

## [A Matter of Trust](#) by [SGTRJ](#)

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**Summary:** With the entire wizarding community convinced of his duplicity and guilt, Snape is forced to ally with a former student. As their relationship develops and the final confrontation with Voldemort looms, what choices will be made? HBP compliant.

## Prologue

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Desperate he was, weeks of hiding and running and sudden spurts of panic making his mind ragged, his nerves constantly screaming. Even possessing foreknowledge of his possible plight, he had not anticipated this level of difficulty. A solitary, taciturn man by nature, withdrawn and hard by choice, he had underestimated the impact of being wholly rejected, hated and hunted by everyone. Rest was next to impossible when every noise, every flash of movement on the periphery could mean death. Wards and charms and potions could only help camouflage and disguise so much, and even Strengthening Solutions had their limits. He was weary, bone tired in a way that went beyond exhaustion, and the future looked very bleak indeed.

He slumped half asleep in a hard wooden chair, one arm splayed aimlessly on the rickety table at his elbow, wand clenched white-knuckled in the other. Another tiny, windowless room in some filthy Muggle town, a place to stop, if only for a short time, and try to find a solution to the impossible situation in which he found himself. Clad in his customary black, the clothing threadbare and torn, he seemed like just another shadow in the dark still night.

With little hope and stubbornness born of despair, he tried to think logically, develop a new idea that might save him, but fatigue made concentration difficult, and his mind wandered. Like a Muggle movie previously paused, the images in his mind's eye leapt to life as soon as his consciousness relaxed, starting in the middle of a scene he knew all too well. Dumbledore, weak and helpless before him, pleading for him to do what he must; Draco shaking and stumbling, fleeing before him as he tried to escape the horror of his actions; and Potter, all violence and brazen accusations, words filled with hatred and rage that cut too close to the proverbial bone.

Then came the Apparition to the prearranged spot, and the Dark Lord's wrath when he learned of Draco's failure and the disobedience of his trusted servant. Even as the memories surged and rolled, he could feel the burn of tears in his throat as he watched the boy die, bright green flash and soft thud of a body falling limp to the earth, sleek blond hair vibrant against the cold dark ground. A grave miscalculation he had made, he and Dumbledore both, for the Dark Lord turned on him next, wrested the truth about the Unbreakable Vow and his work for the Order from his mind, and the Cruciatus Curse ripped through him again and again until he was sure he would die of the pain itself, every cell in his body screaming for release.

He had no idea why his torture had not ended in his immediate death; the Dark Lord did that, sometimes, kept someone alive for days of agony before he grew bored or impatient and dispatched the unfortunate soul to that which lies beyond. All Snape knew was that he had awoken, wandless, in a locked and warded cell, and that only by blind luck had he managed to kill a particularly inept guard, steal his wand, and run beyond the anti-Apparition enchantment to relative freedom.

But it was not true freedom, only the flight of the condemned. Aurors and Death Eaters both sought his

life. Dumbledore had been adamant that no one know of this contingency too soon, that if it came down to a choice between Snape's death at the merciless power of ancient magic or his own, Snape was to help Draco, protect his position as a spy for the Order, and execute the closest thing he had to family in this world. All term he had begged, in his own cool and condescending manner, for the Headmaster to reconsider, and he'd tried to steer Draco astray, increasingly frantic in his efforts to avoid being placed in the position of killing his mentor to save his own worthless hide. For all his Slytherin instincts of saving himself above all others, he truly would have laid down his life for the other man, convinced that it was Dumbledore who could bring an end to the Dark Lord's reign, and as such his life of the utmost value compared to his own dark, tormented existence.

And no one in the Order knew, and now Dumbledore was not alive to vouch for him. Too risky, for if McGonagall or Lupin found out they would try to find another way, and if Potter caught wind (that sneaky, prying boy who always seemed to know just enough to act impetuously) there was the risk that the Dark Lord would discern it through their unusual mental connection. Dumbledore had promised, sworn that he would let another know when the time was right, when such a confrontation was an inevitability and not merely a potential. But Draco had proven more resourceful than either thought possible, and that fateful night when Dumbledore left and Snape was told of the presence of Death Eaters at Hogwarts, he knew his fate had been sealed.

As the pictures in his mind played again and again, permutations and theories whirled as he tried yet again to find an answer to how he was to survive this ordeal. To whom could he turn? Who would, if not trust him, at least give him a chance to say more than two words before hexing him into oblivion? A muffled crash from outside destroyed his reverie, and he was on his feet in an instant, the chair falling with a dull clatter to the floor as he bolted upright, wand pointed in the direction of the disturbance, hearing pounding in his throat and a curse on the tip of his tongue. Slowly, as nothing occurred and silence filled the room, he swallowed hard, set his chair on all four legs, and resumed his seat, shaking slightly and sinking deeper into anguish. It was burning inside him, the hopelessness of it all, and suddenly he cast a Silencing Charm on the room.

"Who can I turn to, Albus?" he roared, voice rusty with disuse and exhaustion. "You left me with no one to turn to, no one to trust, no one who will trust me! I may as well have died that night, because now I'm as good as dead." No answer came, no sudden inspiration, and he sank to the floor, vaguely embarrassed by his outburst and shaking with emotion and dread. Eventually his eyes slipped shut again as he struggled to think, and the memories flashed anew.

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A/N: This story was originally begun before the release of DH and is therefore AU for that book, though otherwise canon. While it is a WIP, new readers can rest assured that I have no intention of abandoning the tale before its completion, and I average two chapters a month (and never less than one). The character death warning is NOT for either HG or SS; however, this will not be a typical "happily ever after" story. It is instead my take on the end of the HP tale (including the final battle and the Horcruxes) with an HG/SS relationship (with eventual lemons) thrown into the mix. If this sounds like something that interests you, I invite you to read on... *SGT RJ*

# Chapter 1: New Responsibilities

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Since it was no longer possible to continue using Grimmauld Place as their headquarters after the death of their Secret-Keeper and Snape's betrayal, the Order of the Phoenix had procured alternate housing. A similarly desolate neighborhood was easy enough to find, but locating a suitable house to equip with all the proper wards and charms was harder. They managed, Lupin becoming the new Secret-Keeper, and before long the derelict old house just outside Bath was bustling with secrets and plans.

The day he came of age Harry Potter arrived at the new location, looking drawn and grim, immediately throwing himself into research and his own secret meetings with Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger, the only two people who knew the full extent of his determination and his mission. Both having already reached the age of majority, they had joined the Order at the end of their sixth year at Hogwarts, Mrs. Weasley's feeble and somewhat hysterical objections overshadowed by the fact that they were, as Harry's friends, as much a part of this war as anyone, and as adults they had every right to do what they chose with their lives. Harry himself officially joined the day he arrived, and soon the three of them were immersed in books and theories, trying to find any clues as to a mysterious Ravenclaw item (or any item that previously belonged to one of the four founders of Hogwarts) that Voldemort could have found and used to house a portion of his soul.

"We've been over and over these books," grouched Ron, tossing a copy of *The Complete Guide to Wizarding Antiques* to the floor. The large square table in front of the trio was covered with mounds of books, reams of paper, and a stray inkwell or two. Harry nodded silently, rubbing bleary, slightly reddened eyes.

"I know, but I can't think of what else to do. If we assume Dumbledore..." His voice caught, trembling slightly as he resumed his train of thought, "...was right, we need to figure out what item is the fifth Horcrux, then locate Slytherin's locket, Hufflepuff's cup, and this other mysterious item. Then, we somehow have to destroy three extremely dark, dangerously magical items and figure out a way to take out Nagini before Voldemort can be killed," he finished wearily, ignoring Ron's reflexive whimper at the sound of the dark wizard's name.

"And, of course, that involves out dueling the greatest dark wizard the world has ever known," Hermione added dryly, her quill dancing over the sheet of parchment in front of her as she made some notations from the book opened in front of her.

"Right, mate, that should be the easy part, don't you think?"

Harry smiled wanly, rubbing his eyes again. He hadn't slept properly since the night Dumbledore died; he wondered sometimes if he would ever know a time without disturbing, haunted dreams. He was sick of waking up in a cold sweat, sheets tangled around his body like restraints, trying to bind him fast as he fought and shook, sleep-blind and terrified.

His two best friends exchanged looks, and he sighed and quickly picked up another book to peruse, face burning as he avoided their worried glances. Mentally he reviewed the list again, skimming the text for something, anything that would help him solve any part of this mystery, allow him to find and destroy the Horcruxes and avenge his parents, avenge Sirius, avenge Dumbledore.

'Cup, locket, snake, other...cup, locket, snake, other...cup, locket...' A hazy image swam to the forefront of his brain, and he gasped softly as he contemplated the possibilities. Why hadn't he thought of this before? It was too obvious, right there in plain sight – could it possibly be the one?

"The locket," he whispered, standing suddenly, his chair tipping over backwards with a soft thud on the carpeted floor. "Ron, remember when we helped your mum clean up Grimmauld Place? That cabinet with all that strange stuff, the music box that made us sleepy. Wasn't there a locket?"

Ron looked vaguely stunned. "Dunno, there was a lot of junk, wasn't there?"

Hermione's eyes were flashing, though, searching her excellent memory for an inventory of the items she'd seen that day. "Harry, I think you're right!" she exclaimed, a look of wild excitement on her face. "There was a gold locket on a heavy golden chain, and it wouldn't open."

Harry turned to her, eyes blazing. "Think, Hermione. Did you ever see it again?"

A brief pause, then a triumphant grin. "I think...yes, Harry, I'm sure I saw it there again that Christmas."

"But that doesn't make sense, does it?" Ron interjected. "If You-Know-Who turned it into a Horcrux, how could Sirius have gotten it?"

"Not Sirius! Don't you remember, he told us his brother was a Death Eater – Regulus. RAB! Harry, Regulus must have been the one who found the locket in the first place, and he hid it at Grimmauld before they found him and killed him." She was almost trembling, confident in her deductions, thrilled to have maybe found one of the many clues they needed.

"Where'd you see it, Hermione?" Harry sounded fierce and yet happy, instinct telling him this could be the first glimmer of success he'd had in weeks, the first positive thing to happen since he'd retrieved the fake locket and realized that all he'd suffered that night, the loss of another mentor and ally in this fight, may have been in vain.

"When I gave Kreacher his Christmas present, he had a bunch of Black family mementos hidden in his cupboard. The locket was there, too, Harry, I'm positive."

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It was a simple matter to obtain the item; Ron had reminded Harry of Kreacher's Apparition abilities, and his inability to refuse a direct order from Harry. Despite Hermione's protests to "let the poor creature be", Harry left the headquarters within minutes, unable to call the house-elf to the headquarters without the permission of the Secret-Keeper. Ron and Hermione watched him through the ground floor window in the main sitting room, his purposeful stride quickly taking him beyond their view.

“I’m worried about him, Ron,” she murmured, a sudden pain gripping her chest. He was so quiet now, pale and withdrawn, and she knew the specter of Dumbledore’s death clouded his mind constantly.

“Me too, but we’ll help him all we can, right?” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, awkwardly pulling her into a one-armed embrace, and she leaned into the solid strength of his body, drawing comfort from his warmth, his presence.

“As much as he’ll let us,” she replied, and heard his mumble of assent as much through the vibration of his chest as via his voice. They stood for a bit in companionable silence, mutual concern for their friend thick in the air, before his hand began tracing tentative patterns on her shoulder and arm.

There’d been a great deal of uncertain tension between them toward the end of their last term at Hogwarts, and she’d expected him to do or say something for weeks now. She tensed slightly then forced herself to relax; this was Ron, one of her best mates, and she’d fancied him for a long time.

But even as he took her silence for acquiescence and turned her to face him, she knew it was not to be. Somewhere in the pain of his activities with Lavender and her own insecurities, the bloom that could have been romantic love had faded and died. Part of her regretted this deeply; she had no wish to confuse or hurt him, and some things would probably be much simpler if she could, indeed, love him that way. But she couldn’t, not anymore, and when he bent his head to press his lips to hers in a soft, uncertain kiss, any doubts she had withered as she felt nothing but a stinging regret.

When she didn’t respond to his touch he pulled away, confusion stamped on his face. “I thought...you know...”

She nodded, tears prickling behind her eyes, and she lowered her gaze to avoid his. “I thought so too, once. It’s just...I think whatever chance we had is gone already, Ron. I love you like a friend, a brother, but not...”

“...a boyfriend,” he finished, his face falling. He’d already known that, really, but he felt he had to try, if only to make up for the awful way he’d treated her their last year in school. He’d always felt intimidated and awed by her; truth be told, she often made him feel foolish (though he knew that was rarely her intent), and it was difficult for him to imagine being with someone he felt he would never measure up to. But they were together all the time, and he did feel something for her, but apparently whatever the feeling was it was not strong enough, or passionate enough, to be that type of love.

He blew out a deep breath, a chagrined smile on his face, when a sudden thought occurred to him. He paled, freckles standing out like angry red ink splotches. “Wait, you’re not seeing...you don’t fancy someone else, do you?” Even knowing they were not to be, he felt a sudden rush of something akin to jealousy at the very idea of her with another.

She snorted indignantly. “Honestly, Ron, do you think that’s the reason I don’t think we should be together?”

“Well, no, but there isn’t anyone else, right?”

She laughed a little and patted his arm. “No, there isn’t, but there may be someday, just like you’ll go with other girls. We just have to decide here and now that no matter what comes down the road, we’ll stay friends, alright?”

He relaxed a little, a relieved and a somewhat lopsided grin on his face. “Sure, ‘Mione, that would be great.”

A short, awkward moment later, they laughed and hugged, both secretly relieved that they’d resolved the whole issue of them as a couple without anyone getting hexed. As they broke, still laughing, Minerva McGonagall stepped into the room, her discreet cough alerting them to her presence.

“Might I have a word with you, Miss Granger?” she inquired, quirking an eyebrow as she observed the laughing, slightly flushed pair of teenagers. Giving Ron’s hand an affectionate squeeze, Hermione smiled and nodded, exiting the room with her Head of House.

McGonagall led her through another door in the hallway, down a set of winding stairs. They emerged in a spacious, albeit dark and slightly musty, basement. Hermione immediately discerned its usage; long tables with cauldrons and shelves of murky liquid and dried herbs identified it as a makeshift potions laboratory, and one that hadn’t been utilized to any extent.

McGonagall motioned to the workspace with a sweep of her arm. “As you can see, we have made accommodations to have a ready supply of essential potions on hand. What we lack is an individual with both the time and skill to brew the potions. Until now.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. She was shocked and flattered by the insinuation, and not a little terrified by the responsibility. “But...Professor, I haven’t even finished school!”

The older witch permitted herself a small smile. “I’m well aware of that, Miss Granger. However, I have the utmost confidence in your ability to concoct the basic medicinal supplies we’d like to have on hand. Fever reducers, Blood-Replenishing Potion, things of that nature.”

“What about Professor Slughorn?”

McGonagall’s smile faded, a faint sneer of disgust curling her lip. “Professor Slughorn has made his desire to dissociate himself from Hogwarts and the Order abundantly clear. And Professor Snape...” Her eyes flashed, and her lips thinned to a grim slash. She composed her face into its normal no-nonsense mien, but Hermione noticed the tightness around her eyes.

“It’s hard to believe Dumbledore could have been so wrong, isn’t it?” she offered hesitantly. Neither she nor the boys had heard the older adults discuss the matter much, and it had occurred to her that if anyone knew the full truth of the matter, it was likely to be her Head of House.

McGonagall’s features tightened further, and the small quaver in her voice betrayed the depth of her emotions. “Even the greatest of us makes mistakes, I’m afraid.”

Hermione waited, but when nothing further was forthcoming she sighed and looked around the lab. She couldn’t prevent the giddy smile from spreading across her face as she pictured herself tending her own

potions, researching and studying and generally engrossing herself in books, experiments, and academia.

“I take it you accept this responsibility,” McGonagall remarked, recognizing the look of wonderment and anticipation on her prize pupil’s face. “Make a note of whatever ingredients you need and we will provide you with supplies.”

She nodded absently, already forming mental lists when another question popped into her inquisitive brain. “Professor, I’ve been here over a week now, I could have already been busy in the lab. Why did you wait until now to ask?”

“Some of the others thought it was too much to ask of a chi...a new, and young, member of the Order, but I assured them of your intellectual capacity and your conscientiousness. I know you’ll come to me if you require assistance, something I cannot accurately state about Mr. Potter or Mr. Weasley, even if their Potions marks were as consistently as good as yours, which of course they were not. And the rest of the Order really is too busy to give the job their full attention and dedication.”

At the mention of Harry and Ron, Hermione’s expression crumpled a little. How would she be able to juggle researching, finding, and destroying the Horcruxes while keeping the Order well stocked with potions? Would they think she was abandoning them? Or feel jealous that she’d been given the task?

“I’m sure your friends won’t begrudge you some time to help all of us, particularly when they’ve already seen some of the lesser casualties,” McGonagall remarked. Just two nights previous Tonks had appeared covered in a frightening amount of blood (head wounds being especially prone to profuse bleeding) and had required both the Blood Replenishment Potion and an analgesic eye salve. She observed the younger witch, keen eyes taking in the play of thoughts and emotions across her expressive face.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to divulge the purpose of the research you and your friends are conducting, would you?” Hermione’s flush betrayed her sudden discomfort, and she struggled to find a response that was neither truth nor lie.

“We’re trying to find a way to help Harry when it comes time to fight, of course. What else would we be doing?”

“You expect to find solutions in *Relics of Magical Fame*, do you?”

Hermione’s flush deepened, but as she couldn’t think of a suitable answer she kept her mouth closed, the silence drawing long and tense between them. McGonagall finally broke; sighing audibly, she resigned herself to wait for another opportunity to discover the meaning of the trio’s secret meetings. It had troubled her since her first conversation with Harry about where he and Dumbledore had disappeared to that fateful night, and she was determined to uncover the full truth of the matter.

“Very well, Miss Granger, I’ll leave you to inventory the supplies and get started on some basic remedies. If you could tell me where Mr. Potter is, please, I would like a word with him as well.”

Stammering slightly, Hermione offered, “Well...er, he’s not here at the moment. He left to get something important, but he’ll be back soon.”



McGonagall's mouth parted briefly, and her eyes shuttered closed in apparent exasperation. "Are you telling me that Mr. Potter left the security of the headquarters without an escort? Without protection?"

At Hermione's sheepish nod, the older woman left the room with haste, her footfalls echoing rapidly in the stairwell. Hermione felt a small pang of guilt for getting her friend in trouble with the stern woman, but it was quickly replaced with excitement at her new job.

'My own lab,' she thought gleefully, hurrying to survey the stocks of potion ingredients. She, like Ron, sometimes felt as if her contributions were minimal, and the opportunity to contribute in a tangible way, as well as the implied confidence of the older members of the Order in her abilities, filled her with pride.

Running upstairs quickly to grab parchment, ink, and quills, she threw herself with abandon into her new duty as Potions maker for the Order of the Phoenix.

## Chapter 2: Generation Gap

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Harry sat quietly in an overstuffed arm chair, mentally savoring his triumph while the 'grown-ups' argued about how he should be punished or protected (though, to him at least, their protection was tantamount to punishment). He'd succeeded in his mission, Kreacher having brought him every necklace hidden in the old Grimmauld residence, and it wasn't difficult to figure out which one was the Horcrux. Not only had Harry seen it during his Pensieve excursions, but the locket in question was graced with the intricate carving of a serpent, faded and and so worn over the centuries that it was almost indistinguishable from the surrounding metal. However, just as he'd been about to start planning on how to destroy it, he'd been unceremoniously rounded up by Mrs. Weasley and forced to sit and listen while others deluded themselves into thinking they were deciding his fate.

Ron and Hermione were both standing behind his chair, leaning against the wall, Ron clenching and unclenching his fists with a worried expression, Hermione biting her lower lip. Harry hadn't been mad at her for telling McGonagall he'd gone out; in fact, he was rather relieved, as it meant they could get this foolishness over sooner rather than later.

Molly Weasley was red-faced, her anxious voice rising momentarily above the others. "He cannot go out without someone there to protect him, and that's final! We're all he's got, and he may be our only chance!"

"No one is suggesting we won't protect him," came Alastor Moody's coarse growl. "But the boy has to understand..."

"I'm not a boy," Harry stated quietly.

"...that we can't protect him if he doesn't tell us where he's going..."

"And I don't need your protection."

