Ginny, too, as I recall.* He tried to keep up, but the broom work was hard. As wind and backwash swept over him, the Death Eater hood blew away from Snape's face, but he was enough of an amateur in Operations, that the import of this never occurred to him.

Then another hooded Death Eater swooped by, quicker and more maneuverable on his broom than Snape. His wand hand came up, and Snape realized he had a clear aim at Lupin's back. He pointed his own wand at the Death Eater's hand and thought, *Sectumsemptra!*

He missed. His familiarity with brooms, or lack of it, nearly proved fatal. The cutting curse flew cleanly past the Death Eater and struck 'Harry' in the side of the head. "Good one!" cried the Death Eater next to him, revealing by his voice that he was Rookwood. "Did you get him?"

"Flesh wound, I think," replied Snape, then slowed, for Lupin and his 'Harry' were now moving beyond Snape's capacity to follow, and he wanted to get back to the starting point to find out what was happening with the others. He let his companion race ahead without him.

Back at the Dursley house, not all was calm and peaceful. A form, a shadow, a body, kicked and twisted in the yard. Snape lowered his broom and dismounted, glancing up at the sky around him to see if any Death Eaters were coming back. Then he approached the struggling body.

It was Moody. It took only the lighting of a Lumos spell to show Snape that Moody had been hit in the face by an Ignis curse. The right side of his skull was charred, the hair singed away. The rest of Moody's body had been broken by the long fall, and yet he was still alive. Barely, but still alive. As Snape dropped to his knees, the enchanted blue eye swirled, made contact, and communicated in silence.

Get off me, you... boyo?

It's me. Can you move? But Snape already knew he couldn't. Broken bones, ruptured organs—the fall had been cruel.

Where are they? There was a desperation in Moody's unspoken voice that Snape had never heard before.

They'll be back soon. Let me help.

No, no. I just always thought I'd go fighting, a wand in my hand. Not Moldywort's plaything.

Tell me what you want, and I'll do it.

I couldn't lay that burden on you, boyo.

Snape let the tip of his wand slip under Moody's jacket, an inch now from Moody's heart. *And watching them kill you wouldn't be a burden? If you wish it, I'll do it.*

Bless you, boyo. I'll speak a good word for you when you come to the veil.

The words of the killing curse were nonverbal, the tiny flash of green light hidden by the fabric of Moody's coat. The physical wounds were enough to explain the event, and Snape rose slowly, calm and cool, to await the return of the other Death Eaters and his Lord.

* * *

"Dead?" the Dark Lord hissed. "It should have lived to repay the defiance it has shown us."

"Had he fallen from a lesser height, Lord," Snape assured him, "it would have been different. As it was..."

The moon had by now risen, and its light reflected off the blue eye as the Dark Lord sneered down at his fallen enemy. "Bring it, in any case. It can still provide sport, and we know the Lestranges, especially, will be amused." As a precaution, however—or maybe it was a trophy—he took the enchanted eye, leaving an empty socket in its place.

Snape was in charge of the removal of Moody's body, and watched with a bemused smile as the Death Eater operatives bounced it against sidewalk, tree, and stone, then played a modified hoop-and-stick game with the stiff, cartwheeling corpse. He did not try to imagine what they might have done with a live Moody. Such mind games were unnecessary, and interfered with his ability to shut down. Back at headquarters, the body continued to be a foil for fun and entertainment until the naturally progression of decay impaired its integrity. When that happened, it was thrown into the garbage. Snape did not interfere. It was not really Moody, only the house he had once lived in.

Meanwhile, Potter's birthday came, and the Dark Lord eagerly sought the boy's hiding place. Snape, in a less dangerous world, would have wagered his eyeteeth that it was the Weasley home, but nobody pressed him. At least nobody he was interested in wagering with.

But other things were happening as well, and the evening of Potter's birthday coincided with another important staff meeting. Only this meeting turned at once into an Operation as Bella's people handed out hoods and potions. There was plenty of Veritaserum, and other brews to impair will and ensure cooperation, in case the Imperius spells didn't work.

Their destination and their goal was the Ministry of Magic.

That very afternoon, the last cord of the net had been woven into place, and now the head of every department, and every bodyguard that surrounded the Minister, was Imperiused or bribed into the hands of the Dark Lord. Scrimgeour was ripe for plucking, and the Dark Lord wanted to be there for the harvest.

They arrived after midnight at the start of Friday, August first. Snape had no opportunity to contact Dumbledore since he didn't carry the locket with him at all times, and he'd had no chance to return to his laboratory to use it. Scrimgeour would get no warning at all.

The Imperiused heads of departments were called in. Snares were laid for Ministry officials who might try to interfere. Snape spared a brief thought for Arthur Weasley and Nymphadora Tonks, and then remembered this was the day of Bill Weasley's wedding. They would not come in to work, and were therefore safe. It was a small mercy.

Everything had long been in place when Scrimgeour arrived at eight o'clock with his bodyguard. They led him right to the trap in his office, and the doors sealed him from all possibility of aid before he was even aware he was caught.

Scrimgeour's sharp intake of breath was the only satisfaction the Dark Lord got from the Minister's surprise. "I have brought some old friends to visit you, Minister," the Dark Lord sneered, and one by one the circle of Death Eaters pushed back their hoods. Bella and the Lestranger brothers, Dolohov, Mulciber, Rookwood . . . face after face, and every one had been a prisoner in Azkaban under the care of dementors. Every one except . . .

"You!" Scrimgeour bellowed as Snape, too, lowered his hood. "You filthy little . . ." And he lunged for Snape's throat, to be brought up sharply by a casual wave of the Dark Lord's wand.

"You know each other?" The Dark Lord's voice dripped sarcasm as well

as surprise. "My, my. Such a small world." He seized Scrimgeour by the hair and forced his eyes around. "Incarceration, shackles, a trial . . . our poor little potions brewer? Minister, he was barely more than a child. Those who abuse children should be punished. We shall allow Severus first blood, in a manner of speaking."

Snape was locked down and icily calm. "Lord," he said quietly. "I hope I do not disappoint you. You recall I was never in Operations and have never . . ."

Bella threw back her head with a howl of laughter. "Never?" she shrieked. "Never cast a Cruciatus curse! That'll go high on my list of things you've never done. Almost as high . . ."

"Bella," the Dark Lord remonstrated with the air of a kindly father, "there is always a first time. We are certain Severus will not disappoint us. Severus?"

Snape drew his wand and stepped forward. His face betrayed no more emotion than if he were about to cast a Wingardium spell on a feather. Scrimgeour followed every move with a look of pure hatred. "You little piece of owl dung," he growled. "You cockroach. And to think a decent man like Albus Dumbledore would ever consider you worth even one hair of his beard."

Snape's wand moved up, almost of its own accord, level with Scrimgeour's heart. "*Crucio*," Snape said softly, and Scrimgeour dropped to the floor, writhing in pain, for softness can still carry intent.

After several seconds, while Scrimgeour fought to keep from screaming, the Dark Lord raised his hand. "Thank you, Severus. And now it is Bella's turn."

For the rest of the session, stretching into hours, Snape only watched. The survivors of Azkaban were far too greedy for revenge to even notice he wasn't participating. Not content with the simplicity of the Cruciatus curse, they danced Scrimgeour around his office, their curses like knives, whips . . .

After the first minutes, the Dark Lord began his interrogation, and it centered on one question: Where was Harry Potter? What blood traitor's hovel concealed the Chosen One? Scrimgeour roared his defiance and scorn and refused to answer. They continued. The office was spattered with flecks of blood; the Dark Lord's ire mounted until he joined his Death Eaters and added his power to Scrimgeour's torment as afternoon melted into evening.

And then it was over. Suddenly and unexpectedly over. "NO!" the Dark Lord screamed. "Bring him back! We are not done!" Scrimgeour's limp body lay on the rug, unmoving. "Bring him back! Severus, tell us he is not dead!"

Snape knelt by the fallen Minister. To him it was obvious, but not something that would occur to a Death Eater. "It was his heart," he said. "His heart gave out. He is dead, Lord."

The Dark Lord drove a fist into the top of the desk. "He cheats us! Even now, when his Ministry lies helpless in our hands, he cheats us! Where is Potter?"

The Dark Lord stormed to the door of the Minister's office, his team of Death Eaters fearfully watching him. "Bring them!" he cried to the Death Eaters who came running from different offices. "All the Ministry traitors not already on our side, bring them!"

"Sir," said one Death Eater who had not been with the group questioning Scrimgeour, "most of the rest aren't here." He was trembling in terror, but had to answer. "We wanted to . . . You said you were not to be disturbed."

"Not here! Not at their posts on a Friday! Where are these slothful, slovenly excuses for workers?"

"Sir, they took the day off. To go to a wedding. Arthur Weasley's son got married today."

"Then take a force to the Weasley home and bring them here!"

All eyes were focused on the Dark Lord. Only Snape, emotionally cut off from the scene because of his defenses, noticed the flicker of movement in a painting on a side wall. A painting he'd thought was empty. The portrait of a little wizard with a toadlike face and one of the long formal wigs of the seventeenth century peered from behind the chair it usually sat on, then scurried back out of the frame.

Good, Snape thought. I don't know whose office he connects with, but this day's work is no longer secret. People who might have been trapped will be warned.

The Dark Lord was calming now, his face shrewd as he planned the next moves. "We must find Potter," he said, "and we must take care not to lose sources of information through carelessness or anger. We have lost this one," — he nudged Scrimgeour's body with his foot — "we shall lose no more except by deliberate choice. Interrogate all as to Potter's whereabouts, but do not kill. And do not," he looked significantly at Bella, "drive insane."

Parties of Death Eaters — Death Eaters and tame Ministry workers — were sent out, not just to the Weasley home, but to homes of others known to be associated with the Order of the Phoenix. Still the Dark Lord pondered. He questioned his new servants. "How can we locate one wizard among

many?" he asked. "The Ministry does it all the time. How?" He was talking now to Pius Thicknesse, head of Magical Law Enforcement.

"We have dossiers on most people," Thicknesse responded. "The easiest way is a Taboo, if you know a unique habit the person has. Let's say you want a wizard and know he puts treacle in his coffee. That's a very uncommon habit. You place a Taboo on flavoring coffee with treacle, and the next time he does it, the Ministry knows where he is."

"What does Potter do that no one else does?" the Dark Lord asked, then answered his own question. "The boy is arrogant, defiant, insulting. We understand that he commonly speaks our name, which none in the wizarding world do. We shall punish his arrogance. Place a Taboo on the speaking of the name Voldemort."

The Taboo worked. Rowle and Dolohov thought they had Potter cornered in London, but he slipped through their fingers. They were reminded of the consequences of disappointing the Dark Lord. Then the Dark Lord's name was mentioned repeatedly in Grimmauld Place. Potter had fled to Number 12.

Snape was questioned again about how to enter the headquarters of the Order. Thanks to Moody's curses, he could give no information. The Dark Lord scanned and probed him for long, exhausting hours, and was satisfied that the information was no longer there. A guard was set in the square to catch Potter should he ever appear in front of them.

With the Ministry in their hands, the Dark Lord ceased using headquarters, taking up more or less permanent residence in the Malfoy mansion, taking pleasure in toying with Lucius's fears. Snape kept up constant attendance either on the Dark Lord in Wiltshire or at the Ministry. He no longer had the opportunity to be alone in his laboratory where the locket with Dumbledore's portrait remained concealed.

And all through August, the Dark Lord's plans for Snape and for Hogwarts unfolded.

One Ministry employee who came into the Dark Lord's camp immediately and eagerly was Dolores Umbridge. Her obsession with blood purity was as intense as the Dark Lord's and it was a wonder that she'd not been a Death Eater before.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," she said cheerfully when he arrived at the Ministry on the fifteenth, exactly two weeks after the coup. The Board of Governors for Hogwarts was now required to hold its meetings in a Min-

istry conference room, and Snape was there for his formal interview. Clearly Umbridge intended to sit in on the meeting.

“Good morning,” Snape replied. “I trust I am not late.”

“Very punctual, in fact. Shall we?”

They entered a wood-paneled room with a long, wide table. The twelve members of the Board looked around when the door opened. They had been standing or sitting in small groups, but now went directly to their seats, ranged along one side of the table. Umbridge marched to a chair at the head and settled into it.

“Professor Snape,” said the Chairman of the Board, a stout, businesslike wizard named Sandro McPherson, “there is no need for you to stand. Please, be seated.” He indicated a chair that stood alone on the other side of the table where every member of the Board would be able to see Snape’s face.

“You come very highly recommended, Professor,” McPherson continued. “We have most of the information from your file, though we’d appreciate hearing some of it in your own words. You attended Hogwarts as a student, no?”

“Yes, Mr. Chairman, from September 1971 until June 1978.”

“OWL results?”

“Outstanding in Potions, Charms, Herbology, Astronomy, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Exceeds Expectations in the others.”

“Electives?”

“Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.”

“Did you ever take Muggle Studies?”

“No. I had no interest in Muggle Studies.”

A stylishly dressed younger witch, closer to Snape’s age, leaned forward. “What is your blood status, Professor? I hope you don’t mind my asking.”

“Not at all. It is a matter of the gravest concern to anyone who cares about the education of young witches and wizards. I am a half-blood.”

“Dear, dear. And which parent was the . . . you know?”

“My father was a muggle. My mother was pureblood.”

“And the bloodlines, both sides if possible.”

Snape didn’t flicker an eyelash. “Prince, Rossendale, Hewitt . . .” he began, and continued with a list of pureblood names — provincial, but pureblood. “I fear I cannot do the same for my father’s side, which never interested me much. My father and I had a rather strained relationship.”

“How many years have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” inquired an older woman.

"September will begin my seventeenth year."

"What administrative experience have you had, Professor?" asked a white-haired wizard.

"I have been head of Slytherin house since my first year. In addition, I was usually the one assigned to familiarize new staff with their duties."

"Why you? Why not the Deputy Headmistress?"

"I presume because Headmaster Dumbledore considered me competent for the task. It always coincided with that period of the year — August — when the Deputy Headmistress had the most work to do concerning the incoming students. Headmaster Dumbledore felt it better to split the labor rather than impose it all on one person."

There were nods around the table. McPherson asked, "Why were you never given the job of Deputy Headmaster?"

"Hogwarts already had a Deputy Headmistress of great administrative competence, a trait common to persons of her cultural background, I have heard. There was never any need to look for another Deputy. The matter never came up." There were smiles then, as it was well known that McPherson was deeply proud of his own Scottish heritage.

Umbridge coughed slightly. "But does Professor McGonagall respect the new laws. It was my understanding she promotes the welfare of . . . well, mudbloods."

"Professor McGonagall," said Snape carefully, "has great respect for the Ministry, for the Board of Governors, and for the law. She obeys the rules and the law. She does not presume to question or second-guess them. Both the Ministry and the Board told her that it was her duty to integrate persons of muggle background into the school. She followed instructions and did not allow her own prejudices to interfere with her duty. Now that the rules and laws have changed, Professor McGonagall will continue to do her duty."

"Well-spoken!" cried the white-haired wizard, and McPherson looked immensely pleased. Umbridge did not, but she had no vote on the Board. *She has to support me in any case*, Snape thought. *She knows I'm the Dark Lord's choice, even if these others don't.*

"Tell us your understanding of the new laws, Professor," said the younger witch.

"They are there to protect the rights of persons of magical blood from persecution by the nonmagical world. They wish to destroy us, and we must protect ourselves. Persons of nonmagical blood who have usurped the power to perform magic must be identified so that they can be controlled. They

must not be allowed to increase their powers, and so must be denied a magical education. Because the wizarding world outside Britain, and unfortunately some of our own magical families, are still wandering in the errors of the past, all children of magical families must be educated at Hogwarts to ensure they learn the truth about muggles. I wish I had known the truth about muggles when I was young. My own witch grandmother was murdered by a muggle mob.”

It was done. The rest of the interview was pro forma and involved only the confirmation of small details. McPherson was confident as he shook Snape’s hand when it was over. “We have three others to interview, and then the formal review. We’ll probably make the decision on the thirtieth and announce it on the thirty-first, but I don’t think you have much to worry about. I don’t see that any other candidate has your qualifications.”

Umbridge waited in the corridor. “I would love it, Professor, if you’d come up to my office for tea and a little chat. You don’t have another appointment anywhere, do you?”

Snape did not, and took the elevator with Umbridge up to the first floor. The atmosphere in the Ministry was strange, and many of the workers they encountered seemed anxious and worried. They passed through the waiting room where Umbridge’s secretary told her, “No messages,” and then Snape got a shock so powerful that it almost broke through his barriers, the barriers that were weaker today because he didn’t want to shut down completely in front of the Board. The shock came when he realized that the door to Umbridge’s office was decorated by Alastor Moody’s enchanted blue eye.

Umbridge followed his gaze, but didn’t understand his surprise. “Yes, unusual, isn’t it? If someone’s in my office, I can look through it and tell immediately if they’re hiding something. Very useful. The Minister gave it to me. He said it comes from . . . him. A token of appreciation for my dedication to the cause.”

“And no one deserves it more,” said Snape, wondering how it was possible for the Dark Lord to give up his trophy of Moody’s death. There had to be more to it.

He watched Umbridge carefully as she put down the cups and poured the tea, and was reasonably satisfied that she hadn’t put anything into his. As he sipped the tea, he waited for her to begin. After a moment of silence, she cleared her throat in that irritating way he remembered so well.

“It seems you are the preferred choice of the Board. I think it’s not too

early to offer congratulations. I wanted to talk to you about the staff at Hogwarts.”

“What about the staff at Hogwarts?”

“Well . . . oh, dear . . . they’re not all exactly, well, reliable, are they?”

“I am afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Snape was not about to let Dolores Umbridge dictate his duties to him. The Dark Lord did that, Dumbledore did that, not her.

“Think, Professor. McGonagall and her streak of rebelliousness, Sprout and her disrespect, and that little Charms teacher . . . what is he, anyway? And the giant?”

Snape put his cup down and leaned back in his seat. “Of course you faced opposition. When you were there, the Ministry was breaking the law.”

“Breaking . . . ? How could you? How dare you?” Umbridge was sputtering, she was so shocked.

“I must ask you to listen, and to listen carefully. By law, Hogwarts operates under its own charter. It answers to the Ministry in areas where the writ of the Ministry runs, and to the Board for what is under the Board’s control. That charter can be changed not by the Ministry or by the Board, but only by decision of the Wizengamot. When the Ministry passes laws concerning the extension or restriction of magic, that is its prerogative. When it tries to control staffing and administration, it is acting illegally. Two years ago, our world was in confusion, no one knew if the Dark Lord was back or not, the Ministry was in conflict with the Headmaster, and the Board was neglecting its role. But the Ministry was still acting in violation of the charter, and the teachers were defending, as best they could, the charter rights of the school. Today there is no such confusion. We’re all on the same path, and the path is clear. You and the Ministry control the restriction of magic, and Hogwarts will obey you. But the Board controls administration and staff, and unless and until I receive orders from a superior authority to the contrary, I will be duty bound as Headmaster to uphold and defend the charter of the school.”

Snape rose, turned on his heel, and strode from Umbridge’s office.

True to McPherson’s prediction, the Board of Governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry voted on Saturday, August 30, 1997, to appoint Severus Snape Headmaster of the school. He was invited to the Board’s chambers in the Ministry at nine o’clock the next morning for the ceremony of instatement and the swearing of his oath, followed by a reception. It was a little rushed, doing it on a weekend, but they wanted him to be able to go to Hogwarts before the students arrived on the Express.

Snape did not look at Umbridge as he raised his right hand and swore to uphold the ancient charter of the school, though he was sure she was seething. He endured the reporters from *The Daily Prophet* with their cameras and predictable questions. He chatted stiffly yet politely at the reception and responded properly to the expressions of congratulation and good wishes for the future. He had one more task appointed to him by the Dark Lord, and near the end of the reception asked McPherson if he might speak briefly to the whole Board.

They adjourned to a conference room where Snape explained that Hogwarts was still short two staff members, a Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor and a Muggle Studies teacher. Since the opening of school was the next day, he wanted an emergency confirmation of the appointment of Amycus Carrow to the first job and Alecko Carrow to the second. Since three of the members of the Board had actually proposed Amycus as headmaster not two months earlier, Snape had no trouble getting the confirmation.

At one o'clock that afternoon, Snape and the Carrows apparated to Hogsmeade.

Filch was at the gate to take the little baggage they brought, and then Snape, followed respectfully (for they were under very strict orders from the Dark Lord) by the Carrows, climbed the hill to face the staff, all lined up on the lawn to greet him.

McGonagall, confirmed in her position as Deputy Headmistress and obviously remembering her last meeting with Snape, Moody, and the portrait of Dumbledore, stepped forward.

"Headmaster Snape," she said, stiffly and formally, "on behalf of the staff of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, permit me to offer our congratulations on your appointment, and to welcome you back to the school. We stand ready to work with you for the good of Hogwarts, its staff and its students."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall. I'm pleased to be here, and I know we'll all get along fine." He could tell from the guarded expressions on the faces behind her, especially Hagrid's, that they were not going to get along fine, but that everyone had, for the moment, agreed to follow McGonagall's lead. He felt pressure in the sealed places in his brain, pressure behind the locked doors.

"I know you're all very busy getting ready for the students to arrive tomorrow, and I don't want to waste any of your precious time. I'd like to

have our first staff meeting, a brief one, right after dinner. Professor McGonagall, would you please show Professor Carrow and Professor Carrow to their rooms and explain tomorrow's duties to them. I'd like to go upstairs. I'll be in my office if anyone needs me."

McGonagall nodded, knowing what he wanted in the office. She and the other teachers dispersed, and Snape climbed slowly to the seventh floor, relieved that it had been easier than he'd feared.

"Password," said the gargoyle.

Snape stopped. He'd never heard the gargoyle speak before. "I'm the Headmaster," he said.

"Set the password," responded the gargoyle.

"Oh. Sorry. The password is..." Snape wanted something Dumbledorish, but he was still locked tightly down, and no thought would come. "The password is Dumbledore," he said finally, resolving to change it to something less obvious when he had the chance. The gargoyle staircase opened and he went up to his office. The pressure in his head was building. He needed to be alone.

It hadn't changed. The desk, the chairs, the strange instruments and contraptions on the tables. It was as if Dumbledore might walk back in at any moment. Except that Dumbledore slumbered in his portrait behind the desk. Snape walked to the desk. With it between them, it was as if the portrait was the headmaster behind his desk and Snape still the teacher.

"Ah," said Dumbledore, blinking his eyes open. "There you are. And about time, too."

"I got here as quickly as was possible."

Dumbledore cocked his head at Snape's tone. "Dear me, Severus, I was not blaming you. You have been doing an excellent job. Excellent."

"Yes," Snape echoed dully. "Excellent." His head throbbed with the pressure.

"But Severus, you should be pleased, proud of what you have accomplished. You have taken the most important step toward protecting the school, the staff, and the students. You have removed every barrier, overcome every obstacle..."

"One of those obstacles was Rufus Scrimgeour."

"I am sorry to hear that," said the portrait of Dumbledore.

"I'm sure you are." The pulse in Snape's temples was like a drumbeat.

"He was a good man. He had his faults of course..."

"The Dark Lord gave me the privilege of starting. I used a Cruciatus curse on him."

"You did what you had to do."