"How are we supposed to watch him and try to spy on the Death Eaters, and recruit more members, and keep an eye on the Minister..."

Harry stood rather abruptly, and the sudden movement caught the attention of the others. His voice was still rather quiet, but when he spoke the words were laced with steel. "I said, I'm not a boy, and I don't need your protection."

Molly hurried over to him, laying a hand on his arm. "Of course you aren't a boy, Harry, dear, but we're worried about you, you know how dangerous it is for you to be out where you can be seen, or captured, or..."

"Or what, Mrs. Weasley, attacked? Stunned, tortured? Killed?" She took a step back, slightly offended by

his tone. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley, you've been really good to me, but I won't be treated like a child anymore."

Remus Lupin approached and stood directly in front of Harry, eyes narrowing slightly as he observed the young man in front of him. He wasn't acting like a boy requesting permission for something, or pleading for leniency from a parent. His voice was calm, and he spoke with conviction. Lupin was startled to discover Harry was actually several inches taller than him now, and he was forced to raise his head slightly to look the younger wizard in the eye.

"Harry, you have to understand how important you are to everyone here, and to the Order. If you really are the Chosen One, you can't just risk your life, risk all our lives, on a whim."

"I can assure you, sir, that I have no intention of doing any such thing. But I won't be told that I can't go anywhere or do anything without a bodyguard. I've come of age, and I have the right to be treated like an adult. I've faced more danger than almost anyone else in this room, yet you all still act as if I don't know what I'm up against, or how much danger I'm in. Believe me, I know."

They were all quiet as he spoke, somehow more reluctant to interrupt him when he was speaking with such assurance, and with a great deal more maturity than most gave him credit for. He sighed a little and sank back into the chair, absently rubbing his forehead, fingertips tracing the outline of the scar that marked him as special, marked his as different.

Marked him as their savior?

He took a deep breath and looked around at the others, all adults he respected and loved to varying degrees. Molly and Arthur Weasley, the closest thing he had to parents; the twins, Fred and George, whose mischief and spirit kept them all from going places dark and cold inside their head; Remus Lupin, his former teacher, the man who'd helped him learn to repel Dementors and was there when he discovered the truth about the man who'd betrayed his parents to Voldemort; Alastor Moody, paranoid ex-Auror and a man with scary insight at times, as if his magical eye saw through more than just walls and tables; and Minerva McGonagall, his Head of House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a stern but fair woman he'd grown to admire and respect. Others, too, who simply were not there this evening; Tonks, Shackbolt, Mundungus, he wanted nothing more than to assure them. He wanted them all to understand and accept his words, but in the end he'd settle for them simply doing nothing to interfere. He knew some egos would be bruised, feelings hurt, but this was simply another task set before him, and he refused to let his guilt get in the way.

"You've all helped me so much over the years, and I'm truly grateful. That doesn't mean I'll let you treat me like a captive or a misbehaving child. I have a mission to accomplish, and I won't let you interfere. I can't."

"Now see here, Potter," Moody growled. "You're of age, no denying that, but we have a great deal more experience dealing with these things."

"What things? Voldemort?" There were gasps and flinches all around at the sound of the evil wizard's name, and Harry huffed loudly. "You can't even bear to hear his name, let alone say it, and no one here has fought him as many times as I have."

“You mentioned a mission, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said quietly, sharp eyes glinting. “To what mission do you refer?”

“The one Dumbledore gave me before he was murdered.”

The room was utterly still now, the disbelief almost palpable. McGonagall merely nodded, her piercing gaze fixed on him as if she could read the truth from the curves and angles of his face. “The one you were helping him with the night he died, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And you still won’t share it with the rest of the Order?”

There were angry murmurs now, the assembled company (save his best friends and the Weasley twins, who were merely looking at him with amazement) affronted at being kept in the dark by a teenaged wizard. “What mission, Minerva?” asked Lupin, his mouth oddly contorted as if he had swallowed something bitter.

“Mr. Potter has refused to tell me, and Dumbledore chose not to share the information with me prior to his demise.”

The murmurs were louder now, and definitely hostile. “This is unacceptable, Harry, you cannot possibly intend to keep us in the dark. Surely you’ll need help, right?”

Still calm, Harry smiled and turned to glance at his friends, still standing quiet and unsure against the wall. “I have help. Excellent help.” Ron’s complexion soon matched his hair, and Hermione beamed at him.

Moody was nearly crimson with anger. “You cannot possibly expect us to along with this nonsense. Three barely of-age fools with a mission from a dead man, and you expect us to just go along with it?” More gasps this time, indignation and sorrow at the mention of the man whose loss they all mourned, but Moody was too far gone in his anger to notice. “Give you our blessing, send you on your way, then come flying to the rescue when you get in over your heads again, that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Harry’s temper surfaced as well; he stood again, pale and hard, his hands clenching slowly into fists, but instead of yelling as he would have in the past, now he spoke in clear, cold tones.

“If you don’t wish to help us if and when we need it, sir, by all means, do what you think is best. But I was given an order by Dumbledore and I intend to follow it.”

McGonagall opened her mouth as if to speak, but Harry cut her off with a raised hand and a weary sigh. “I’m sorry, really I am, but I agree with him about this. This mission is the key to defeating Voldemort, so the fewer people who know about it, the better. If what we’re doing gets out somehow, that’s the end, and it won’t matter if we get a dozen Chosen Ones, Voldemort will win. It’s not about me not trusting you – it’s about the danger I’m in, and Ron and Hermione, just by knowing about this, and secrets have a way of getting out.”

His hand rose to his forehead, rubbing his scar absently. It wasn't causing him pain anymore, but he often found himself touching it when he was upset, or stressed, or thinking about the enemy and the battle ahead.

"I may need your help, though, and I swear I'll ask when I do. No more hiding and sneaking off, I promise. But I am an adult now, and I've made my decision, and I'm asking you all to trust me. Trust us. Trust Dumbledore's wisdom on this, because he truly believed, and I do too, that what we're doing will save us all."

The silence now was uneasy; some looking anxiously at Moody, expecting him to erupt again, others at McGonagall, who surely was irritated by being cut off by her student, while the rest stared at Harry as if he'd grown a second head. However, before anyone could ratchet the tension even higher, Fred and George broke the spell.

"We're with you, mate," said George matter-of-factly, walking up to Harry and standing beside him, glaring somewhat comically at the older witches and wizards.

"Right, you need anything from either of us and we're there for you, no questions asked," seconded Fred, flanking Harry on the other side, a matching scowl on his face. Neither of them had forgotten what it felt like to be excluded from the secrets of the Order, or treated as if their own ideas lacked merit.

Lupin and McGonagall exchanged glances, worry more than anger now the predominant expression. "Harry," Lupin began, "it's not that we don't trust you, it's just...we're supposed to work together, you know? How can we help you and protect you if we don't know where you are or what you're doing?"

"Yeah, it's a lousy feeling, not knowing what's going on, feeling helpless and mistrusted, isn't it?" He couldn't keep some of the bitterness out of his voice; he'd not forgotten how horrible it felt to think that no one cared a bit for the turmoil he was in, or trusted him enough to fill him in on the details of decisions they were making that directly impacted him.

"Harry, we..."

"No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way, and I'm not hiding this from you because I want to get back at anyone or anything. I just can't tell you."

Hermione had stepped forward now. "We won't let anything happen to him. We've been researching and planning, and we're making progress. Besides, we've done a pretty good job keeping Harry alive up until now, haven't we?"

"Too right we have," added Ron, a slightly sullen expression in his eyes. "You'd think we've done nothing but take tests and write essays at school, the way you all talk."

It would have been comical had the air not been so charged between them, the two sides having unconsciously clustered into groups, the older and younger members of the Order facing off in the headquarters, squabbling about secrets and trust. Hermione noticed, of course, and bit back a grin. 'Generation gap indeed,' she thought, uncertain that the others would recognize the Muggle term but finding humor in the situation nonetheless.

It was McGonagall who settled matters. She couldn't deny she felt betrayed, both by Dumbledore for not entrusting this matter to her, and for Harry for refusing to share, but ultimately she was a very practical woman, and it was obvious that no amount of threats or cajoling were going to break the young man in front of her. "Very well, Harry. I promise that I'll do my best to assist you in your quest, though I do urge you to reconsider letting at least one of us know what exactly it is you are doing. However, I choose to trust your assessment of the situation, and I am confident the others will do the same."

Lupin nodded, although Harry noted a certain hardness in the set of his jaw. "Of course, Minerva, and I wish you the best of luck, Harry. Let me know what I can do to help."

"Oh, Harry, I wish you didn't have to keep putting yourself in danger," sniffed Molly.

"There now, Molly, he's handled himself well so far, and Ron and Hermione will be with him all the way, I'm sure," said Arthur, hugging his wife. "They are young adults now, and it's high time we remembered that. We're here for you Harry, no matter what."

The distinctive clumping of Moody's wooden leg marked his exit from the room, a choked expletive echoing as he slammed the door shut in his wake. Ron was quick to reassure Harry, clapping him on the shoulder. "No worries, I'm sure he'll come around. And if not, he's a world class git, and you're better off shot of him, eh?"

"I trust that Alastor will indeed be there if you require his assistance, Mr. Potter. It is, however, a great deal for you to expect any of us to be thrilled with your reluctance to reveal this mission to us," said McGonagall, only a trace of waspishness in her voice. "And I do ask your forgiveness in advance if we still treat you, all of you," she added, nodding in the direction of Ron and Hermione, "as if you were still students from time to time. It is sometimes difficult to make the transition from seeing you as other than the scared 11 years olds you were when you were Sorted."

The tension slid slowly, almost reluctantly from the gathering, and soon they were all discussing various other matters. Lupin left to meet up with Mundungus, and Arthur and Molly left to return to the Burrow after giving Harry, Ron, and Hermione rather watery and sniffing embraces. McGonagall was just about to excuse herself when Hermione approached her.

"Excuse me, Professor McGonagall? I've inventoried the supplies in the potions lab, and I have a list of everything I'll need for a while."

"Very well, Miss Granger, if you'll give me the list I'll ensure you receive the required ingredients."

When a piece of parchment was not forthcoming, McGonagall pursed her lips. "Is there something else?"

Hermione looked flushed, but confident. "Yes, I was hoping to go to Diagon Alley myself to purchase the supplies. After all, I'll be the one working with them, so I'd like to ensure their quality, and as you've just said, we all deserve to be treated like adults."

McGonagall allowed herself a small smile before her face resumed its normal reserved lines. "Of course, Miss Granger. I'll make sure you are provided with sufficient funding, and an escort should you so desire."

Will you please let me know when you plan to go? We do like to know where all of the Order members are, if only so that can discern if they have run into some danger.”

“Of course, Professor,” she replied happily. “I’ll go tomorrow right after lunch. That way I’ll be done with my shopping well before dark, and shouldn’t require anyone to give up their valuable time.”

“If you aren’t back before dinner we’ll send someone after you. Good luck, Miss Granger,” McGonagall stated simply before exiting the room. Something twisted deep inside her to see her favorite students accepting the responsibilities of fully grown witches and wizards. As she gathered her cloak before leaving headquarters for the evening, she couldn’t repress the wistful thought that she wished they had all remained the happy-go-lucky children she’d met six years previously.

## Chapter 3: Not A Fool

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He slipped through the streets of London, cloaked in dark clothing and magic, observing the ebb and flow of Muggles about their business. He could not have articulated what drew him here; seat of the Ministry of Magic, hub of wizarding activity, surely there were safer places for an outcast and traitor to be. If he'd been asked, he would have sneered and suggested that this would surely be the last place anyone would expect to find him. In truth, he was pulled there by an unfathomable urge, too weak and discouraged to question his own questionable motives.

Like the tide he surged down streets, between buildings, without purpose or conscious destination, simply struggling to stay afloat, stay unseen, stay alive. The crowd around him churned, busy people with places to go, people to see, and he drifted with them, lost in thoughts of self-pity and sacrifice. It was not his nature to dwell on the unpleasantness of life; he'd long been accustomed to fate dealing him a raw hand, and he actually took a measure of pride in the stoicism and strength with which he endured his less than happy life. But he was worn now, rejected by one and all, and the harsh realization that there were indeed worse things than first year students and the unrelenting pull of two masters left him analyzing his life and choices with more despondency than he ever would have allowed himself in the past.

With a start he realized he was on Charing Cross Road, just outside The Leaky Cauldron, the magical world just beyond the bricks and mortar nearby. He turned to retrace his path back to Muggle infested areas, back to relative safety, when a distinct crack, like the backfire of a car, left him in a cold sweat.

His eyes swept the press of humanity once, twice, and then he saw her. She Disillusioned herself precisely as one of the shop doors opened, giving the impression that she had just exited the sweet shop across the street from The Leaky Cauldron. Dressed in perfectly normal jeans and a royal blue scoop neck T-shirt, dark robes (or was it a jacket – certainly no one around her would be able to tell the difference) draped neatly over her arm, Hermione Granger blended in perfectly with the crowd; had he not recognized her distinctive bushy hair, he would never have spotted her as a witch. Paranoia gripped him, and he darted behind a kiosk, heart hammering as he prayed (to whom or what, he could not say) that his own Disillusionment Charm held, wondering why they had sent her, of all people, to search for him. But she never so much glanced in his direction, instead popping into a Muggle bookstore for a few minutes before walking purposefully toward the pub that allowed entrance to the world of magical shops beyond.

Without conscious thought or decision he swiftly positioned himself just behind her, matching his steps with her own so only one echo of footfalls resounded on the wooden floor of the pub as they passed through the nearly empty bar (only a forlorn looking Tom behind the counter, and his excitement at seeing a potential customer was quickly dashed as he realized that a young witch was unlikely visiting his establishment for the ambiance and selection of fine beverages) and into the alley beyond. He watched as she opened the portal and stepped through in her wake before taking position under the eaves of one of the many closed and boarded shops to watch her as she went about her tasks.



A glimmer of a plan was beginning to take shape in his anxious, sleep-deprived psyche. While he claimed to loathe all of his students equally (except, of course, those that were in his own House), it had not escaped his noticed that Granger was, without question, the most intelligent and mature of her year, and certainly the brains of the operation where herself, Potter, and Weasley were concerned. She'd never expressed any outward hatred of him, had always applied herself to her work, and even seemed capable of almost adult-like reasoning. Yet he did not fear her, not like he would Minerva or Lupin; after all, she was still a child, still hesitant about her skills and her power, and it occurred to him, as he regarded her exit from the apothecary, that even if she did not believe him, she was hardly capable of capturing him. He had little to lose (in his own estimation) in finding a way to approach her and forcing her to listen to his version of events.

He renewed his Disillusionment Charm before moving toward her, hesitating when he realized her new destination. Knockturn Alley? What could she possibly require from there? He tread softly, keeping her in sight, so preoccupied with his impulsive plan to find a way to talk to her, reveal his misery to someone with a sliver of compassion who might, just might, not hex him on sight, that he failed to notice two shadows fall into step behind him.

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It had not taken long at all to purchase most of the necessary supplies. Hermione was pleased with her efforts, even more so to have been given this greater 'adult' responsibility, and she was eager to ensure that McGonagall's assurances of her abilities were not in vain. She'd spent the morning with the boys, cautiously examining the locket and pouring over books of dark magic and ancient knowledge. Nothing so far, though a simple spell of revealing had confirmed that some magic clung to the jewelry, a shimmer of poisonous green (the exact same shade as the Killing Curse, she'd noted) that none of them had discerned yet how to breach.

She hesitated as she perused her list, mentally ticking off the items she had managed to secure. Unfortunately, the main apothecary in Diagon Alley was out of Erkling venom, and she did want to try her hand at making an effective scar minimizing salve for children. She had a feeling it would be most appreciated by the youth who found themselves unwitting victims of the war, and as loathe as she was to think of herself and her friends as 'children', she had a feeling it might also be effective on the young adults of the Order. The shop keeper had directed her, in a rather strained voice, to another supplier in Knockturn Alley before ushering her somewhat precipitously out the door.

She shivered slightly as she hesitated at the entrance to the infamous passage. She'd been down it once before, of course, creeping silently with Ron and Harry, invisible and elated at her own brazen disregard for warnings and danger. She felt much different today, exposed and vaguely guilty; though she was mindful of the irrationality of this, she still took a moment to still herself before proceeding.

Creete's Sundries was directly across from Borgin & Burkes. It was a tiny cramped store of unsavory looking displays with a surly, wizened wizard behind the counter who had glared balefully at her, wrapping her purchase without a word and chancing a sickening leer at her figure when he thought she wasn't looking. Eager to return to the house in Bath so she could start brewing and assist Harry in his research, she left the store swiftly, so engrossed in her own head she almost missed the flash of light from another, even darker walkway to her right.

Within seconds she had her wand out, rapping herself lightly on the head and feeling the now familiar sensation of coldness trickling over her body. Wand firmly in hand, she crept in the direction of the disturbance, blood pounding in her ears. Another flash, and now harsh murmurs in the dark, two distinctly male voices, and the intonations sounded suspiciously like an Unforgivable Curse. There was no one else around, and with only a single frozen moment of hesitation as she considered the consequences of sneaking up on what sounded like a dangerous and possibly deadly scene, she pulled her courage around her like a cloak and advanced down the passage. She simply couldn't bear the thought that someone was possibly being tortured, even killed, and not do something to stop it.

Two hulking figures stood over a third who lay prone on the gritty cobblestone street. One of the men standing hissed, "*Crucio!*" and the form on the ground writhed and contorted, limbs flexing in silent agony, while his tormentors cackled in appreciation.

"You should have kept running, traitor! Did you think the Dark Lord would forgive your treachery, allow you keep your worthless hide? He knew you'd show up here sooner or later. He always knows!" Hermione pressed her free hand to her mouth, swallowed her gasp of alarm. She recognized that voice from the battle at Hogwarts, and though she could not immediately recall his name, that fact, coupled with his reference to the "Dark Lord" could mean only one thing – Death Eaters.

"Your master has a most unpleasant reception planned for you," intoned the other, a thin, raspy voice she couldn't identify. "We will enjoy watching you suffer and die, you pathetic – bloody hell!" She had heard enough, seen enough, and she'd be damned if she allowed Voldemort or his followers to kill someone else if she had the power to stop it.

The two Death Eaters whipped around in confusion, wands soaring toward the hazy outline of a person, before two bolts of red light shot across the dim light of the alley, striking them squarely in the chest in turn. They crumpled to the ground, stunned into unconsciousness. Hermione smiled grimly, thankful she'd continued practicing her non-verbal magic, and quickly bound the two criminals with a flick of her wand before Disillusioning herself and turning to assist their victim.

He was curled up in a ball, extremities still twitching in the aftermath of the curse. She reached down to soothe him, comfort him, even as she became aware of a subconsciously nagging voice that something was amiss, something about the body at her feet, something familiar and dangerous. She knelt beside him, touching his shoulder gently, pressing him to lie flat on his back so she could attend to him, and this time her gasp pierced the air as his hand grabbed her wrist, lightening quick, in an iron grip.

"You!" she whispered, and her wand was pressed to his throat. He said nothing, did nothing, but his eyes burned into hers, and his hand grasping her wrist squeezed, tightened to just this side of unbearable. He shuddered again, convulsing as his nerves fired in the aftermath of pain, and her mind scrambled to make meaning of this sudden turn of events.

Death Eaters had been torturing Snape. Why would they be tormenting one of their own, naming him traitor, taunting him with Voldemort's wrath? Had he betrayed them too, somehow, as he had the Order with Dumbledore's death? What possible motivation could he have had to betray both sides of the conflict, make himself a pariah to the Light and the Dark? With whom did his loyalties lie?

She wrenched free of his grip, wand steady as she rose. A quick search of the immediate vicinity revealed three wands on the ground; she pocketed the one she thought might be Snape's, snapped the other two in half, and advanced on her former Potions teacher with grim determination. If there was one trait she'd obtained from all her time spent with Ron and Harry, it was a deep desire to untangle mysteries, and she had a feeling that the one that had just landed at her feet would prove difficult indeed to unravel.

She had little time to argue even with herself as she hauled the half-conscious man to his feet, struggling to maintain her balance under his weight. A wave of her wand produced a blaring siren, an alert she was certain would bring someone quickly to discover and apprehend the followers of Voldemort she left bound and senseless on the ground. Keeping a firm grasp on the man she was supporting, she braced herself, pivoted with all the destination, determination, and deliberation she could muster, and embraced the unpleasant sensation of Apparating herself and Snape away.

She staggered as they arrived, never having performed a Side-Along Apparition before, and he crashed heavily to the floor. He emitted a muffled moan, face pressed against a carpeted floor, and another wave of pain washed over him. He gritted his teeth and endured it without further sound, a detached part of himself noting the sensations were less severe now, and would likely taper off for good within the hour. He'd endured far worse in the past, and recognized his current reaction was as much a product of his own diminished physical health as his tormentor's efficacy with their wands.

He rolled onto his back as the spasms abated, surveying his surroundings. He was in a bedroom, that of a Muggle girl, he surmised. The few photos he could see were stills, the walls decorated with small portraits and the usual flotsam people tend to accumulate in their travels, postcards and knickknacks, souvenirs and memories. Everything was neat and tidy, and an enormous bookshelf, crammed with literature, dominated the room. Her bedroom, he assumed, for Snape could think of no other teenaged girl so enamored with reading.

She watched him cautiously as his eyes flickered over her belongings, noted that his trademark sneer was absent, his acerbic tongue still. Sunlight streamed through a window, illuminating him fully, and she was shocked by his appearance. Thin and worn, his eyes glittering above circles so dark they resembled bruises, and his skin tone had progressed from merely sallow to take on an unhealthy grayish tinge. His longish black hair was matted with substances unknown, and his robes, trousers and boots were caked with grime. He had the drawn, sickly pallor of someone who hadn't eaten or slept properly for some time, and she felt an unbidden wave of concern for his well-being, and she chided herself for her weakness. This was Snape, not some poor unfortunate who happened to stumble into a trap, and she knew she would have to keep her wits about her lest he trip her up. The fact that she'd rescued him, and had every intention of listening to whatever he had to say, did not diminish her fear that she'd made a terrible, dreadful mistake in allowing herself to be swayed by even an iota of pity for this man.

He could almost see the thoughts tumbling behind her eyes, and he waited for her to make the first move. She hadn't hexed him, at least not yet, and he chose to view this as a promising sign. He was not, however, so far gone as to believe she would not attack him if provoked, and he had no intention of doing so.

Her voice was soft but confident, and her wand hand very steady as she kept him under guard. "Is there anything you can tell me that you'll actually be able to prove is true?" Faint flicker of admiration on his part; she had deduced his dilemma and not wasted time with inquires he could not answer to her

satisfaction.

“I could tell you that the sun appears yellow to our eyes, something you could undoubtedly verify with your own senses, but I assume you are referring to things I could tell you about where my loyalties lie.”

She wasn't amused by his attempt at sarcasm. “I don't believe this is a wise time for you to dissemble, sir.”

He shrugged as gracefully as possible for a man lying flat on the floor. He hadn't missed the fact that she was still addressing him with respect. Could she be made to see reason? “I agree, Miss Granger, but it was a rather broad inquiry. Would you mind if I sat up?”

She nodded and he pushed himself up off the floor, settling to sit with his back against an old wooden hope chest. He was careful to move smoothly but without any movements that could be construed as aggressive. He had no desire to test her resolve in using her wand.

She in turn sat on the edge of her bed, observing him closely. There was a stiffness to the way he positioned himself, and his eyes kept flicking to her wand. He appeared convinced she would use it if necessary, and there was maybe even a hint of fear in his posture. ‘Good,’ she thought mirthlessly. ‘Because I would.’

“Professor Snape...”

He snorted, a sharp, humorless sound. “Please, Miss Granger, I highly doubt you will ever have occasion to address me by that title again. Let's not pretend this is anything other than what it is – an interrogation by a member of the Order of the Phoenix of a known Death Eater, murderer, and traitor.”

“Sir...I don't understand. Dumbledore trusted you implicitly, assured us all that you would never betray him or the Order. But...well, you...”

“I killed him.”

“Yes. Harry said Dumbledore begged for his life, and that you looked at him with loathing and disgust, and then you murdered him.”

Snape sighed, a ghost of his usual sneer curling his upper lip. “I'm afraid Mr. Potter has never been impartial where I am concerned. I submit his interpretation of events may be...biased.”

Hermione chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip, waiting for more. Cautiously, he offered, “It is certainly true that I killed the Headmaster, and that my expression betrayed something of my inner conflict. I can only assure you that any loathing he may have seen was not for Dumbledore, but for myself.”

“You didn't want to kill him?”

His eyes squeezed closed for a few seconds, and he saw the older wizard's face, heard his final plea, once again. “No,” he whispered, voice breaking slightly, and then he steeled himself to witness her reaction. He searched her visage, looking for the scorn and distrust and disgust he expected, he deserved.

He searched her face like a mirror, expecting to find the emotions of his own bitter soul reflected back in her young eyes.

Instead he found caution, intelligence, and a wary softness. Not belief, but not disbelief either, and he felt the first true glimmer of hope since his world had imploded.

She nodded slowly, more to herself than anything else. “I know you won’t be able to prove a thing you say, so I can’t promise I’ll believe you, or what I’ll do when you’ve finished. But I can and will listen to what you have to say. So…” She hesitated, searching his face for rancor or deceit, cunning or triumph, and saw only weary resignation. ‘He doesn’t expect me to believe him,’ she realized, and the idea gave her pause. What must it be like to know that no matter what you say, you’ll be branded a liar, and worse?

She took a deep breath, determined to keep an open mind. “What led up to that night, sir? Whose side are you on?”

He let out a shuddering exhale, and the tale tumbled out of him. He left nothing out, all of it emerging in a steady stream; his discovery of Draco’s task, accepting the Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa, Dumbledore’s decision about his own death, should it come to that, and the part he expected Snape to play. The futile attempts during the year to dissuade either the Headmaster or Draco from their paths, and his growing certainty that he was going to be forced, once again, to do something abhorrent for a theoretical “greater good”. He spoke quietly, only the facts of the story in their bare bone simplicity, too closed and controlled a man to reveal his anguish in words, never mind to a former student. But Hermione could hear the undercurrent of anger and grief, revulsion and disgust. When he described his discovery of Death Eaters at Hogwarts, his last ditch effort to stop Draco or save Dumbledore all for naught, she could almost feel the pain radiating from him. She felt the sting of tears behind her eyes as he revealed his experience of the aftermath; Draco’s death, his own discovery and torture, and finally his escape and existence since.

When it was over, he experienced an overwhelming sense of relief, as if the weight that had been pressing inside his chest was lighter simply because another knew of it. He recognized the odds were excellent she would reject his story in whole or in part, but at least he’d gotten the chance to tell it, and part of him took immense satisfaction from that. He may yet die, or be locked away from the world for the rest of his miserable life, but he would not yield without a fight, however weak the struggle may be.

She was up now, pacing along the floor beside her bed, as she weighed the information she’d been given with what she already knew (or believed) to be true. Nothing he had said, she realized, was definitively false, and a lot of it seemed consistent with her understanding of how Dumbledore operated. His tale even confirmed Draco’s role, and she felt a creeping prickle of shame. If she had only believed Harry, helped him figure out what the Slytherin boy was up to, would things have been different? Would Dumbledore still be alive, and Snape still a member of the Order?

Ah, but what else did she expect from one as conniving as the man sitting on her floor? He’d had weeks to sort out his story, and his years as a double agent (for whom?) had undoubtedly given him the ability to sound very sincere, convincing one or both his leaders that he was wholly in their fold, committed to their work. She could almost hear Harry’s voice, an outraged roar in her head, as he recounted all of his misdeeds, his foul temper, his cruel nature. Can painful truth come from such an unlikely source?

Hermione was torn, and cognizant that any choice she made could have dire repercussions. What if he was telling the truth, and she turned him over to the Aurors? He would be imprisoned, possibly executed, a martyr to injustice. And if this was all a clever scheme, and she didn't turn him in now when she had the chance, would she be able to live with the guilt of having been duped by Dumbledore's killer? She could envision Harry's face, and Ron's, rage and disappointment, and they might never trust her again.

"There's no way I can know for sure about any of this, is there?" It wasn't until he answered she realized she'd spoken aloud.

"Even if you were a skilled Legilimens, I am a superior Occlumens; you would see nothing except what I allowed. Pensieve memories can be altered. Veritaserum would work, but then I am a Potions master, so how could you trust I had not ingested a counteragent?"

"Yes, I'm sure you've been brewing no end of complicated potions these past few weeks," she remarked, then blushed as she recalled the man she was conversing with. She was unaccustomed to being anything less than deferential to a teacher. 'Former teacher,' her mind supplied. 'And I'm the one with the wand.'

He only raised an eyebrow, a shadow of a smirk on his face. "Indeed, Miss Granger. However, as I doubt you keep a supply of Veritaserum on hand, the point is moot."

"What do you expect of me, sir? Why did you tell me all of this?"

"You asked," he said simply. "I had not dared to hope I would be given a chance to explain or defend myself. When I saw you today, I was determined to discover a way to talk to you. You are the least... prejudiced of your friends. However, I do not expect you to simply believe me, Miss Granger. To do so would be foolish on your part, and whatever else I may think of you, I do not believe you to be a fool."

He sighed again, and his voice was quiet, almost sad, very like the sound of a man who had already given up on life. "I expect you'll turn me in now, either to the Order or the Aurors directly. I only ask you consider relating what I have disclosed. I am not ignorant of my own flaws, but I am no traitor to the Order or Dumbledore. It would be charitable of you to give others a chance to believe that as well."

Agitated now, she gestured somewhat wildly with her wand, choices and implications running furiously through her mind. She could feel the beginnings of a tension headache creeping through her temples, a sharp ache just over the bridge of her nose. "If you didn't expect me to believe you, why on earth did you tell me everything?"

Another small smirk. "I had to at least try. I have not come this far, nor done the things I have done, to give up an opportunity to convince someone of my veracity."

She was starting to tremble, the enormity of the decision and consequences leaving her rattled, on unsure ground. Without a word she retreated from the room, an odd squelching noise letting him know she had sealed the door. He was impressed when he discovered she'd included the windows as well.

Standing now, he found the ever present turmoil in his mind and body oddly quiescent. Since the day he fled the Dark Lord's captivity, he had been moving and thinking ceaselessly, fixated on the idea that, if he was to stand any chance of survival, let alone vindication, he would have to find someone willing to

listen. That he would find such an individual in the person of Hermione Granger was something of a shock; she was, after all, best friends with the Potter boy, and as a Gryffindor he was certain she had a low opinion of him as a person – House rivalries were notorious, and ran deep. But when he'd seen her earlier, he'd been drawn toward her by a force he did not understand, drawn to the concept that she might be the one he was looking for. While he would have sneered at the idea of fate intervening, he was bemused at the fortuitous turn of events that had led him here.

When she returned he was seated calmly on the edge of her bed, determined not to react whatever her choice. He had thrown his fate into the hands of a Gryffindor teenager; for better or worse, he had made peace with it, realized his options were minimal and his circumstances dire. Still, he could not prevent a shadow of confusion from darkening his face as she placed a tray on a small table next to the bed, the fragrance of a hastily prepared meal wafting into the air. His stomach literally twisted as the scent assailed him, and the audible rumble caused his cheeks to flush. He had eaten only hurriedly gathered scraps since his flight, and it was all he could do to stop himself from falling on the food with abandon.

“What is the meaning of this, Miss Granger,” he asked, tearing his eyes away from the feast. “A last meal for the condemned? How noble of you.”

She glared and grabbed her purchases from the floor, thankful they'd been wrapped so carefully upon purchase. It had certainly been a more eventful afternoon than she'd originally planned. “The meaning of it? Its food, sir, I'm sure you are familiar with the concept. You look awful, and I have no intention of leaving you here without at least providing for your basic needs.”

He stiffened, uncertain and wary. Leaving him here? Surely not, or was she simply giving herself an opportunity to depart before someone came to round him up? “What are your intentions?”

She sighed, shifting the bag with her potions supplies from one hand to the other. “I can't decide what I'm supposed to do right now, sir. I need time to think. My parents are away on holiday, they'll never even know you were here. There's a bathroom through that door there,” she gestured to the wall near her massive bookcase, a closed door he hadn't noticed before, “and you're welcome to sleep on my bed. I'll return tomorrow.”

He stood, vaguely affronted. He hadn't expected this, and he suddenly found the notion of simply waiting in limbo a discomfoting one. “You can't be serious.”

The set of her jaw certainly indicated she was. “Completely. There's too much at stake for me to make a rash decision. I've sealed all the doors and windows. I suppose you could attempt to escape, and you might even succeed, but I should think you'd be safer here. After all, who among the Order or the Death Eaters would expect you to seek refuge in the Muggle house of one of your most detested students?”

She smiled a little fiercely and turned to leave. Pausing, she couldn't resist throwing a last barb at the unnerved man. “Of course, if you like, I might be willing to simply let you go, sans wand, of course. You could try your luck at evading everyone, or you can stay here and wait for me to decide what I should do about your situation. I think it would be very foolish of you to turn down this offer, and whatever else I may think of you, I do not believe you to be a fool.”

And the last thing she saw before she Apparated back to the Order headquarters was the stunned, gaping

expression on the face of Severus Snape.



## Chapter 4: Decisions, Decisions

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“Where have you been? We've been worried sick!” Hermione squealed in surprise as Ron grabbed her in a rough embrace, hugging her so tightly she found it difficult to breathe.

“I'm happy to see you, too,” she gasped, pushing him away with a laugh. “But why were you...um...did something happen? Is everyone okay?” Her voice shifted from amused to frightened as she looked at the boys, both shock-white, faces creased with concern.

“What happened?” Harry said incredulously. “You mean you don't know? Hermione, where have you been, where did you go?”

Utterly confused, she wracked her mind, trying to discern why they would be so shaken by her absence. ‘They can't know about Snape,’ she thought frantically. “Was there another attack? I was in Diagon Alley purchasing potions supplies, I told you before I left, and I said I'd be back before dinner, now what happened?”

“We know you went to the Alley, but where'd you disappear to after you left Creete's? Are you saying you don't know what happened in Knockturn Alley this afternoon?”

“No, what...wait, how did you know I had to go to Creete's? Did the Order have someone trail me? I swear, after all that talk about treating us like adults...” She was shaking now, terrified that they knew her secret, and she flinched inwardly, waiting for the tirades and accusations.

Ron was staring at her in open-mouthed disbelief. “Hermione, two Death Eaters were captured right near there. Some sort of siren went off, and when Shackbolt got there they were just lying on the ground, knocked unconscious and tied up. They investigated, and the wizard at Creete's said you'd left only a few minutes earlier, but no one could find you! We thought maybe you'd been captured, who knows how many of those bastards were there before someone rounded up a couple.”

Relief flooded her, and she laughed aloud. “Oh, Ron, Harry, I'm so sorry, I had no idea. I went to some Muggle shops afterward,” she explained, fishing her new copy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* out of her bag. “I had no idea anyone thought I was in trouble.” Guilt twisted in her chest, but she knew she could share nothing of the truth of her discoveries that day with either of them. Neither had a shred of reason when it came to the subject of their Potions teacher, and while she regretted keeping them in the dark about anything, she was determined to give his situation the serious and fair consideration she thought it was due.

Ron grabbed and hugged her again, and Harry too wrapped his arms around her, shuddering almost imperceptibly. “Thank goodness you're okay. I don't think I could bear it if...” He couldn't finish the thought, but she knew, and she held him tighter, heart breaking for the burdens he tried to bear so quietly.

Next she had to reassure a nearly hysterical Molly, who had Floo'd over as soon as she heard of the mysterious capture of two Death Eaters. Hermione was touched, if somewhat exasperated, by the level of concern being exhibited by everyone. She made a mental note to remember this if she ever felt underappreciated in the future.

After stowing her purchased potions ingredients safely in her lab and eating a plentiful dinner cooked by a relieved Molly, the trio retired to 'their' meeting room. Harry and Ron had discovered nothing new in her absence, and they resumed brainstorming ways to destroy the necklace containing a fragment of Voldemort's soul.

Only Hermione's mind was not fully on the task at hand. She found herself recalling, again and again, Snape's story, wondering how much, if any, of it was true, and what her next move should be. It was consuming her thoughts, the idea that this choice, to trust or not to trust, could have repercussions far into the future. It was not inconceivable it could even help decide the course of the war. She shook herself mentally for her melodramatic fancy and worried her lower lip, trying and failing to follow the threads of conversation between the boys, the text laid out before her.

It did not take her long to reach at least one conclusion. While she was not sure she did believe him, something in her wanted to. She tried to examine this urge, dissect it logically, but ultimately reason failed her. She could not pin down the whys and wherefores, much to her frustration and chagrin. Pressed, she would have been forced to concede that her desire to think the best of Snape was based wholly on impulse and feeling, the cold certainty of intellect playing no part, and that was a hard potion for someone as intelligent as she was to swallow. She was accustomed to following carefully deduced rationales; she was the voice of caution and reason, the one who held back while Harry and Ron charged headlong into uncertainty. Her inexperience in trusting her instincts over her intelligence left her cold and uneasy.

Still, she could not shake nor dismiss the sensation of utter wrongness she experienced when she contemplated telling Lupin or McGonagall of Snape's location, or when she pictured Aurors bursting into her parents' home to drag him away. Something in his eyes, his voice, his demeanor told her he was being completely honest, and while she could not make herself trust him or her instincts fully, she could not act against them, either.

"You all right, 'Mione?" asked Harry, his forehead wrinkled with concern as he looked at her.

"What? Of course, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You seem distracted, is all. You've barely said a word since dinner."

It was obvious her mind was elsewhere, and she felt the sudden need to be alone. "I'm just tired, I think, and preoccupied deciding what potions I'll start on tomorrow."

Ron snorted and shook his head. "Most normal people try to avoid thinking about work, and here you are daydreaming about it."

"I'm not going to apologize for being excited about this," was her dignified reply. "But I am sorry I've been distracted, I'll try to be more helpful tomorrow."

“You off to bed then?” Harry looked a little peeved, but hid it well, his tone light and friendly.

“Yes, I think so. See you in the morning.”

She gathered up some books and scraps of notes, already immersed in her thoughts. Absently, she headed toward the basement potions lab rather than her bedroom, dumping her armload of paper on one of the tables and sinking onto a small wooden stool. ‘Have I completely lost it?’ she pondered, burying her face in her hands. ‘Even if he is telling the truth, what am I supposed to do? Hide him in my parents' house? Pass him food and Galleons on the sly?’ She groaned softly and pressed her fingertips lightly against her eyelids; her headache from earlier had never fully subsided, and a spot deep in the center of her forehead pulsed with the beat of her heart.

Absently, she began organizing the potions ingredients on the shelves, most of which (her earlier purchases included) had been placed there rather haphazardly. She found the orderly sorting and categorizing physically relaxing and mentally soothing, found that as she imposed order on beetles' wings and powdered wartroot the chaos in her mind seemed more controlled as well.

Though possessing a Gryffindor's courage and sense of honor and duty, she also had the intelligence of a Ravenclaw and the practicality of a Slytherin (though she'd never share that bit of self-reflection aloud, at least not to her friends). She struggled to reconcile the desire to see justice (or even revenge?) done in memory of her slain Headmaster, her loyalty to her friends and the Order, and the insistent and growing voice telling her that things were not as they had seemed. Dumbledore had trusted Snape completely; was it possibly that trust was, in fact, well-placed, and that it was the whole Order that had made a terrible mistake?

She sighed, looking around for a sink or rag with which to wipe clean her hands, small particles of dust and a bluish powder (crushed Arctic snail shells, she thought) clinging to her fingers, when she noticed a door in the wall. Hidden from the basement entrance by the position of the shelves and a stack of old plastic milk crates, undisturbed cobwebs strung from the corner of the room across the doorway told her that no one had opened the door in a substantial amount of time. She opened it to find a smaller room, something a Muggle might refer to as a root cellar. It was apparent someone had tried to refurbish the area at some point; there was a shower stall, sink, and toilet concealed behind a small screen, a few cans of paint and an encrusted roller on the floor, and the concrete walls were colored half natural grey, half a deep green. A quick test revealed the sink was operational, though it took a minute or two for the water to change from reddish-brown to clear. As she washed her hands she pondered the best way to put the newly discovered space to use. Perhaps as storage for more volatile ingredients, as she was certain she could reinforce the natural materials with heat, water, and explosion resistant charms.