The dam burst. "I did what you made me do!" Snape screamed, and around him astrolabes and globes swept to the floor in a great crashing of copper and crystal. "I watched Charity beg for help, and didn't lift a finger!" Books hurled against the walls and shattered two mirrors. "I killed Alastor Moody, did you know that! I laughed when they disgraced his dead body!" Chairs smashed into the fireplace and the door. "I let them take twelve hours to kill Scrimgeour! Twelve hours!" Chandeliers swung wildly, portraits sprang from the walls, windows burst open, twisting their hinges. Snape grabbed the edge of the heavy desk and upended it, lamps and quills scattering on the floor. Kicking a lamp out of the way, he flung open Dumbledore's wine cabinet and began pitching the bottles at the fireplace with every ounce of strength his thin body could muster. Glass shattered, mead splashed, and when the bottles were gone he started on the glasses. By this time he was screaming again, "Murderer! Murderer! You've damned me! Damned me! I hate you! Damned . . . damned . . ."

A large hand took the last glass away, and suddenly Snape was sobbing, his body wracked with pain and grief, and for some reason it was quite natural that Hagrid would be there, easing him to the floor and supporting his shoulders. He buried his face in the sleeve of Hagrid's jacket and continued sobbing, his whole body shaking with the force of the thoughts, the feelings, the memories, that exploded through the locks and seals of his mind.

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore calmly. "Was the storm audible outside?"

"Could anyone hear him, you mean? No. I didn't catch what was happening 'til I got t' the office door. I sorta got the feeling it might happen, though. Done it before, once or twice. Never quite as bad as this, I reckon."

"He has been under considerable strain."

"Professor Dumbledore, you got a talent for understatement . . ." Hagrid looked down at Snape, whose trembling was beginning to weaken, who seemed to be relaxing, going more limp. "I guess you better sit down." To Dumbledore he said, "I'd pour him a glass o' firewhisky, but he seems to have done for the entire stock."

"You may repair some of the damage, if you wish, Hagrid. There is no one here to see but myself."

“Just like you, Albus, to forget everyone else!” exclaimed the portrait of Armando Dippet. “My gracious! Is he always that temperamental?”

Dumbledore sighed. “He swings to extremes. It is a problem both of heredity and nurture, though today it is more a reaction to what he has been through these last two months.”

Hagrid helped Snape stand, then guided him to an overturned chair, which Hagrid righted before settling Snape into it. He pulled his ever-present pink umbrella out of his pocket and began clearing up the mess, even able to return most of the liquid to repaired bottles. He poured a rather large amount of firewhisky into the glass his presence had spared.

“You drink this now, lad,” he told Snape. “It’s medicinal.”

Snape did as he was told, then leaned back in the chair, breathing quickly and softly. “Hagrid,” he gasped finally. “What brought you here?”

“Impending nuclear meltdown,” said Hagrid. “Remember, I was there for the first one when you was thirteen. I can read the signs.”

“Thank you,” Snape said, beginning to recover. “Does anyone else know?”

“It appears not,” said Dumbledore, “shielded as you were from the rest by about seven floors of solid masonry. If it were to happen again during the school term, however, up on the seventh floor like this, Gryffindor house would have a field day with the story.”

Snape cradled his forehead with a hand. “It won’t happen again,” he stated.

“I dare say not. You are now at Hogwarts. You are no longer under the daily control of Riddle. You will no longer be forced to watch or participate in torture and murder. You have a place of your own to go to, and others you can turn to for support. Your situation is now utterly different.” He nodded to Hagrid, who took the hint and left them alone in the office.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. I imagine it was even therapeutic. Did you know that all this past month, Harry Potter and his two closest friends have been at 12 Grimmauld Place? Phineas has told me all about it.”

C H A P T E R S I X T Y - T W O

THE CONSPIRACY OF THE SWORD

Shifting the topic from himself to more tactical matters helped Snape focus through his stress and exhaustion, and he stirred with more interest now. “Yes, and we’ve been watching it. There are people out there every day, but so far Potter’s been careful and they’ve seen nothing. It’s because he set off the Taboo.”

“What Taboo would that be?” Dumbledore asked.

“The Ministry’s put a Taboo on saying the Dark Lord’s name. It was picked up the first night. Quite ingenious, really. I couldn’t imagine Potter going for any time at all without using the name in conversation with his friends.”

“It is indeed ingenious. I, however, have even more information about what is going on inside. Phineas? Phineas!” The portrait of Phineas Nigellus did not stir. Dumbledore looked over his spectacles at Snape. “He is taking advantage of the fact that he can ignore me now that we have a headmaster. Do you think you might wake him, Severus?”

“Eh, certainly. Excuse me, Headmaster Nigellus. Could we . . . could I have a word with you?”

Nigellus shifted and blinked his eyes. “What a polite young man!” he exclaimed. “Why weren’t you ever that polite to me, Albus?”

“I suppose because we were both of an age to call each other Phineas and Albus. Severus here is only thirty-seven. Why, you must be the youngest headmaster in . . . in . . . Phineas, was there ever a younger headmaster?”

Nigellus chose to ignore the question since Snape did not ask it. “What did you wish to ask me, young man?”

“You’ve been in contact with the Black residence, haven’t you? What’s Harry Potter doing?”

Puffing out his chest with importance, Nigellus said, "They chased the werewolf away, and they are trying to get into the Ministry of Magic. They are not having great success."

"The Ministry of Magic!" Snape exclaimed. "Are they crazy? And what werewolf? Greyback?"

"Well now," Nigellus admitted, "I don't hear everything. I'm in the one bedroom, and I do visit the other portraits in different parts of the house from time to time, but they spend a lot of time in the kitchen with the house-elf — more like servants themselves, really — so I don't get everything. They were talking about a locket in Regulus's bedroom the day after they got there, but then they went downstairs and to the kitchen. The werewolf came on the fifth. They talked in the kitchen, then there was a bang, and the werewolf stalked out. He was angry about something. Yes, and the house-elf was gone for three days, and after he came back they started trying to find a way into the Ministry. The house-elf has gone crazy, by the way. He's cleaning everything, and he's changed into a new towel."

Dumbledore chuckled. "That sounds like a happy house-elf. Harry and Kreacher, together at last. I wonder what happened. It also sounds more like the werewolf was Remus Lupin."

"Well, at least it's something," said Snape. To Nigellus he said, "Please keep me posted if anything happens. It could be important."

Nigellus agreed and immediately left for his portrait in Grimmauld Place.

"A lot is going to change," Snape said to Dumbledore after a moment. "The new laws..."

"Yes, Minerva has told me. She has been quite incensed about it. What will the Ministry do with Hogwarts now?"

"Dolores Umbridge has already started. She wants me to sack people, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Hagrid for example. I threw the charter in her face and hid behind the Board of Governors. Oh, and we have two Death Eaters on staff. Amycus and Alecko Carrow. Amycus is Dark Arts, and Alecko is Muggle Studies. The Dark Lord warned them to start out smoothly and not cause trouble, at least at first. He's been preoccupied with something, and I had the feeling he was hinting that he was going somewhere and didn't want his plans disturbed by petty problems."

"Hmm," said Dumbledore. "Now where would Riddle go?"

They talked for a couple of hours more, and then Snape made his way downstairs to the Great Hall for dinner. He felt exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally. This meeting was going to be a short one.

In the Great Hall, no one had taken a seat. Snape immediately decided to follow Dumbledore's old custom of not sitting at the high table when school was out of session. Instead they sat around a table in the middle of the Hall McGonagall at Snape's right, and the Carrows on his left — where he could control them better.

Food came first; the meeting was after dinner. The staff was reserved and quiet until Alecto tried to say something about the new laws. Snape stopped her. "We do not discuss business during a meal," he said. "That's for later." That broke the ice a little and the teachers chatted with each other about other things.

"You have a strange way of taking charge," Alecto said to Snape in a low voice.

"You need to learn to adapt to different situations," Snape replied, noting that McGonagall had not missed the exchange.

Dinner over, McGonagall, as Deputy Headmistress, called the meeting to order with a tap of her spoon against her glass. Everyone was silent at once. She looked at Snape. "Headmaster?" she said.

Snape was immensely grateful to his old colleague for treating this whole situation as if it were even marginally normal. The last time he'd seen Flitwick, he'd stunned him. McGonagall had watched him flee the school in the company of Draco Malfoy and a party of Death Eaters. Every one of them had heard Potter's story of how he'd murdered Albus Dumbledore. McGonagall did have the word of Dumbledore's portrait that he, Snape, was on the side of the angels, but there was also so much for her to be angry at.

"First, I have introduced them already, but I should like again to present the newest members of our staff. Amicus Carrow has a very well-grounded practical experience in the Dark Arts, and will be able to impart that experience with considerable success to our students. Alecto has been specifically suggested as someone particularly suited to implementing the new Muggle Studies curriculum created by the Ministry of Magic and approved by the Board of Governors. They both come recommended at the highest level, and I know everyone here will do everything possible to make them feel welcome at Hogwarts." Snape started the polite little round of applause, and the others joined him — politely. Amicus and Alecto looked astounded. It was a milieu outside their experience.

And of course, neither of you has the slightest clue that I just warned the whole staff that Amicus is an active Death Eater who is going to try to recruit the stu-

dents, or that Alecto is a muggle-hater. And that you are both here because the Dark Lord wants you here.

"I wish," Snape continued, "that I could have been here earlier. Arriving the day before the students hardly gives us any time, but I am confident that you do not need my supervision to accomplish the routine business of preparing for the coming year. Everything tomorrow will be run according to long-standing tradition."

The teachers nodded, for now Snape had told them he would not be watching them every minute, and he did not come to make drastic changes.

"One thing that will make a dramatic difference is the change in the student body. All of our former muggle-born students will no longer attend Hogwarts. This is in compliance with the new laws regarding the restriction of magic. In their place we will receive all the pureblood, half-blood, and part-blood students who previously were home schooled or attended other schools. In fact, it is apparent that the size of the school will increase dramatically from its previous number of two hundred eighty students to four hundred — Professor McGonagall, do you have an exact number?"

"Four hundred thirty-nine," stated McGonagall crisply. The teachers shifted and looked at each other in dismay.

"All of these new students, regardless of age and year, will have to be sorted. Heads of houses, have you prepared extension spells for the dormitories and common rooms? The bathrooms and lavatories?" They nodded. Snape did not probe or question, assuming they told the truth.

"The bad news is that staffing will not increase. I have discussed it with the Board of Governors and they have decided that, despite the Ministry's desire to supplement staffing, it would be less disruptive if the changes were implemented by a staff that is experienced and used to working together." And the translation of this was that no Ministry watchdogs would be spying on the staff. They had to deal with the Carrows, but not with anyone else.

"Your class sizes and your workload will increase. Extracurricular supervisory duties will increase. I apologize, but it can't be helped. I guess that's all I have to say. A lot of the future is a question mark. Some of that will be resolved tomorrow when we see who the train brings us. Any questions?"

Slughorn raised a hand. It was strange for Snape to have his old Potions teacher deferring to him. It was strange to have any of them deferring to him, but especially Slughorn, Flitwick, and McGonagall, who had watched him being sorted when he was eleven years old. It was like supervising your parents.

"Headmaster," said Slughorn, "I don't have any of my supplies. We submitted the orders at the beginning of August, but nothing's here yet."

Snape turned to McGonagall. "We sent them in as usual," she said, "and the orders came back with instructions to resubmit them on Ministry requisition forms. They want to examine everything we order. I've tried to get them to hurry. No one listens to me."

"I'll contact the Ministry myself, first thing in the morning. Have contingency plans ready, though. It's Potions that's affected the most. Can you give me a list of the ten things that have highest priority? I can make a special plea for those." Snape looked around. There were no other questions.

"Good. Tomorrow is our last chance to relax until the Christmas break. Make the most of it. Be at your stations by six-thirty. When the Express hits Hogsmeade, fun and games are over."

As they walked together to the marble staircase, McGonagall said, "Nicely done. You can be almost personable when you try. How long d'ye think the honeymoon will last?"

"I honestly don't know," said Snape. "With all the new laws and the Ministry breathing down my neck. If I make it through the school year at all, I'll be extremely grateful."

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1997

Breakfast was served late the following morning to allow the staff one more chance to sleep in before the Christmas break. Snape was up earlier, talking by Floo network with the supply liaison at the Ministry, trying to get Slughorn's Potions ingredients. He was bounced from clerk to clerk for nearly an hour before he finally got someone who promised to get back to him with a report. It was the best that could be done for the moment.

Snape did have the feeling that those he spoke to were treating him with . . . not respect, exactly, but a certain respectful fear, as if they knew by whose order he was at Hogwarts and passed him from colleague to colleague more because none of them wanted to be the one responsible for telling him 'no' than for any other reason.

Great! Now it's common knowledge that I'm a Death Eater and work for the Dark Lord. If Potter ever manages to defeat the Dark Lord, I'd better be as close to Dumbledore's portrait as I can get, or I'm going to be lynched.

Most of the staff had started breakfast by the time Snape came down. They were scattered in small groups around the Hall rather than at one table,

but that was normal. Snape took a seat at what was usually the Slytherin table and helped himself to toast, kipper, and coffee.

Alecto slid onto the bench next to Snape, her brother beside her. "When are you going to whip these muggle-lovers into line, Snape? You're supposed to be in charge here."

Snape looked around the Hall. "Everyone seems to be doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing. I'd say they were in line and I am in charge. Would you kindly tell me who has been talking to you about loving muggles?"

"They taught muggle-borns!" Alecto spat out. "They're contaminated!"

"I shall inform the Dark Lord you question his decision. I'm sure he'll be pleased to have your opinion on the subject."

Alecto drew back, her eyes wide. Amycus leaned forward. "She's not questioning anything, Snape. Why'd you say a thing like that?"

Snape turned to face both of them. "This is an unfamiliar world to you, and you'd better learn the rules. If you want to undermine the Dark Lord's plans, just keep on doing what you're doing." He could see that most of the teachers in the Hall were now surreptitiously watching the three of them, but they were isolated enough on the Slytherin side of the Hall that no one would be able to hear.

"First," Snape continued, "I am Headmaster of Hogwarts. You will call me Headmaster, or sir, at all times. The Dark Lord has placed me in charge. If you don't treat me with respect, the others will doubt my authority, and he will not be pleased with you. Second, up until two months ago, I taught muggle-borns. Am I contaminated? He clearly considers me the best choice for the job or he would have picked someone else. Do you want to tell the Dark Lord he made a mistake?"

Both Alecto and Amycus now looked slightly cowed.

"We've been here less than twenty-four hours," went on Snape. "You know nothing of the school. Didn't Bella teach you anything? You have to lay the groundwork for a successful operation. The first step is to establish your own credentials. You will call everyone here Professor, or Madam, and by four o'clock I want to know what you intend to do in every class you have scheduled for the rest of the week. I want to know that you actually opened and looked at the texts you're supposed to be teaching from."

"Excuse me, Headmaster." McGonagall had approached them quietly, unnoticed, from behind Alecto and Amycus. "If it's convenient for you, I am

prepared to go over the lists of the incoming students and brief you on all the preparations that have been made. Perhaps after breakfast?”

“I think I’m finished here, Professor McGonagall. If you like, I can come now.” Snape nodded to the Carrows. “Professor. Professor. Thank you for your company.” He rose and left the Hall with McGonagall, heading up to her office on the first floor.

During the inspection of the students’ files, McGonagall’s behavior was professional but cool. *How much of that conversation did she overhear, I wonder*, Snape thought, *and did it make her trust me less rather than more?*

There were so many students who could not return. Just among the seventh years there were Hermione Granger (of course), Hannah Abbot, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Sally Anne Perks, Terry Boot, Kevin Entwhistle, Lisa Turpin . . . Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were the hardest hit. Interesting, too, that most of the newcomers were purebloods or half-bloods with old wizarding names. The thought crossed his mind that their families had kept them out of Hogwarts for the same blood purity reasons that inspired Umbridge and the Dark Lord. The school was turning into quite a little hothouse of the wizarding elite. *Who’ll they go after next? Half-bloods like me? Hagrid and I are the only half-bloods on the staff.*

Snape spent the afternoon arguing with the Ministry, reviewing the events of July and August with Dumbledore, and revising the Carrows’ lesson plans. At six-thirty he went down to join the others in the final preparations for the arrival of the Hogwarts Express.

The welcoming feast was a nightmare. To begin with, for the first time in its hundred year history, the Hogwarts Express left King’s Cross station nearly an hour late. The arrival of so many students, almost fifty percent of whom had never been in a muggle train station before, or through the barrier to Platform 9 3/4, or on a train, had resulted in complete chaos and the need for the Ministry to alter the memories of one hundred seventeen muggles.

Next, all of these new students had to cross the lake on boats to be given the Secret, for while Hogwarts was not exactly protected by a Fidelius Charm, its defenses were similar. The boats had to make the trip five times.

Needless to say, the Sorting also took nearly five times as long, though Snape was beginning to get the feeling that the Sorting Hat toward the end started calling out “Slytherin, Slytherin, Slytherin . . .” just to get the whole business over with. Slytherin house ended up twice as big as any of the others, and they had to magic in another table to go across the rear of the hall. Slughorn was having fits trying to make his extending spells more powerful,

and the house-elves insisted that they really had run out of treacle tart, and please give them more advance warning in the future.

Snape kept his welcoming speech to the bare minimum. Most of the students already knew of his appointment since it had been in that morning's *Daily Prophet*. There were cheers from Slytherin, boos from Gryffindor, and polite neutrality from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Snape ignored them all, introduced the Carrows, set out the most basic of the rules, and dismissed everyone to their houses. It was ten minutes before midnight.

Up in his office, the portrait of Dumbledore was considerate enough to allow Snape to pour himself a goblet of mead and sit comfortably before his fire for a grand total of fifty-seven seconds before announcing, "Phineas has been sacked, you know. Bagged. Pouched."

"Poached?" said Snape.

"No. Pouched. Locked in a lady's reticule."

"The mudblood," broke in Nigellus, "has placed me in her purse."

"Don't say mudblood," warned Dumbledore.

"You no longer give me orders," Nigellus replied.

"Don't say mudblood, please," said Snape. "I presume you're speaking of the Granger girl and your portrait in Grimmauld Place. However could she put a portrait into a handbag?"

"She has Extended it. It is horrible what that poor picture is forced to cohabit with — books, clothing, food — I shudder at the thought of returning."

"Wait a minute. This doesn't make sense. Why would she put your picture into her handbag?"

"She thinks she is being clever," Nigellus sniffed. "They read in the *Prophet* that you'd been named Headmaster, and they want to prevent my overhearing them and reporting back to you."

"Did it work?" Snape asked.

"After a fashion. I cannot see them, but I can hear them every time she opens the bag. When she put me in, she tossed the bag aside without latching it properly. I have actually learned more in the past couple of hours than in all of last month because I am now with them in the kitchen."

There was a long pause. "And . . ." Snape prompted at last.

Nigellus sniffed again. "You wish me to tell you?"

"Of course," said Snape. "Do go on."

"They have been observing the entrance to the Ministry for the past month, collecting information so that when they go inside, they won't be detected. They plan to use Polyjuice Potion. They are after the Umbridge

woman, or rather they are after something she possesses. They plan to go tomorrow. There is something wrong with the Potter boy, who left at one point. The others followed him and they were away from the kitchen for a while. It had something to do with the scar he bears."

Snape looked at the portrait of Dumbledore. "What can we do?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Dumbledore. "Nigellus cannot warn them; they would assume he came from you. Neither you nor I can warn them. Naturally we cannot warn the Ministry, nor do we have any means to warn the Order that would not be counterproductive. We must wait and see what happens. Phineas, yesterday you said they spoke of a locket in Regulus's bedroom. I know of a locket, but Harry already has it. What were they talking about?"

Nigellus thought for a moment. "It made very little sense. There was something about a basin in a cave, and the initials R.A.B.—which was my young kinsman Regulus—and finding a locket that could not be opened, but they threw it away—Oh, but they think that what the Umbridge woman has cannot be opened either! Maybe they think it is the locket they are seeking."

"It cannot be," Dumbledore repeated. "Harry already has that locket."

They were silent. Then Dumbledore turned to Snape. "R.A.B.," he said softly. "Severus, how did Regulus Black die?"

Snape was surprised by the question. "We didn't know. One day he was there, and then he was gone. The Dark Lord summoned him, and there was no response. We always assumed he'd been caught and killed by... by the Order. To be honest, it was one of the reasons I accepted the story that Sirius had betrayed Lily and James—because he went over to the Dark Lord's side after the Order killed his brother."

"No, Sirius always thought Riddle had Regulus killed. Strange. And they know of Regulus because of R.A.B., which has something to do with the locket."

"Albus," Nigellus said, "the house-elf started wearing a locket right after the Potter boy arrived."

"Really!" exclaimed Dumbledore. "What did it look like?"

"Gold. Not very valuable. Rather plain... I think it was in the house long ago..."

"I am a fool," said Dumbledore. "Of course, that is understandable, since I had just drunk a basin full of poison. It was not the same locket. Regulus must have somehow switched them and then disappeared. The real one was at Grimmauld Place all these years. How on earth might Umbridge have gotten it?"

"Mundungus Fletcher," said Snape with a sigh. "He robbed the house after Sirius died, remember? When he sold that Death Eater a box with a Black emblem and Bella nearly strung the poor man up by his thumbs?"

"Ah, yes." Dumbledore paused. "You know, this means that we want Harry to get into the Ministry and take the locket back. It will be an excellent thing if he achieves it."

"Headmaster Nigellus," Snape asked the portrait. "Would you continue to find out as much as you can about what Potter and his friends are doing? I know it might conflict with your own sentiments..."

"Conflict with my own sentiments!" Nigellus exclaimed. "I know you cannot possibly understand all of this, young man, because you are yourself a poor, benighted half-blood — though from what I hear, of respectable provincial wizarding stock — but the wizarding world is falling into the hands of an upstart half-blood madman spawned in the despicable, ignorant, lunatic house of Gaunt — a blight on us all, that the blood of Salazar Slytherin should have sunk so low — and I for one consider it my duty to help expunge him from the pages of history."

Snape froze in shock, but Dumbledore chuckled. "Phineas can talk like that," he said, "because he has been dead for more than seventy years. It is easy to be brave when one cannot be harmed."

"Humph!" said Nigellus, and left his portrait to stand watch in Grimmauld Place.

Thus it was that the following morning, as staff and students breakfasted and then made their way to the first classes of the school year, the little group of headmasters in the tower office followed the exploits of the Potter gang.

"They have the Polyjuice Potion and the Invisibility Cloak," Nigellus reported, "but what in the name of Merlin are Decoy Detonators, Puking Pastilles, Nosebleed Nougat, and Extendable Ears?"

Dumbledore laughed heartily, and even Snape smiled. "Fred and George Weasley," Snape said, though that was hardly an explanation.

Dumbledore sobered. "That was unfortunate about George Weasley," he said, "though I know that you did not mean to do it."

Snape was horrified. "What did I do to George Weasley?" he demanded.

"Oh, my. I thought you knew. He was one of the many Potters. It seems you cut his ear off."

"Great," said Snape. "Something else to add to my load of crimes. How long and how heavy will the chains be before you're done?"

"I beg your pardon, Severus."

“Jacob Marley,” said Snape, and declined to explain further.