She was tired, and perhaps more than a little muddled given the excitement of the day, which was her only excuse that it took as long as it did for her to even contemplate another use for the space. Harry and Ron were still talking in their makeshift meeting room, though the discussion had quickly degenerated into an amiable argument about the Quidditch League standings rather than focusing on books or Horcruxes. They started when they heard the thunder of footsteps boom through the hallway from the basement. They watched in silent amusement as Hermione flew past the open doorway, bushy hair streaking behind her; a minute or two later, she sprinted past again, back toward the stairs, arms wrapped around at least three thick tomes.

“Mental, that one is,” Ron stated, idly tipping his chair back to balance on two legs. “Wonder what that was all about?”

Harry smiled slightly, recalling other times he’d seen her dart about with books or rush off to the Hogwarts library to look up some obscure fact. “Who knows. I do wonder if it’s got something to do with this afternoon, though.”

“You reckon she’s not telling us everything?”

Harry thought carefully. “I don’t know. Odd that she missed all the commotion, though, isn’t it? That shop keeper said she left minutes before the siren went off, and then nothing for close to three hours until she showed up here. It just seems odd.”

“True, but she could’ve gotten wrapped up in the Muggle shop. You know how she is with books.”

“Yeah,” he responded noncommittally. Still, he could have sworn he saw a flash of panic and something else when they’d asked her where she’d been, something suspiciously like guilt. Had she seen or done something she didn’t want him and Ron to discover?

The doubt gnawed at him a little as he resumed swapping Quidditch gossip with Ron. As his mind swirled with possibilities, each more dangerous than the last, he shook himself mentally and pushed the thoughts out of his mind. This was Hermione, after all. She’d never been one to keep secrets or leave him out of things. With the exception of the Time-Turner (which he resented only for an instant) and her date for the Yule Ball their fourth year, he couldn’t think of any other secrets she’d kept for any length of time. Comforted by the thought that if she were hiding anything, she’d surely confide in them soon, he followed Ron upstairs to their shared bedroom and quickly fell asleep, the gentle serenade of Ron’s snores and insect activity outside the house soon the only noises in the still dark night.

Except in the basement, where Hermione pored over the texts she’d borrowed, looking up everything she could about the Fidelius Charm.

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AN: Like all authors, I live for feedback. Also, if anyone knows of an interested beta, I've struck out so far in the forums.

## Chapter 5: The Right Thing

Disclaimer – All characters and other aspects of this universe are the sole property of J.K. Rowling. I'm just having a little fun with them. Trust me, there's no profit here.

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Snape paced around his prison cell. He was certainly aware that the room was, in fact, a bedroom, the bedroom of a former student of his. A former student who also happened to be a know-it-all Muggle, and a friend of Potter. He sat on the bed, attempting to force himself to remain still and calm, but before he even realized what he was doing he was up again, walking back and forth, his mental agitation finding expression in physical movement.

Since he'd escaped from the Dark Lord he'd been constantly in motion, moving without rhyme or reason from place to place, catching naps when exhaustion overtook him until he would snap awake in a cold sweat, wand out and eyes searching for danger before taking flight once again. Now he'd been given an opportunity to sleep in a clean bed, in relative safety, and he'd never felt more confined. He'd tossed and turned throughout the night, unable to relax, half remembered images of nightmares tormenting him with Dumbledore's voice, Dumbledore's eyes.

Now he was stuck waiting, unable to flee or find any sort of peace. Waiting for answers, waiting on the decision of a seventeen-year-old witch. He allowed himself a small laugh, as he was alone, momentarily struck by the irony of it, the feared Potions master of Hogwarts, the bat of the dungeons, awaiting the judgment of a student. The sound rang brittle and hollow in the small room, and he felt a fleeting regret that his laugh held no humor, and had not for longer than he cared to recall.

A sound from below alerted him to her presence, and he managed to still himself as she walked into the room. His dark eyes searched her face, looking for a clue to his fate, and his gaze darted to the space behind her as well, more than half expecting to see another Order member or two, or Aurors with sternly excited faces and wands drawn. But she was alone, and he relaxed a little, still trying to discern her intentions. Her face was closed, eyes cautious, and the only thing he was able to extrapolate was that she looked tired and drawn.

"You've brought no reinforcements," he said softly.

"No, I haven't," she replied.

The silence stretched and hummed between them, and he lacked any semblance of patience; weeks of uncertainty weighed heavily, and he needed to know something, anything about the path ahead.

"Well?" He could not contain his impulse to address her as he always had, a student to be sneered at, and she felt her indignation flare.

"Well what, sir?"

Anger exploded in his chest, and he was advancing on her, glaring down at her with his best scowl. She

dared to play games with him, now, over this? He noticed fleetingly that he didn't have to look down as far as he had expected, the top of her head level with his chin. It also did not escape his notice that she was meeting his gaze head on, no cowering or deference or fear.

"I am not a man to be toyed with, Miss Granger. I insist you dispense with these childish games and inform me of your decision at once."

Poised and collected, she stood her ground, though a part of her quavered reflexively under his furious gaze. "First of all, I don't believe you are in a position to insist I do anything. If you want my assistance, I suggest you back off and treat me, if not with respect, than at least with civility."

His voice was a dark thrumming hiss of warning. "You do not wish to test me, Miss Granger."

Hers was cool and hard, steel and ice. "Nor you me." Her wand was pressed against his ribs, and she dug in it a little, her intent clear. She'd rather expected this sort of reaction from him at some point, expected him to attempt to intimidate and frighten her, and she was certain this was the proper way to call his bluff; she didn't believe for a second he was going to attack or attempt to disarm her. Why she was so certain confused her (why wouldn't a cruel man, a Death Eater hurt her?), but she was learning to listen to her instincts.

She could see him swallow hard, practically feel the indignant fury seeping from his pores. But he nodded curtly, stiffly backed up a few steps, and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring coldly at this impertinent chit who dared speak to him in such a fashion. His pride almost did not allow him to back down so, but he mastered it for now. He had reconciled himself to the fact that he needed help, and badgering the one person who may be willing to give it to him seemed shortsighted at best.

Careful to keep her satisfaction hidden, she steadied herself mentally, shoved aside the all remaining vestiges of doubt. Though she'd thought this through carefully, she still experienced a tremor of trepidation, for there was no going back from here.

"I think I've found a place for you to hide. It's perfect, no one would ever think to look there, even if they could."

He felt a sliver of cautious curiosity. "You plan to assist me then. You...you believe me?" Incredulity warred with hope; he'd barely allowed himself to envision any sort of positive outcome from this fiasco.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and broke eye contact with him for the first time since she'd entered the room. "I...I don't trust you fully, I can't lie to you. But I believe you didn't want to kill Dumbledore, sir. I think you're still really on our side."

He was torn between shouting at her for her stupidity (were all Gryffindors such trusting, naïve fools?) and a sudden, wild urge to break down completely. He was almost undone; even conditional trust was a gift at this point, and he knew it was one he had not earned. He was well schooled in suppressing his emotions, his reactions, and only a miniscule tremble in his hands, a tiny tightening of his mouth, betrayed any feeling at all.

"I find myself at a loss, Miss Granger, but I am...grateful. May I inquire as to what you have planned?"

Not as practiced as he was at maintaining a neutral expression, the surprise she felt at his, if not pleasant, at least cordial tone, showed plainly. She clasped her hands behind her back, fidgeting. Confident when she prepared for this and when she entered the room, she found herself feeling much more uncertain now, young and eager that her carefully constructed plan meet with his approval.

“I think I’ve figured out a way to hide you with us at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.”

This time his reaction was plain – open skepticism. “Surely you jest. Such a thing is impossible.”

“No, it’s not. I looked up everything I could find last night on the Fidelius Charm, and discovered it is possible to hide something in an already hidden location.”

“Come again?”

“There’s a room in the basement no one else knows about. I only found it last night. All of the texts agree, sir, it’s difficult to do, and rarely necessary, but I’ve managed to perform the Nested Fidelius Charm on myself. I’m the Secret-Keeper for that one room.”

His lips were pursed, thin slash of nearly colorless flesh as he pondered the implications. Was it possible? “Even if you have succeeded in hiding this one specific room, it is impossible for me to enter the primary location without the permission of that Secret-Keeper. Assuming that is not you, I fail to see how you could possibly be planning for me to breach such a powerful and ancient magical force.”

Smiling proudly, she produced a small slip of paper from the pocket of her robes. “What if I convinced the Secret-Keeper to divulge the location for me?”

She thought he would be impressed, pleased even, but his face darkened in anger, and she thought it had taken a good deal of his formidable self-control to refrain from lunging at her again. “Do you care nothing for the security of the Order that you would do such a foolish thing! What if you had been intercepted? Such magic is not tricked or coerced, Miss Granger, and it will backfire horribly if improperly obtained.” With great effort he lowered the volume of his voice, the echo of his shouts still reverberating in the air. “It is very important that you answer this honestly. How did you obtain the information?”

Flushed, feeling childish and petulant, she responded angrily in turn. “Do you think I know nothing, that I didn’t research this thoroughly? I misled him, that’s true, but he gave it to me of his own free will, then I…” She stopped abruptly, realizing she was about to admit to a fairly serious act to a man whose true allegiance she did not wholly trust.

“You what, Miss Granger?” he asked, voice soft and dangerous.

She inhaled deeply and squared her shoulders, looking him directly in the eye without flinching. “I Obliviated him.”

Snape could scarcely believe his ears. Not only did she seem willing to trust him, help him, she was describing performing complex and potentially illegal charms, misleading members of the Order. For him. Why?

“What are your motives, Miss Granger?”

“My motives?”

He sighed, an exasperated explosion of air. “Yes, you daft child, your motives. What is it you expect of me? Money? Gratitude?” He was sneering now, face twisted and bitter. How could he have not seen this before, he who had served powerful masters since his late youth; there was always a catch, always something of himself he had to give. Blind obedience, information or knowledge, his very soul had been demanded of him for every favor, every pardon, every second of existence. He could not fathom not owing somebody something, for it felt like every choice he’d made since the day he took the Dark Mark had been decided by, and for, another.

Hermione was overwhelmed suddenly, eyes gritty with fatigue and the prickle of tears, too many thoughts and emotions to focus on, his derisive, hard tones stripping her confidence. She’d been so sure, so confident that this would work, could keep him safe. Must he be so difficult? Harry’s voice whispered in her ear, ‘What did you expect from a murdering, greasy git?’ She didn’t know what she had expected, but this wasn’t it.

Was all her hard work and scheming to be for naught? It had taken almost four hours for her to get the incantation for the Nested Fidelius Charm right, and more than a little guilt for her to manipulate, then hex, Lupin. No small feat, either task; the spell had left her head throbbing, and it had taken all of her courage and wiles to approach Lupin when he’d arrived at the house at dawn, looking more grey and careworn than ever. She’d led him to believe she needed to let someone know about the Order’s location as part of her mission with Harry, assured him that she would never endanger them all, her gut burning all the while with doubt, knowing full well that if she was wrong about Snape, people she loved could die. It was probably indicative of how much strain and exhaustion Lupin’s work induced that he’d finally agreed to write down the secret on a piece of parchment, agreed to give it to her only if she told him for whom it was intended. Her hand extended to take the paper, she’d told the truth, said Snape’s name, and as his eyes widened with shock and horror she’d whispered the incantation to wipe away his memory of their meeting, wand hidden in her sleeve, and she’d watched with a pang of remorse as his eyes turned blank and oddly empty, and she’d slipped the little piece of paper out from his unresisting fingers.

Good fortune continued to shine; Harry and Ron were off to the Burrow to help with Bill and Fleur’s upcoming wedding, the other Order members out on this mission or that errand, and she’d begged off going with the boys until the afternoon, claiming she needed a lie-in after being up all night looking for something to help them (another twinge of guilt, though she rationalized to herself that this was very nearly the truth). She felt utterly dejected now, all her planning and hard work called into question. What had she expected – this was Snape! And just what *did* she expect?

She’d been quiet for too long now, emotions roiling, and his sudden movement as he sat down on her bed startled her back to awareness of the present. Impatiently he surveyed her; how like a child, and a Gryffindor, to wear her feelings so plainly, every doubt and tumultuous thought starkly visible. No subtlety, no control. Could she not even answer a simple question?

But then she was. “I don’t expect anything like that from you, sir. I just...I guess I expect that if you really are on our side you’ll help us as much as you can, or at least not hinder us. It’s not like I’m not doing this



for recognition or reward. It just seems like...well, like the right thing to do.”

“Let me ensure that I understand you correctly. You wish to help me by hiding me within the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, risking your very lives if I am still a servant of the Dark Lord, and at the very least risking the rejection and wrath of your friends, to say nothing of imprisonment for aiding and abetting a wanted man – a man who has been nothing but hostile and cruel to you all for six years – because it’s the right thing to do?”

Never had that cold smooth voice sounded as disbelieving. She had to admit that phrased that way, her decision did sound remarkably foolish and dangerous. Part of her was screaming for her to listen, take the out he was handing her, and abandon him to his fate. This was madness, and she knew it. But she was not a Gryffindor for nothing, and suddenly her resolve hardened.

“I’ve made my decision, sir. However, I won’t force you to return with me. If you want my help, this is what I’m offering. The decision is yours.”

Tiny frown as he absorbed her words. “And if I decline your generous offer?” he drawled, voice sharp with sarcasm.

“Then I’ll set the wards to release when I leave, and you’ll be free to fend for yourself again. Wandless, of course; I’m not as stupid as you apparently believe. A wanted, hunted man, but I’ll tell no one I’ve seen you.”

“Hardly a choice, then,” he snarled.

“I can’t risk returning your wand if you are still loyal to You-Know-Who. That would be foolish, sir, and I believe we’ve already established that neither one of us really thinks I’m a fool.”

“And if I agree to your insane scheme. Will I receive my wand back then?”

She swallowed audibly; it was a question she’d hoped would not come up, though she knew that was highly unlikely. “No, sir,” she replied, voice barely above a whisper. “At least not right away. If I’m wrong about you...”

He felt another sliver of admiration; while he was struck almost speechless by her plan and the reckless nature with which she seemed to have pursued it, he couldn’t deny that she was at least cautious enough to hold back some trust, leave herself some measure of control over him, some assurance that things would not go completely awry if he escaped or turned. It was exactly what he would have done, under the circumstances. After reevaluating, he decided that it was assuredly not what he would have done, as he never would have agreed to help in the first place.

Was that what he had sensed when he’d seen her in Diagon Alley? That something in her nature would compel her to help, risks be damned? He knew she’d taken chances before to help Potter; broken rules, run pell-mell into danger to find the Philosopher’s Stone, to find Sirius when they thought him guilty, to find him again when they knew him to be innocent and believed his life to be in danger. He found this concept difficult to comprehend, as he believed his own sacrifices to be ultimately nothing more than attempts to save himself by serving the stronger side, the winning team. That she clearly was motivated by

other things, things he pretended not to understand, was the only reason he could fathom to explain her actions now.

He knew there was no choice, not really, but he found he could not be resentful of that. So many times before he had been, burning with loathing and humiliation as his hand was forced. How much had he seen and done to appease one master or another? Too much, and he'd grown ever more hardened and bitter as the years passed and he remained shackled, unable to refuse or comply, only move as directed. Like a puppet or a chess pawn, but not a man with a mind and a will. Never that.

So why did he find this choice that was not a choice at all a more palatable one to swallow?

She was waiting still, anxiety and apprehension poorly masked, and he stood and walked smoothly, two steps, and he was in front of her. "I accept your gracious offer." No sarcasm or regret, just simple acceptance, and her smile seemed genuine. He wondered yet again if he'd been completely addled by the events of the past few weeks, that he so willingly turned his life over again to another, and without that swelling hatred he was so used to feeling. Instead, he felt simply resigned.

Wordlessly she held out her hand, the slip of ivory parchment proffered without hesitation. He accepted it, noted the familiar texture of the paper was warm, slightly crinkled as if it had been worried with nervous fingers. Nervous that he would accept, or decline? No matter now, and he unfolded it, read the spiky masculine script, committing the address to memory before offering it back to her.

At her quizzical glance, he murmured, "It should be destroyed to prevent another from discovering the location." She blushed, embarrassed to have allowed such a basic precaution to slip her mind, before taking the scrap and cramming it back into her pocket. She then raised her wand, indicated her desire to touch him with it; he flinched, and she reassured him softly.

"I just want to cast a Disillusionment Charm, sir, as a precaution." He nodded, oddly bemused at his lack of resentment over the fact that he was denied the luxury of ensuring his own safety, and shivered slightly as the cool magic spread over him.

Hermione charmed herself as well, then hesitantly offered him her hand. His expression was unreadable, eyes dark and glittering, and then he slid his hand, warm and dry, into hers. She nodded, an odd sense of finality settling on her, and Apparated with Snape to the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

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AN: I welcome all reviews and feedback, especially if parts of my little tale just don't seem that believable. And if someone can come up with a better name than "Secondary Fidelius Charm", I'm all ears.

AN: Thanks to Darque Hart for the suggestion of "Nested Fidelius Charm" (like the Russian dolls), which I thought sounded much cooler. There is one more chapter already in queue, and another close to completion.

## Chapter 6: Interlude

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McGonagall burst into the house, searching frantically for any signs of disturbance. Nothing in the hallway seemed amiss, nor the kitchen; wand out, nerves jangling, she swept from room to room on the main level, pounded up the stairs to search the rooms of the two floors above. All empty, and slowly the blood stopped thundering in her ears. No enemy, no ambush, nothing out of the ordinary at all, just an empty house.

And then she remembered – it shouldn't be empty. Quickly checking Hermione's room again, finding it unoccupied, she clattered down the stairs, all the way down to the basement, fearing the worst.

Her concern was soon replaced by irritation as she found the girl, clearly startled by the older woman's sudden appearance and her flushed, breathless countenance. Surely the child had heard her frantic search; why had she not made her presence known?

“Is something wrong, Professor? Did something happen?”

McGonagall's eyes scanned the room, finally satisfied that there was, indeed, no danger, and lowered her wand. “Someone tripped the wards, and I was ensuring that our security has not been compromised.”

“What wards?”

“Surely you don't think that the only thing protecting us here is the Fidelius Charm. There are other enchantments as well. One of them is a ward designed to alert us if anyone bearing the Dark Mark enters this town.”

Fortunately her sudden gasp of surprise was easily covered. “You...you mean there's a Death Eater here?” she squeaked, desperately keeping her gaze locked on McGonagall, resisting the almost overwhelming urge to glance at the spot where Snape stood, the charm and shelves and shadows all conspiring to keep him invisible to his former colleague's penetrating stare.

“Not necessarily here at this residence, but yes, apparently one did enter the town limits. I was dispatched to ensure that this house was secure, and I've found nothing amiss. Did you see or hear anything?”

“No,” Hermione replied, relieved that McGonagall was not a Legilimens; she was certain her thoughts were trumpeting her secrets and schemes loud enough for the world to hear, magic or no. She thought she heard, or was it her imagination, a ghost of a snort from the spot just outside her peripheral vision where she knew he was standing, and she clenched her teeth to squelch the sudden and wholly inappropriate bubble of laughter she felt struggling to burst free.

McGonagall nodded slowly and took one last hard look around the room. Hermione seemed unusually

jumpy, and a little flushed, and her teacher's instincts clamored that something was off. Still, she could see nothing out of the ordinary, and she quilled up her sudden suspicious flare as nothing more than adrenaline.

"Very well, Miss Granger. Now that you're up, though, I do hope you will join Potter and Weasley at the Burrow. Better to be with others during these dark times."

"Of course, Professor," she said, turning to fuss with some vials as she listened to the steady tread of the other witch's retreating footsteps, then the muffled thud of the exterior door as it closed behind her.

"That was rather close, Miss Granger," she heard him mutter, dry humor with a distinct thread of sarcasm. She turned and glared at him fully, an indistinct shape in the shadows against the wall.

"Rather," she said shortly, rapping him smartly on the head with her wand, taking a small bit of perverse pleasure as his scowling visage became clear, and he rubbed the spot on his scalp her wand had impacted.

"Did it occur to you that a better place for me to hide would be this secret room of yours?" The intimidating-professor demeanor was back, and she struggled not to cringe.

"Of course it did," she ground out through clenched teeth. "But I couldn't risk her overhearing me and thereby knowing about the room now, could I?"

He made a non-committal noise and took in the basement more fully now, as they'd barely reached the bottom of the stairs when McGonagall's entrance upstairs had prompted her to shove him against the wall behind the shelves. A potions lab, obviously, and he felt that familiar surge of anger. He grabbed it and held on; anger he knew, and it was a much more comfortable emotion for him than hopelessness or desperation or this bizarre complacency in which he found himself mired. Severus Snape was a caustic, vengeful man, and he found that persona to be a small comfort in the center of his newly chaotic universe.

"Your true motives are suddenly transparent, Miss Granger. Did you think I would not notice this pathetic excuse of a laboratory? You believe you've found the Order some slave labor, do you?" He relished the swell of power as he spoke, the knowledge that he could still intimidate and ridicule. That his barbs were logically flawed was no matter; that cold disdain was like a live-saving draught, proving to him that he was still the man he assumed himself to be, reliance on this slip of a girl aside.

She looked at him as if he'd sprouted a second head. "What the hell are you on about? This is my lab! I'm more than capable of brewing what we need." Her response was colored with anger to match his scorn, and she wondered what it was about him that roused her ire so effortlessly, and when she'd developed the stones to talk to any adult, let alone her spiteful ex-Professor, in such a fashion.

"Your lab?" The irony was almost sickening, and his temper surged to new heights. A child, an insufferable know-it-all Gryffindor, a champion of Potter, all this was bad enough, but she was also usurping one of his jobs within the Order, that of potions provider?

"Yes, my lab. None of the other members have the time or skill, and I'm fully qualified to brew simple remedies and more. Or did you forget, *Professor*, that I was the best student in my year in Potions, even

better than your precious Malfoy.”

As soon as the words left her mouth she knew she'd gone too far; his face was contorted with fury, hands clenched at his sides, and she felt a sudden wave of power knock her backwards, and she staggered to keep her feet. She'd never seen an adult wizard lose control of their magic, and for the first time since she'd seen him lying on the ground in Diagon Alley she was afraid.

Trembling, she waited soundlessly for a verbal outburst, but he only stood there panting, his face still a mask of rage but there was something else there now, too. Shock? Surprise? Regret? She couldn't tell, but she watched as the emotions drained out of him, watched him pull his restraint around him like a cloak, and her fear dissipated as well, leaving only a niggling sense of shame.

She knew better than to rise to his bait; she'd always been the one to preach restraint, to admonish Ron and Harry to hold their tongues. What was it now that made her so bold, so unable to keep her own sharp retorts in check?

“I'm sorry, sir, that was uncalled for. I don't expect your help on any work I do down here, unless you... well, anyway, it wouldn't look good if I was producing anything too complicated, would it?”

He could hear the remorse in her voice, and silently castigated himself for his temper. He must remember she was his only ally, his only chance at something akin to redemption and he was not (as much as it galled him to admit it) in a position to dominate or threaten her, and it would be in his best interests to stay on her good side. And Snape was quite adept at keeping his own best interests in the forefront of his mind, and altering his actions accordingly.

Still, he was shaken a little at what had taken place. He'd lost control, both of his rage and his magic, and he could not remember the last time that had happened. He'd learned very young to keep his emotions tightly reigned, his Muggle father erupting at the slightest hint of his “disgusting” nature. He had swallowed more hatred and pain in the years that followed to think of himself as immune to immature outbursts; his spiteful sarcasm as much a tool as his wand, and even when he shouted and raged he was always mindful of that final thread of restraint, that last tether that prevented the full measure of his emotions to be unleashed. That he'd released that tether for even a moment startled and unnerved him, and he resolved to keep his feelings in even tighter check. Again, it was in his own self-interest to do so, but a small part of him acknowledged that he would feel something if he somehow hurt another (even a Gryffindor) due to his lack of control.

“It would be acceptable to me if I could assist you as needed. I know you are capable, Miss Granger, and I'm confident you'll be an asset to the Order.”

He said nothing else; no apology (saying something positive about the girl was tantamount to an apology in his eyes), nothing about Draco Malfoy (even thinking the name made his stomach lurch), and he was satisfied that she had accepted his overture. Still, she appeared hesitant and uncertain now, and he very much desired to be alone, to think, to analyze his lapse, and to devise the best course of action for dealing with his new situation, and her.

“Perhaps it would be best if you showed me my room,” he suggested.

“Oh, of course,” she replied, still a little shaken by his anger, his power. “42 Bitterwing Way, Bath, England, Basement, The Unfinished Room.”

His right eyebrow quirked, and suddenly there was a door, faded grey paint blending almost perfectly into the color of the surrounding cement, and he realized that he had been pressed against it while hiding from McGonagall. Impressed against his will, he silently conceded she’d done her homework well; the room was hidden perfectly.

“How did you determine you had been successful with the Nested Fidelius Charm?”

“I brought Ron down this morning and asked him if he could see anything on that wall. I think he thought I was hallucinating due to fatigue or potion fumes or something.”

His lip curled only slightly; he couldn’t repress six years of automatic reactions overnight, though he did acknowledge that expressing overt hostility toward her friends was ill-advised at this time. “How... gallant of him to be so concerned for your well-being.”

She flashed him a quick grin, then motioned to the newly revealed door. “It’s not much, sir, but it’s the best I could do on short notice. I should go, they’ll expect me at the Burrow soon.”

He nodded, about to enter his new “home” when her voice stopped him. “Wait, I almost forgot,” she said, fumbling in her pocket then holding out her hand. When he held his own out in return, palm up, she dropped a silver Sickle into it. She was about to explain when he spoke, sounding mildly amused.

“Should I assume you’ve used your proficiency with the Protean Charm again, Miss Granger?” The story of Dumbledore’s Army and her accomplishments with various charms in her fifth year had become common knowledge among the staff, and McGonagall and Flitwick in particular enjoyed gloating about her superior achievements.

“Yes, sir,” she said, a pleased blush coloring her cheeks. “I’ve charmed it to grow warm when I know someone will be arriving at the house, and cold when I know Moody is coming.” Again, he felt a frisson of admiration for her calculating mind; Moody was the biggest threat to his safety, given his ability to see through solid barriers, but he knew the magical eye could not penetrate a Fidelius Charm.

“That should be...adequate, Miss Granger.”

She recognized this as a dismissal and started up the stairs, already preparing for an afternoon of decorating and rambunctious Weasleys. Then a quiet murmur floated up to her ear and she turned to look at him, amazed.

“I am in your debt.”

He was already gone, door closing in his wake, and she was left to wonder if he had actually thanked her or if she had only imagined it.

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It had been a fun but exhausting afternoon. Hermione had arrived during lunch, gasping at the changes that had already occurred. The normally homey, slightly shabby looking house was gleaming; fresh paint adorned the exterior walls, warped roof tiles had been replaced, and the windows shined – she giggled slightly when she saw one of them spit a small amount of what appeared to be pink soapy water into the garden.

That, too, had been overhauled, weeded and trimmed and de-gnomed, an explosion of beautiful flowers filling the air with their sweet but subtle perfume. Hermione wasn't aware of any flower that gave off the distinct aroma she inhaled, and assumed that the some or all of the blossoms had been charmed to emit a scent Fleur had chosen. The trees in the yard were gold now, and festooned with large blue blossoms. Gold and blue, the color scheme for the nuptials, gold the color of Fleur's hair, blue the exact shade of Bill's eyes. The overall effect was striking, the yard a riot of brilliant hues, and she found the colors gorgeous and romantic.

Over lunch she'd listened as the guest list and other arrangements were discussed. Despite Mrs. Weasley's and Mrs. Delacour's objections, both Bill and Fleur had insisted on a rather small affair. Between the growing, persistent danger from Voldemort and the still somber atmosphere that seemed to hang over the entire wizarding world since the death of Dumbledore, they felt that a huge ceremony would be somehow disrespectful, and certainly risky. So they were keeping the guest list relatively small (in a family the size of the Weasleys', small was definitely relative), Mr. and Mrs. Delacour graciously agreeing to hold the wedding in Britain, inviting only the closest relatives and friends.

After lunch they all tramped out into the yard to set up the tent, a rented space that, while it barely looked as if it could accommodate the entire Weasley clan, let alone guests, was magically enchanted so that the interior resembled a spacious cathedral, all carved stone and arches, with more than enough room for all those invited to attend. Of course, even with magic it took several attempts to get it set up properly, and then there was more decorating to do. Soon Hermione was busy arranging flowers, enchanting the seats the proper colors (gold frames with blue cushions, of course), and spelling dozens of candles to float along the aisles.

She was surprised at how quickly the time flew, and once everything met with Fleur's approval they enjoyed a light dinner in the yard. It was a warm, hazy summer evening, and while everyone was in good spirits, excited about the upcoming wedding, there was still an air of unspoken sadness, a somber cloud that hid some of the happy sun from view.

Fred and George had brought some of their new products for everyone to see and enjoy, including a set of Quidditch balls that would have made the game next to impossible to finish; a Quaffle that grew warmer the longer it was held, Bludgers that multiplied upon being struck, and a Snitch that Apparated as soon as anyone got within a foot. While everyone passed the items around (except the Stink Snake, a variation on a boring Muggle firework that filled the air with the odor of rotten eggs and dragon dung), Hermione sat in the shade of one of those golden trees, watching the antics of the twins and letting her mind drift as she watched the sunset, brilliant splashes of orange and purple and red illuminating fluffy white clouds. It was so nice to just be, quiet and relaxed. There was so little time for that now, her days seemingly filled with reading and planning and worrying about the future. Her reverie was broken as Harry sat down beside her on the grass, holding two bottles of butterbeer and sporting a purple mustache.

She laughed as he handed her one of the bottles. "That's a nice look for you, Harry."

He grinned good-naturedly. George had assured him the effect wore off in about an hour. "You'd think I would know not to eat anything I don't recognize when the twins are around."

They sipped their drinks in comfortable silence for a minute or two, enjoying the easy familiarity of friendship and the warm evening air. It had been some time since they'd had the opportunity to experience this, just being together without some urgent pressing matter to discuss. Harry looked at her carefully, noting the tired eyes, the slightly paler complexion.

"Did you find what you were looking for last night?"

"What? Oh, no, I had an idea that some sort of protective charm might help us when we destroy the... thing, but I didn't really find anything useful," she improvised hastily, lowering her voice to ensure no one else overheard them talking.

"You shouldn't wear yourself out, 'Mione. We'll find the answer eventually. You're no good to us dead on your feet."

She smiled and patted him on the arm. "Don't worry, Harry, I'm sure we all have some sleepless nights ahead. I'm fine, really. *Really*," she reiterated, seeing the protesting look in his eyes.

"Okay," he said, taking another sip of his butterbeer. He cleared his throat, a question he'd wanted to ask since the end of sixth year burning in his throat, and he suddenly blurted it out, wincing slightly at his lack of tact. "So what's up with you and Ron, anyway?"

She looked at him quizzically, but he seemed more curious than demanding or possessive. She sighed – explaining the exact nature of her relationship to Ron was no easy task, even to her. She knew there had been an unspoken assumption that they would end up together, just as she knew that Molly in particular was lying in wait, expecting any day to receive the news that her youngest son was in love.

"We're...well, we're friends, Harry, but nothing more, and I don't think we'll ever be anything more. We talked a bit while you were out getting the locket. He...he kissed me," she remembered with a blush, almost feeling the shy press of his lips against hers, sweet but passionless.

"He fancies you, you know," Harry said carefully. He cared for both his friends deeply, watched them laugh with and infuriate each other, and he knew that while Ron could be rather clueless when it came to boy-girl relationships, he believed the other boy cared deeply for their mutual friend.

"I know. I fancied him, too, for a long time. But...I don't know, Harry, it's just no good now. With the war and all, and the way he acted last year, I just don't feel the same way any more. I care about him, and love him, but it's like the way I love you, like a brother, only a little...a little sadder."

He slid his arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into the lean strength of his body. "I'm sorry," he replied simply. He didn't really know what he was apologizing for. The thoughtlessness of his best friend? That they hadn't found happiness together? He just held her, lost in thoughts of love and loss and friendship, and how they all seemed to weather the storms even when things didn't work out quite right.



“There’s no reason for you to apologize, Harry, but thank you.” She hesitated, then reciprocated, asking the question she’d been pondering. “And you and Ginny?”

He squeezed her shoulder, holding her to him a little more tightly, and she felt his breath ripple through him in a weary, painful exhalation. “I can’t right now, it’s too dangerous, too...I just can’t. But I still...I want...”

He choked a little, unable to continue, but she understood, and wrapped an arm around his waist, holding him as he was holding her. They sat there as the sun continued to set, nestled in friendly comfort and melancholy, and the happy din of family and friends surrounded them in contentment, at least for this little while.

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## Chapter 7: Temper, temper

Disclaimer: Not mine. No profit.

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‘Not much has changed,’ he reflected sourly, eyes scanning the room again, though he knew there was nothing else, nothing new to see. Just another desolate room, another cell, and he felt an unbidden surge of empathy for Sirius, revulsion boiling his blood even at the idea of having something in common with that insolent cur. Still, he’d had a whole house to roam, while Snape now found himself confined to a single room, too leery and cautious to venture outside the protection of this hidden sanctuary, even with his enchanted coin to warn him. So he stayed put and paced, seven steps exactly from wall to wall, already itching to move, to act, to do something other than just sit and let the unknown happen around him, to him, without his input or impetus.

Less than twenty-four hours into his new captivity and he was already climbing the walls (figuratively, of course, as he could not do so literally without a wand), already frustrated beyond reason. Clearly he had not thought this through, thought about the consequences of this sequence of events. Now he was truly trapped, unable to extricate himself from this bind (did he want to?) and he found his resentment burgeoning inside his breast, resentment at her and at himself.

He’d heard them return the previous night, heard the muted voice, the squeaks of floorboards, the soft susurrations of water in pipes. No one had descended the basement steps, however, and he’d found himself undisturbed, and he felt almost safe. Safe enough that he’d been dragged into a dark tunnel of slumber, hours without dreams as his body recuperated, then another hour or two of familiar, tormenting visions before waking once again in a panic, sweat clammy on his brow and chest, reaching for a wand he did not possess.

That had marked the end of his rest, and he found himself pacing like a caged animal, almost growling in his distaste for captivity, for the silence that now mocked him in his futility. Again, the irony struck him; how many times, in a castle full of clamoring adolescents, had he wished for nothing more than to be alone, untarnished by the voices, thoughts, even the scent of another living being. And now he had his wish, alone with his own thoughts, and for a fleeting instant he thought that anything, even a first year class of Gryffindors, would be preferable to this.

Of course, when he’d contemplated a silent haven, there had always been his preferred diversions present as well. Books, journals, his own research and academic pursuits, and the silent simmering glow of cauldrons, the aroma of his craft. Never had he desired this – silence without purpose, isolation without intent. He was safe now, perhaps, but was simply being safe enough?

At least he felt better, physically, a tepid shower and change of clothing he’d found folded neatly at the foot of his cot doing a great deal to make him feel more civilized, more human. A plate set out on a small table, empty when he’d first arrived, had filled with food the previous evening after some Order members had returned, and again this morning. Hermione had clearly mastered another complicated charm, and a plate elsewhere in the kitchen would provide him with sustenance when filled.

But now it was mid-morning. His need for food and rest satiated, nothing to do but pace and think, he found himself horribly bored, antsy, and battling again a swelling resentment.

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“It’s hopeless,” grumbled Ron, prodding the locket with his wand and glaring at the stubborn bit of jewelry.

“There’s got to be something we haven’t tried,” Harry replied, sounding more confident than he felt.

“I’m still looking,” mumbled Hermione feverishly, eyes moving so quickly back and forth as she read the page of yet another dusty tome that Harry felt a bit queasy just watching her.

The excitement they’d felt when Harry retrieved Slytherin’s locket had vanished, replaced by a creeping sense of desperation and futility. It simply refused to open, and no amount of unlocking charms seemed to be working, though Hermione continued perusing every book at their disposal. True, it had only been three days, but each had thought that the hardest part of their quest would be finding the Horcruxes, not disposing of them. Harry thought, in retrospect, that this had been rather short-sighted of them; he had no idea how Dumbledore had destroyed the ring, and it had been good fortune rather than solid planning that had allowed him to dispense with the diary. Basilisk fangs didn’t exactly grow on trees.

“Maybe we need to think more creatively. Voldemort never seemed to think outside the box. He expected that if anyone knew or suspected about the Horcruxes, he would be trying to thwart fully trained, powerful wizards, not teenagers who haven’t even finished school. Maybe...maybe we need to be thinking about easier ways to break something open, not trickier ones.”

Hermione’s brows knitted together. “You may have something there, Harry. He does seem to ignore certain aspects of the world if they don’t meet with his approval, or if he considers them to be somehow beneath him. Like love providing the protection your mum gave you.”

“So...er...what’s a simpler way to open something?”

“We could smash it somehow. Oh, like a Muggle maybe, I’ll bet my dad would know something about that,” Ron said brightly. “Or maybe we could melt it or something.”

“But we already tried a Fire Spell, and it’s bound to have enchantments protecting it from brute force, right?”

“Well, it’s worth a try, isn’t it? You-Know-Who hates Muggles, he would probably never dream a Muggle-born would ever be anywhere near his Horcruxes.”

She was about to retort when Harry cut her off, staring at the locket and waving his hand. “Stop bickering for a minute. What’s the easiest way to get something to open?”

“Er...you know, just turn it or unclasp it or whatever.”

“What about asking?”

Dumbfounded, Ron and Hermione watched as he picked it up, held it directly in front of his face. “Open.”

Nothing happened. “Um...open, please?”

The others tried as well, but the locket remained firmly closed. Momentarily stumped, Ron asked, “Well, how would You-Know-Who ask?”

Hermione gasped, the answer striking like lightening, and felt as if they all ought to have considered this sooner. “Harry, try it in Parseltongue!”

Harry groaned at the obviousness of it. Concentrating on the faint outline of the serpent etched into the golden surface, his lips parted. “*Open*,” he said, vaguely aware of the guttural hiss that flowed from his mouth.

Suddenly the locket trembled then began glowing, a faint, eerie gleam of poisonous green. Harry dropped it on the table, startled, and they all watched, mesmerized and horrified, as it sprang open, rattling against the wooden surface. The green light grew brighter, seemed to coalesce into a mist that rose from, yet still clung to, the opened halves of the jewelry. Breathless with dread, unbearably curious, Harry inched closer, peering through the emerald haze to see what was inside. Where tiny photos would normally have been, there was instead nothing but an inky black pool. Mirror smooth yet rippling, the darkness appeared to swell and grow as Harry stared, and he was paralyzed but moving closer, the obsidian void swallowing his vision, he was being dragged into the abyss, and then he was falling, screams piercing his ears and fire searing through his soul...

And then he was waking up on the floor, flat on his back with the panicked faces of Ron and Hermione looking down at him. ‘*Déjà vu*,’ he thought glumly, wincing as he felt the back of his head throb; he assumed he’d struck it against the floor when he’d fallen, and the raw sensation in his throat confirmed that some of the screams he’d heard were probably his.

“What happened?” he croaked. “Did either of you fall in, too?”

“Harry, you didn’t go anywhere, you just...you went rigid and starting yelling and then you fell, it looked like you were having a seizure, and...and...” She found she couldn’t continue, fear clogging her throat, and Ron looked positively ashen.

“And what, ‘Mione? I was the only one affected?”

Ron nodded, lips trembling. “Harry, your scar, it...well, it...”

Harry sat up too quickly, the room spinning while his stomach lurched but he kept going, on his feet and stumbling into the hall, panicked now as he realized that his scar was prickling for the first time in months. He pushed into the bathroom and found his reflection in the mirror.

He was so pale his features stood out in stark relief, dark spiky hair like thatch against his skin, eyes bright with apprehension, and the scar, that damned scar, a vibrant tattoo across his forehead, livid and

pulsing...

His stomach dropped, and he thrust his knuckles into this mouth to stifle a cry, when he realized that instead of the bright red shade he'd been anticipating, he saw instead that his scar was a violent, horrific green.

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Preoccupied, Hermione made her way to the basement after lunch, trying to clear her mind to focus on the upcoming task – she was planning to complete a batch each of Pepperup Potion and Calming Draught. She was plagued by thoughts of Harry and his scar, and the implications that were now swirling in her brain. What she had observed had frightened her, the tendrils of mist reaching out to her friend, almost caressing his face, his brow, and then the answering pulse of jade that seemed to burst to life from his sinciput. He was resting now, the vile shimmer nothing more than a memory, but she was afraid of what it might mean, and what they might have to do.