Nigellus told them when Granger, looking now like another witch, fed Puking Pastilles to a small wizard, and when Granger gave larger robes to Potter so that he could transform with his Polyjuice Potion, too. And even the enchanted bag could not entirely mask the sound of toilets flushing as Granger entered the Ministry.

“You should know,” said Dumbledore, “that Headmistress Dilys Derwent has a portrait in the Ministry of Magic, as does Everard over there.”

At Snape’s request, both hurried to the Ministry to see if they could discover what was happening to Harry Potter.

Derwent was back in a few minutes. “Everard is keeping an eye out, but we really don’t know who to watch. They’re Polyjuiced, and we don’t know who they’ve Polyjuiced into. It could be anyone. Everard is going to visit Faris Spavin. He has a portrait in the waiting room outside Umbridge’s office as well as the Minister’s antechamber. Maybe Everard can see them go into her office.”

They waited. It seemed an eternity, but was really only about half an hour. Then Everard returned, rather precipitously. “Explosions!” he yelled as he raced into his frame. “Oh my goodness! I saw the Invisibility Cloak! Or rather I didn’t see it! You know what I mean! He stole her peephole!”

“Who was he, Everard?” Derwent asked.

“Don’t know. He took off the cloak while he searched the office. Tall, very tall, strong, bearded . . .” He described the Ministry official whose form concealed what they all knew was Harry Potter. The two returned to the Ministry.

“Well,” said Snape. “I confess to being impressed. He got to her office. That is something.”

“I wonder,” mused Dumbledore, “what Everard meant by ‘stealing her peephole.’ It is an odd expression.”

Snape looked up, fighting to keep his emotions down. Dumbledore saw this and held up a hand. “There is grief here, Severus, is there not? Do not hide it from me. Do not hide it from yourself. In this office, you are lord. Everything is allowed.”

Turning to the window to look down on the lake for a moment, Snape let his mind fill with the memory of Alastor Moody. After several minutes he was able to control his voice, and not because he had locked the moment away. He held Moody in front of his mental vision.

“After Moody . . . died . . . the Dark Lord took his enchanted eye from its

socket. I learned later that he'd given it to Umbridge in reward for her zeal, and she used it to spy on her secretary."

"And Harry has taken it back. That was well done."

There were a few more minutes of waiting, and then the fat hit the fire, the two spying wizards bouncing in and out of their portraits to report.

"Something's happening in the criminal court area!"

"There's an order to lock down the main entrance!"

"Fight in the Atrium! Fight in the Atrium!"

Derwent brought the last report. "Albert Runcorn just helped nearly a dozen accused muggle-borns escape from the Ministry through the Atrium itself!"

"Excellent!" cried Dumbledore. "Were there any other odd pureblood wizards with him?"

"Mafalda Hopkirk and Reg Cattermole."

"There you are, Severus! They got in, and they have escaped! Well done, Harry! Well done!"

Dumbledore's joy was interrupted by the sudden reappearance of Phineas Nigellus, who was breathing hard. "Don't ever . . . Don't ever ask me . . ." he gasped. "Albus, it was never this chaotic while you were headmaster. This boy has got to go."

"This boy, Phineas, is living in dangerous times. Do not blame him for the times. It is not Severus's fault."

Nigellus didn't reply for a moment. When he'd recovered somewhat, he told them, "They've left the Black home. They're on the run."

"How?" Snape exclaimed. "How do you know?"

"We apparated, and then suddenly, practically in the middle of the apparation, the mud . . . the Granger girl switched direction. Then, a few minutes after we stopped, someone opened her bag and summoned Essence of Dittany."

Snape paled. "Essence of Dittany is to stop copious bleeding and mend torn tissue," he said. "Someone's been injured."

"Where are they?" Dumbledore asked Nigellus.

Forgetting that he was not obeying Dumbledore anymore, Phineas Nigellus looked around at the attentive portraits and the Headmaster. "I do not know," he said. "Some place quiet. Very quiet. Like a forest or a moor. No people at all."

They all were silent, and then Snape looked at an antique clock on the mantelpiece. "It's lunchtime," he said wearily. "I'm supposed to go down

and find out how the morning classes went.” He rose and, bracing himself for the transition between the world of his office and the world of the school, he crossed to the door and left.

On his way down, Snape pondered the strange alteration in his existence. Dumbledore had always, almost always, kept him in the dark about his plans. Now he, Snape, had access to information beyond his wildest dreams. No wonder Dumbledore had spent so much time secluded in his office, leaving the running of the school to McGonagall! The secrets of Ministry and home were open to him as long as someone there had a portrait of a former headmaster. How many wizards today guarded a secret portrait of Dumbledore hidden behind . . .

Snape stopped. It could not be. It was impossible. He turned and sprinted back up the stairs and into the office, quivering with the idea. The portrait of Dumbledore was so surprised that he didn’t even pretend to be sleeping.

“Where can you go?” Snape demanded.

“I do not know, Severus. I have never been a dead portrait before, and no one has yet asked me to try going anywhere. Is there somewhere you want me to go?”

“Not yet,” said Snape, “but does it work with chocolate frog cards?”

“I do not know.” Dumbledore looked around. “Very few headmasters ever made it onto a card, maybe none, in fact. Armando! Armando you are on a Famous Wizard Card, are you not? Can you visit your cards?”

Headmaster Dippet yawned and stretched. “Of course I can,” he said grumpily. “How do you think I keep up with the antics of my great-grandchildren?”

“Well, there you have it, Severus. I suppose I can.”

“What a minute!” Nigellus was awake and alert. “Why am I not on one of these cards! I’m famous!”

Dumbledore glanced at Snape. “I think I shall let you answer that one,” he said.

“It’s very simple, Headmaster Nigellus,” Snape replied, glaring at Dumbledore. “The cards aren’t really a catalog of fame or importance. They’re for children. Half of them are popular singers and Quidditch players. The only reason Professor Dumbledore is on one is because the children know him personally from school.”

Nigellus seemed mollified. “Thank you, Severus,” said Dumbledore, but his heart was clearly not in it.

Snape went back downstairs and into the Great Hall. The teachers were

there, arrayed down the high table as they had been at the feast the night before, as they would be every day until Christmas. Flanking the center chair were McGonagall on the right and Alecto Carrow on the left. Snape approached the table. This had to be handled carefully. At any moment the Carrows could become dangerous if the Dark Lord's mood swung their way.

"Ah, Professor Carrow," he said, pointedly ignoring McGonagall. "May I speak with you for a moment? I have need of your advice." He circled the table and led her into the little room off the dais.

"What do you want, Snape?" Alecto asked as the door closed behind them. Snape drew himself up and simply looked at her, unwavering, until she dropped her gaze. "How can I help you, Headmaster," Alecto said, a note of resentment in her voice.

"You and Amycus are unfamiliar with custom here. You should probably ask if you're uncertain about something. We're supposed to be trying to win support for the Dark Lord, not alienate people. I know you didn't mean to..."

"What did I do now?"

"The seat to the left of the Headmaster is reserved for the senior Head of house. That's Professor Flitwick. Flitwick taught Charms when the Dark Lord was at Hogwarts, and may have influence..."

"The Dark Lord went here?"

Of course, Snape reminded himself. Very few of the lower level Death Eaters know anything of the Dark Lord's past. Mulciber and Avery know — their fathers were at Hogwarts with him. But not Macnair, or the Carrows...

"This is what I mean, Professor Carrow. Until you learn the lay of the land, there are pitfalls you can only avoid by being cautious. I, for one, would hesitate to show disrespect to Professor Flitwick without knowing the Dark Lord's will in the matter."

Alecto left first. Without drawing attention to herself, she joined her brother further down the table. Only then did Snape leave the room and take his place in the center chair, beckoning Flitwick to his side. Aside from the routine questions about how the morning had gone, however, they didn't talk. Snape didn't want Alecto to think he'd made the switch so that he could share confidences with Flitwick.

The Headmaster's office was a haven, but the Hall and the Staff Room were a maze of snares and quicksand. A long road stretched ahead of him, and Snape needed to tread carefully.

The afternoon was spent in a headmasters' conference.

"They are camping," was the first thing Dumbledore told Snape when he reentered the office. "Phineas heard them take a tent out of the bag." They waited, but there was no more information. In fact, though they didn't know it at the time, there would be almost no information about Potter other than the daily stowing and unpacking of the tent for several weeks.

That same afternoon, Dumbledore tried his first foray into a Famous Wizard card. He was back almost immediately. "The inside of a footlocker," he explained. "I could not even tell where, though I suspect one of the houses of Hogwarts."

A quick succession of similar trips earned mediocre results. Most of the chocolate frog cards were in desk drawers, photo albums, or shoe boxes. Occasionally they were on display in a bedroom. After many tries, Dumbledore returned from one excursion looking concerned.

"The Creeveys are in hiding," he told Snape. "The card belongs to Dennis, and he carries me in his pocket. They were ordered to report to the Ministry, and Colin and Dennis have taken their family into hiding."

As it turned out, after many more tries, a significant number of the students at Hogwarts carried Dumbledore's Famous Wizard card in their pockets. It was an encouraging discovery. Snape had no intention of doing anything at the moment, but at least they could get some idea of which and how many students were still loyal, in their own fashion, to Dumbledore.

Snape went to bed that night after a tiring day. A routine day, but a tiring one. The headmasters had learned nothing more about Potter and his friends.

Within a very short time, Snape realized that removing the muggle-borns from Hogwarts was probably a good idea. Alecto's curriculum in Muggle Studies turned out to be a hate-filled maligning of everything the muggle world had to offer, and Snape couldn't stop her, since the curriculum was approved by the Ministry. The only thing he could do was keep her from using the term 'mudblood' in class.

"Why can't I say 'mudblood?' It's what they are!"

Snape sighed. "Alecto, we are trying to convince the undecided of the wizarding world that these restrictions against muggle-borns are based on fact and on science. In order to do that, we must present our argument in a dispassionate and scientific way, with rhetoric devoid of the trappings of prejudice or racism. It must be presented as a logical, scientific position. Saying 'mudblood' undermines our efforts."

Alecto shrugged, and Snape doubted she understood words like 'dispassionate' and 'rhetoric.' "All right," she said, "but they're still mudbloods."

And why, Snape thought later, *did I do that? Don't I want to undermine our efforts?* And yet the greater part of himself was repulsed both by the word and its memories of Lily's shocked face, and by the idea that he was expected to drive a wedge between the supporters of the Dark Lord and those who would oppose him given the chance. Wasn't it good to have a supply of undecideds? Especially since now, with the Dark Lord in ascendance, to be undecided really meant to be on Dumbledore's side?

Amycus, meanwhile, was running into the brick wall of McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout.

"He's handing out detention right and left!" McGonagall was pacing Snape's office in high dudgeon. "Not just writing lines or cleaning desks, but canings! And for things he should simply be deducting points for, if anything. Gareth Armitage was given detention because he couldn't Imperius Florence Murphy on the first try! Imaging punishing students for not casting Unforgivable Curses!"

"I'll talk to him, Professor McGonagall."

"You had better! You had better start acting like the headmaster of this school instead of letting those two run roughshod over it." She nodded towards Dumbledore's portrait. "I know he and Alastor thought you were in their camp, but Albus would trust a ferret in a hen house, and I haven't heard anything from Alastor since the beginning of July. So I'll reserve my judgment until I see a bit of action."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall. I shall take your remarks under consideration."

"Under consideration!" McGonagall approached Snape, trying to meet his eyes. "We used to have a wee bit more of a personal understanding than you just taking my remarks under consideration. Have ye lost your heart, lad? Have ye given them your soul?"

Snape did not, could not, reply. McGonagall marched to the door, turning to face him with her hand on the handle. "I'll no be giving Gryffindor students over to the mercy of Amycus Carrow. If you can't stand up to him like a man, I'll look for help elsewhere." For a moment she seemed to melt. "Och, Severus, what path have ye chosen to walk down? Can ye no turn around and choose another?" Then she steeled herself. "I'll fight ye, ye know. For the students' sake, I'll fight ye. If they take Hogwarts, it'll be over my dead body."

Snape watched her stomp away, and made no effort to call her back.

In the days that followed, Snape was faced with new challenges. These

were generally of an administrative nature—the imbalance of class sizes, scheduling conflicts, unstable extending spells that were trying to fit eight students into dormitories meant for five—and with McGonagall teaching a full load of Transfiguration courses, it all fell on Snape.

After two weeks, most of the problems of opening school had been straightened out, and Snape decided to pay a visit to the Ministry of Magic to make a more immediate and personal plea for Slughorn's still missing supplies. On the way he stopped at headquarters.

"I'd like a meeting with the Dark Lord," he told the clerk as he signed in. "Can I do that here, or do I need to go to Wiltshire?"

The clerk looked nervous. "He's not seeing anyone, sir. He hasn't granted an interview since the last week in August. I'm sorry . . . I . . ."

"That's all right," Snape reassured him. "I can be patient."

"Well look who's here!" exclaimed a familiar voice, and Snape turned, his face already set into an artificial smile (more of a grimace, really) to greet Bella.

"A pleasure, as always, Mrs. Lestrangle."

"I want to talk to you, Snape. It's about Alecto and Amycus. I hear you're restricting their actions and authority."

"I wasn't aware they had any authority outside the classroom, and I have been acquainting them with normal school procedures."

"Well, you need to give them more room, more scope. They have to be able to impose the Dark Lord's will . . ."

"How modest of you, Bella, to be willing to accept the menial role of messenger boy."

Bella colored, her face flushing a dangerous red. "Watch your mouth, puppy dog. I'm giving you orders."

"You don't give me orders. Hogwarts isn't Operations, and you're not part of its chain of command. The Dark Lord gives me orders."

"I'd think twice before taking that tone with me," Bella retorted. "As close as I am to the Dark Lord . . ."

"When was the last time you spoke to him, Bella?" Snape was pleased at the confusion on her face. Clearly she hadn't seen the Dark Lord since the end of August either.

"I know his mind," she countered. "I know his will."

"Can you stand here," Snape asked, his voice soft and threatening, "and tell me that you're relaying the Dark Lord's exact instructions? Because the first time I speak with him, I shall remember to ask. And if he finds out

you're using his name to feather your own nest..." Snape didn't finish the sentence. Bella could work that out on her own.

Bella glared, but backed down. "Have a nice year at Hogwarts, puppy dog," she said as she walked away, down the corridor that led to Operations.

Why is the Dark Lord missing? Snape thought as he left headquarters and found a secluded spot from which to apparate to the Ministry in London. *It isn't like him to leave things to run themselves. Gives too much leeway to the mice.*

Solomon Whitgift of Personnel Administration and Supply was waiting to greet Snape at the public entrance to the Ministry of Magic. It had changed — the telephone booth was gone. Snape looked around as he shook Whitgift's extended hand and noticed unusual numbers of people heading down two flights of stairs to visit what his muggle father had called 'public conveniences,' and for some reason no one was coming back up. "You've remodeled," he commented to Whitgift.

"Had to expand the entrance," said Whitgift apologetically. "They've restricted Floo entry to the upper echelon, and we needed something that could accommodate more people."

When Snape entered with the token Whitgift gave him and saw that the Ministry workers were required to flush themselves through toilets to get inside, he knew at once whose idea it was. *The Dark Lord does have a rather pedestrian sense of humor. There are more subtle ways to humiliate your fallen enemies, but I doubt he could think of them. A little ham-handed for my taste.* Snape suddenly realized he was thinking highly disparaging thoughts about the Dark Lord. *Is that what happens when he leaves us? We start chipping away at the bars? Or is it the influence of Dumbledore and Nigellus? I need to be more careful about my thoughts.*

Snape spent a very unsatisfactory hour going from desk to desk and office to office trying to break the supply logjam. He did finally get the release forms for the animal parts by threatening to leave several cases of eyes in the Ministry to putrefy. The herbs and minerals were still on hold.

As he was leaving, he was hailed from across the Atrium. "Headmaster," the man called. "I'm so glad I caught you. I'm Forbes from Law Enforcement — Deeds and Wills. I'm sorry to trouble you, but we need to do some more tests on that sword."

"He's off somewhere doing something," Snape said that afternoon as he finished telling the portrait of Dumbledore about the Dark Lord's mysterious absence. "I'm sure of it."

"A brilliant deduction," said Dumbledore. "Most people are somewhere doing something."

"You know what I mean." Snape was beginning to realize that being in constant contact with Dumbledore wasn't as wonderful an experience as he'd originally thought. "If even Bella doesn't know where he is, who does?"

"Harry might," said Dumbledore, "but only because you could not teach him occlumency. It was," he confided to the other headmasters, "one of Severus's more spectacular failures."

"It wasn't my fault!" Snape exclaimed. "It was . . ."

"Of course it wasn't your fault, Severus. Nothing ever is."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that there are things you chose to do . . ."

"Name one."

"Very well, the prophecy, for example. You gave Riddle the prophecy."

"I was nineteen. I was being tortured. It wasn't a moment conducive to clairvoyance."

"Granted there were extenuating circumstances . . ."

Snape changed the subject. "I went to the Ministry, too. It was more obvious there. Thicknesse hasn't had any orders, and since he's Imperiused, he has trouble thinking of things on his own. His underlings don't understand why this is happening, but they're all rushing to fill the void. Supply hadn't completed our order for the Fall Term yet because they're trying to hoard everything they can. Magical Transportation wants to license broomsticks. And Law Enforcement wants to run some tests on Gryffindor's sword. 'More' tests he called it, so I thought it might be something you were already aware of."

"They want to look at the sword again?" said Dumbledore, puzzled now. "I was under the impression they checked it thoroughly in July."

"Why did they do that?" Snape asked, puzzled himself now, too.

"I left it to Harry in my will."

"You can't do that!" Snape almost laughed, he was so surprised. "That's not your personal property."

"I was rather hoping no one would notice," the portrait of Dumbledore

sighed. "Harry must have the sword, you see. It is the one sure way of destroying the Horcruxes that I can give him. It is what I used to destroy that ring."

"The one that created this whole mess because you had to go and put it on? That ring?"

"Yes, Severus. That ring. There are other things that must be found. Harry must destroy them, and for that he needs the sword. Unfortunately, everything I left to Harry and his friends was examined by the Ministry, and they would not release the sword. And now that their attention has been drawn to the sword, it will be hard to get it out of Hogwarts and into Harry's hands without endangering you. They will notice it is missing, you see. They already want to look at it again."

"What can we do?" Severus asked, and the question was addressed to all the headmasters, who had shared all of Dumbledore's quests and his explanations to Harry Potter over the last year and more, and who knew as much about Horcruxes by now as anyone living.

It was Headmaster Fortescue who suggested a decoy sword. "A good replica to put in the case if anyone comes, and no one will know the real one is missing," he insisted.

"Don't be a jackass," Nigellus responded. "They want to test it. They've already tested it, and they want to test it again. If they ever test the replica, they'll know it's a fake. It won't work. It will just get poor Severus here into more trouble."

"At least someone," Snape remarked, "is worried about me."

"Still," commented Dippet, "the idea of a decoy could be used in other ways."

They hashed this around for a while. Headmistress Derwent sighed. "It's a pity you couldn't convince them that the sword had to be locked away somewhere safe. Then you could lock up the fake and hide the real one. Everyone would think the real one was out of reach and you could do what you want with it. But what's safer than the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts?"

The utter silence that followed this statement made Derwent look around nervously, as if they might all be laughing at her suggestion. Then Snape and Dumbledore said together, "Gringotts."

The first step was a delaying tactic. Snape got back to Forbes via the Floo network and said that since the time period for probating a will was long past, his request to run more tests on Gryffindor's sword could no longer be considered an extension of the original request, and he had to resubmit it

in quadruplicate and present his case before the Board of Governors at their next meeting on October first.

That gave them barely two weeks to work on the replica, a job that Snape had to perform, as he was the only living wizard among them. He was carefully coached by the others, and though there were a few false starts, by September twenty-seventh he had produced a sword that would pass all but the most expert examinations.

"They'll know," Severus said morosely as the headmasters congratulated him on his achievement. "The goblins at Gringotts will know."

"Ah," said Dumbledore smiling, "this is true. But they will consider it a huge joke at your expense and will say nothing."

"Great!" replied Snape. "Every goblin in Gringotts, maybe in all of Britain, will be laughing at me."

"In a good cause, Severus. In a good cause."

Then came part two of the plan. Dumbledore had spent much of the same two weeks flitting through Famous Wizard cards. After four days he'd found the cards belonging to the second of Potter's trios — Neville Longbottom, Ginny Weasley, and Luna Lovegood. He reported back that the three of them were malcontent, convinced that Snape had murdered Dumbledore, and aching to do something to disrupt the new regime. They had just not yet figured out what.

"You are closer to these students than I, Severus," the portrait of Dumbledore admitted. "You taught them in close proximity for five, six years. Pick one."

It was an important decision. "I'd go for the Weasley girl as the leader," Snape said, "but I think she's too level headed to take advice from a chocolate frog card. Longbottom is too much of a self doubter to pass on what he heard. Lovegood, on the other hand, accepts the strangest things as true, so that she'll probably regard it as quite natural that chocolate frog cards are conspiring against the Dark Lord. Do you know that she once told me in front of an entire class of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs that the key ingredient in Pepper Up Potion was the powdered cartilage from the septum of a kangaroo?"

"Lovegood it is," said the portrait of Dumbledore.

By great good fortune, October first was also the new moon. It was thus a simple thing for Dumbledore to persuade Lovegood that the night for her and her companions to make their attempt was the night after the Board

of Governors granted permission to the Ministry to reexamine the sword. Snape would be taking the sword to the Ministry the following day.

Any real thief would have been alerted at once by the ease with which the students got into the Headmaster's office and opened the glass case. Lovegood simply assumed it was the assistance of her chocolate frog card guide. The three were caught with the sword on the stairs between the fourth and the third floors by Amycus and Alecko Carrow, who were on patrol that night. The following late night session in the Headmaster's office was a stormy one, with the Carrows pitted against all four Heads of houses, the frightened students by the fireplace waiting for their fate to be decided, and Snape in the middle.

"They're in league with Potter!" Alecko screeched. "They've been in contact with Undesirable Number One and they were helping him! That's not just a breach of school rules! That's a criminal offense!"

"It was a prank, Professor Carrow," insisted McGonagall with fierce dignity. "If you cannot tell the difference between a child's prank and a crime then you should not be teaching in a school."

"They're conspiring against the Ministry of Magic," Amycus shouted, "and they'll go to Azkaban for it!" He smiled. "Though I'd rather handle the punishment here myself. I can get them to tell me where Undesirable Number One and his gang are."

"I have been in emergency contact with the Board," said Snape, and they all turned to him. "The Governors agree that in light of this serious, serious attack against the school, the sword of Godric Gryffindor will be taken tomorrow to a place of greater security, and the offenders need to be punished." He had not dared to confide any part of the plan to the Heads, and he prayed fervently that they would understand.

"In light of the gravity of their offense, they will be placed on detention and required to go into the Forbidden Forest to assist Professor Hagrid in his nonacademic duties."

McGonagall recoiled in surprise, and Flitwick and Sprout exchanged astonished glances. McGonagall recovered first and dove into her role with intense fervor. "Ye cannot send the poor children into the forest! 'Tis inhuman! Severus Snape, we do not punish children by sending them out as bait for wild animals, werewolves, and vampires! If you've a feeling heart in you, please give them some other punishment." Behind her, Weasley was clinging to Longbottom, and Lovegood was sobbing ostentatiously into the sleeve of her robes.

Snape was unmoved. "What I have decided," he said, "I have decided."

Alecto and Amycus wore expressions of glee. The students appeared terrified. Slughorn, Sprout and Flitwick followed them out in stunned silence, and McGonagall managed to flash Snape a wee smile and a quick wink as she, too, left the room.

The very next day, Snape apparated to the Ministry of Magic, Office of Deeds and Wills. He brought with him several things: the Sword of Godric Gryffindor; a Letter of Authorization from the Board of Governors permitting the Ministry of Magic to perform certain tests on the sword; an amendment to the authorization that stated that due to certain recent circumstances involving the safety of the sword, all tests were to be done in the physical presence of Hogwarts's Headmaster, and that the sword was to remain in the Headmaster's custody during the periods of time when the Ministry was not actually testing it; an order for a high-security vault at Gringotts Bank; and a small bag, altered by an Extension Charm, containing the replica sword.

It went like clockwork. The Ministry needed two days for its tests, so Snape got a room at the Leaky Cauldron and took the sword back there with him at night. The morning of the third day, the tests on the real sword now complete, Snape switched swords, putting the real one in the extendable bag and taking the replica to Gringotts. On leaving the Leaky Cauldron, he was met by Forbes from the Ministry, who accompanied him into Gringotts and watched as he handed the sword to the goblin clerk. The goblin smiled slightly as he lifted the sword, but said nothing.

On his return to Hogwarts, Snape placed the real sword in a newly made compartment behind Dumbledore's portrait. There was no way to get at the sword without Dumbledore knowing.

"Now all we have to do," sighed Dumbledore, "is find a way to let Harry know the importance of the sword, then plan how to get it to him." They briefed Nigellus on things he could say that would impart the necessary information and yet not appear that it was from Snape. "Harry, I fear," said Dumbledore, "would never act on information he thought originated with Severus. Are you certain, Phineas, that you cannot tell where he is?"

"I told you," grumbled Nigellus. "It's always the same. Quiet and rural. I can't learn anything except they're having trouble finding enough to eat and the... Granger girl is a terrible cook."

"Keep trying," said Snape wearily.

In the days that followed, Weasley, Longbottom, and Lovegood did their

detention and returned from the Forbidden Forest, properly cowed and refusing to discuss what happened to them there. The Carrows went around looking pleased with themselves, and the rest of the staff treated Snape with guarded respect. Phineas Nigellus continued with his dull, unchanging reports until the moon had gone full cycle and was once again new and dark. Then, on the night of October twenty-eighth...

"She's calling me! The mudblood's calling me!" Nigellus suddenly screamed in the middle of an otherwise boring meeting, and before Snape could scold him, he was gone, but not before Dumbledore managed to yell, "Tell them about the sword!"

They waited. It seemed an hour, but it wasn't. Then Nigellus was back. "The mudblood blindfolded me!" was the first thing he said. "That wicked, disrespectful girl..."

"Phineas," Dumbledore asked patiently, "do they know about the sword?"

"Well, of course they know about the sword. Do you think I'm an idiot? Funny, I don't know why, they actually asked me about the sword. I didn't have to bring it up. I told them how it got its strength, and that Albus destroyed the ring with it. They wanted to talk to Albus, but I disabused them of that notion quickly enough. They were also worried about the three who stole it, and then they asked if I told Headmaster Snape about Albus using the sword. The girl thinks she's so clever, but she didn't notice that I didn't really answer the question. Ha!"

"Were all three of them there?" Snape asked.

"A girl and two boys," said Nigellus. "One of the boys was Potter. I recognized his voice. I ought to, I've heard it enough."

"And we still do not know where they are," said Dumbledore. "But at least we know that when we figure out how to get the sword to them, they will understand how to use it."

It was about the same time, just when things seemed to be going well concerning Potter, that Snape began to reap the harvest of his leniency with Weasley, Longbottom, and Lovegood. Apparently in the belief that they wouldn't be severely punished, students began rebelling all over the school. It was directed chiefly against Amycus and Alecto, but also against himself, and as October waned, Snape found himself with a real problem on his hands.

"Look at this!" Alecto shrieked, waving a copy of the Muggle Studies text, teacher's edition with curricular guidelines, in Snape's face. "They glued the

pages shut! They damage my equipment! They erase the notices on the board! They post drawings of me all over the school!"

Amycus burst into the office then, for it was Snape's regular office hours, and the gargoyle could let anyone pass. Amycus's eyebrows were growing at an alarming rate. "Cursed!" he bellowed. "Cursed in my own classroom! I have the culprits, Snape, and they're going to be caned for this!"

"I think a lesser punishment . . ." Snape began, but Amycus strode behind the desk, practically toe to toe, a sneer on his lumpy face. They were not the same height, and Snape had to look up to meet Amycus's eyes.

"You know what I think, Headmaster," Amycus spat out. "I think you encourage them. I think you want us to look bad so you can shine. I've been talking to Bella, and she's making up a little list to give to Him when he gets back. How you're taking all the power to yourself and keeping Hogwarts out of the control of the Ministry or his people. You know what Bella thinks? She thinks you'd like to be the Dark Lord yourself."

The situation was now dangerous. Not knowing where the Dark Lord was, or what his mood would be on his return, knowing only from the mark on his arm that the Dark Lord was still alive and strong, Snape began to crack down on Hogwarts.

The students who'd cursed Amycus were caned, Snape insisting, however, that their Head of house (in this case McGonagall) be present to ensure that the punishment did not go beyond the allowed bounds. At dinner that evening, McGonagall refused to sit next to him, moving down the table to join Sprout and Sinistra instead. Part of Snape sympathized with, and part of him resented, her judgmental position.

I know you think I have choices, Minerva, but if the Dark Lord pulls me down, then Amycus Carrow will be in control not only of Hogwarts, but of Dumbledore, too, and everything will be lost. I don't see the choices. I only see consequences that I can't live with.

And then it was Halloween. Snape ordered all the trappings: the cats and bats, the candles and jack o' lanterns, the apple and pumpkin pie, but his heart was not in it. For the first time in several years he truly felt the despair Lily's death had brought him sixteen years earlier, and realized it had never left him, just remained quiet and hidden, ready to return at any moment.

In the hours before the feast began, Snape retreated to his office, trying to sort out his position and his path, to deal with the isolation he felt, to deal with the pain of having to lose McGonagall, unable even to explain to her.

What is the nature of choice? When I choose to do one thing instead of another,

what is the basis for my choice? Is it inwardly centered? Do I choose because I have to weigh the morality of one of my own actions against the morality of another of my own actions? Or is it outwardly centered? Do I weigh the outcome of one of my actions against the outcome of another of my actions?

Look at the tower, at Dumbledore begging me to kill him. If my basis for action was inwardly centered, I would not have killed him. I would have refused. In that case, Dumbledore would still be dead, and I would be dead. Potter would be dead and the forces of the Dark Lord would have taken over, then and there. But I would have salvaged my own soul. At the cost of everyone else, I would have saved my soul.

But I looked away from my soul and chose to kill Dumbledore, and that has altered everything. Dumbledore is still dead, but I live, Potter lives, and I still stand between the forces of the Dark Lord and his total dominance of Hogwarts. Is that a bad thing? Dumbledore does not think so. Perhaps I do not need to think so either.

It is a most important question. Save my soul and lose the world, or lose my soul and save the world? I wish I could be sure that by losing my soul I really was saving the world. McGonagall disagrees. She thinks I'm presumptuous to believe that I can predict the outcome of my actions.

Two and a half years ago, Dumbledore as much as told me he thought I should have been sorted into Gryffindor rather than Slytherin. 'We sort too soon,' he said. Did I have a choice there? I don't recall being given one. How would my life be different with no Bella or Rabastan, no Rosier, Wilkes, or Mulciber? Branded for life at the age of eleven, and McGonagall prats of choices.

Maybe she expects me to act nobly, like some pasteboard hero in a book or a play. It would be so easy if the Dark Lord had to follow the same script. I could behave as recklessly as I wanted because no matter what I did, we'd all reach the predetermined end anyway and take our bows after the curtain closed. But I do not have the luxury of a self-indulgent morality. I have been assigned to walk through a mine field, and if I deliberately step on a mine to prove how brave I am, then I desert my post.

The Halloween feast passed without incident. The students were laughing, fooling around, and demolishing treacle tarts. If Snape could have ignored the silent disapproval of the teachers, it would have been like every other Halloween feast (minus trolls, of course). He affected not to notice that he was being ostracized, and sat quietly back in his center chair, arms folded across his chest, watching the activity at the house tables, preferring isolation to the company of the Carrows.

As November progressed, the Carrows brought more and more accusations of conspiracies against themselves, the Headmaster, and the Ministry. Snape ordered a ban on the meeting of groups of more than three students, partly to prevent students from plotting, but equally to give the Carrows nothing that they could point to and use against the students. Snape knew perfectly well that the ban would never prevent the students from talking, especially when they slept eight or ten in a dorm room, but the Carrows didn't, and for a while things calmed down.

For some reason, Potter and his friends started talking to Phineas Nigellus more and more, and the portrait of Nigellus was permitted to feed them information in the hopes of extracting some from them, though Nigellus did tend to get huffy when they insulted Snape, knowing both sides of the situation as he did. After a while he reported a curious absence.

"I wasn't sure at first," Nigellus told Snape and Dumbledore, "because of course she continues to blindfold me, but I haven't heard the voice of the other boy at all. It seems like just Potter and the girl."

Which left them wondering what had become of Ron Weasley.

At the beginning of December, the Dark Lord returned. Snape and the Carrows were summoned to Wiltshire where the Dark Lord imposed his presence on the luckless Malfoys. It was no surprise to Snape that when he, Amycus, and Alecto entered, they were greeted by Bella Lestrangle.

"There you are, Headmaster," Bella cooed. "I hope you have a wonderful report on Hogwarts. He isn't in the best of moods."

Snape gave her a mock smile. "I'm sure you've been busy paving the way for me."

"Don't I always?"

Bella entered the drawing room—where Charity Burbage had died—along with the three from Hogwarts, apparently secure in the knowledge that she was permitted to hear what Snape had to say. After a few minutes' wait, the Dark Lord entered from the far side of the room. He said nothing.

Faced with silence, the three immediately knelt on the carpet at his feet. Something was wrong, and Snape prayed it was not directed at him. "Tell us of Hogwarts, Headmaster," the Dark Lord said at last, and Snape was instantly wary. The use of the title was a sign of displeasure.

"Lord, everything goes according to plan. There are no muggle-borns at the school and enrollment has nearly doubled with all the pure- and half-bloods that now attend. The new curriculum is well received..."

"Why did you remove the sword of Godric Gryffindor from the school?"

Snape stopped. It was not the question he expected, and his answer was a split-second too late.

"Lord, the sword..." and then the pain hit. When it abated, Snape had fallen forward on his knees so that his hands touched the floor as well. His breath came in sharp gasps, and he dared not move or look around, though he was certain Bella would have an expression of pure delight on her face. A shark, circling in bloodied water.

"Do not consider your answer," the Dark Lord said. "Speak quickly and without guile."

"Lord, two things happened at the same time. First, the Ministry asked to reexamine the sword, a request approved by the Board, and then a small group of students attempted to steal the sword. They were caught in the act, but we felt it best to give the sword better protection."

"Why did they want the sword?"

Snape guessed that the Dark Lord was talking about the students. "They were once friends of Potter's," he said. "Their imaginations were overwrought."

"Were they punished?"

"Yes, Lord."

"And the sword?"

"Now lies in the vault of the Lestranges in Gringotts."

"So Bella assisted you in this?"

"Yes, Lord."

"You have been called over lenient."

"Forgive me, Lord, if I have erred. I understood that willing obedience was preferred to grudging coercion that might break out later in rebellion."

The Dark Lord turned his red slitted eyes to Bella and the Carrows. "This is no question of disobedience, but of subtlety," he said. Then to Snape, "Is it true you refused to accept Bella's advice and guidance, Severus?"

On surer ground now, Snape replied. "I asked her if her instructions came from you. She was unable to assure me that they did."

"It is well." At the Dark Lord's gesture, Snape rose to go, relieved it had not been worse. As he opened the door and stepped back into the foyer, he heard, "Bella, we leave again for a few days. Our path is obscure. It may be that in that time that you will hear from Nagini. If so, you will assist her at once. There is nothing else so important as that."

Back at Hogwarts, Snape reported to Dumbledore. *At least here, he thought, I don't have to kneel.*

"So Riddle is separated from his snake," said Dumbledore. "That is most interesting news. I wonder what Nagini is doing."

Then came the Christmas break, and suddenly Hogwarts was empty.

In the days leading up to the end of term, Nigellus reported a change in Potter and Granger's actions. He'd noticed it because of Potter, who started waiting until Granger was asleep, then taking his rucksack out of her bag, sitting quietly for a while, then replacing the rucksack. At the same time, they acquired a new sense of energy in their voices, almost an excitement, but Nigellus was unable to get any clue of what they were planning.

Dumbledore began to instruct Snape about the sword. Not why Potter must have it, but how Potter must get it.

"The goblin-forged blade of Godric Gryffindor cannot be wielded by just anyone, Severus. It must be taken in an act of courage in a situation of great selfless need. Courage and chivalry, Severus. Only a true Gryffindor can use it."

Snape was fingering the ruby-encrusted hilt. "I suppose the touch of my loathsome Slytherin hands is polluting its purity."

The portrait peered over its glasses. "I doubt that very much. Think of the ideal of medieval chivalry — devotion to a lady, pure and unobtainable. I think we have that. And courage. Who else among us would have walked into Riddle's presence two and a half years ago, knowing he was about to face torment and possible death, forbidden to fight back? My dear boy, that is the kind of courage mere warriors never understand. You would have done well in Gryffindor."

With a snort of contempt, Snape laid the sword back on the table. "Can you imagine me sharing a dorm room with Sirius Black and James Potter? The thought makes my skin crawl. And what point is there to being a dun-derheaded bully, smashing my way through life and roaring like an idiot on an overdose of testosterone?"

"You are right, Severus. You may be too intellectual for Gryffindor. Still, I think we sort too soon."

The most important thing, however, other than Potter's actually getting the sword, was that under no circumstances could he know that Snape was involved. Given Potter's feelings about Snape, it might interfere with his willingness to take the sword, but vitally more important was Potter's total lack of ability as an occlumens.

"If he ever comes face to face with Riddle, and Riddle sees the connection between you and the sword, then we are undone. Harry would have to

vanquish Riddle at that moment, or you would die, Hogwarts would lose its protector, and I would be taking orders from Amycus Carrow. Not a pretty picture, that.”

“No, sir,” Snape agreed. “Not one I care to contemplate, certainly.” He was working out how he might accomplish the task of giving Potter the sword, under conditions of daring and need, without being seen. He already had an idea.

Something had happened to Snape the night, a year and a half earlier, when he’d faced Sirius Black for the last time over the green Floo connection in Dolores Umbridge’s office at Hogwarts. He could still hear himself pleading with Sirius not to go to the Department of Mysteries, and he could still hear Sirius’s reply: “No! He’s James’s son! For Chris’sake, Severus, he’s Lily’s son! And he’s the closest thing to my own son I’ll ever have. Dammit, I love him!” And his own voice responding, *Good luck*.

Sirius Black died that night, and something inside Severus opened for the first time. For the first time he faced the possibility that what he felt for Lily after all these years could, in fact, be called love. He rejected the thought at first, refusing to admit that love existed, calling it friendship, affection, anything but the word that everyone threw around so glibly and so meaninglessly — but it would not go away.

It wasn’t until well into that summer, when he wanted to send Dumbledore a patronus message, that the full import of what had happened hit him. His patronus had changed. Instead of the clever little fox that he was used to, his wand spurted forth an image he’d never seen before, the image of a beautiful fallow doe, dainty and graceful, that leapt and pranced around him joyfully, as if joyful at finally being released.

Where did you come from? Snape had thought, staring aghast at the lovely creature so unlike himself. Then it hit him. James Potter was ‘Prongs’ to his friends. His patronus must have been a stag. The doe, then, was Lily.

Instead of being pleased, Snape was horrified. True, the Death Eaters never communicated by patronus. Snape doubted if the majority of them could produce a patronus. But the fact of this patronus was now both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because he could conjure it, and it would skip about him, so full of affection that it made even Snape feel, well not tenderness exactly, but less alone. A curse because that patronus, produced in front of the Dark Lord, or Bella, or Macnair, was a death sentence. The only other person who knew of it was Dumbledore.

Now, however, he had a task, and Snape was, if nothing else, dedicated to the accomplishment of the tasks set before him by Dumbledore.

So, when Nigellus came tumbling back into his portrait the morning of Friday, December twenty-sixth, bellowing, "Headmaster! They are camping in the Forest of Dean!" Snape had already worked out the basics of what he was going to do.

It was cold in the Forest of Dean. It was bitterly cold, and Snape dared light no fire to warm his numb fingers for fear Potter or Granger might see it. He himself had not yet seen them. What he had seen, after several hours of trying to detect protection and concealment spells, was Ron Weasley.

What is he doing back? And more to the point, if he is back, why doesn't he go right to Potter and Granger? The only possible answer was that Weasley had no way to communicate his presence to the other two. And yet he was here, amazingly, inexplicably, here. That must mean that Potter and Granger were somewhere near as well.

Night fell, and a soft light snow began to drift through the trees overhead. The cold was like a metal clamp around Snape's head, but still he searched until finally, mercifully, he felt the vague, insubstantial hum of a Muffliato spell. It was unmistakable, probably because it was a spell he'd invented himself. *The little monsters stole that from my spell book. Well, at least it has served a purpose and allowed me to locate them.*

Snape retreated into the woods hampered by a pitch blackness that was partly due to the clouds that brought the snow, and partly because the moon was almost new and would not rise until well after five o'clock. Finally forced to use his wand, he murmured "*Quaero aquam!*" and followed the resulting pinpoint of light to a pool of water, full from recent rain, that was already covered with a thin layer of ice from the cold. It was about four feet deep, shallow enough to stand in, but deep enough so that anyone wanting to retrieve an object from the bottom would have to submerge himself entirely.

I know, Dumbledore, that bending down in chest deep water isn't normally considered the height of courage, but you have no idea how cold it is here. He could freeze to death before he got back to the tent.

Snape took Gryffindor's sword from his pouch and paused, considering how to get it to the middle of the pool. Simply throwing it wasn't an option since, besides being disrespectful to the sword (never be disrespectful to a goblin-made sword), he wasn't sure if the weight of the sword was sufficient to break through the ice. Instead he broke the ice with a spell, then levitated the sword into position and gently lowered it. *Now to get Potter!*

Almost as soon as he cast the patronus, Snape knew his instincts had been correct. Out of the thin air of a concealment spell, Potter appeared, attracted by the shimmering light. He seemed entranced by the image of the doe, and Snape had to admit that the patronus was softer, gentler, lighter than usual. Snape was at a loss to explain why this might be, unless the tiny vestige of Lily that must still animate the doe recognized the presence of Lily's son. It gave Snape a chill that had nothing to do with the exterior cold.

After a moment, Snape had the doe turn and lead Potter through the trees in the direction of the pool. After first calling to her to return, Potter followed like a man in a dream. Just beyond the pool, Snape slipped behind two oaks that grew closely enough together that, in his dark clothing, he would be able to watch unseen. He had to be sure Potter succeeded before he could leave.

The patronus and the boy reached the pool, Potter stepped forward as if to speak, and Snape let the doe vanish. There was silence, then the word "*Lumos!*" and then the illumination of faint green light. Potter glanced around him, and saw the sword.

He stared. He knelt in the snow before it. He scanned the surrounding woods while Snape crouched behind his trees to avoid detection. He circled the pool like a stalking panther. Then he seemed to steel himself.

Dumbledore had been right. Potter knew exactly what to do. After a moment's understandable hesitation, he began to strip down to his underwear in the freezing cold. He laid everything aside, shoes, glasses, wand, a pouch he had slung around his neck, everything but his underwear and something that gleamed gold on his chest. A Diffindo spell broke the congealing ice and, not trusting himself to ease slowly in, Potter jumped into the pool. He stood shivering in chest deep water for a moment, then ducked under.

What happened next was so utterly unexpected that at first Snape couldn't react from the shock. Potter began to thrash and kick in the pool as if fighting an enemy. But there was no enemy there. The pool, as Snape knew, was empty but for the sword. *Could the sword have attacked Potter?* There was no time to lose, or Potter would drown. Snape struggled to his feet, but someone else moved faster. Bushes crashing as he pushed them aside in his wild haste, Ron Weasley dashed from the trees and flung himself into the water. In a matter of seconds, Potter was back on the ground, clutching at his throat, and Weasley was back in the water groping for the sword, which he used to cut whatever was strangling Potter.

Snape waited only long enough to be sure Potter was alive and conscious,

and then he slipped silently away from the oaks, obliterating his footprints as he went, and returned to Hogwarts.

Dumbledore had a fire roaring, and Snape crouched down on the hearth to warm his icy, numb body before saying anything. Then he stood and faced the portrait. "If I've been frostbitten and lose my toes, it's your fault," he snapped.

"Does Potter have the sword?" Dumbledore asked, ignoring the accusation.

"No. Something went wrong, and he almost died. Weasley saved him. Weasley's back, he saved Potter's life, and he retrieved the sword."

"Then Ron must wield the sword," said Dumbledore. "Dear me, I hope Harry is wise enough to realize that."

C H A P T E R S I X T Y - T H R E E

BURNING BRIDGES

Dumbledore's tone made Snape suddenly angry. "Did you by any chance give him any information that would let him reach that conclusion? Because if not, the fact that he makes a mistake here lies solely on you."

"I beg your pardon, Severus. I have done what I could to prepare Harry for his task."

"What if it wasn't enough? What if you played your cards too close to your chest, and he hasn't got clue one what you expect him to do? What if you treated him like you treat me? He's got the sword, and he thinks he knows what to do with it, but oops! we left out that small but vital piece of information, and the whole plan goes down like a house of cards? I'm not wild about freezing my rear end off for nothing."

"I assure you, you did not freeze your rear end off for nothing. Harry has what he needs, if he remembers it, to use the sword."

"Right. I know the lesson well. It's number two hundred sixty-six. 'Oh, by the way Harry, if Ron should happen to retrieve a sword from a pool in the middle of the night because you were choking on something, please let him use it first.' A truly well developed lesson plan. I use the basic format all the time."

Dumbledore peered over his glasses. "You are becoming tiresome, Severus. You are assuming too much—or rather, too little. Harry knows what is expected of him."

Snape turned and swept out of the office. Behind him, as the door closed, he could just barely hear Nigellus say, "You know, Albus, the Potter boy isn't the only one with green eyes."

It wasn't until he'd stormed all the way down to the fourth floor that Snape realized he was heading for the dungeons and his old rooms. The headmaster's office, which had seemed a refuge in September, was a refuge no

longer, and it was becoming clearer and clearer that contact with the portraits wasn't the same as human contact. Snape wanted to talk to someone, a person, even if it was just the meaningless banter of the staff room after a tiring day, but there was no one to talk to. McGonagall wouldn't talk to him; Sprout wouldn't talk to him; he doubted Hagrid would talk to him. No human contact at all. The headmaster's chair was an isolation booth. For the first time it struck Snape that when he died, he would probably be alone.