Absently she went to the shelves where the ingredients were kept, grabbing the requisite items, a glass stirring rod, phials and stoppers to bottle the potions once they had cooled. She had just finished arranging the various herbs and powders around two of the pewter cauldrons when she heard a tentative rap from behind the door to Snape's room.

Quickly casting a Silencing Charm, she opened the door, startled to find herself face to face with a visibly irritated Snape. She was forcibly reminded of the numerous times she'd seen him with an identical expression on his face; brows knitted, eyes sparking, lips contorted into an angry, condescending sneer. A tiny part of her mind was also vaguely amused – the clothing she'd secured for him, while his preferred black in color, was Muggle in origin, a loose T-shirt and faded denim jeans. She had only the back of her father's closet to scrounge from, and the pickings had been fairly slim and decidedly unwizardly. As her father was both taller and broader than her former professor, the clothing didn't quite fit right, and the overall effect was definitely less austere than his normal presentation.

“Where have you been, Miss Granger?”

Nonplussed, she responded. “I was helping Harry this morning.”

His temple throbbed, as it usually did when Potter was mentioned. “I do not appreciate being ignored.”

Surprised, she couldn't suppress a burst of laughter. “I was under the impression you enjoyed solitude, sir. That you found the constant presence of students and conversation oppressive and irritating.”

He had learned from his explosion the day before, so while he experienced a fresh surge of powerful emotions, he consciously maintained a dam against the flood, containing his magic behind the barrier. It was probably aided by the acknowledgement that she was right, he did value solitude, freedom from the endless, pointless questions of dimwitted children or the pontification of other professors. So why was he so mad now, why did he want to shout at her, rage at her, throttle her?

She was still smiling as she prodded the burner under the first cauldron with her wand, measuring the

appropriate amount of salamander blood to start the base of her Pepperup Potion. She could feel him behind her, a dark brooding presence, but she refused to be drawn into his dour mood today. She'd decided over lunch, as she ruminated on their exchange the previous day, that it would be far easier to behave with him as she had for years in his classroom; namely, ignoring his harsh words and vindictive tone, and taking nothing personally. After all, she suffered no delusions that he enjoyed her company. She was well aware he would not have turned to her had another option presented itself. He was who he was, and she thought it would be rather foolish to behave or believe as if she was expecting him to act in any other fashion.

As she continued working, feigning ambivalence to the seething wizard behind her, he felt his temper begin to cool, leaving him confused and agitated. Unaccustomed to being ignored or in having such difficulty managing his reactions, he found himself unable to fire off a scathing retort to her laugh, to her cheerful dismissal of his ire. Slightly desperate to assert some sort of normalcy, he scrutinized her every move, waiting for her to make an error in her brewing so that he could pounce and criticize. It seemed as if every facet of his existence was sliding from his grasp, carefully structured routines and facades slipping through his fingers like water. He wanted, needed to reestablish himself. Teacher to her student was as good an option as any.

“Miss Granger, if you stir too quickly the mixture will destabilize.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said automatically, reaching for the essence of capsicum.

“You must be careful with that, the potion is at its most delicate stage.”

Still determined to ignore his provocation, she forced her tone to remain bland, neutral. “I was aware of that, sir, I have made this potion before.” She thumbed the cork from the slender beaker, keeping it well away from her face as a puff of steam rushed out.

“If your current demonstration is any indication, I highly doubt it was as efficacious as possible. Stand aside and allow me to demonstrate.”

“Really, that won't be necessary, I know what I'm...”

She was turning to face him as he reached to take the bottle from her hand, and the container hit him squarely in the shoulder. Jarred loose from her hand, it seemed that the moment was frozen in time, that they had an eternity to watch the glass glinting in the light from the cooking flame, the sharp crack and tinkle as it hit the lip of the cauldron and shattered, the arc and splatter of caustic liquid as it flew up and out from the impact.

And then as time righted itself she was shrieking, the burning fluid splattered on her exposed hand and face. She fell to the ground clutching at her face, swiping at her eyes with hands that felt like they were on fire. She couldn't see past the red haze of pain, her eyes boiling hot orbs, the flesh of her countenance a conflagration of torment. It hurt in ways she had never imagined, the blistering heat absolute torture, agony past endurance.

He had been shielded from the flying liquid by her body, only a small bit of it hitting his pants, the exposed skin of his forearms. Ignoring his own pain, Snape cursed, snatched her wand from the table to

Vanish the spilled fluid, but it had already penetrated her skin, set her nerve endings ablaze. He knelt beside her and tried to pull her hands from her face so he could help her, but she was still wailing and thrashing, lost in her anguish, unable to respond to anything but the searing pain.

Roughly he grabbed her shoulders to still her, lowering his head to speak directly into her ear. "Miss Granger! Miss Granger...Hermione, you must be still so I can help you. I'm trying to help you."

She heard a noise penetrating the white-hot blaze of her distress, but concentration was too much; she was all instinct and wounded animal, oblivious to reason. It was her name that broke through, finally, her given name from a deep familiar voice, gentle yet commanding, and she forced herself to listen, really listen, as he said something over and over, that he could help. And she knew this voice, knew he meant no harm, and she tried to do as he said, tried to control her tossing limbs.

Trembling and whimpering, but no longer fighting his grasp, he softly pried her hands away from her face. "*Aguamenti*," he murmured, and cool water flowed from the tip of her wand, rinsing corrosive fluid from her swollen, crimson hands. She shuddered in relief, some of the burning subsiding and then he was pulling her head into his lap, blessedly chill water pouring over her lips, her cheeks, her eyes, flushing away the fire, cleansing the pain. So careful his fingers as he massaged her eyelids, coaxing them apart so that the water could wash away the final traces of the capsicum, the spring from her wand mingling freely with her tears.

Satisfied that he'd eradicated the substance from her skin, he held the tip of her wand over his own arms, sighing softly as the burn was extinguished. Finally he whispered the words to stop the flow of water; another whisper and the puddles on the floor vanished. He helped her to sit beside him, examining her skin for blisters, tracing the reddened flesh of her hands and face to gauge the damage.

Their eyes locked, and Snape was struck suddenly by an uncomfortable truth. This was no adolescent, no student, no annoying chit who met his gaze so openly, her warm brown eyes puffy and glazed with tears. It was a difficult transition, sometimes, for any adult to recognize when someone they've known as a child is now someone new and entire. He was painfully aware in that moment that she was different, more than the image of her he held in his mind's eye, more than that bushy haired student with her hand in the air and smudges of ink on her nose. She was more, different and yet the same, and her expression held none of the malice he was accustomed to seeing in another. He felt his world shift inexplicably to incorporate this new data; her hand gripping his elbow, the heat of her body next to him, the curves of her body he saw revealed beneath the damp shirt she wore, now plastered to her form.

He scrambled to his feet, staring down at her with a peculiar look on his face. She stood more awkwardly, examining her inflamed fingers, feathering them over the planes of her face that felt huge and monstrous, though she knew they were likely only reddened and mildly swollen. She was mentally berating her carelessness; she knew better than to handle the volatile substance without her gloves, but had deemed them unnecessary, never expecting him to interfere. She supposed she should have been angry at him, furious that his intrusion had spoiled the potion and caused her pain, but the look on his face was so odd, so foreign, that she found her irritation was gone even before it was born.

It wasn't until he flicked her wand again, drying their clothing wordlessly, that she realized he was still holding it. Granted, she hardly begrudged him the use of it to aid her, but she was very still nonetheless, pulse hammering in her chest, as he glanced at it, then at her. He was armed again, and if she was wrong,

if she had been mistaken in trusting him and bringing him into this sanctuary, she could now pay a terrible price.

He smiled briefly, a small, sad twist of the lips, and wordlessly offered her the wand. He knew the thoughts that had raced through her mind just now, and he did not blame her in the slightest. He had done much in his life to earn the mistrust of others. He was disinclined to do anything that would breach her fragile faith in him now.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, her relief evident in her voice, and she quickly disposed of the now useless concoction and Scourgified the cauldron.

“Gratitude is unnecessary,” he replied stiffly, still somewhat unnerved by his recent discovery that she was no longer a girl, but a woman.

Awkward silence now filled the space between them. He felt compelled to explain, to defend his actions, but he did not understand them himself. Abruptly, it occurred to him that his towering anger had very little to do with her, and that he was simply giving vent to it in her presence because that was his *modus operandi*, to take out his nasty moods on whatever victim lay in his path. He had schooled himself well, in his years as a spy, to never show his true feelings to the one who deserved to see them. So he berated the innocent, vilified whoever was available, and used their fear and trembling to sooth the unfulfilled desire for vengeance.

No more. He would save it, contain it, swallow it down until it could be unleashed against the Dark Lord, or against himself. It was the mistakes of his callow youth that had molded him into the closed, sometimes vicious man he had become; his mistakes, and the pure evil of his sometime Master. While it had never bothered him before to take out his rotten moods on others, he finally found himself in a situation where not only could this tack prove more harmful than beneficial, but he actually did not want to do so anymore.

“Miss Granger, I...regret my temper. You are not the cause, therefore you do not deserve to be subjected to it. I have been...impatient and bored. At your convenience, I would appreciate being given access to some reading material or parchment and ink. I will endeavor to leave you in peace.”

She doubted she could have been more shocked than had Ron suddenly started paying attention in History of Magic, or Harry declared his undying affection for Voldemort. Was he...apologizing?

“O-Of course, sir, I’m sorry I didn’t think of it earlier,” she stuttered. “And, well, I wouldn’t be averse to your helping me here. I can’t imagine what it must be like to be cooped up all alone with no way to help, you must feel worthless...” The inflammation from the capsicum gave way to a dark flush of embarrassment and horror, and she castigated her runaway mouth for its lack of tact.

“Indeed,” was his rueful reply, and when she dared to look at him, she saw no malice in his expression, only wry amusement. “I would enjoy the opportunity to be useful in some way.”

The rest of the afternoon passed in silence, their newfound and uneasy truce heavy in the air. But there were no more accidents or explosions, with either materials or words, and when she left to return upstairs it seemed as if they had reached a comfortable though unspoken understanding. And when his meal appeared a while later, there on the edge of his plate of Lancashire Hotpot, was his wand.



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AN: Capsicum is one of the ingredients in police issued pepper spray. As a former cop, I can attest to the effects; though it is intensely painful, the effects are ultimately harmless and short-lived. I may have taken a few liberties with the properties here, but this is one area where I feel like I do know what I'm talking about. :)

Also, this story is now officially longer than my masters thesis. I can't figure out if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

## Chapter 8: The Wedding

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money.

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The trio made no further progress on the locket in the days leading up to the wedding. They had decided to leave it closed until they had a solid plan for eliminating it, and all their research had been focused on methods of destroying Dark artifacts. Unfortunately, they were woefully out of their depth; even Hermione was having difficulty locating potentially helpful material, and the resources at Headquarters were simply not adequate to the task at hand. Harry flatly refused to discuss his scar, and she and Ron once again resorted to hurried conversations about their concerns, watching their friend as they tried to work, exchanging worried glances when he cringed and rubbed the offending mark. It seemed to be bothering him again, almost as frequently as it had in their fifth year, and though Ron seemed genuinely concerned, he also thought they should let him deal with it his own way. Hermione, on the other hand, was almost beside herself with worry, and she had a sneaking suspicion that this time around, the pain and Harry's odd behavior when the scar was bothering him portended something far worse and more sinister.

While their progress with the Horcruxes was nil, she thought her relationship with Snape was nothing short of astonishing. He hadn't said a snide or biting word since the accident with the capsicum. He was civil, cordial even, quietly thanking her for the return of his wand and the reading material she'd provided, assisting her in brewing medicinal remedies. A man of few words, not given to extraneous conversation, they had spent several days working in companionable silence, passing ingredients and phials, and he had questioned neither her choice of potions to be concocted nor her technique.

She actually wondered if he was well, but he looked increasingly healthy, and she was loath to question this startling but welcome change in his demeanor. His severe features were more relaxed, and garbed now in Transfigured clothing more to his tastes, he seemed almost serene. She found that she did not dread his presence now; in fact, she rather enjoyed the time spent in the lab, her contribution to the Order so much more tangible there than in her so far fruitless research, and the quiet company of a competent companion sometimes more agreeable than the often discordant grumbling of her friends.

Still, she knew the importance of the mission she shared with Ron and Harry, and she was determined to find something that would help. That was her forte, was it not? She was the one who used brains and knowledge, plucked facts from books and provided them with answers and hope. Since the library in the house had yielded few results, she would have to look elsewhere for material, and she had a good idea where to start.

Hermione approached Professor McGonagall the day before the wedding, asked permission to raid the library at Hogwarts for books that may prove useful. The information they needed had to exist somewhere, and the extensive holdings of the school seemed a likely place.

"Of course, Miss Granger," the older witch replied curtly, and Hermione noticed the strange, dark shadow that flitted across her face.

"Is something wrong, Professor?"

McGonagall signed deeply, a sharp ache in her heart. “Hogwarts will not be opening in the fall, my dear. It’s simply too dangerous, with Albus gone and Severus...” That hitch again; it seemed as if whenever a member of the Order spoke Snape’s name there was that pause, as if the word itself were poison, unclean. “Severus knew many of the secrets of the castle, its defenses and protection, and too many parents have opted to keep their children close to home.” Another sigh, sad and weary. She could not blame families that had chosen to stay together in these dark times, but she had dedicated such a large portion of her life to the school, and it hurt, physically ached, to contemplate the months ahead without the rooms that had been her home, without students to teach and mentor as she watched their squabbles and victories, tears and triumphs.

“I didn’t know,” Hermione said softly, lost in a flood of her own memories of the school, and she had to clear a sudden lump from her throat before continuing.

“May I remove books from the school? And I was hoping to be allowed access to the Restricted Section as well.”

McGonagall’s gaze sharpened. There were good reasons for those manuals to be restricted; many contained Dark magic, and all could be dangerous in the wrong hands. “I assume you are asking because of your research with Mr. Potter. Can you at least tell me generally which texts you wish to consult?”

Hesitantly, Hermione weighed the request before speaking. “Well, we’re looking for ways to destroy cursed or Dark artifacts.”

McGonagall pursed her lips into a thin, disapproving line. The force necessary to eradicate Dark magic was inherently dangerous, and it required great control and purity of purpose to resist the seductive pull of such power. The latter did not concern her greatly; she thought that if anyone could resist the lure of the Dark Arts, it was Potter and his friends. She was uncertain any of them possessed the strength or magical control required to even attempt breaking a truly evil enchantment, and failure in such a venture could be disastrous.

Still, what other option was open to her? She was felt quite conflicted in her desire to both aid and protect them. If an older member of the Order had approached with such a request, she would have acquiesced with little hesitation, offered her assistance in locating the appropriate information. To offer such blatant approval to these three seemed foolhardy, asinine, wrong. She was already regretting her declaration to treat them like adults – they were so young!

“I can provide the titles of those books I believe would be most useful. If you see something else you would like access to, I would request that you let me know. These are ancient and often terrible texts, Hermione, and I do not wish you to come to harm.”

She smiled a bit at the serious tone and somber mien of the older woman. “That sounds great. It would be a huge help if you could narrow the selection down a bit, and I promise to take excellent care of anything I borrow.”

McGonagall snorted delicately. “Of that I have no doubt.” The girl absolutely revered books; she would do no more damage one than declare herself a Slytherin.

“Thank you, Professor,” she beamed. “I’m hopeful we’ll find what we need at Hogwarts.”

McGonagall allowed herself a small smile, taking pleasure from the enthusiasm of her former student. So young. Fates willing, that spark would not be erased in the long months ahead.

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The day of Bill and Fleur’s wedding dawned bright and clear. Everyone was looking forward to a day of joy and celebration; there was an unspoken feeling that it could be the last such occurrence for some time. Harry, Ron, and Hermione rose early, swapping good-natured banter with their morning porridge and bacon. Each spent extra time with their daily ablutions, donning dress robes, taming unruly or bushy hair, or dabbing Drexley’s Debonair Cologne in strategic locations in hopes of attracting the attention of any single young witches. Of course, only Ron included the latter strategy in his morning routine, as Harry was still pining for Ginny and Hermione had no particular inclination to attract witches, young or otherwise.

The nuptials were to take place at eleven in the morning, so right around nine they left the house in Bath and Apparated to the Burrow, arriving early enough to help with last minute details. Hermione wondered if Fleur was disappointed by the necessarily limited scope of the affair, if she longed for a huge spectacle with more guests, more fanfare, more everything. The intimate gathering of only close family and friends just didn’t seem to be her style, and she wondered if the bride felt cheated at all, cheated out of a childhood dream by danger and war.

Soon it was time to begin, the gathered guests finding their seats and waiting expectantly for the ceremony to begin. Ron was surveying the assembly, looking hopeful whenever he spied an unfamiliar and attractive female; Harry looked wistful, his eyes returning again and again to Ginny, beautiful in her simple sky blue robes, her long red hair flowing loose and free. Hermione was content to listen to the quiet hum of voices, snippets of conversation, as she scanned the small gathering around her.

“Lovely day,” she overheard an elderly witch comment to her partner, a tiny, frail wizard with enormous spectacles balanced precariously on the bridge of his nose.

“I wonder, where ees Henri?” said an anxious looking man, French accent thick and worried.

A single, delicate musical note rang clearly over the gathering and a hush fell. Never having attended a magical wedding, Hermione watched, enraptured, as the attendants filed in, smiling and flushed, all wearing gauzy robes of blue with gold threading, simple and lovely. Then Fleur, floating and beautiful, her ivory robes accented with tiny golden suns and azure moons. Bill’s scarred face made his grin look twisted, but the love in his eyes shone bright and unspoiled, and he reached for his bride’s hand as she gently drifted back to earth by his side.

A prim looking older witch performed the ceremony, and as the couple was bound, legally and magically, those in attendance watched in reverent silence, the couples’ joy at the union palpable and shared by those they loved. Everything seemed suspended in a blissful haze, the ceremony short but sweet and timeless, and for a brief moment all seemed right in the world.

It was as Bill was leaning forward to press his lips to his new wife's mouth that a sharp, fleeting pain rippled through members of the crowd. Hermione felt it too, glanced about in confusion as a grimace blossomed on the faces of Harry and Ron as well, and then their perfect little universe exploded in violence.

The discomfort they had felt was the breach of the protective wards; all of the Order gasped, the horror of the truth dawning, and a dozen masked Death Eaters suddenly appeared in their midst. Wands were drawn, but in the whirling chaos of pressing bodies and flashing wands, bellows and cackling laughter, it was difficult to aim. Hermione saw Harry running toward the front of the tent, toward the altar, his features contorted with fury and light erupting from the tip of his wand. A bolt of orange flame brushed her shoulder and she threw herself to the ground, rolling away from the danger, and then she was on her feet again, searching for an enemy to fight, a black robed figure to hex, but all she could see were panicked faces and streaking spells. There, a body on the ground, desperately trying to protect his head as others ran by; and there, smoke obscuring air as the side of the tent caught fire, and she could make out only bits and pieces of what she was seeing.

“Now!” a hoarse voice cried, and she whirled toward the sound, fixed her sights on the hulking man, a curse on her lips. Before she could finish the incantation he was pivoting, the flash of red from her wand sailing through now empty space, and all around she heard the distinct cracks of Apparation as they fled the scene.

As swiftly as they'd arrived, the Death Eaters vanished, leaving nothing but destruction and death in their wake.

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AN: I know, what a place to end a chapter. The causalities will be revealed in the next chapter. On that note - this story was begun before the release of Deathly Hallows and is NOT DH compliant. Different canon characters will die in this story, and there WILL BE major character death. Those chapters will be noted appropriately, Chapter 9 included.

## Chapter 9: Aftermath

Disclaimer: 10th verse, same as the previous nine.

A/N: This will be the first of multiple chapters featuring a major character death. Again, this story is NOT DH compliant. You have been warned...

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“It was him, I know it was him...”

“You don’t know that, Harry, you never saw his face.”

“...and when I find him, I’m going to kill him. I’ll kill him slowly.” His voice was hard and cold, sharp and piercing. Death Eaters had attacked the Burrow, disrupted what should have been the happiest day of Bill and Fleur’s life, and he had done nothing. None of his curses had struck their mark as he stumbled and ducked, and then he’d seen *him*, the traitor, Snape, standing tall and proud as he hexed the bride. Harry was sure, so sure; it had to be him, it was his curse, Sectumsempra, and he’d been forced to watch, helpless, as the blood flew.

“Please, Harry,” Lupin pleaded, eyes bloodshot and raw, hands trembling slightly as he clutched his mug of coffee. “Don’t do anything rash, don’t fill your mind with thoughts of revenge.”

They were sitting in the kitchen of 42 Bitterwing, nursing beverages and talking mostly in soft, shocked tones, monosyllabic phrases. Harry at the table, staring into a small glass of firewhiskey, face tight and dark; Hermione on his right, hand on his arm, desperate to soothe him, tears blurring her sight as she remembered, over and over; Lupin, ragged and worn, who had spent the hours after the ceremony searching fruitlessly for the attackers; and Mundungus, terrified to be alone, already drunk and only half awake, slumped in his stool by the fireplace. They hadn’t left the room since the last Floo call, too numb to think, too hurt to contemplate anything like a plan.

The Death Eaters had executed a textbook quick strike, Apparating, inflicting as much damage as possible, and fleeing the instant they feared the turn of the tide. Many of the guests had suffered minor injuries, as many from the crush of panicked bodies and flying chairs as from the hexes themselves. Fred Weasley had regained consciousness fairly quickly, and his badly sprained knee was well on the mend; Tonks was put to right quickly by McGonagall, and had joined in the search for the followers of Voldemort that followed. However, not everyone had been so fortunate. Gabrielle, Fleur’s little sister, was at St. Mungo’s, completely incoherent when she wasn’t screaming, and Moody was in even worse shape, unresponsive and catatonic, his magical eye spinning and spinning until they’d finally spelled the eyelid shut.

And then there was Fleur, the bride. Slashed open across her flawless face, crimson blood staining her snow white gown, and Bill beside himself with grief. The healers were uncertain if she would survive, so deep and grievous was the wound, and the sight in her left eye was gone regardless, her visage permanently torn open and ruined. Her physical beauty in tatters, she clung precariously to life, and her new husband refused to leave her side, clutching desperately to slivers of hope and her seemingly

tenacious desire to survive.

But that was not the worst by far, and the whole of the Order was collectively shaken by the death that had shattered their family. Arthur Weasley, lover of Muggles, provider and father, parent in absentia to Harry, had fallen. Struck down by the Killing Curse, there was nothing that could be done, and the entire Order was mourning his loss. Harry could feel it, feel the death, a sick hot feeling in the pit of his stomach, a pounding throb behind his eyes, and little flashes of Mr. Weasley kept playing through his mind; on the platform waiting for the Hogwarts train, at the Burrow surrounded by his family, in the hospital after the attack by Nagini two Christmases ago. He barely noticed the occasionally splash of tears in his drink, and he felt adrift, bereft. He ached to be with Ron, too, and Ginny, to comfort and just be with them, but they and the rest of the Weasleys (minus Percy) were at St. Mungo's, watching over Fred and Fleur and lost in their grief.

The only other death so far was a member of the Delacour family. Henri, Fleur's cousin and lifelong friend and confidant, had been deposited by the Death Eaters at the Burrow, body broken and eyes open and empty. They had invited so few people, entreated all of the guests to keep the particulars of the wedding secret, but it was obvious that the poor man had been tortured for information, and slaughtered when he'd served his purpose. How they had known of him or found and captured him was a mystery still, but it didn't seem to matter much, now. Not when they had lost so much.

Harry seethed when he recalled the poor man's bloodied face, frozen in agony by death. He would have died rather than betray his friends, no matter the price. He felt bile and enmity in the pit of his stomach, repressed the urge to retch, and took another sip of the burning amber liquid in his glass, felt it scorch its way down his throat into his gullet, mingle there with the heat of his fury and loss. He was so angry; at the world, at Voldemort, at his friends now urging him to be calm. They just didn't understand, couldn't fathom the depths of his rage.

And it was fixated all on Snape. A small part of him acknowledged that this was a distraction. It was Voldemort who commanded the Death Eaters, Voldemort who was responsible for the pain and death of those he loved, Voldemort who deserved the full brunt of his ire. But he kept seeing Dumbledore, helpless and spread eagle in the air, then shattered on the ground; Fleur, her flesh open and bleeding, Bill hovering over her with misery and despair etched on his face; Arthur's body, empty vacant eyes staring at nothing, never again to see his wife, his children, never again to shine with love and enthusiasm. And overlaying them all was Snape, sneering and cold, his wand alight with malice, hurting people he cared about, killing those he loved. It didn't matter that he hadn't seen the face of the man who'd cut down Fleur, or even witnessed Arthur's demise. He had seen Dumbledore's death, and it seemed easier somehow to heap the whole of his misery, all of the torment and fury, onto Snape's greasy head, easier somehow to contemplate killing his former professor, who at least was flesh and blood and mortal.

Lupin had been sent back with Harry and Hermione to protect them, be with them. He was greatly disturbed as he watched Harry, observed the tumble of black thoughts, dark emotions twist and mar his young face. He'd barely spoken since they had arrived at the house, and showed little acknowledgement when Lupin and Hermione responded to his bitter words, tried to comfort and console, attempted to reason and plead.

"What are you thinking, Harry?" asked Hermione, breaking the dismal silence. His eyes frightened her, icy sparks in their green depths, such hatred blazing from orbs she normally saw filled with friendship

and love. She felt like he was slipping away from them, leaving to tread a path she could not follow, and the very idea scared her.

“I’ve told you what I’m thinking. I’m thinking of killing Snape. How good it would feel to watch the life drain from his eyes, to know that I had avenged Mum and Dad and Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley.”

“You shouldn’t think like that, Harry!” She was crying freely now, tears leaving trails down her cheeks, but Harry felt no compassion now, no warmth. Only cold rage.

“She’s right, Harry, none of them – your parents or Dumbledore – would want you to do this. They wouldn’t want you to give in to hate.”

He snorted derisively. “Like you said they would have wanted me to show mercy to Pettigrew? How well did that turn out? Voldemort’s back because of that traitor. Flesh of the servant, willingly given. I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

Hermione’s voice broke on a sob. “P-Please don’t say that, Harry. You don’t know, you never saw his face! Maybe it wasn’t Snape, maybe you’re wrong. Please don’t go looking for him, Harry!” She could barely see through the haze of her sorrow and fear, but what she could make out of his face chilled her to the bone. Cruel, bitter contempt as he looked at her, and she knew despair.

“How can you defend him?” he whispered. She flinched at his voice, he should have been yelling, ranting, but this quiet fury was even worse, new and terrifying. “I know what I saw. Just like I knew Malfoy was a Death Eater, and that Snape couldn’t be trusted. You never believe me, you’re like him, Dumbledore, assuming you’re smarter and cleverer and you can’t make a mistake. You did. He did. I know what I saw.”

And then he was gone, and she was choking on guilt and regret, painful stuttering sobs wracking her body as the agony consumed her. He was right, she hadn’t trusted his judgment enough in the past, and look at where that had gotten them. But she knew he was wrong, and couldn’t prove it, and tonight the dichotomy was tearing her apart.

“I’ll talk to him,” sighed Lupin, rubbing his gritty eyes and sparing Mundungus a contemptuous glance; the man had slid almost off his perch and was now snoring rather loudly. “He’s just upset, I don’t really think he’ll try to track Snape down, even if he could. Besides, he could be right, maybe that bastard did kill Arthur. The man betrayed us all,” he finished bitterly; while he’d never liked Snape much, he’d respected him and was deeply hurt by his deception and treachery.

She could only nod, still too overcome to speak properly. Besides, what could she say? That Snape couldn’t have murdered Mr. Weasley because he was hiding in the basement? With her knowledge and assistance? ‘He could have been there,’ a part of her argued, causing shame to nearly overwhelm her. ‘You gave him back his wand, he could have betrayed you, too, and now Mr. Weasley is dead...’

She heard a door slam upstairs, and raised voices, and a fresh wave of grief and uncertainty crashed over her. Strangling on her emotions, she was on her feet, fleeing the kitchen, suddenly unable to bear being there with only an unconscious drunk for company. She needed to know, needed confirmation that she’d been right, that her trust was not in vain, that her hands were stainless, untainted by the blood of another, her best friend’s father.



Down the stairs, clattering loudly as she staggered blindly in her grief, and then she was wrenching open the hidden door, standing in front of an obviously startled Snape. She couldn't even speak, so overwhelming were her feelings, so she just stood, staring at him, watching his mouth moving but unable to comprehend the words.

When she burst unannounced into his sanctuary he was seated at the end of his bed, having just removed his boots in preparation for retiring for the evening. Shirtless, clad only in his trousers and pants, he went quickly from mild annoyance and confusion to alarm. She was just standing there, visibly trembling, arms crossed over her chest, hands fiercely clutching her own elbows so that she was holding herself, embracing her own torso, shaking and staring at him with bright wounded eyes.

“What has happened, Miss Granger?” he asked sharply, hoping his commanding tone would jolt her into speech, but she continued to shiver and hold herself, and he was at a loss on how to proceed.

Cautiously he stood, moving slowly as if she were a frightened child, and then he saw the tracks her tears had left on her cheeks, saw the sheen of moisture in her eyes and the drops clinging to her lashes, and he felt even more out of his element. She was clearly distraught, and his mind reeled with the possibilities. She'd been at the Weasley's for a wedding and something had gone wrong, horribly wrong, and now she was here and crying and he did not know what to do, what to say, or why she had sought out him, of all people, in this state.

He had limited experience in dealing with anyone so overwrought, particularly a female. Though Head of Slytherin, he'd rarely had to deal with the typical emotional states of adolescence – members of his house tended not to be overly demonstrative to begin with, and even when they were histrionic they rarely came to him. He had carefully cultivated his reputation as a man who caused tears, not soothed them. On those infrequent occasions he was forced to deal with a crying child, he did his best to halt the outburst as quickly as possible, not with comfort or placating words but with admonishments and mild threats.

But this was no distraught child, so while he was intensely uncomfortable with her tears, he found he did not want to simply push her away, or frighten her into a more acceptable emotional state. He wasn't sure what he did want, exactly, but not to scare her or batter her with harshness.

The days since the accident over the Pepperup Potion had been...nice. His existence was now pared down to essentials; wake, prepare for the day, eat, read or write or meditate, eat again. Boring, yes, but he seemed to have finally marshaled at least some of his inner resources. He was plagued less by bouts of restlessness or resentment, and better able to banish or contain them when they arose.

The afternoons were a different story altogether, and they had rapidly become his favorite time of day, though he would have denied it vehemently if asked. Not that she would, and there was no one else to ask. Afternoons were when she was there, usually, and he left his small room to brew potions, and this was the current highlight of his existence. If he had to say why he favored this over solitude and the order of his own thoughts, he would have sneered and commented that even a recluse needed to feel useful, and this was the only time he felt permitted to use *her* lab, to leave his cell and see a new set of walls, if only for a while. And that was part of it, no doubt; working over a simmering cauldron, chopping and measuring and stirring, had always soothed his spirits, ensnared and calmed his mind.

But there was more to it than that. Although he had not yet admitted it even to himself, he did more than merely tolerate her presence, her company. He almost enjoyed it, the propinquity of another, her, intelligent and (shocking though he found it) capable of working with him in unburdened silence. He would have found the idea that he would find working beside anyone, the insufferable know-it-all of Gryffindor least of all, more tolerable than solitude ludicrous. But it was true nevertheless; having the young woman near him, her quiet movements and deft handling of the materials around them, was more satisfying, somehow, than he would have anticipated. Now that they had established a cordial relationship of sorts, no more flaring tempers and loud words, he found himself wanting her there, and vaguely disappointed when she left.

So he had become accustomed to her, and this new and disturbing appearance of her, weeping and trembling, jarred him rudely, caused an unfamiliar response from some forgotten and buried segment of his psyche, and he did not know what to do.

“Miss Granger, what has happened? Are you injured?” No, of course not, he could see that for himself even as she shook her head violently, still staring into his eyes, still silently crying.

“Miss Granger, you are overwrought. Clearly something has disturbed you, and your arrival here now suggests you wish to speak with me about it.” No response except a tiny catch of her breath, the effort to suppress the explosion of her distress faltering.

“Miss...Hermione, I cannot assist you if you do not tell me what is wrong.” Her name again, her first name from his lips, and she could contain her sobs no more.

It was not noisy hysterics, but the quiet gasping anguish of one who valued restraint, and relaxed it only under great duress. Still, even this escalation of her obvious grief further agitated him. She could not talk until she calmed, and he was not known to be a calming influence on emotional witches. Unless...

Later, when he reflected on his actions, he could not fathom what had compelled him to move forward, stretch tentative hands out awkwardly to rub her shoulders. He expected her to flinch from his touch, show him her disgust, but she did neither. Her head dropped, shoulders heaving with the force of her release, and he drew her slowly toward him into a loose embrace. Unsure of how to proceed, anticipating her angry shove at any moment, he traced hesitant circles on her upper back, meaningless patterns as he willed her to relax, to be comforted, to heal. At least enough to tell him what in the name of Hades had transpired.

And, miracle of miracles, she did. Momentarily undone at his touch, she cried harder, the horror and guilt and grief flooding up and out. It did not take long, though, for her to regain some semblance of her bearing, and a sudden wash of humiliation surged through her, making her feel heated and flushed. This was Snape she was wailing against, his chest now damp from her tears and mucus, and she burned with embarrassment.

Relieved that she was calmer, he felt her tense and withdraw, saw the red blush suffuse her features. Idly, he wondered why he was not repulsed or angry, why he could watch her fall apart and feel compelled to assist her in regaining her composure. Surely another would receive nothing but his contempt and dismissal. He pushed the thought aside, though, mostly because he did not want to examine this, didn't want to think about why he had not responded in his typical fashion, had instead touched her, held her,

comforted her, if only for a short while.

She drew her wand; a flick of the wrist and his skin was dry, her mortified expression still in evidence. He ignored it, retrieved his shirt from the bed and slipped it over his head, clothing the upper half of his body. He immediately felt more at ease; funny how a simple shirt could instill greater confidence and clarity.

“Can you tell me what happened now, Miss Granger?”

She nodded, still feeling hot and deeply ashamed by her breakdown. “Death Eaters,” she whispered, fighting to keep her voice from choking, pushing past the suffocating sorrow. “At the wedding. Mr... Arthur...” Struggling still, she looked at him pleadingly, willing him to understand without words, and she saw the tightening of his mouth, the dark flicker of something akin to regret in his eyes, and knew that her inadequate words were unnecessary.

“Were there any other casualties?” he inquired, sounding strained.

“Fleur’s cousin...they tortured him, that’s how they knew where and when. Moody, he’s bad, Gabrielle and Fleur, too. At her own wedding...” It seemed easier now to talk, as if starting had broken something open, but she shivered again as she recalled Fleur in her gown, radiant and joyous, then wounded and soaked with blood.

“And the Death Eaters, how many were captured? I know their weaknesses, valuable information could be extracted with the correct persuasion...” Then he recalled his situation and tasted bitter defeat in his mouth. He was useless and worse, unable to help the Order while his loyalties remained unknown, and he wondered how often this would happen now, this sickening plummet in his gut as he heard the details of the war play out, helpless to intervene.

“It all happened so fast, they were there and then they left, as soon as we knew what was happening and started fighting back they just fled. Lupin said he knows he Stunned one of them but someone must have grabbed him up when they ran.” The whole thing still bothered her, the way they were there and then not, before she could fight. She felt slow, inadequate, and guilty; others had reacted so much faster, gotten hexes off, fought back while she gaped and stared.

“I see,” he said softly, lost in thought. Not a typical Death Eater strike then, maximum death and mayhem and the arrogant assumption that they could not be stopped. This was something new, different, and he felt something twist in his heart as he tried to imagine what his former master was planning now. “My condolences on the loss of Mr. Weasley, and for the pain this has caused you and your friends.”

She looked at him suspiciously, struck again by the absurdity of this man expressing anything akin to an apology, and cognizant of his less than fuzzy feelings for her, and Ron. “You didn’t even like him.”

His lips twisted in a grim caricature of a smile. “It is certainly true that there was no love lost between myself and any of the Weasleys, but I never desired this. Arthur was a good man, and dedicated to fighting the Dark Lord. I would regret the loss of any member of the Order, if only for that reason.”

“Even Harry?” she asked before she could stop herself, and he could not repress the reflexive grimace the

name provoked. That boy...

She was suddenly nervous as she watched his face contort, and she thought of the many injustices he'd inflicted in the past, and of Harry's cold proclamation of vengeance. They hated each other, wholly and without reservation, and she was again filled with trepidation as she recalled Harry's words, his conviction about Snape's actions at the wedding, and why she had descended the steps to the basement in the first place.

"Harry...he's convinced you were there. At the wedding, he thinks he saw you hexing Fleur. He wants... he wants to kill you."

He looked at her curiously, the anxiety plain on her face, her conflicting thoughts obvious in the flicker of her eyes, the twisting of her hands. "I see. And do you concur with Harry's plan?"

"What? No, I...I know you weren't there, you couldn't have been there, but I can't very well tell them, can I? You couldn't have been there..." And he knew, suddenly, what she was really asking, and it pained him that there was doubt there still. He was beginning to tire of proving himself to her. No, it was more than that, and less; he was tired of proving himself to anyone at all, tired of the need for deception and lies that had made him untrustworthy and outcast. He had been proving himself to someone else all his life, it seemed.

Quietly he withdrew his wand, pointed the tip at her. Startled, her eyes widened, and she twitched violently, mouth open in a silent scream. Stupid, she'd been so stupid, and now her naivety would be revealed and she would never be forgiven, if she even survived her idiocy.

Sad, his eyes were so sad, though his features remained expressionless, and he opened his hand, offering the wand to her. "You may check my wand, if you wish. *Priori Incantatum* will reveal the most recent spells it has preformed."

And she knew, then, what she would find. Relief flooded her, relief and a fresh pang of guilt, that she had questioned his motives, that she still could not trust. She went through the motions, though, touching the tip of her wand to his and holding it there. The first wisp of a spell emerged, smoky fragments of a book flying through the air to his waiting hand. "*Continuus*," she whispered, and more shadows appeared, a ghost of parchment, his wand tip extinguishing and flaring, the outline of his hand as he Scorgified a viscous substance from his palm and fingers. No curses or hexes, no Apparation or Avada.

"I'm sorry," she murmured as she handed it back to him. "He was just so sure, and I thought..."

"I know, Miss Granger. I have done much in my life I would change if I could, but I cannot. You have every right to doubt me. I would do the same, in your shoes." And he would, but it hurt just the same.

Not knowing what to say, she just shook her head, ashamed and wanting nothing more than to retreat for now. She turned to leave, hiding the renewed prickle of tears in her eyes, remorse for him and the Weasleys' and all the rest still burning. "I'll go now, sir. I..." Her throat closed on the words, and then she was gone.

And they both went to their beds that evening, troubled and raw, lost in thoughts of what more the war

would bring in the days ahead, and of each other.

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A/N: Am I now forgiven for my cliffie?

## Chapter 10: Horcruxes

Disclaimer: Again? Really? Not mine, no money.

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Ron came back to the house late the next day, eyes reddened and rust colored stubble on his chin and upper lip. Harry and Hermione had both hugged him tightly, murmuring condolences and assurances, desperate to help him bear the pain, to help themselves. They were sitting in 'their' meeting room, but not around the table with its jumble of books and parchment. They'd pulled their chairs into a loose circle and simply sat, abortive attempts at conversation flaring and dying. Harry was mostly silent and vaguely sullen, smarting from the lecture Lupin had subjected him to, the constant pressure to sit and wait, think and plan instead of act. He was resentful still, a little, that Hermione hadn't believed him, hadn't jumped to validate his idea, his anger. Ron was trying so hard to want to be there, to be present with them and prove his ability to help in their quest; he kept trying to start discussions, to talk about things they could do or try. Hermione in turn tried to respond, fighting back the sudden choking sensations, the well of tears that came and went, clutching Ron's hand in hers as they sat in intermittent silence and awkward fits of conversation.

"How's Ginny?" Harry asked suddenly; they had all been silent for at least ten minutes, and the words broke the silence like a clap of thunder, startling and unexpected.

Ron's voice was hoarse, rough. "She's okay, I guess. She's going to help Mum with the...the arrangements."

Harry nodded absently, seeing her in his mind, red hair flowing, smiling at him, then crying and miserable. He wanted nothing more than to go to her, comfort her. He remembered vividly the smell of her skin, the silken feel of her hair through his fingers, the hot wet press of her lips against his own, against his cheek and throat and chest. Hermione's voice cut through his thoughts.