I like being alone. I want to be alone. Yet 'alone' was a relative term. It was one thing to seek solitude after a hundred student contacts in a day and the noise of the Great Hall. Being alone in his room with a book or a new potion at such times was a welcome relief. Now it was a constant state of being, and Snape missed betting on Quidditch games with McGonagall, or playing cribbage with Flitwick, or helping Sprout set out seedlings, or even having Hagrid fuss over his eating habits.

All I have now is Dumbledore — and Nigellus, and the hunt for Potter. And until we bring down the Dark Lord, that's all I'll ever have. Even Amycus and Alecto won't talk to me because they work for Bella, and Bella thinks I'm her rival. And to think there were times in my life when I thought I could actually live like a human being in a normal world.

Truth be told, those times had been few and far between, and suddenly Snape wanted to get out of Hogwarts and go somewhere, anywhere, where he could be normal, do something normal, act human again. He trudged back upstairs into his office, and from there into his bedroom, and returned settling a warm cloak around his shoulders.

"Where are you going, Severus?" the portrait of Dumbledore asked.

"London," Snape replied.

"Whatever for?"

"I'm going to a movie, and then to a restaurant, and maybe I'll even buy a book or two."

"But Potter . . . They have the sword now. We may learn . . ."

"I already know the report, sir. They're camping. It's someplace quiet, rural, where there aren't any other people. Granger's doing the cooking. End of report."

"Severus, it is ten o'clock at night on Boxing Day. Nothing is open . . ."

Dumbledore was right, of course, but Snape didn't care. He stalked down the hill to the gates and disappeared.

He ended up in the pub in his home village. Men who'd known his father, and who'd tried to teach Snape to play darts, came over to wish him a happy

Christmas. He had a pint, then someone bought him another, and he found himself pondering the mysteries of table skittles, in this case devil among the tailors, and the use of geometry in determining the arc of the ball. It was a good sight easier than darts. All too soon, the pub keeper shouted "Last call, lads," and then it was closing time, and a much mellower Snape found his way to his own home, from which he apparated to Hogsmeade. As he made his way back up the hill, Snape decided that it was good to have a home village. Something to remember in times when he was more alone than usual.

And naturally, it would be precisely that evening, when he'd run off and played truant, that the report would be different. "I told you, Severus," Dumbledore's portrait said the instant he set foot in the office. "Ron Weasley has used the sword. The locket is destroyed."

That night, lying sleepless in bed, Snape tried to work things through.

Nigellus thinks I'm jealous of Potter. Is that true? Am I jealous? Much as Snape hated to admit it, when set the question, he had to acknowledge that since Lily's death the most important person in his life had been Dumbledore. Dumbledore had kept him out of Azkaban, provided a place and a purpose, and to some extent had given him trust and that indefinable sense that he belonged to a family.

Now, inexorably, it was all being whittled away. Dumbledore was dead, the shadow of his portrait presence the only consolation. Hogwarts was no longer a home but once more a prison where he barricaded himself in the middle, against both sides. And trust? In the last year Snape had come to realize that Dumbledore trusted him about as much as he trusted anyone — to perform certain specific tasks, but no further. *Am I exactly like Potter? Another pig being raised for slaughter?*

It was darkest, blackest night, the moon almost new, and Snape could not see the ceiling that he stared at. *What if I had done differently? What if I had not set things in motion? If I had been strong and withheld the prophecy from the Dark Lord?* But that, of course, was silly. That night when he knelt before the Dark Lord to confess his failure and receive his punishment, the prophecy held no meaning, the child it referred to, if indeed it referred to a child, as yet unborn, as yet unconceived, but the pain of punishment was very real. *And I was no seasoned spy for Dumbledore. I was nineteen, and the Dark Lord's faithful servant. There was no cause to withhold the prophecy.*

Still, if he had not chosen to climb those stairs and listen at that door, he would have heard no prophecy. *I would have had nothing to give him to turn his wrath from my failure. I would have died that night, but Lily would still be*

alive. And yet, was even that true? The night Snape had heard the prophecy, the Dark Lord was at the zenith of his power. Opponents fell before him like flies, and Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix battled in hopeless retreat, already betrayed, as Snape now knew, by Peter Pettigrew. It was only a matter of time before both James and Lily, and in all probability their son as well, would have died. As Fabian and Gideon Prewett had died. As Marlene McKinnon had died. As one by one all Dumbledore's followers had been dying. Until a new and hitherto unused spy had provided the information to turn all that around. The spy who spied because of the Dark Lord's interpretation of a prophecy.

No, Lily would still be dead, and the Dark Lord would have come into the fullness of his power sixteen years ago. The prophecy caused his downfall and gave Dumbledore time — time to learn more of the Dark Lord's plans so that now, even now, hope glimmers that the last item will be found, Potter will know of his role, and the Dark Lord will be vanquished forever. Maybe I don't stumble blindly in the darkness. Maybe instead of a blundering fool, I'm an instrument of fate, and my role in this is as important as anyone's.

The problem was, there was no way to know. Not until the last choice had been made and the last act played out. And maybe not even then. *The odds are that I'll die without learning if any of it was worthwhile.* But still, the idea of being an instrument of fate rather than of Dumbledore was somehow comforting, and at long last Snape was able to sleep.

He told Dumbledore so the next morning. "I've decided. You're not in control of the situation."

"No?" the portrait raised its eyebrows. "And who, Severus, is in control? Not you?"

"God," Snape said, and ordered breakfast from the kitchen rather than go down to the Hall to eat with the skeleton staff.

"You amaze me. Have you found religion at last?"

"Let's say I've decided that we're not leaves blown helplessly along by the winds of chance. Someone is guiding us. Call it fate if you like."

"This is truly astounding, Severus! You have taken a great step forward in the . . ."

"Don't patronize me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're acting like an instructor whose job is to inculcate an understanding of the seven levels of wisdom. As if you already know what the seven

levels are, and your job is to help me find them. As if you're partly responsible for my groping my way up to level three. Like a dog trainer. Well that's male bovine fecal matter. I'm not following you in order to expiate my sins. I made the right choices. You just happen to be going in the same direction I am. I'm not sure I want to trust your compass quite so uncritically."

Dumbledore peered over his glasses. "You might want to work that out better, Severus. It was a bit hard to follow."

"There you go being patronizing again. I decided last night that fate does play a role in this, but that fate and the will of Albus Dumbledore are not always the same thing. I decided I need more information." Snape took a small handful of Floo powder and knelt in front of his fireplace.

"What are you doing?" Dumbledore asked.

"Flourish and Blotts," said Snape, throwing the powder into the embers. When a clerk responded on the other side, Snape said. "This is the Headmaster of Hogwarts school. I'd like to order a copy of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* by Rita Skeeter. Put it on my personal account."

Snape tried to ignore the portraits most of the morning, even though Dumbledore did his best to engage conversation. Of the two, Dumbledore was the more successful.

"You know, Nigellus says that you really gave those three a morale boost yesterday evening. They know now that someone is helping them. They do not feel alone anymore," he said around ten o'clock, after several failed starts.

"They're exactly as alone as they were before." Snape answered. "Only their perception of the situation has changed."

"But that is because of you and your actions. The patronus was a brilliant inspiration."

"And if they knew where it came from, they'd be equally horrified and unsure of themselves."

"It does not detract at all..."

"Yes, it does. I've been trying to protect that boy since his first year, and he hates me. If I told him London was the capital of England, he'd immediately insist it was Lincoln."

"You haven't exactly been the most loving of protectors."

"He hasn't exactly been the most endearing of students."

"You were comparing him to his father."

"I wanted to compare him to his mother."

"And how did you endeavor to do that?"

"When did Hagrid first take Potter to Diagon Alley?"

"On his birthday, wasn't it?"

"Right. July thirty-first. Then he took his books home and kept them for a month. A month. You would think he'd at least open them. The first day of classes, I asked him three questions. The answers were in the first chapter. He couldn't answer one of them."

"Which led you to the conclusion . . . ?"

"Lily would have known the answers."

"And James would not have. I see. I had understood from Professor Slughorn that under a different teacher . . ."

"Now it's my fault? I'll remind you, sir, that the OWL scores in Potions have risen . . ."

"That was not my meaning . . ."

"And he was cheating!"

"You really do have to explain that to me, Severus."

"Slughorn let him use an older text until he got the new one. The book Potter got was my own, with all my notes and annotations. Potter was using my research, my experiments, to get good grades."

"Slughorn said he was like his mother."

Snape was silent.

"I see," said Dumbledore after a moment. "He was indeed like his mother, right down to the source of his inspiration and success."

"Lily was good at Potions!"

"But not extraordinary. No, Severus, that apparently took assistance. The assistance you gave to the mother, you also gave to the son. I see no cause to be bitter about it."

"When I gave him detention after Easter . . . The spell he attacked Draco with was mine."

"I see," Dumbledore repeated. "It was rather a . . . drastic spell."

"Sir, do you have any idea how long I worked with that spell, so that it could be wielded like a surgeon wields a scalpel, not like a lunatic with a meat cleaver?"

"I see the sins of Harry Potter are legion. He has taken after his father, has been insufficiently like his mother, and has benefited from your assistance, both intentional and unintentional, without showing the proper gratitude."

"You left out being an arrogant showoff."

"I thought that was covered in the 'take after his father' part," said Dumbledore with a sad smile.

Snape went to the Great Hall for lunch, and it was there that the owl arrived from Flourish and Blotts with the biography of Dumbledore. The staff was not together at one table, so Snape unwrapped the book then and there and began to read, quickly aware that the others had noticed and were . . . not happy.

After a few minutes, McGonagall joined Snape at his table. "You've actually given that woman money for writing trash?" she said.

Not looking up from the page, Snape remarked, "I thought you weren't talking to me."

"Don't flatter yourself, 'tis no conversation. I'm scolding you."

"Oh, well, that's all right, then."

They were both silent, then McGonagall took a deep breath. "Severus, I'd like a word with you, if you don't mind, in my office."

"It sounds like you're putting me on detention."

"This is no joke. There's something I want to say, and it wouldna do to say it here."

Snape rose, and McGonagall copied him. "I suppose," he said, "that I've no choice but to face the music."

She led the way out of the Hall, and all eyes followed them. It rather reminded Snape of an execution.

Neither spoke until they reached McGonagall's office, with its shelves of books and prim, academic decor. She ushered him in with a formal gesture, then closed the door and stood in front of it, barring his exit.

"Am I a prisoner?" Snape asked wryly.

"I don't know," McGonagall replied. "Are ye?"

It was a moment of clarity, clarity and sorrow for what had once been and could never be again. "You know why I'm here," Snape said.

"I know what was spoken of upstairs between ye, and Moody, and Dumbledore. But Dumbledore was already dead, and now Moody's dead, too, so there's just ye and me left to remember it, and I'm asking — Are ye a prisoner?"

Snape regarded her for a moment, his head cocked to one side. Fierce though she could be, confrontation was not McGonagall's strong suit, and he knew she was at least as uncomfortable about this as he was. "I come and go at my pleasure," he said at last, "but am always constrained to return, and the one who determines my actions is not always me. So you tell me. Am I a prisoner?"

McGonagall didn't blink. Instead she held out her hand, palm up. "I

would take it as a very great favor, Severus, if you would be so kind as to allow me to look at your wand.”

Knowing now what McGonagall wanted to do, and worse, knowing what she would find when she did it, Snape felt the blood drain from his face — and knew she would note that as well. He allowed himself to count silently to ten, then said softly, “I’m sorry Minerva, but I can’t let you do that.”

“Is it truly so bad as that?” McGonagall said, equally softly. She put her hand down. “Then there is nothing more we have to say to each other, is there?”

“Would you allow me to explain?”

“D’ye honestly think it would help?”

Snape turned away from her and went to the window, to look down onto the lawn in front of the castle, now covered with snow, and to the Whomping Willow and Hagrid’s hut, from whose chimney a thin curl of smoke rose. The loneliness that had driven him from Hogwarts the night before filled him again. No matter what he did now, he’d lost McGonagall. Refuse or grant her request — either was equally damning. Yet in him was a desire, a longing, to have at least one person know his side of it, know what he’d gone through, to be able to say after it was all over — this is what Snape told me.

He turned to face McGonagall again and slowly drew his wand from his sleeve. “Promise me,” he said, “that you’ll let me explain. Promise that you’ll listen.”

She stepped forward and touched his hand. “How can I promise, laddie, when even you are so certain that I will not want to?”

McGonagall eased the wand from Snape’s unresisting hand and took it to her desk. Clearing the desk of every item — for this was a powerful spell she needed to cast — she carefully laid the wand in the center as Snape watched, unmoving and impassive, from the window. Then, with a commanding up-sweep and downward flick of her own wand, McGonagall ordered:

“Prioris omnis incantationis!”

In its place at the center of the table, the wand vibrated. There was a small, percussive pop, followed shortly by another. “Apparation,” murmured McGonagall. “Ye went somewhere. Last night, maybe,” but another pop interrupted her, and then the unmistakable wisps of ghostly silver that were the shapeless traces of a patronus spell.

McGonagall glanced up in surprise at Snape. “Who were ye contacting with a patronus?” she started, then had to devote her attention to the

backward scan of the daily life of a school—Lumos spells, graffiti-cleaning spells, Evanesco spells, a spell that carried an injured student to Madam Pomfrey . . . all this interspersed with apparating—Snape remembered his trips to the Malfoy mansion, headquarters, Gringotts, and the Ministry, though the wand itself did not say where.

And then — “What were ye doing to Gryffindor’s sword? Were ye daft, lad?” — followed by more routine until the unmistakable voice of Rufus Scrimgeour, Rufus Scrimgeour crying out in pain, emerged, and from that moment McGonagall could only stare speechless at the wand, stare and watch as, like bursts of color among the monotone of more mundane spells, she saw the Killing Curse that ended Alastor Moody’s life, the slash of Sectumsempra that severed George Weasley’s ear, the whiplash that struck Harry Potter’s face and, finally, the twin curses that killed Albus Dumbledore and threw his body from the Astronomy tower.

At that point McGonagall stopped the Incantationis spell. There was nothing further she needed to see, and she sat down heavily in the chair behind her desk, her face a mask of shock and horror.

After a moment, Snape said tentatively, “Minerva?”

“Don’t speak to me.”

“You said you would listen.”

“I made no such promise, and if I had, I would break it. There is nothing I want to hear you say.”

“Minerva, please.”

“That’s what Albus said, isn’t it? Harry heard it. Severus, please . . .”

“He was asking me to do it.”

“I don’t believe you!” McGonagall was on her feet again, an avenging fury. “What about Alastor? And Scrimgeour?”

“Minerva, I swear . . .”

“D’ye think I dinna remember what you hold against them? What you’ve held against them all these years? I watched them take ye off for a Death Eater, and I thought because ye were young, and a glib tongue in yer head, and a shy way about ye that maybe Albus was right and they were wrong, and no harm givin’ ye shelter. And all these years ye’ve cozened me, and flattered me, and fooled me! Get out of my office ye snake! Get out! The sight of ye sickens me!”

Snape took his wand and left, and stumbled his way back upstairs to the seventh floor and the gargoyle. How could he possibly have miscalculated so badly? He’d considered McGonagall a friend, had assumed that even when

faced with the worst she would at least think of him as a human being and hear his defense. How wrong he had been. . . . how wrong. And where he'd hoped to make things at least endurable, he'd only succeeded in making everything . . . everything . . . infinitely worse.

Snape walked straight past the portraits, ignoring portrait Dumbledore's calls of "Severus . . . Severus?" and up the short, spiral stairs to his bedroom, where he lay down on the bed and again stared at the ceiling. Below he could hear the portraits.

"Severus! Severus, what has happened?"

"I told you, Albus, we have been doing this . . ."

"We're supposed to help the Headmaster, Albus, not drive him . . ."

"Albus, this is too much of a burden . . ."

"Quiet, the lot of you," said Dumbledore's portrait, muffled through the staircase, but still audible. "He will be fine. He is one of the most resilient people I have ever met. He bounces back from adversities that would crush a normal person. And he knows that what we do is for the greater good of the wizarding world. He will not fail us."

For the greater good of the wizarding world. Snape lay on the bed and listened to the portraits discussing him. *If only I could believe that, believe that the pain and the suffering did serve some higher, better cause. If I believed that, I could keep going. If I believed that, I could accept even . . .*

But why not believe it? The fact of the Dark Lord was inescapable. Voldemort existed. Voldemort was driving everything before him, taking control, destroying opposition . . . Snape had been set a task, a duty, and that duty was to assist in the destruction of Voldemort. If that task was accomplished, then Snape existed for the greater good of the wizarding world. All pain, all heartbreak, all sacrifice, was worth it for the greater good. Snape rose and went back down the staircase to face the portraits.

* * *

Snape did not go down to the Great Hall for supper; he could not face it. Nor did he order food sent up from the kitchens since he wasn't hungry, his stomach rebelling, as it usually did when he was upset, against food. There was no news of Potter and his friends, and the portraits slumbered quietly. Snape stood by the window and watched snow flurries reflect the light from the candles in his office.

The slam of the door being kicked open made Snape jump and spin around, his wand instantly in his hand, expecting attack. And after a fashion it was an attack, though not one threatening bodily harm. Hagrid stood in the doorway of the office, holding a tray loaded with food. "Sorry to startle ya," he said gruffly. "M' hands was full."

"I'm not hungry," Snape said, putting the wand back up his sleeve and turning again to the snow.

"Yeah," said Hagrid, crossing the room to put the tray on the desk. "I heard. Seems you got a knack for doin' stuff that gets other people's backs up. Figured y'd be off your feed. There's plenty here 'cause I figured I'd join ya." He pulled a huge chair over to the desk. "So whyn't ya just settle yerself and do as y're told 'cause I don't relish sittin' on ya and forcin' it down your gullet, but I will if I have ta." He set out two plates and glasses for wine, and began loading food onto his.

Snape turned, leaning back against the stone wall, his arms crossed on his chest, to watch Hagrid. "Am I to assume you're not as particular about the company you keep as McGonagall is?"

"Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid through a mouthful of potato, "is a woman o' high moral character. She sees as there's things ya just don't do, not for any reason. It were bad enough suspecting y'd killed Professor Dumbledore, but now she knows there's three murders, and y've gone along with the Ministry, and y've allowed corporal punishment dealt out t' the children, and she's got t' figure y've sold yer soul."

"Maybe I have."

"Don't think so. I ain't too bright, but I can still add two and two."

"Meaning?"

"Alastor Moody. I was there that night, remember. I knew it was you. Y'never were comfortable on a broom. I figured you'd figure I were the one with Harry, so it weren't no surprise ya didn't go after me. Ya went after Lupin and cut off George Weasley's ear. Lupin recognized ya."

"That was an accident. I was aiming at the Death Eater who was going to kill Lupin. I... missed."

"I'm glad t' hear that. Didn't think ya had anything 'gainst George. Course, ya wouldn't've known it was George, would ya? Point is, ya didn't go after Moody. You-Know-Who went after Moody. Bill Weasley saw it. You-Know-Who hit Moody in the face with a curse, and he musta fallen fifty, sixty feet. So if you got a killin' curse in your wand for him, there's gotta be another story to it."

"Moody was still alive. He was dying — the fall — but it would have taken a couple of hours, and they were coming back. The Dark Lord's anger is both cold and cruel."

"Which o' you made the decision?"

"Moody."

"Tha's all right, then. And then there's old Scrimgeour. Ye were there?"

"Yes."

"How long did it take?"

"Twelve hours."

"There now! All that time and only the one curse outta your wand! They must notta been paying you much attention, ya get away with a halfhearted effort like that! Now you get over here and eat!"

"You haven't asked about Dumbledore."

"Don't have to. He told ya t' do it. I knew that the minute Harry said 't was you."

"How . . . ?"

Hagrid put his knife and fork down and leaned forward, his fists on his thighs. "Now ain't I taken care o' you since you was twelve? Wasn't it me ya first came to when ya turned yer back on You-Know-Who? Not Dumbledore, me! And wasn't it me as grabbed yer coattails that night ya thought y'd go flying off the tower? How'd I know? I know you. Now you start eating before I have t' sit on ya."

Snape left the window and joined Hagrid, helping himself to the food rather eagerly, for he was suddenly hungry. The first bite was halfway to his mouth when another question occurred to him. "Hagrid, how did you get into my office?"

Hagrid grinned at the question. "There's a conspiracy below stairs, has been for decades."

"Below stairs? Servants? You mean the house-elves?"

"Got it in one! You always was bright. House-elves can go anywhere. Ya don't make yer own bed, do ya? Lay yer own fire? Nobody ever asks how the house-elves get by the passwords." He held up his pink umbrella. "Didn't ya ever wonder about this?"

"I know it's a wand you're not supposed to have . . ."

"Tha's right. I got kicked outta Hogwarts when I was thirteen over that Chamber business, and they broke my wand. Ever hear of a broken wand that still works? Ever hear of a broken wand that can be fixed proper?"

"Now that you mention it, no. I do remember the damage caused by Weasley's wand, and it hadn't actually separated."

"Mine wouldn't work either, but then Headmaster Dippet gave me the job. Well, that put me on staff, too, not like a teacher, but like them elves. Servants. They fixed my wand and put it in the umbrella. It still ain't real powerful, but it can do elf-type things, like get through doors."

Snape nodded. It was amazing the things that happened every day in the school that he never noticed or knew about before. He and Hagrid continued eating in comradely silence, but just as Hagrid was leaving, Snape had another thought.

"It's probably best if you don't try to defend me to anyone. There's a long road still ahead of us, and if the Carrows ever get the idea I'm not on their side, I may not make it to the end."

"Gotcha," said Hagrid. "Y're a deep-dyed villain."

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Snape. "And thank you for supper."

The next day was Sunday, the twenty-eighth. Snape went down to breakfast and endured the ostracism of his erstwhile colleagues. The Carrows weren't down yet, and Hagrid was obeying orders, so Snape ate alone, reading the biography of Dumbledore that he hadn't had the heart to pick up again the day before, after his encounter with McGonagall.

The book gave him a lot to think about. That the young Dumbledore had been friends with Gellert Grindelwald was a surprise, but that he'd dabbled in questionable, elitist philosophies didn't bother Snape at all. It was part of youth to stretch out and try things that appealed to the heart as well as the head, and to think that you had the secret for saving the world. Snape had dabbled in questionable, elitist philosophies, too, and had the mark on his arm to show for it. *The key is whether or not you grow and learn and change. Anyone who has exactly the same principles at forty that they had at twenty just isn't doing any thinking.*

After breakfast, Snape continued to read in his office, taking notes from time to time of things he wanted to ask portrait Dumbledore about, though he wanted a clearer picture in his own head before he actually broached the topic. He was so deeply engrossed in the subject that when the mark on his arm started to tingle, he absent-mindedly scratched it. The tingle grew stronger and became an itch, and then he was staring at his arm as if it was a monster rearing up to strike him. He ran for his bedroom, grabbed a cloak, and raced out again, crying to the portraits, "He's calling me!" as he bolted out the door and down the stairs.

The Carrows had been called, too. Snape wasn't happy at the idea that the whole staff would guess that the three of them were dancing attendance on the Dark Lord together, but there was nothing else he could do. They could not disapparate from Hogwarts. They had to go down the hill and out the gate, and leave for the Malfoy mansion from Hogsmeade.

The call was not from the Dark Lord. The call was from Bella. This in and of itself was a shock, since Bella had never dared usurp the Dark Lord's prerogatives before. The cause, when she told them however, was sufficiently important that Snape understood, and felt the Dark Lord would likely not be angry.

"Potter's been seen," Bella announced as soon as most of the inner echelon had arrived and were seated around the meeting table. Bella sat between her husband and brother-in-law, leaving the Dark Lord's seat empty. "Travers and Selwyn saw him escaping from Lovegood's house this afternoon. The mudblood girl was with him."

"Did they apparate?" Rookwood asked.

"Selwyn tried tracing them, but it looks like they put up protective spells at once. He couldn't get a fix, so he contacted me immediately."

"What did they want from that nut case Lovegood?" Avery asked. "He has trouble getting the time of day right."

"We don't know," Bella replied. "They Obliviated him just as they were leaving. Luckily they trusted him at first, otherwise they'd never have given him the chance to contact Travers and Selwyn."

Rabastan smiled. "I told you he'd be more reasonable once we had his daughter in our power." At Snape's look of surprise, he elaborated. "We took her off the train at the beginning of the Christmas break. She's a prisoner in the cellar of this house right now."

Say something, Severus, Snape thought. *Something that a person in your position should say, would say...* He gazed blandly back at Rabastan. "How long were you planning on keeping her? She is, after all, a student under my jurisdiction."

"I think your jurisdiction can take second place to stopping the articles her father was printing. She'll probably be a guest here for a while." Rabastan exchanged a smirk with Bella and Rodolphus while the others around the table waited in silence. Macnair was practically salivating.

"In that case," Snape said calmly, "I'll have to insist on evidence that the girl is unharmed."

Bella gasped. "You have to insist? Keep your nose out of Operations, Headmaster. You haven't got any authority here."

"Oh, but I have," Snape replied. "The girl is enrolled at Hogwarts for the entire academic school year which will not end until June twenty-eighth. I am legally responsible for her since she has yet to return to the protection of her family. Now if you had waited until she had gotten back home..."

"Don't prat to me about legalities, Snape!" Rabastan spat at him. "The reality is..."

"The reality is that you're blundering ahead without the authorization of the Dark Lord, and may be rudely awakened when he finds out you've angered his old Head of house and his Charms professor. But if you want to take that chance..."

"What are you talking about?" Bella snapped, her eyes narrowed and dangerous.

Snape calculated the odds and rolled the dice. "How much has the Dark Lord told you of his time at Hogwarts, Bella?"

Her eyes widened. Snape's gamble had paid off. "He has... hasn't... I..." she faltered.

"Nothing, I take it," Snape said. "You are completely unaware that the Dark Lord remembers his old school with a fondness he reserves for few other things." In this, of course, Snape was relying on information passed to him by Dumbledore, but it was better than anything anyone around him had. "I have already mentioned this," he nodded to the Carrows, "but it is worth repeating. We are supposed to be winning hearts and minds to the Dark Lord's cause. If he held ill feelings towards his former professors, people like Slughorn and Flitwick, or against former classmates, people like McGonagall, would he not have sought the Board of Governors to have them removed and replaced with others? That he did not should be a warning to you to treat them with care. Now you tell me that you are holding a girl of impeccable blood purity who is in the house of the Dark Lord's former Charms professor and in the Potions classes of his former Head of house. A girl who is respected and well-liked—" This was an exaggeration, but they would not know it. "—a girl after whom they will inquire. All I wish to be able to say is that she is safe and well treated. I do not consider that an unreasonable request."

Bella eyed Snape shrewdly, then called, "Wormtail!" When Pettigrew responded, she ordered, "Take the Headmaster to see our prisoner and show him she's safe. Don't let her see him."

Snape would have preferred staying at the table until the meeting was over, but took what he could get. Rising, he followed Pettigrew out of the room, down a corridor toward the kitchen of the manor house, and then down a spiral staircase to the cellar. It was a large area, with several storerooms. Pettigrew walked over to one whose door was both padlocked and sealed with charms and tapped on the wood.

"Who's there?" said a soft, gentle voice that Snape recognized as Lovegood's.

"That's none of your business," Pettigrew said. "There's someone here who wants to hear you."

"Oh, how lovely!" replied Lovegood behind the door. "So many people just want to see you. But if someone wants to hear you, then you have to talk, and that's a certain amount of interaction."

"Tell him that you're okay, that you haven't been harmed."

"Him?" Lovegood asked. "Father, is that you? I am sorry I didn't have a chance to give you my Christmas present . . ." She paused. "Not my father? An admirer, then? Someone who read my article on the Crumple-Horned Snorkack and wants an autograph? I knew I would be famous for that."

"Tell him everything is fine. You haven't been hurt."

"Oh, but I have! I have been hurt. Let's see. They twisted my wrist, and they pulled me by the hair. And then they used ropes to tie me up. And I was blindfolded when I so wanted to see the snow crystals on the trees. And I missed Christmas. And I haven't had treacle tart even one time. And they won't let me take proper care of Mr. Olliv . . ."

"Shut up!" Pettigrew yelled at her. Then he turned to Snape. "Satisfied?" he asked, rubbing his hands together, the flesh one and the silver one.

Snape nodded. He would have liked to have assured the girl that her captivity was under surveillance, but he didn't dare as that would have made the situation worse and jeopardized his own position. Still, she seemed perfectly normal — for Lovegood at least — and she'd thrown out a piece of information. Ollivander was also in the cell. Perhaps he was even the prisoner who'd been in the cellar during the meeting in July, when the Dark Lord had asked for Malfoy's wand.

"Well?" Bella asked when Snape returned to the meeting room.

"She seems well enough," Snape replied. "Make sure she stays that way. At least until you have orders to the contrary."

"Now," said Bella, "we need to talk about the rest of the school."

"I beg your pardon?" said Snape.

"We've been having a discussion. It seems you've been hampering your new professors."

Snape spared no glance for the Carrows. "The new curriculum for Muggle Studies has been implemented as fully as can be expected considering that there is no approved text. Professor Carrow is aware of the need for her to provide supplemental material. I have denied none of her requests..."

"I was thinking more about Dark Arts."

"The curriculum for Defense Against the Dark..."

"No, Snape! You're not listening. I'm not talking about defense. I'm talking about Dark Arts."

"The Board of Governors hasn't..."

"But you don't really work for the Board of Governors, do you?" Bella looked around the table, and Snape followed her gaze. Sharks was the word that again came to mind. Blood in the water. Jackals. Hyenas.

"Technically, I do," Snape said.

"But in reality, you don't. I think I'm going to have to remind you, puppy dog, that the Dark Arts class is part of Operations. We're training people, new operatives. They need to know the material. Unforgivables is part of the material. Amycus needs to teach it."

"Neither the Board of Governors nor the Ministry has..."

"But the Dark Lord has. Who do you work for, Snape? We're all friends here." Her gesture was meant to take in the whole table, but seemed to point to Macnair more than anyone. "You're not talking to the Board or to the *Prophet*. You're talking to the Dark Lord's servants. Don't you want to implement his will? Don't you want to train operatives for him?"

"Of course I do," Snape answered, there being no other acceptable answer.

"Then you should be finding ways to help, not looking for excuses to defend inaction."

"I'm still answerable to the Board. If they don't like what I do, they'll fire me. My replacement might not be as acceptable to the Dark Lord."

"You're a bright boy," said Bella. "You'll figure out something."

Snape looked over at Amycus, who was grinning. "I'm sure we'll be able to work out an acceptable solution," he said.

The return to Hogwarts took place in total silence. As they were walking back up the hill, Amycus finally spoke. "Cruciatu curses," he said. "That's what they really need to work on. Cruciatu curses. Only experienced people

can handle Imperiuses, and killing is on special orders, but even the kids can help with interrogation.”

“I’ll keep your views in mind,” said Snape, and left them in the entrance hall.

The portraits debated long into the night.

“Teaching students Unforgivable Curses,” lamented Headmaster Dippet, shaking his head sadly. “What has Hogwarts come to?”

“I myself gave similar orders three years ago,” said Headmaster Dumbledore, “though I admit the professor I gave those orders to was not who I thought he was.”

“But that case was not at all similar,” insisted Headmistress Derwent. “That was information. These students are being asked to practice the spells.”

“And if they do not,” interjected Headmaster Fortescue, “we will lose Headmaster Snape and acquire someone new who will not have Hogwarts’s best interests at heart.”

“And what do you have to say about this?” Dumbledore asked the hitherto silent Snape.

Snape was staring into the fire. “Potter has not yet,” he said, “been given the information he needs to ensure the defeat of the Dark Lord. I understand that only I can give him that information. Is my remaining in a position where that might happen of sufficient importance to warrant causing students to suffer temporary pain? I don’t have the answer to that question.”

“Then let me ask you another, Severus,” said Dumbledore. “If you were one of those students, would you be willing to suffer the pain in order to destroy Voldemort?”

Snape looked up at him, all that he had lived through glowing bright in the anger in his black eyes. “That, sir,” he said, “is a question you already know the answer to.”

The first one Snape had to talk to was Flitwick.

“Not coming back?” said the Charms instructor. “Detained? I don’t understand.”

Snape tried to choose his words with care. “Miss Lovegood’s relations have been publicly attempting to undermine observance of laws. Her presence was required to assist in showing these relations the lack of wisdom inherent in these actions.”

Flitwick refused to discuss the matter in a calm or rational manner. “She’s been kidnapped to force her father to stop publishing! That’s what you’re trying to say, isn’t it? They’re using the children to coerce the parents! How

can you go along with this, Severus? I thought you were a decent human being! How can you go along with this?”

Because of the consequences I cannot live with, Snape thought, but did not voice this thought to Flitwick. Instead, he concentrated on the practical. “I saw where she’s kept,” he said. “She spoke to me. She’s well — unharmed. Just detained. I’ll do what I can to get her back, but you have to understand that I don’t have a lot of authority in this.”

“Well you’d better find some!” Flitwick bellowed in a voice much too large for his tiny frame, and stalked out of the office.

The meeting with McGonagall was equally tense.

“I’m denying them permission to go to Hogsmeade,” Snape said for about the dozenth time. “I have good cause, and nothing you say will change my mind.”

“Then why won’t you tell me the cause?”

“I can’t. Minerva, please . . .”

“It’s petty vengeance, it is, Severus Snape! These children — Weasley, Longbottom, Finnigan — they won’t bow to your rule like sheep, so ye take away one of the few pleasures they have. It’s mean, it’s cruel . . . It’s action I’d have said was beneath ye a year ago.”

It’s protecting them from kidnapping, Minerva, Snape thought, *but I can’t tell you that. It’s as much as my position’s worth to tell you that, and I have to keep my position at all costs, at least until Potter’s informed and the last scene is being acted.*

McGonagall, like Flitwick, stomped down the stairs in rage.

The last straw, naturally, was the implementation of Amycus Carrow’s plan to have detention served by being the subjects of the upper years’ Dark Arts exercises. Snape actually found out about this in a backhand way since it was not school policy, just Amycus’s idea of detention.

“Do not be hasty,” cautioned the portrait of Dumbledore in the second week of January with the school humming again with students. “We are not talking about a large number of students. What is it now, three? And the students casting the curses . . . they are not hardened Death Eaters. Have you known one of these curses to cause even as much pain as . . . as dropping a copy of *A History of Magic* on your toes?”

“That can be pretty painful,” Snape answered.

“Yes, that is true . . . Did you really once drop *A History of Magic* . . .?”

“No,” said Snape. “Never. And McGonagall doesn’t agree with you about

the mildness of the spells. The fact that students are encouraged to curse other students is more than enough for her.”

“I recall she got considerable amusement from James Potter and Sirius Black cursing you.”

“Did she! The old witch! Not as pure as she makes out! I’m going to use that, sir. I mean it. I’m going to use that.”

“Just,” said Dumbledore, “don’t tell her you got the idea from me.”

And in the midst of the turmoil there was Hagrid. Three or four times a week, Snape crept out of the castle after curfew to sneak down to Hagrid’s hut for a cup of tea and a chat. He usually did most of the talking. Mostly against McGonagall.

“Doesn’t she understand it’s for their own protection? Does she want them held hostage for their families’ behavior? Does she want Arthur Weasley knuckling under to the Ministry because his Ginny’s locked up under the floor of the Malfoys’ dining room? Does she?”

“Probably not,” said Hagrid, pouring more tea. “Have ya put it to her like that?”

“I can’t. If I say anything and it comes back to me . . .”

Hagrid shrugged. “This thing Dumbledore wants ya t’ do, is it really that important? Is it important enough t’ wager yer soul on? ’Cause it seems t’ me that’s what y’re doin’.”

Snape thought about this for a moment, “Yes,” he said finally. “It’s that important.”

And then there was the long wait.

One of the great mysteries in all of this was the continued absence of the Dark Lord. Clearly he was off somewhere doing something that was vital to his closely held plans for success, but informed no one of his whereabouts or intentions. Even Bella had no idea where he was.

Equally mysterious was the continued lack of information about Potter, though here Snape was a little bit less in the dark than other people because of the continued reports of Phineas Nigellus. At least Snape knew of a certainty that Potter was with his friends, camping in a new spot every night, and lying low.

With the new year, however, others were not lying low. An underground resistance had sprung up all over wizarding Britain. It started with part-bloods, half-bloods, and purebloods giving shelter to fugitive muggle-borns. A clandestine radio station began giving reports of Ministry clampdowns and Death Eater attacks, and encouraging discontent. The hundreds of students

going home for the holidays in the middle of December, revealing what was happening at Hogwarts — the new classes, the corporal punishment, the outbursts of rebellion against the regime of Snape and the Ministry — had added fuel to the fire.

Now, as the new year advanced, Bella took more and more control, sending operatives out on missions to crush opposition, round up rebels, and shut down the broadcasts. There were weekly reports of attacks and deaths, and no one was willing or able to curb Bella and her department.

At the beginning of February, Snape was called into his laboratory at headquarters to make more potions for the infirmary and Operations. It took the better part of two weeks, and Snape was constantly apparating between Hogwarts and the lab.

"I thought you'd been promoted while we were away. Guess I was wrong."

Snape didn't turn at the sound of Macnair's voice in the doorway, but continued decanting a wound-knitting brew. "Only to fill the vacuum until you got back," he said quietly. "You know I could never replace you."

"No stomach for it, eh?" Macnair laughed. "Or maybe you just prefer to be in the other role."

"Right," Snape said sarcastically. "The light touch of your wand at the base of my skull was one of the high points of my existence."

Macnair crossed the room easily and stood, a head taller than Snape, watching over the potion master's shoulder as he stirred the now clear medicine and poured it into a large flask. "Admit it, Severus, it's moments like that that let you know you're really alive."

Snape wanted to step away; Macnair's presence made his skin crawl. And yet, the ghost of an idea had formed. Macnair had information. "Walden," he said, and felt rather than saw Macnair's smile at the use of his first name. "Why was the Dark Lord so angry that night? He knew I couldn't come right away. What happened before I got there?"

"The Potter brat got away. You know that."

"No, I mean the details. What happened?"

"He was already angry when he called us. He was furious that the only ones who could answer were the ones who turned their coats, renounced him, wiggled out of Azkaban. He Cruciated Avery. I thought he was going to do the same for me since I was even working for the Ministry. But what he really wanted to do was duel Potter."

"Duel, not kill?" Snape was certain now that Potter had given all of this

to Dumbledore, but that Dumbledore had kept it to himself. He also knew instinctively that a duel with wands must be connected to Lucius Malfoy's wand that the Dark Lord still carried, and with the old wand maker in the Malfoy cellar.

"Yeah. It was fun to watch at first, how he toyed with Potter. Forced him to bow. He was going to win, too, just playing with Potter before the kill, except something happened between the wands. The spells met in midair, and the wands couldn't separate, couldn't break away, and the Dark Lord's wand started giving up its spells."

Like McGonagall did with mine. Only this wasn't because of a spell. It has something to do with the wands. "So there was a duel and Potter won. He didn't just escape, he won."

Macnair stepped quickly back, distancing himself from Snape. "Don't say that, Severus. The whining little rat didn't win, he just ran. Running isn't winning."

"Of course not. I was being foolish for a moment. The boy ran. He didn't win." But it was not Potter's wand that had been forced to give up its secrets. Was that the reason the Dark Lord took no part in the fight in the Department of Mysteries until forced to in order to salvage Bella from the debacle? Why he didn't come through the vanishing cabinets himself to preside over the taking of Hogwarts? Why he took Malfoy's wand that night...? That night...

"Walden," Snape turned to face Macnair. "Did you follow the Dark Lord in July, that night we tried to take Potter?"

Macnair frowned, puzzled. "Not me. I followed the thestral. Selwyn was with him, though. Why?"

Snape shrugged. "All these potions for all these operations got me thinking, remembering. That was the only operation I've ever been on and I found it all very confusing. I'm still not sure what happened that night."

"That's what you get for not socializing. You should hang around with me more—you'd pick up all the news. The Dark Lord got Moody, then he went after Shackbolt. That's who I was after. Selwyn says they were following Hagrid when the Potter kid used a signature spell—he's too nice for his own good, that one, and they called the Dark Lord in for the kill. But something was wrong with Malfoy's wand, so the Dark Lord took Selwyn's and then they ran into a protective charm and Potter got away."

"Something wrong with Malfoy's wand? Isn't the Dark Lord still using it?"

“Who knows?” said Macnair. “Selwyn just said the Dark Lord was using Malfoy’s wand until Potter got off a crack backhand shot, and then the Dark Lord ask for his, Selwyn’s, to keep fighting with. Selwyn’s got his wand back, but Malfoy hasn’t.”

“It still sounds confusing,” said Snape, turning back to the counter and his potions work. “I think I’m not cut out for operations. I’ll stick to what I’m good at.”

Back at Hogwarts, Snape confronted Dumbledore’s portrait. “What else are you keeping me in the dark about?” he demanded, furious and letting it show.

“In the dark? Severus, whatever are you talking about?”

“You’ve known for two and a half years that the Dark Lord is concerned about the wand he uses to fight Potter with, and you haven’t mentioned it to me once!”

“Has this come up for some particular reason?” Dumbledore was peering over his glasses again, a mannerism Snape was beginning to find immensely irritating.

“Nobody knows where he is. He’s looking for something. Did you know he borrowed Lucius Malfoy’s wand the night Potter left his old home? At the time I thought he was just being mean to Malfoy, who still doesn’t have it back...”

“How would I know this, Severus, unless you told me? Who is keeping whom in the dark now?”

Snape stared at the portrait. “Oh, right,” he said after a moment. “Macnair tried to... well Macnair referred back to the night of the Dark Lord’s return and told me what happened when his wand met Potter’s. Nobody told me that before. Then I thought about his keeping out of Potter’s way when there was fighting, and kidnapping Ollivander—I’m sure now it was Ollivander we heard in the cellar the night we went after Potter, and he didn’t want to use his own wand to fight Potter, so he borrowed Malfoy’s except he didn’t say that was the reason, but he was perfectly willing to use his own on Scrimgeour. I thought he still had both wands, but Macnair says Potter was able to get off a backhand shot that made the Dark Lord take Selwyn’s wand and...”

Snape was perfectly aware that he sounded barely coherent, but the thoughts and images were connecting so rapidly in his brain, streaming in from all sides to form one suddenly clear picture, that for once he

could not control the words that tumbled from his mouth. The portrait of Dumbledore remained silent, listening.

“Sir,” Snape exclaimed, “could that be what the Dark Lord is doing? Looking for the right wand to fight Potter with?”

“It is very possible,” Dumbledore replied. “And I wish to point out to you that it was wise not to entirely rebuff Macnair’s advances. He has proven an excellent source of information.”

“But why does the Dark Lord have to look for a wand? He has Ollivander. Can’t Ollivander just make him a new one?”

“An excellent question,” said Dumbledore, though he made no attempt to answer it.

Both were silent for a while, and then Dumbledore asked, “Do you remember the fairy tales, Severus?”

The question was so far off the topic that Snape opened his mouth, had nothing to say, and closed his mouth again. After a moment, he said, “You mean like ‘Sleeping Beauty?’ ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?’ You know neither of my parents ever told me stories. I used to get sent to a neighbor’s house when my father wasn’t . . . feeling well. Mrs. Hanson told me a couple of stories. I always liked ‘The Steadfast Tin Soldier.’ I could see myself in that little paper boat, heading for the ocean.”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, “it does seem to fit you. Rather a sad tale for a little boy, though.”

“Really? I thought he was noble.” Snape realized then what he’d said, and reddened. Both he and Dumbledore allowed the subject of fairy tales to drop for the time being, though later Snape wondered if Dumbledore might have been referring to Beedle the Bard.

C H A P T E R S I X T Y - F O U R

THE END OF ALL THINGS

With Snape away so much of the time taking care of Bella's business, the Carrows began to flex their muscles at Hogwarts. Amycus's plans to use students on detention as targets for curse casting was hampered by the fact that the other teachers suddenly stopped giving out detentions, and so the numbers were kept very small. Other students began getting in the way of the curses, and secret meetings were held to plan strategies.

Neville Longbottom was turning into a ringleader. Dumbledore's question to Snape — If you were one of those students? — was also being answered in the affirmative by Longbottom, who had uncovered an important weakness in the position of the Ministry and the Carrows — there were very few truly pureblood families left. Truly pureblood students were precious, and not to be placed in serious danger. And if any family was purest of the pure, it was the Longbottoms.

Longbottom was immune. Not immune from punishment, but immune from serious physical danger. He therefore took it upon himself to deflect punishment away from others onto himself, and at the same time encourage defiance. He challenged authority and insulted the Carrows in their classrooms. He helped hide students who were in trouble, and Snape had no idea where he was putting them. He was, truth be told, acting quite heroically, though Snape could never say so to anyone but the portraits.

It was the meetings that threatened to bring down everything. Students who met in twos and threes, then regrouped in other sets of twos and threes, were one thing. When they started coalescing into groups of six, ten, and fifteen, it was a problem.

The problem centered on Slytherin house. Larger than the others, Slytherin was also the Death Eater house. The parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, siblings of the Slytherin students were the operatives that Snape was making

potions for in his laboratory. While opposition to Snape and the Ministry were covert, Slytherin was a minor problem. When it came out into the open, students began sending home owls with messages that the headmaster wasn't acting loyal enough.

Snape clamped down on the school again.

Then there was Hagrid. Snape, on his way to visit Hagrid the evening before Easter break began, was surprised when Hagrid met him halfway up the hill. "Tonight ain't a good night," Hagrid said. "I'm busy working on something."

Snape nodded and started to go back, when a burst of faint laughter erupted from the hut, then died away. "Hagrid," Snape asked, "why are there students in your hut?"

"Tain't nobody there, sir," Hagrid replied shiftily. "I'm just... eh... hatching golliwogs."

Snape found out about the golliwogs two days later when the first of the owls from irate Slytherin parents began coming in. It seemed that the story was the first thing out of the mouths of their sons and daughters as they stepped off the train.

"Support-Harry-Potter parties!" Snape screamed at Hagrid, waving the letters under his nose. "Do you want to go to Azkaban! Do you want me to go to Azkaban! I'm walking a bloody freaking tightrope here and you're holding Support-Harry-Potter parties!"

"I just wanted to give 'em a bit of a boost. Keep up their morale." Hagrid shifted uneasily in Snape's office, looking around at the slumbering portraits as if hoping for support.

"What about MY morale? I'm already being accused of lack of sufficient zeal in carrying out Ministry orders, and Bella Lestrage is breathing down my neck! Do you want Rabastan or Rodolphus in this office? Because you've been working at it pretty hard!"

"I'll stop 'em right away, Professor. No more parties."

But it was already too late. The next afternoon Snape got a Floo message from Law Enforcement at the Ministry. Headmaster Snape was requested to open the Hogwarts gates, as a special team was apparating into Hogsmeade to apprehend and arrest the dangerous dissident known as Rubeus Hagrid, who was also known to be on Hogwarts's grounds.

Snape stared at the fire. *What am I going to do? I can't let Hagrid be arrested, but if I warn him, they'll know it had to be me. It's so obvious. They tell me they're coming and Hagrid immediately runs. They'd arrest me on their way out.*

And yet, he couldn't let them take Hagrid. Not Hagrid. Sending Filch down to the gate, Snape walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the lake. He had a little time before Filch reached the gate, and a minute or so after that before the Ministry team would be able to see the hut. With a whisper and a prayer, he sent the delicate, beautiful little doe down to Hagrid, then reentered the castle. He had to be far away when events unfolded. He watched from a first floor window.

At first Snape wondered if Hagrid had even understood the message. The doe was unfamiliar to him, and there was no movement around the hut. Then Hagrid appeared in the rear, sending Fang into the Forbidden Forest. Snape breathed a sigh of relief. Hagrid was going to pretend he saw the arresting team coming.

The drama was short, but well-played. Hagrid walked out of the hut, reacted in surprise to the advancing team, seized a log and, roaring defiance, hurled it at them to make them scatter, then raced toward the forest. Once he was inside, they would never find him.

It was a terrible thing to know that Hagrid was gone, that now nothing remained except the cold company of the portraits. For three and a half months, only the silent sympathy of Hagrid had stood like a wall between Snape and crushing loneliness. Now that was gone. Snape locked himself in his office, the stillness of the nearly empty school like a tomb around him.

For hours he stood at the window, looking down at the lake. Supper time came and went, but Snape didn't notice. He wasn't hungry, and now there was no Hagrid to see that he ate anything. The sun set shortly before eight o'clock, and the long northern twilight stretched out, and finally Snape went up the short spiral staircase from his office to his bedroom and lay there, facing the wall.

After a while, Snape slept.

The voice that woke him in the small hours of the morning was shrill, desperate, and panic-stricken. "Snape!" it screamed. "Snape! For God's sake, Snape! Please, come! Please, answer me! Please, Snape!"

Snape scrambled off the bed and rushed down the stairs to the fireplace. The pale green light of Floo communication illuminated the office, and even before he saw the heavy-lidded eyes, now wide with terror, and the mass of dark hair, Snape knew that it was Bella calling him, and that something was horribly, horribly wrong.

Dropping to his knees before the remains of the fire, Snape spoke quickly. "It's me, Bella. I'm here. What's happened? Bella, are you all right?"

Instead of answering, she screamed. Snape watched in horror as her face twisted and writhed before his eyes, and he knew she was being tortured with a Cruciatus curse. Then it stopped, and with a sob, she spoke.

"This is what happens to all who displease the Dark Lord. He will crush the proud and the ambitious and all who presume to substitute their will for his or detain him on the path he has chosen."

"Lord," Snape gasped, himself now terrified, too, "tell me what you wish, and I will do it!"

Bella paused, listening for instructions on her side of the fire, then she looked Snape in the eyes. "Would you execute this miserable slave who has failed me?" she asked.

"Yes," Snape replied at once, and Bella closed her eyes in fear.

A moment later she was speaking again. "Here are your instructions. The Dark Lord goes now to the gates of Hogwarts. You will let him in. You will speak no word, and you will cast no spell. You will return to the castle and await the Dark Lord's coming. The Dark Lord's business is not yours." Bella opened her eyes again. "He is on his way. Go now, Severus, quickly. Do not make him angrier than he is."

Snape was on his feet at once, racing for the door, the stairs, pausing only to grab a lantern in the entrance hall and then heading out onto the lawn. The quarter moon had set three hours earlier; the sun was not even a faint promise on the horizon. Snape had to slow his speed for fear of missing his step in the wavering light from the lantern, and it bobbed up and down in his hands as he moved down the hill toward the gate, his heart fluttering like a caged bird in his chest.

The Dark Lord was back, back and raging in anger. He'd tortured Bella . . . Bella and who else? And for what offense? And his first stop was Hogwarts. Why? Why?

Snape forced himself to act calmly, for the Dark Lord already stood cloaked at the gates. He fumbled a little as he opened them, and bowed the Dark Lord in, locking the gates again afterwards. The Dark Lord did not speak, and Snape, too, was silent as they moved along the path into the grounds. Then, where the path divided, one side up the hill to the castle, and the other around toward the lake, the Dark Lord turned the slits of his crimson eyes on his servant.

"We shall join you in the castle shortly. Leave us now." His voice was high and cold, and full of menace.

Snape bowed and walked up the hill, not once glancing back. The Dark

Lord's business was not his business, and he still did not know if Bella's crime included some action of his own. He reached the great oak doors and stepped into the entrance hall. There he waited.

Minutes passed, a quarter of an hour, and then the Dark Lord glided into the entrance hall, and Snape once again bowed. "Your office," the Dark Lord said, and the two climbed the long staircases to the seventh floor and the gargyle staircase.

Once inside, the Dark Lord looked around. "It is unchanged," he said, seating himself behind the headmaster's desk, "except for the new portrait of an old fool."

Not sure how to respond, Snape asked, "Does my Lord wish refreshment?"

The Dark Lord chuckled, and it might have been the pleasure of an event remembered, or anticipation of pleasure soon to come, still no clue to what Snape might face in the next hour. "Yes, Headmaster, we are pleased to accept refreshment. This night, that started in disappointment and anger, will end in victory and the destruction of those who oppose our will. You may pour us a glass of mead, and then you will stand before us and answer our questions."

Snape waited, as the Dark Lord sipped the mead in lingering appreciation, and watched his nervous servant. Finally tipping back his head, as if sniffing with his slits of nostrils, the Dark Lord said, "Tell us who among our servants is loyal."

Quicksand . . . gaping pits . . . an open mine field . . . "Lord, forgive me if in ignorance I displease you, but I know of no disloyal servants. All who . . ."

The Dark Lord raised his hand, and Snape stopped. "Wormtail is dead," the Dark Lord said with a sneer.

Snape said nothing.

"Does this news please or displease you?" the Dark Lord asked.

"I don't know, Lord," Snape answered. "If he died for transgressions against you, then I'm pleased. If he died in your service, I'm not pleased."

"He failed us," the Dark Lord said, "and his punishment was deserved."

"Then I am pleased," responded Snape. His defenses were going up, and his feelings were locking down.

"Bella, too, has failed us. This very night she called us, summoned us from our task to give to us the person of Harry Potter, but allowed Potter to slip through her fingers before we arrived. Summoned us in order to present us with failure. Not only that, but she has lost our other prisoner, too. She has lost us Ollivander. It matters not. He was of no further use to us, for we

have progressed far beyond his poor knowledge, but the failure to guard was a grievous fault in Bella.”

The pause seemed to await an answer. “Then she deserved her punishment, Lord,” Snape said.

“And now, Severus, we will discuss your failure.”

Snape slipped instantly to his knees, his heart in his throat. “Lord,” he gasped, fighting to control his voice, “punish me for my failure, but I beg you also to enlighten my ignorance, for I do not know wherein I have failed.”

The Dark Lord chuckled again. “You amuse us, Severus. So different from Bella. She tries to push blame and punishment onto others. You cry, ‘punish me, punish me.’ Yet which of the two is more successful at avoiding punishment? Still, we must be fair to Bella, who at least did have the person of Harry Potter in her possession when she called us, whatever may have happened after that. What have you done to secure the person of Potter?”

Not waiting for an answer, the Dark Lord pointed his wand at Snape and said lazily, “*Crucio*.” Snape doubled over in pain and lay on the floor, clutching at the carpet. Yet he had endured far worse, and this was a mere game. Still, it did not do to spoil the Dark Lord’s pleasure by self-indulgent courage and endurance. He cried, and kicked, and whimpered in agony until the pain abated.

“Stand up,” said the Dark Lord, and Snape struggled to his feet, trembling. “Is the old fool of assistance to you in your labor here?”

Snape didn’t look at the sleeping portrait. “They are only shadows of the people they represent. They can be amusing, but they’re not as much help as their reputation would have us believe.”

“Require it to speak to us.”

“Headmaster Dumbledore,” said Snape formally. “I want to talk to you.”

The portrait coughed, and blinked, and looked around as if befuddled. “I beg your pardon,” it said, “I seem to have been dozing. How may I be of service?”

Snape looked at the Dark Lord, who merely nodded to him. “Dumbledore,” Snape said, “we have a guest.”

The portrait looked down. “Goodness me, it is Tom Riddle. You will not know this, Headmaster, but Riddle here was one of the best, most successful students Hogwarts has ever known. Why I remember back in forty-three when he was first made a prefect . . .”

“Thank you, Dumbledore,” said Snape. “Do you have the information I requested about the Astronomy class?”

"Yes, ahem. Hogwarts acquired its first telescopes in 1732. About 1860, we suffered a severe setback when Headmaster Burke mistakenly replaced them with prism binoculars under the impression they would see twice as far. I remember as a much younger teacher running across..."

The Dark Lord laughed. "An old fool indeed. You will see us out, Severus."

Snape returned to the office fifteen minutes later. He was still trembling. "I still don't know what I did to make him angry," he confessed to Dumbledore.

"You did not make him angry, Severus. He wanted an excuse to try out the wand, and I commend your acting ability. You were a bit preoccupied so you probably did not notice, but the wand he used to torment you with was mine."

* * *

"Where are they?" Snape demanded of Nigellus for about the hundredth time. "Something must be happening!"

"Albus," Nigellus said, pointedly bypassing Snape, "would you remind this importunate young man that I have told him repeatedly..."

"Phineas has told you repeatedly, Severus, that Miss Granger has not opened her bag in many days, and it has been a few weeks since she took the tent out. Since before they ran into Bella, in fact. We must only assume that they are staying with someone who is protected, probably by a Fidelius Charm. It could be anybody."

"Meanwhile, he gets stronger. Now that he's in Britain and has a new wand, he's getting stronger. And nobody knows where Potter is."

"I am certain someone knows, just not you. Now, Severus, if we could go over..."

"Why? We've done it so many times."

"Because you are the one who has to do it. You are the one who has to convince Harry that you really do work for me and that what you have to tell him is significant, of the utmost importance, in fact. Riddle's having the wand will play into our hands."

"How?"

"It will make him confident of success, and remove the last barrier to action."

Snape sighed and began to recite. "I tell Potter that you and he spent all last school year discussing Horcruxes. Horcruxes are items that contain a fragment of soul. Their function is to tie the soul to earth so that the person cannot be killed, as the Dark Lord was not killed by the ricocheting of his killing curse. I tell Potter that you showed him pensieve memories of the Dark Lord's acquiring of the Horcruxes. One commemorates his shrewdness as a student and the fact that he was Slytherin's heir — the diary that was already destroyed. Another commemorates the blood lineage of the Peverells, the one that somebody was stupid enough to try wearing — the ring of Marvolo Gaunt which has also been destroyed. Then there was something from each of the Founders — Slytherin's locket — destroyed, Hufflepuff's cup — not located yet, something of Ravenclaw's, but we don't know what it is..."

"Well that might also be Gryffindor's, Severus."

"I don't think so. I think it's Ravenclaw's."

"I would appreciate it if you would explain your logic."

"You told me that Potter is an unintentional Horcrux because the Killing Curse blasted away a fragment of the Dark Lord's soul and it attached itself to the only living soul left in the building — the child. But Horcruxes aren't usually living things. They're usually objects. Why couldn't that fragment attach itself to a chair, or a sliver of wood? I think it's because the Dark Lord intended to make a Horcrux of something belonging to Gryffindor, and a Gryffindor student belongs to Gryffindor, right?"

"Severus, I do not want to break this to you too harshly, but Harry was one year old. He was not yet a Gryffindor student."

"But his father was Gryffindor, and his mother was Gryffindor, and it was a foregone conclusion that he would be..."

"The Hat wanted to sort him into Slytherin, but he asked it not to."

Snape stared at Dumbledore in disbelief tinged with sarcasm. "I'll never believe that," he said at last.

"I fear you must. The Hat confirmed it to me."

"No. The Hat was fooled by the fragment of the Dark Lord's soul. That's the only reason it thought about Slytherin. That boy is no more a Slytherin than I am..."

"A Gryffindor? But if courage is the mark of Gryffindor, Severus, you really should..."

Snape slammed his hand down on the desk. "You keep this up, and I'm going to go into the lavatory and be sick to my stomach!"

"Shall we get back to the original topic, Severus? We have strayed somewhat."

"The point is, that when the Dark Lord realizes that the Horcruxes are in danger, he's going to become very protective of the snake. That's when things have to happen in the right order, and Potter has to know about it. The rest of the Horcruxes have to be destroyed, including the snake, and then Potter has to let the Dark Lord destroy him. After that, the Dark Lord can be killed. For the last two years the Dark Lord hasn't wanted to duel Potter because of what happened to his wand, but now he has a wand that gives him confidence that he'll win the duel, so he won't hesitate to kill Potter. He won't be expecting Potter to just let him do it — and that's what I have to get Potter to believe."

"Perfect, Severus. You always were a quick study."

"Yes, but I'm making book right now that Potter will kill me before I get to that part. And then where will we be?"

All through April the situation deteriorated. Bella and the Malfoys were under house arrest, and the Carrows became terrified that they weren't showing sufficient enthusiasm for their job. Their intimidation tactics against the students expanded to include incarceration and torture. Neville Longbottom disappeared, but from the reaction of the Carrows it had nothing to do with them. Other students began disappearing as well, and when Snape tried to rein the Carrows in, they threatened him.

"Can't you get it through your head, you fool," Amycus yelled at Snape in the headmaster's office, "that Potter got into the Malfoy mansion and helped prisoners escape! These little rats in this school will do anything to help him. We have to break them! crush the life out of them! or we'll end up like Bella and Lucius! Do you want to be screaming on the floor while he Cruciates you!"

"I thought I was here to protect Hogwarts!" Snape in his turn yelled at the portrait of Dumbledore. "To protect the students! How am I supposed to do that if I can't even control Amycus Carrow!"

"Easy, Severus. Easy. Your primary function is to make sure that Harry knows what he has to do when he meets Riddle. Everything else, yes including the temporary welfare of the students, is secondary. Riddle loved Hogwarts as much as he can be said to have loved anything, and I am sure one of the items is here. It may all come down to here, and here you must remain, even if sacrifices are made."

Snape was now sleepless most nights, rolling everything over and over

in his head, trying to find an answer that would lead to success without at the same time destroying everything else. It was at this point that he became convinced that he was going to die.

A pig raised for slaughter. Dumbledore's known for years that Potter has to die; has he known about me equally long and with equal certainty? And what a death for Potter, the little hero, the pinup boy of half-wizarding Britain. To be able to stand there and know — know — this is the moment of victory. This is the moment the Dark Lord falls. And then a painless Killing Curse. And my death? Tortured in a cellar? Killed by someone I used to think was a friend in the middle of a fight? And not one person will know. Not one will mourn me. The nights filled with those thoughts were very bitter.

Worse, if anything could possibly be worse, was that more and more he was beginning to distrust Dumbledore. *On the Astronomy tower, I did what he asked me to because I believed him. I trusted him that it was the right thing. But does he, in fact, want the right thing? Some of the things in that biography make him sound as bad as the Dark Lord. What if telling Potter to allow himself to be killed is the wrong thing, and only makes the Dark Lord stronger? Am I so sure that Dumbledore is right?*

A memory surfaced then, as disturbing as any thought Snape had ever harbored. It was the memory of the night that Dumbledore had told him that Potter himself was a Horcrux, that Potter had to die. They were sitting there in Dumbledore's office and . . . Dumbledore closed his eyes! Snape sat up in bed. He focused his thoughts and brought the image back. It couldn't be right. He hurried down into the office, though it was two in the morning, and opened the cabinet where Dumbledore kept his pensieve.

"What are you doing, Severus?" the portrait said, but Snape ignored it. Placing his wand to his temple, he pulled out a thin filament of thought and let it swirl in the bowl. He gazed at it for a long time. He had not been mistaken. All during the time that Dumbledore was talking about Potter being a Horcrux and having to be killed by the Dark Lord — his eyes had been closed.

Snape looked up at the portrait in horror. He was shaking like a leaf, and his breathing was shallow and fast. *He didn't want me to read him. He didn't want me to see the thoughts behind the words. Because the words were lies. I'm supposed to tell Potter what to do, and I'll be telling him lies.*

The portrait continued to question, "Severus, what is wrong? What is upsetting you?" but Snape wouldn't answer. Carefully replacing the thought into his head, he put the pensieve back in its cabinet and went up to his

bedroom. For three days he spoke to no one, no person, no portrait, and was utterly, utterly alone.

In the clear light of day, Snape could see that he was overreacting. There was no doubt that the Dark Lord was evil, and must be destroyed. There was no doubt that Dumbledore and the Dark Lord were enemies. There was no reason for Dumbledore to lie to him about the manner in which the Dark Lord had to be destroyed. But then why be so careful to shut him out? Why shield his thoughts?

In the clear light of day, Snape believed, but in the cold dark watches of the night, doubt and fear filled his soul, and Snape thought of all he'd been asked to do, and had done, for the man he'd once trusted so completely — of the murders of Dumbledore, Moody, Burbage, and Scrimgeour, of the students he could not help and the boy he would lead by the nose to his death, and Snape knew himself lost. Lost and damned. And he hated Dumbledore for what he had become. And he stopped eating altogether.

Then, at the beginning of May, the portrait of Nigellus brought news. "They took out the bottle of Polyjuice potion. Today. They're doing something today."

What that something was, neither Snape nor the portraits knew, and they could only watch and wait, and hope for the best.

That night, all hell broke loose.

It started at dinner, so Snape, who no longer sat in the Great Hall at mealtime, didn't hear it. What he heard was a nearly hysterical Alecto Carrow screaming at the gargoyle, "Let me in! Let me in, do you hear me! Snape! Snape!" He admitted her at once, and she crashed into his office in panic.

"Something's happened," Alecto shrieked. "Something terrible's happened! The kids are yelling it all over the Hall. Amycus shut up the Boot rat, but now the others are . . . They say Potter robbed Gringotts today!"

"Robbed Gringotts? Nobody robs Gringotts! Calm down Alecto. Tell me everything you heard."

"This little rat, Boot, comes running into the Hall just as dinner's started waving a piece of paper and yelling about Potter. He says Potter's robbed Gringotts Bank and that he and his friends got away on a dragon . . . and then Amycus got to Boot and slapped him silly, but now they're all yelling . . ."

"Shut up!" Snape yelled at her. "I don't care how many people are yelling! They were down where the dragon is?"

Alecto nodded, Snape's more focused fear affecting her now, too. "They unchained a dragon and rode it out of the bank."

"I saw that dragon in September," Snape said, feeling the adrenaline pour into his system. "That's where Bella Lestranger's vault is. That's where Gryffindor's sword is." *But Potter wouldn't be after the fake sword because he has the real one. And Bella's been known to keep things for the Dark Lord before...*

Snape wheeled and grabbed Floo powder. "Headquarters!" he cried, "Infirmary!" and looked around for any of the healers. "This is Hogwarts school!" Snape called, aware that his voice was unusually loud. "Shane! Nugent! Is anyone there?"

A healer's face appeared in the flames. "Hogwarts," he said, "watch your back. He got bad news a few minutes ago. They're sending in the bodies now."

"Bodies? What bodies?" Snape called back. "What's happened?"

"Haven't you heard about Gringotts? They stole something of the Dark Lord's. He killed the goblin who brought the news, then started killing everyone in the room he could reach. They've already brought in Barrows and Quinley. Most of the dead were lower echelon. I have to go. There may be wounded as well."

Snape closed the connection and stared in shock at Alecto. A second later he was paying no attention to Alecto, for the Dark Lord was on the Floo network and asking for him, coldly and insistently. "I'm here, Lord," Snape stammered.

"Good. One at least is at his post. You must be alert this night. Potter will try to enter Hogwarts. He must be stopped. He must not be killed, but he must be stopped. He will go to Ravenclaw tower. Wait for him. Notify me when you have him."

"Yes, Lord," said Snape, but the Dark Lord was already gone.

Quickly Snape hurried down to the Great Hall. "Heads of houses!" he bellowed above the noise, and there was a lull. "Students will proceed at once to their houses. Prefects, see to it that there are no stragglers. Heads, I want a roll call and a report on anyone missing. If students didn't get a chance to eat, send up food from the kitchens. When all students are accounted for, I want all staff back here. Go! Now!" The fury, the urgency, radiating from his thin body was intimidating. Only McGonagall stood up to him.

"Ye'll not be punishing the whole school for a wee bit of gossip!"

Snape whirled on her, "Professor, you know nothing of what's happening. Do as I say, and do it now!"

"Ye'll not talk to me like that!"

"Woman! Look to your house!"

McGonagall paled, but held herself with great dignity and shepherded Gryffindor house from the Hall.

Snape waited until the teachers, with the Heads of houses, had reassembled. As the time passed, he began to calm down. The students were protected — it was the first, the most important concern, regardless of what Dumbledore thought. The next important thing was that Potter, Harry Potter, might be coming to Hogwarts, perhaps that very night. Snape's two masters both wanted him to meet Potter, the Dark Lord to take him prisoner, and Dumbledore to give him instructions. And if Dumbledore was right, both masters would get their wish. Snape longed to know how much of his mission Potter had already accomplished, but that might not ever be his to know. Now he could only do what was set before him to do.

It had been Snape's first intention to patrol the corridors and stop Potter. Now, on reflection, he did not want to do that. To the staff he said, "There is potential for trouble tonight. Students must stay in their houses. Teachers will walk their normal patrols. If anything unusual occurs, notify me at once. Professor Flitwick, it will be necessary for Professor Carrow" — he indicated Alecko — "to spend the night in Ravenclaw tower. You will admit her." He did not explain.

Then came the tense calm of waiting. Snape talked to the portraits for over an hour.

"Did he say anything about the snake, Severus. Has he started protecting Nagini?" It was not the first time the question had been asked.

"I don't know. It was short and concise. He would never tell me something like that anyway."

"It is vital that all the Horcruxes, Nagini included, be destroyed first. If that doesn't happen, all is in vain."

Snape looked at the portrait and sighed. "Did you tell him the snake was a Horcrux?"

"Yes, well that I thought it might be. Harry listens quite well."

"To you he listens. He's never listened to me. What if he won't listen, or won't believe. My telling him could cause him to do the opposite." *Was that why you closed your eyes, Dumbledore, because you want him to do the opposite and do not want me to know?*

"I wonder," said Dumbledore, "if Harry knows he is looking for something of Ravenclaw's."

"If he doesn't, I can tell him. I can at least tell him that the Dark Lord expects him to go to Ravenclaw tower and plans to capture him there."

"If Harry can get in, destroy the Ravenclaw Horcrux, and get out without being discovered," said Dumbledore, "it will be a good thing. We will have time to plan our next move."

Snape jumped then, shock adding to the violence of his reaction, and stared down at his left arm. "She's called him," he gasped. "Alecto's called the Dark Lord. She has Potter. How did he..." He was on his feet at once, heading down the spiral stairs.

"Severus," Dumbledore called after him, "Severus, good luck," but by that time Snape was too far down the steps to hear.

He walked, as McGonagall had noted so many years ago, as quietly as a cat. There was nothing in the corridor near the gargoyle, but then Alecto was in Ravenclaw tower, so Snape made his way through the seventh floor corridors and was stopped by the sound of voices. He slid into shadow.

Amycus was talking. "Go and get Flitwick! Get him to open it now!"

"But isn't your sister in there?" came McGonagall's voice. *Drat!* thought Snape. *Trust her to be prowling around trying to find out what Alecto's doing.*

Snape listened to the two argue, then McGonagall agreed to open Ravenclaw door. Amycus's howl of shock and anger reverberated through the floor. "What've they done, the little whelps? What's the Dark Lord going to say? She's gone and sent for him, and we haven't got him!"

McGonagall's voice came again, calm but somewhat exasperated. "She'll be perfectly all right."

"Not after the Dark Lord gets hold of her! He thinks we've got Potter!"

"Got Potter?" Enlightenment swelled in McGonagall's voice.

"We was told he might come in here. We can push it off on the kids, say Alecto was ambushed..."

McGonagall was on her high horse again, talking of truth and lies, of courage and cowardice... "You are not going to pass off your many ineptitudes on the students of Hogwarts. I shall not permit it."

"It's not a case of what you'll permit. It's us what's in charge now."

Snape could not see what was happening, but what he heard next sent a tremor through him.

"You shouldn't have done that," and the voice was Harry Potter's. It was followed immediately by the shout, "*Crucio!*" and the sound of a falling body.

Snape waited for McGonagall's explosion of righteous anger, but the ensuing exchange made it clear she only objected to Unforgivable Curses when they were cast by people she didn't like. She had no problem if it was Harry Potter. *And I'll make sure she never forgets it,* Snape thought.

There was quieter talking, harder to hear, but Potter mentioned the Diadem of Ravenclaw. That was the Horcrux, but it was equally clear that Potter did not know where it was. Then McGonagall was talking about barricading the school against the Dark Lord while Potter searched for the Diadem.

No, thought Snape. That puts everyone in danger. You have no idea of the forces he can move against the school. And what of the children? You may think it anathema to kill an eleven-year-old, but he wouldn't bat an eyelash.

They were coming. Snape saw only McGonagall, who conjured three patronus cats to summon the other Heads, but he was sure Potter was under the Invisibility Cloak. He followed softly behind them until McGonagall heard his steps, turned, and said, "Who's there?"

McGonagall's wand was up, pointed chest high at her unseen opponent. Snape let his own slip from sleeve to hand, ready to use it if necessary, but still relaxed, pointed at the floor. He took a deep breath and stepped around a suit of armor that blocked her view.

"It is I," Snape said, but he wasn't paying as much attention to her as he was to the air around her. Potter was here. The primary reason for Snape's being at Hogwarts was standing in this corridor, and Snape couldn't see him because of the hated Invisibility Cloak. He couldn't speak to him either, or both Potter and McGonagall would know he was looking for Potter, and the way things stood now, that would guarantee her keeping Potter away from him. She had that fierce air of a lioness protecting her cubs. Snape stalled.

"Where are the Carrows?" His voice was calm, as if this were a perfectly normal situation, standing there with her wand pointed at his heart.

"Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus."

Slowly, not wanting to provoke a reaction, Snape eased forward, trying to identify the spot where something magic didn't block his view. He kept talking, distracting, "I was under the impression that Alecto had apprehended an intruder." I came because of that, not because I'm spying on you.

"Really? And what gave you that impression?"

The tingle from Alecto's call was still there, and Snape moved his left arm as an answer to McGonagall's question.

"Oh, but naturally. You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication. I forgot." There was scorn in her voice, and Snape registered that this was the first time she'd ever flatly called him a Death Eater. It was a wall between them when he needed a bridge. The air vibrated with the unseen presence of Potter.

Snape changed the subject. "I did not know that it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva."

"You have some objection?"

"I wonder what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour?"

"I heard a disturbance."

It was good. She was defending her actions. He might yet talk the situation down to a lesser confrontation. "Really? But all seems calm."

And then, maybe because they were standing so close, and he needed the information so desperately, maybe because this might be the only chance he ever got, Snape made a fatal mistake. He looked into McGonagall's eyes and made a suggestion, hoping to see her response before she was aware of what he was doing. Ready now to take the chance of explaining to her, because Dumbledore required it, and he was running out of time. The Dark Lord was already on his way.

"Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist..."

The lioness attacked, and the only thing that saved Snape was that he saw the Stunning spell in her eyes before it reached her wand. He staggered back, his Shield Charm a reflex so automatic after all these years that he was hardly aware he'd cast it.

Snape didn't want to hurt her, but McGonagall had no such qualms about hurting him. She lashed out with a rope of fire that he transformed into a cool snake to avoid being burned. The snake dissolved and reformed into daggers and Snape, horrified now by the realization that McGonagall was actually trying to kill him, knowing himself outmatched in a battle of transfiguration, flung the suit of armor between them and let it absorb the force of the knives.

There was a clatter of feet on stone, and the three Heads of house that McGonagall had summoned rushed onto the scene. "Minerva! No!" Flitwick screamed, and Snape crouched behind the armor, making no attempt to use his wand, hoping Flitwick would reason with McGonagall. But that was not Flitwick's intent. As Flitwick yelled, "You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts," the armor came suddenly to life, throwing its heavy arms around Snape and squeezing the breath from his body. Frantic now, he flung it from him against an empty wall, dove for the floor to avoid the deadly spells shot at him by people who had once been his colleagues — his friends — scrambled to his feet, and ran.

There was an open classroom door, and Snape lunged for it, intending to

seal the door behind him, but McGonagall and the others were too close. His task remained unaccomplished, and Snape was cornered. If they took him now, they might kill him. At the very least, he would never be allowed to speak to Potter. He saw one way out and, forgetting he was on the fifth floor, took it. Spells streaking past him, he leapt for the outer wall of the room, twisting to hit the leaded casements with his right shoulder. His body curled for the impact, arms wrapping his head, Snape crashed through the window in a shower of shattered glass and broken lead, then plunged a hundred and fifty feet to the ground below.

Suddenly, miraculously, the fall slowed, and Snape was drawn, pulled, summoned toward the gate and Hogsmeade. Powerful wizards cast powerful charms, and it does not do to allow a servant to fall to his death before you have the chance to extract information from him. The Dark Lord had arrived at Hogwarts.

* * *

Snape knelt, trembling, in the common room of the Three Broomsticks where the Dark Lord had temporary headquarters. Death Eaters were apparating in from all corners of Britain. Bella and Lucius were there — and Macnair, too, who had been given the privilege of reminding Snape of the consequences of abandoning his post. Now, waiting for the first of the Dark Lord's questions, Snape was unable to straighten his doubled-up body for the pain that cramped his stomach.

"We were summoned here," said the Dark Lord, and even in his torment, Snape noted the great snake that curled beside him.

"Alecto Carrow, Lord," Snape gasped. "She was stationed in Ravenclaw tower according to your will, and caught Potter as he entered, but was attacked by other students."

"So he is there."

"Yes, Lord."

"You have seen him?"

"No, Lord." Snape hurried his answer forward, to get past the renewed pain. "He wears an Invisibility Cloak, but I heard him speak and recognized his voice."

"Why has he come?"

"He seeks something of Ravenclaw's. He doesn't know where it is."

The Dark Lord smiled, a cruel smile. "He will never find it. Take us into the castle, and we shall dispose of the 'Chosen One.'"

"Lord," Snape said, "they are already fortifying the castle against you. Amycus Carrow told McGonagall that you had been summoned. They are prepared for an attack."

This was not welcome news, and Snape collapsed as the Cruciatus curse hit him. When he was released, his brain was racing. For now, finally, all actions converged on the same consequences, and now, finally, there was a semblance of choice. Casting the fears and doubts of the last few months aside, Snape chose Dumbledore. *How do I manage to contact Potter? How can I find a way to let him know? I can't go back in, but Potter can come out.*

"Lord," he said, "Potter has never been able to let others suffer for him. He can be persuaded." *And I'll be there. I'll find some way to tell him and some way to get him back into the castle. I will. I'll think of something.*

"Yes," said the Dark Lord. He turned to his lieutenants. "Bring reinforcements. Everyone we can pull in. Our large friends from the north, the evil things of the forest. Everything that can break down the defenses and force Potter to be noble. Inform me when it is done."

The snake draped itself around the Dark Lord's shoulders and he left, going, as everyone knew, to gaze at the castle through the ironwork of the great gate. Snape remained kneeling in the circle of Death Eaters, for he'd not been given permission to stand. It was Bella who dragged him to his feet.

"You're on probation, puppy dog. Mr. I-stayed-at-my-post-through-thick-and-thin finally turned tail and cleared out as fast as he could go. But answer one question . . ." Bella's voice surprisingly held just a tiny note of admiration. "Whatever possessed you to jump out that window?"

"I don't know," Snape admitted. "At the time it seemed like the logical thing to do."

"You'd better get out there and dance for him. He's going to have questions."

Snape went out to the gate and stopped a respectful distance away. There he remained as the forces gathered, a roar far to the left indicating that there was even at least one giant. When the Dark Lord moved, Snape moved. When the Dark Lord stood, Snape stood. He was a shadow, a shackled slave, a dog on a leash, constrained to stay at his master's side in case he might be wanted.

At eleven o'clock, the Dark Lord was ready. His voice, when he spoke, was amplified, magnified, projecting everywhere and through everything so that Snape, standing so close, clapped his hands over his ears.

"I know that you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have until midnight."

An hour, Snape thought. An hour to find a way to leave the Dark Lord's side. An hour to figure out which exit Potter will use. An hour to pass on Dumbledore's message.

He didn't get the hour for, all that time, Snape remained tethered to the Dark Lord, desperate and anxious as the minutes ticked by and Dumbledore's task slipped through his fingers. But in the end he needn't have worried. For once, Harry Potter chose not to behave like an idiot Gryffindor. Potter did not come walking out of the castle, and the Dark Lord ordered the attack to begin.

Spells shot from the perimeter to shatter against the defenses of Hogwarts, and simultaneously Snape's very being was pierced by a scream, a wild, keening wail of rage and frustration. Snape dropped, shattered by the sound, then realized as he lay on the ground that it had come from the Dark Lord.

Hope leapt up and burned fiercely, for Snape knew at once what had happened. A Horcrux had just been destroyed and now, so close and so sensitive to his danger, the Dark Lord had felt it and recognized it. *How many left?* Snape thought. *Was that the fourth or the fifth? Was Dumbledore right? He was right! This is really going to happen!* He looked around. The Dark Lord was gone. He'd retreated into the night, and Snape was free, free to join the other Death Eaters and try to find a way into the castle.

All of McGonagall's and Flitwick's skill was no match for the Death Eaters. Protective spells were crumbling like ancient masonry, curses and hexes shooting into the castle through broken windows and cracked stone. Snape aimed his wand at the castle, too, striking out with nonverbal blasts of red and green light, sparks and blue flame, his spells doing surprisingly little damage, for in the confusion of battle, who would notice if the bolt of red was a stupefying spell or a charm to clean away mold?

The defenders did damage, too, and around Snape the explosions, bursts of roaring flame, crack of sundered trees, and the cries and screams of wounded Death Eaters was deafening. Eruptions of explosions lit up scenes out of a nightmare as a hooded figure staggered by clutching blackened

hands to its hidden face, and another tried to staunch the flow of blood where an arm had once been.

And through it all, Snape was driven by one thought — Get into the castle. Get into the castle, find Potter, and give him Dumbledore's message.

They breached the doors and poured into the entrance hall. Far above Snape's head the giants battered the walls with enormous stones, huge spiders scurried by, and Snape elbowed his way through the press, shoving others aside, parrying blows, looking, always looking, for Potter.

Then he shuddered as the distant echo, faint and almost missed, of the Dark Lord's wail of fury lanced through him. No one else seemed to have noticed. *Because it was so faint. Because they don't know what it means. Do I know what it means, or did I imagine it?* The thought that another Horcrux was gone blazed through him.

The world was shattered suddenly by an explosion of such force that the fighters in the entrance hall were knocked to the ground, great stones shook loose from the ceiling and walls and fell to crush those beneath. Dust from masonry and plaster rose in a billowing cloud, and Snape struggled back to his feet coughing and wheezing.

They were making no headway in the entrance hall. The defenders were shooting from doorways, behind pillars, shielded by the sweep of the great marble staircase, and the attackers were unprotected on the wide, open floor. Snape dodged spells and tripped over bodies, trying to find a way upstairs. A way to locate Potter.

Someone grabbed his arm and he spun, wand at the ready, to find himself facing Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy's mouth was moving, but in the din of battle Snape couldn't hear what he had to say. Malfoy leaned closer, his mouth next to Snape's ear. "He wants you!" Malfoy cried. "He wants you now. Go, please. He's in the Shrieking Shack."

Snape shook his head and tried to break away, pretending he hadn't understood, but Malfoy wouldn't let him go. "Severus, for God's sake, he's asking for you! Go to him! Go now!"

It was over. That bid to accomplish his task was over. Snape followed Malfoy out of the castle and began threading his way through the dead, the wounded, the still-arriving reinforcements that crowded on the lawn. He looked up at the castle and saw that part of one wall had been blasted away entirely — the effect, probably, of the Dark Lord's rage.

The snake, Snape thought as he hurried down the hill, leaving Malfoy behind. *If that was his anger at the destruction of the fifth Horcrux, then only the*

snake remains. I can't kill the snake. I have to give Potter his instructions, and I can't do that if he destroys me for killing the snake. Please let me have another chance to talk to Potter. Please...

Snape made his way through the deserted streets of Hogsmeade. The Shack was oddly quiet, an island of calm after the storm of battle. Its enchantments had been removed, allowing Snape to walk to the door, lift the latch, and enter. The Dark Lord was in the room on the ground floor, the one where Snape and James Potter had managed to escape the werewolf Lupin.

"Severus," the Dark Lord said as Snape entered. "Has Hogwarts fallen?"

"No, Lord," Snape said, bowing. "When you summoned me, we had taken the doors and were inside. The entrance hall will soon be in our hands, and we'll be able to isolate pockets of them and defeat them piecemeal. I greatly desire to give you this victory, my Lord, if you will permit me to return to the battle."

"I think not, Severus. It is something else we need you for now."

Snape was shutting down, locking and sealing the doors of his mind. *I can't let him see how much I need to go back, to find Potter. I can't let him suspect.*

"Lord..." Snape paused, not wanting his desire to be too strong, too suspicious. "I can still help in this battle. I am a good fighter. I wish to see your will accomplished in this, my Lord. Their resistance is crumbling..."

"... and it is doing so without your help. Skilled wizard though you are, Severus," and something in the cold, high voice turned Snape's veins to ice, "I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there... almost." The Dark Lord was not, Snape realized, talking about the battle. He noticed the snake, wrapped in a protective bubble, like a cage. He was slowly filling with a deep, nameless dread.

Potter. I have to tell Potter. It's the only thing left that matters. "Let me find the boy," Snape tried to keep his voice low and calm, not to let the Dark Lord hear his fear. "Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please."

The Dark Lord rose from the table where he had been sitting. He was fingering a wand. Dumbledore's wand. Pieces began to click into place in Snape's head. The Dark Lord's voice was gentle. Gentle and dangerous. "I have a problem, Severus."

"My Lord?" Snape said. He looked at the wand and thought of Dumbledore, eyes closed, telling a story that Snape had to believe because Harry had to believe, eyes closed to conceal the part that Harry couldn't know.

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"

Snape's face was a blank, his mind closed tightly now to block the anger that sprang up inside him. "My Lord," he said, "I do not understand. You . . . have performed extraordinary things with that wand." The anger was building. Anger against Dumbledore. *You knew. You knew it would come to this, this last step needed to give him the confidence to use the wand against Potter. You knew. All that talk about sparing an old man pain and humiliation — an act to trick me into doing your will. Another pig led to slaughter.*

"No, I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand . . . no. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those year ago." The Dark Lord paused. "No difference."

There was nothing to say. Dumbledore had fooled him, and now Dumbledore would reap the penalty of his lies, because the crucial, vital task had not been accomplished. Snape knew that he was about to die, and Potter had not been told. Hatred flared against Dumbledore, and Snape felt a certain satisfaction that the old fake had failed. And yet . . .

The reality of the Dark Lord was inescapable. He was altogether evil. He had twisted and blighted Snape's life, destroyed everything that gave it meaning, brought cruelty and death, and turned Snape's friends into enemies. He had killed Lily, and now he would kill Lily's son — and suddenly Snape had a glimmer, an inkling, of why Dumbledore's eyes had been closed, and he knew that in a choice between the Dark Lord succeeding and Dumbledore succeeding, he would follow Dumbledore, because there are worse things than being led like a pig . . . no, like a lamb . . . to slaughter.

He had a task. "My Lord . . . I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter. He might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself . . ."

The Dark Lord spoke of his wand, dragging out the moment, toying with Snape who saw where this was leading and could think of no way out. He couldn't even try to kill the Dark Lord, for the soul fragments in the snake and in Potter would anchor him, keep him alive. He could only wait and watch his own death approach. And still he tried, "My Lord . . . let me go to the boy . . ."

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner. You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot be truly mine."

"My Lord!"

"It cannot be any other way." The Dark Lord moved the wand and hissed a command, and suddenly the meaning of the snake's bubble, its cage, became

horrifyingly clear. It detached itself from its moorings and rolled across the room to encase Snape's head and shoulders. His hands were now helpless to defend himself from the great serpent.

Snape's fingers clawed desperately at the outside of the bubble, powerless to protect his neck, powerless to even touch the snake as Nagini's fangs sunk again and again into his throat. At first he screamed, but then his throat clogged with blood and the scream would not emerge. He fell to the floor, kicking against the boards, against the air, as he fought to break through the bubble.

The Dark Lord's last words to him were a mockery, something that Dumbledore would have said as well — "I regret it."

Through the transparency of the bubble, the still-conscious Snape watched as the Dark Lord moved the wand again and the bubble that supported his head and shoulders vanished. Snape slumped on his side, his hands finally able to reach his throat.

The Dark Lord looked down, and then his footsteps moved away, and the snake went with him, and Snape was left alone. Alone — pressing his hands against the gaping wounds in his neck.

At that moment there was total clarity. Life was neither love nor duty. Life was not friendship or loneliness, pleasure or pain. Life was red, liquid, and sticky, and it leaked through Snape's fingers as he struggled vainly to stem the exodus of life from his body.

But he had to stop it. He had to stay alive. Potter didn't yet know what he had to do when he met Voldemort. Until Potter knew that, the task was not fulfilled, the duty was not done. But life was slipping through his fingers, and with every passing second he became weaker, less able to concentrate, less able to fight for his own survival, less able to stop the outflow of life.

Light was fading, too. Around the edges of vision, darkness thrust its way forward, and Snape strove to stay conscious, to focus on the narrowing window of light — light hemmed now by a growing border of black — because if he gave in to the blackness, he would no longer be able to hold life in his body, and the task would be unfulfilled.

The task. He knew he had something to give, and someone to give it to, but as the red, viscous life leaked through his fingers, he found that words left him, and he could no longer recall what it was he had to give or who the gift was for. Only that he had to stay alive to finish it, and so he clutched his neck and willed life to stay, stay, until he did the thing he was supposed to do.

And then, in the collapsing frame of light, there was a face, and he knew the face, and he knew he had to give the face the thing he held, but he no longer remembered what he held. There were no more words, only images, and he couldn't remember which images he had to give to the face.

There was no other choice. In a life stripped of choices, in the end choice itself was stripped away. In the place of choice there was only need, and he began to claw at the doors that barricaded his mind. Something was in there that he had to give, and if he no longer knew what that was, then he had to give everything. The face drew him up into the light, and he ripped and shredded the locks and the seals because giving was all that was left, and he had to give — a rending every bit as painful as the rending of the fangs that had ripped open his neck.

Nothing was more important. The hands that blocked life from leaving left their struggle, and life poured forth even as the hands gripped fabric and the mouth found words, "Take . . . it . . . take . . ." and the gushing forth of his soul, his very being, as fatal as the gushing forth of his blood, drowned the last of the words.

Then she came. He had missed her for so long. "Look . . . at . . . me . . ." he whispered through the blood in his throat. Her eyes smiled down into his, and he knew that he had done what he was supposed to do, that the task was accomplished, the duty fulfilled, and he was forgiven. He gazed into the peace of the well-loved eyes and relaxed, and let go, and let himself sink into the warm, welcoming darkness. And then . . .

. . . there was nothing.

* * *

McGonagall and Hagrid came for him after it was all over. She removed the barriers Voldemort had replaced around the Shack, and the two of them entered. Entered to clear away the cloying red blood that clotted in his dark hair, to straighten the contorted limbs, and to close the black eyes.

It was McGonagall who conjured the stretcher onto which they lifted his body, thin and scrawny, always off his feed, and small, the smallest ever sorted. And somehow he seemed younger, for he was only thirty-eight, and death had relaxed the tension in his face and let the youth shine through at last.

And McGonagall conjured the sheet, pure and white, that shielded the gaping snake wounds in his throat, and let this last public view be dignified and seemly.

They went through everything he left behind to see if there was a will, but there was nothing, for he was the last of his line, and there was no kin to be notified. His books and his papers went to Hogwarts, and it was fitting.

Thus it was that without warning there appeared at the modest home of Mrs. Hanson in a small mill town in the Pendle region of Lancashire, an aging, dignified witch and a huge shaggy man who might, in another age, have been called a giant. And they told her that Eileen's son was dead, and asked her help in arranging his last journey.

It wasn't a big funeral. Mrs. Hanson was the chief mourner. The lads from the pub were there, as well, to say farewell to Toby's boy, who never could learn how to play darts. The checking girls from the market where he bought the ingredients for beef stroganoff came, and Bill from the village over the hill, the one who'd fallen from the roof twenty years earlier, and now lived to have a wife and two sons.

There were others, too. The boy with the spiky dark hair and glasses, and the odd scar on his face. The little group of teenagers, awkward and shy in their strange clothes. The tiny, wizened dwarf, and the woman with the patched hat and flyaway hair. And, of course, the older woman and the giant who'd brought Russ Snape home.

It wasn't legal exactly, but they buried him in the lee of Pendle Hill, there where he'd snagged conies and gathered herbs. There, where the sky stretched free over the moors from horizon to horizon, and at night you could see all the stars.

Because, for time out of mind, there have been witches in Pendle.

* * *

Here ends the story.

This book was formatted by Blaise Whitesell, who built off the work of other fans of the story. The text was set in 10-point URW Garamond No. 8. Chapter headings were set in Lumos, inspired by the display font used in the US editions of the Harry Potter books, drawn by Sarah McFalls. The book was typeset using L^AT_EX and built on 2016-11-16 at 17:27.