"I've been thinking," she said hesitantly. She had been pondering this for a while now, since Harry had opened the locket, and for some reason she felt compelled to introduce the topic now. It would distract Ron, certainly, distract them all from the crushing uncertainty and grief, and it was important. She feared Harry's reaction, though, and thought it better for Ron to be there when she brought it up, another voice to add to hers. She knew he agreed with her, and that he was worried, too.

"You're always thinking, 'Mione. Nothing to write the Prophet about," Harry mumbled, a little snarky. He really couldn't let go of his hurt that she had opposed him yesterday, not yet.

"What about?" Ron asked, shooting Harry a slightly pleading look.

"Your scar, Harry. What happened with the locket."

"I don't want to talk about it," he responded automatically. He didn't, he hadn't since that day. What more was there to say? It wasn't like it was the first time he passed out, seen and felt things the others hadn't.

“Please, Harry,” Ron said softly. “I’m worried about you, about what it could mean.” Harry glared at the redhead, a sharp retort on his tongue, but he bit it back at the look on his friend’s face, in his eyes. It was hard to deny Ron anything when he looked so lost and broken, and Harry grudgingly conceded it may be better to have this out now. He’d noticed their looks and whispers.

“Fine,” he grunted, sliding down a little further in his seat.

Hermione took a deep, shuddering breath. She’d discussed her ideas with Ron, before the wedding, and they both knew Harry wouldn’t like the conclusions she’d drawn, at least not the primary one.

“I’ve been thinking,” she repeated, nervously worrying the fabric on the arm of her chair with one hand, clutching Ron’s fingers tightly with the other. “About the Horcruxes.”

“What about them?” Harry inquired aggressively.

“Well, when Voldemort started making them, he wanted six, right?” she began, ignoring the pain in her hand as Ron crushed it when she said that name. “That’s what you saw in Slughorn’s memory, that he thought seven was the most powerfully magical number, so he wanted his soul in seven pieces.”

“Nutty, that,” shivered Ron. “Imagine doing that much damage to yourself.”

“Right, six Horcruxes plus himself for the seventh part. This is nothing we haven’t talked about before, ‘Mione.”

“Hear me out, Harry. So he wanted six, and Dumbledore reckoned he had five done the night he tried to kill you. Your murder was going to be used to create the last one.”

“Yeah, he thought Voldemort made the Horcruxes out of special deaths. Important murders,” Harry mused darkly. As if his death was bigger somehow than all those that came before. Countless others, wizards and witches and Muggles, adults and children. His parents.

“So that means he must have been preparing to make a Horcrux when he tried to kill you.”

“And?” Harry bit out impatiently. “What does it matter what he was planning or trying to do? He failed, I lived and Mum and Dad died. Or do you think another was made then, when they died?” He’d never considered that idea before. Was there *another* one they had to look for? He felt jumpy and uneasy, a warm unpleasant sensation in his chest. They were never going to finish this, never succeed; how could everyone believe in him when he couldn’t even believe in himself?

She had to be careful here, she knew, anticipating his disbelief, his anger when he heard her theory. She extracted her hand from Ron’s, taking comfort in the gentle squeeze he gave before releasing her, and stood from her chair, moving to kneel beside Harry. He was slumped down in the comfortable recliner, chin against his chest, eyes hooded and wary as she settled on the floor, placed a cool soft hand on one of his own.

“Harry, I think another Horcrux did get made that night.” Her bottom lip trembled but her voice was quiet and steady and sad. “When we opened the locket, Harry, your scar...the way it reacted. I think...I think its

one, too.”

“No,” he muttered, mind racing, rejecting without thinking. “No, it can’t be, it just acts funny because I lived, no one else has ever survived the Killing Curse, it could be normal for my scar to act the way it does.”

“But the things you’ve seen, mate. You’ve been in his head, and him in yours, like he can see through Nagini.” Ron was leaning forward now, face twisted with pity and grief, eyes hollow. He knew Hermione was right the moment she’d pulled him aside and confided her doubts. All those times it twinged and seared, responded to the presence of You-Know-Who. They never suspected something like this, a part of that evil monster inside him, inside their best friend.

“No. He can’t have made me one, he died, that body died. How could he have finished the spell without a body, without a wand?”

“We don’t really know how a Horcrux is made, though, do we? We don’t know the incantation or if it’s linked to the curse when cast or anything. It’s possible...”

“What? What’s possible? That part of Voldemort’s soul is in my head? You’re crazy, both of you!” He wrenched away from Hermione and bolted out of his seat, heart racing as their words sunk in. Could it be true?

His brain was reeling, spitting out images and memories; the first prickle he’d felt when he was looking at Snape and Quirrell at the Head Table at Hogwarts, and the agony of his head cleaved open when Quirrell touched him; twinges all through his fourth year, and his cranium splitting apart again in the graveyard; the foreign images and feelings all through his fifth year, and the two most important visions of his life, one real and the salvation of a man now dead, the other fake and the catalyst for his godfather’s demise. And, oh, the torture, pain beyond endurance when Voldemort had possessed him, his heart and mind and soul ravaged and torn apart. How could he be taken over in such a fashion? What link bound them? And if his scar was a Horcrux, that meant...he was on a mission to find and destroy them...

He heard moaning, wounded and forlorn, and realized it was coming from him. A single word over and over – no, no, NO! But saying it and wishing it to be true did not make it so. Deep down he knew they were right, knew it the moment she said the words. And as soon as that realization washed over him, drowning him in despair, he knew something else, too.

He knew Dumbledore had known, and hadn’t told him.

Why this stung as sharply as it did, he could not say. He should be used to this by now, used to discovering information that had been kept from him. Dumbledore especially had hidden so much, doling out facts and theories when it suited him, concealing things he needed to know, things about him and Voldemort. Still, he had thought, he had hoped that it had all been revealed last term when Dumbledore had told him about the Horcruxes. Why hadn’t he told him then, told him that he, Harry, held a part of Voldemort’s soul?

That he, Harry, would have to die.



Ron and Hermione were watching him, pale anxious faces and wide shining eyes. Their concern was palpable, like waves pounding the shore, crashing and churning over him and through him. They knew, too. "I have to die?" Hoarse question, not a statement, because he was not quite ready to believe, not yet.

"We don't know that," Hermione said a little shrilly. "The ring and the diary, they're both intact still."

"Right! Just mangled and broken!"

"Harry, please!"

"Is this what you wanted to talk to me about? That you think I'm a Horcrux? Do you want to kill me now, get it over with, or would you rather I help you find the others first?"

"Shut it!" Ron's bellow cut through his tirade, startled him into silence. "Just shut it already, alright? We don't want to kill you, you know that. We'll find a way, figure this out, you know we will. No one else is going to die..." Harry felt guilt seize his chest that he had spoken so rashly, that he'd forgotten his friend's loss in the wake of his own turmoil. But it was too much, and others would die, so many more, and was he destined to be one of the fallen? Neither can live while the other survives...

Hermione gripped Ron's shoulder, tears coursing down her face. She felt like she hadn't stopped crying since the wedding. "Harry, we'll figure something out. How would you have felt if we hid this from you? If we'd just talked about it behind your back? Harry, I know how much you hate it when people keep things from you, and we didn't want to do that, not about this, not about something this important." Tiny sputter of guilt as the enormity of what she was hiding, her secret, rampaged through her thoughts, but she squelched it quickly.

Harry just stared at her, at both of them, looking at him with worry and hope and love, and all the anger and fear and resentment drained out of him. These two, with him from the start, were all he had, the only people he could fully trust, and he was tired, so tired of being at odds over inconsequential details. Suddenly speechless, he felt the familiar sting of tears in his own eyes, recognized the break and spill of hot liquid down his face, and then they were all together in a three-way embrace, holding and clinging and letting the sorrow and bitterness pour out in a release of grasping hands and murmured solace.

"I'm sorry about your dad, Ron, I'm sorry I couldn't stop them..."

"It's not your fault," he rasped, momentarily burying his face in Harry's shoulder as he clung to him, letting the fresh tide of sorrow crest and break. "Neither of you, it's not your fault, I just wish...I never told him..."

"He knew, Ron," Hermione cried, her voice muffled by the front of Ron's shirt. "He knew."

When they finally broke apart they felt lighter, somehow, still deeply troubled but freer, as if simply sharing and acknowledging the sadness was enough to loosen its grip. With a shaky laugh, Hermione wiped her eyes, watching as the young men exchanged a final awkward exchange of pats to the shoulders and arms. Of course they were vaguely embarrassed now, having cried openly. Men.

"If you're up to it, Harry, there was more I thought we should talk about. More you should know." He

nodded weakly, rubbing his own eyes swiftly, obliterating the traitorous moisture still there.

“Sure, it can’t get too much worse, right?”

“Right. Well, like I was saying, Voldemort had already made five Horcruxes before he tried to kill you, which is why he didn’t die when the Killing Curse rebounded. They kept him alive. But what happened to the part of his soul that was in his body, that should have died that day?”

Harry frowned a bit. “It...er, well, I guess it just sort of floated about, right? He mentioned something about that in the graveyard when he was explaining to his followers how he was back. He said even he didn’t know what he was at that point – less than a spirit, less than a ghost, but still somehow alive.”

“But what about that actual bit of his soul, the part that was inside that body, the Voldemort that died that night? It was only a soul fragment at that point, not a whole, and I’ve been thinking, maybe that part was destroyed with the body. Like the portions housed in the ring and the diary.”

Ron looked more hesitant here, still not convinced of Hermione’s reasoning. “But didn’t Dumbledore say something about that Harry, that You-Know-Who’s spirit just sort of existed since he had the Horcruxes to keep him alive?”

He mulled that over for a bit. His faith in Dumbledore was shaken right now, and he certainly knew him to be fallible; he’d trusted Snape all those years, hadn’t he? Hermione’s idea certainly sounded plausible, and they really didn’t know enough about souls and Horcruxes to make more than an educated guess. “Okay, but if that part of his soul was gone, how did he come back? I mean, the rest of it was scattered in pieces, so what’s in his body now?”

“That’s what I’ve been puzzling over. I think he had to use one of the original Horcruxes to reform. He had to pull that piece of his soul out of one of them to animate his new body.”

“Hermione, I didn’t see anything that could have been a Horcrux at the graveyard. The only objects I saw Pettigrew add were the bone and blood and flesh.”

“But he already had a body at that point, right?” Ron interjected. “Not much of one from what you said, but still.”

“The body Pettigrew helped him fashion in the Albanian forest.” Everything was starting to click. “So there must have been one hidden there, that’s why he could invade animals and people who got too close, because part of him was there. He possessed Pettigrew and used him to construct that hideous, scaly thing for him to inhabit. Which means...”

“...one less Horcrux!” Ron finished excitedly.

“No, he replaced the one he used when he made Nagini. And I think he knows about you, too, Harry, he’s sure to have figured it out, the similarities between when he sees through Nagini and through you.”

Harry’s brain was swimming with it all, trying to make it all add up, and he barely acknowledged her last comment, that he may know, that Voldemort knew what he was. What he possessed. “Hold on, there were

five when he tried to kill me, right? The diary, the ring, the locket, Hufflepuff's Cup, and the one we don't know. The diary and ring are already taken care of, and we have Slytherin's locket. That means that either the cup or the mystery item was the Horcrux in Albania."

"Right, but we shouldn't have to find that one now. If he used that piece of his soul to inhabit his new body, that Horcrux would be inert."

"So it's not two objects we're looking for now, it's one! Just one, and it's got to be the cup or unknown Horcrux."

"And Nagini," Ron reminded him.

"Well, right, but she'd be the last one we'd go for anyway, right? Except..." He felt a sinking sensation in his stomach, and he rubbed his scar with trembling fingers.

"Don't worry about that now, Harry." Hermione almost sounded like her usual bossy self. "We'll figure something out, I swear."

Harry couldn't help but feel less than confident. If she was right, and as much as he wanted to deny her logic he found it distressingly compelling, then he was a Horcrux too, and Voldemort couldn't be killed while he lived. Would it hurt, to die? Who would be the one to kill him? To kill Voldemort? Or would darkness reign once he fell?

Ron's next question helped break the morbid turn Harry's thoughts had taken. "If we don't know which Horcrux was in Albania, what do we focus on finding? Hufflepuff's Cup, or do we try to figure out what the other Horcrux may be and track that down?"

Hermione had an answer for that as well. "I think it would be smarter to focus more on where the Horcrux may be, rather than on what it is. Dumbledore didn't know what was in the cave before you two left, did he, Harry? He surmised one was there because of that location's significance to Voldemort. I think we should use the same approach, try to figure out locations he might have left them and narrow it down from there."

Hearing Dumbledore's name did something to Harry, released a fresh surge of anger and distress. Why hadn't he told him his suspicions, why had he left him in the dark about this, of all things? The burning resentment he'd felt in his fifth year felt like it had multiplied ten-fold, his insides full of darkness and acid. What was he thinking, keeping this last detail from him, leaving another bomb for him to stumble across and deal with on his own. How dare he?

But he swallowed it down, responded as normally as possible as Hermione and Ron kept talking, brainstorming possible locations they could investigate. The conversation turned somber again as Ron haltingly revealed some of the details of his father's memorial, and as the darkness outside deepened, Harry's thoughts and emotions followed suit, leaving him empty and bitter, quietly seething. They didn't seem to notice, and he was glad for that, and long after they had all gone to bed for the evening and Ron lay softly snoring, his thoughts kept him awake, staring into the blackness without and within.

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A/N: I know this slightly contradicts HPB, but this was my original take on the Horcrux issue before the release of DH, so that's what I've decided to use. It really, REALLY bothered me that there ended up being seven Horcruxes. And Voldemort didn't figure out Harry's scar was one, even after the visions and the possession at the Ministry? Really?

Okay, I'm done now.

## Chapter 11: Touched

Disclaimer - Not mine. No money.

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Snape wondered if it would feel awkward between them the next time she descended to the basement to brew. He knew she had been embarrassed by her tears and his actions, and ashamed of her suspicions. He did not blame her, but the fact that she still withheld a portion of her trust lingered in the room, the proverbial dragon unacknowledged but seen and heard nonetheless.

He was uneasy, too, still confused by his impulse to soothe her. He was not a man who catered to the emotions of others, and he certainly did not touch or hold anyone with any semblance of a tender feeling, or feel the comforting warmth of another body against his own. It disturbed him, the memory of that awkward embrace. He had not touched another soul in such a fashion in a long time, years, and that the urge to do so had risen and been heeded here, with this young woman, unnerved him.

The whole situation was surreal; that he had turned to her, and she had listened and helped, and that they had formed some sort of a working relationship. He was accustomed to others tolerating him while silently (or not so silently) resenting his dark intrusion. But she truly did not seem to mind his company, now that he'd decided to temper his tongue, and that baffled him. He found he did not mind her so much either, now that he saw her alone, no Potter or Weasley at her elbow, and now that she had ceased with her incessant hand waving and recitation of memorized facts. She seemed quieter, more mature, and while in his eyes the change appeared to have occurred almost overnight, he knew rationally it must have developed gradually, over time, and outside his conscious awareness.

But he was aware now, and discomfited. The dreams certainly weren't helping, either. They started out the same, the familiar haunting images that had tormented him since the Headmaster's death, Dumbledore's words, his face. But now a faceless figure sometimes appeared, comforted him as he knelt weeping over the old man's body, or watching as he tried and failed to protect Draco, as he lay screaming under the Cruciatus Curse, and though he never saw the intruder's face, he knew it was she, Hermione Granger. These deviations bothered him immensely; he had not mourned over his dead friend's corpse, nor gallantly protected his student. Was she there to judge? To help? The nightmares at least were familiar, but the variations confounded and gnawed at him. He neither desired nor deserved her pity or forgiveness, even in his dreams. He had yet to forgive himself, and had no plans to do so.

So he ruminated ad nauseam, his unease only heightened when she did not appear in the basement the afternoon after the wedding, nor the next. The food appeared as always, and the coin burned frequently to alert him to the frequent entrance of Order members to the house. Honestly, though, they had since established a more reliable systems of alerts (entrance wards and alarm spells), and he rarely ventured outside his room unless she was there. Too cautious to risk it, and it felt wrong, as if he were a trespasser, an interloper. He was more comfortable when she was there.

And then she was, looking tired but satisfied, a satchel slung over her shoulders and crammed to bursting. He remembered then, she'd mentioned going to Hogwarts for books and had offered to bring back items for him. The basics, of course, some of his own clothing, a few books he thought would be useful, his

journal. He was loathe to ask for the last, to reveal its existence and location, but he missed the battered old volume, keeper of his thoughts and feelings for years, and he knew somehow that if he asked the right way, said the right things, she would retrieve it without giving into curiosity and opening it. Intriguing how different she was from her friends; he knew without doubt Potter or Weasley could not have resisted, but though her desire for knowledge and information was boundless, she was the least likely to betray such a trust.

“You’ve been to the school,” he said needlessly. The sound of his own voice surprised him, raspy with disuse. He cleared his throat, dark eyes watching her every movement.

“Yes, I got back just before lunch,” she replied. She shrugged the pack off her shoulders and flipped open the top.

“You didn’t go alone, I trust?”

She snorted. “Of course not, the Order believes the school is under surveillance. Harry went with me, and we were with Hagrid the entire time. It couldn’t have gone better.” She was leaving out a great deal about the trip, mostly because she didn’t think he would care to hear it. He didn’t need to listen to her reminisce about how it had felt like a punch in the stomach to approach the eerily quiet castle that had been a second home for six years, to walk the silent hallways that bustled with students and teachers in her mind’s eye, to see the thickening layer of dust on the banisters and portraits and books. She could almost hear the cheerful shouts as friend called out to friend, feel the cold shudder as a ghost slipped through her. September first was just around the bend, and the knowledge that the school would remain cold and empty wrenched her painfully. The fine creases around Harry’s eyes and the twist of his lips told her he was experiencing some of the same memories and emotions.

“Did you have any difficulty disabling my wards?” he inquired as she began pulling items out of her bag.

Her lips quirked upwards, and she mentally shook herself, clearing away the cobwebs of her melancholy memories. “Not at all, sir. Between what you and Professor McGonagall told me, I was able to access everything I needed.”

“And what exactly did Minerva tell you?” He was vaguely amused; he should have known the Deputy Headmistress would try to gain entry to his quarters after he fled. She was clever and powerful, and fueled by grief and rage. He would not have been surprised had she burned the room out.

“After...well, after you left, she broke it to find any information that could be helpful to the Order. She wanted to hurt you in some way, too, and she knows how carefully you guard your privacy.” She was a little nervous telling him this, but he maintained his normally impassive visage, and she could detect no anger in him. “Anyway, she gave me the passwords for the wards she reestablished – I only told her I wanted some of your rare potions and ingredients. The protection around your personal vault was intact, I don’t think she even tried to break it.”

With that she withdrew the possessions he’d requested from his most secret location, the journal and a small ivory box. He took them from her, touching them almost reverently. He was tempted to open the box to ensure the items within were safe, or to thumb through the journal as though seeing the pages and words would tell him if she had looked inside, violated his confidence. He didn’t believe she had, but he could

not shake the niggles of doubt, either.

Then he noticed the pile of books she had stacked neatly on the table, a quick wave of her wand restoring them to their full size. He immediately recognized several volumes he did not recall asking her to retrieve. “May I ask what prompted you to raid my collection for these particular books?” he asked, plucking one from the pile. It was the rarest of his private library, a well-worn first edition, the lettering on the cover so faded it was barely legible. It had cost almost the entirety of his Gringott’s account to purchase *Elixirs Ancient and Arcane*. Except for its obvious age, he wondered why she had chosen this one, if she knew the types of potions it described. It impressed him to think that it might be so; the text was rarely mentioned elsewhere, and the potency of the mixtures described therein was even less well known.

She blushed a bit but otherwise gave no sign that she was bothered by his comment or her liberal definition of the concept of borrowing. “I told you I was doing some research with Harry and Ron. I thought these books might prove useful.”

“So you took them without my permission?” He tried to sound stern and commanding, amused by her audacity and irritated by the same. He had texts he would not trust most of the staff of Hogwarts with, and she simply removed those that struck her fancy?

“To be honest, sir, I didn’t think I required it, under the circumstance.” She was lying, she had felt guilty even contemplating the small theft, but she did it anyway. His collection was amazing, volumes she’d only seen referenced in other texts next to seminal works on Potions, Arthimancy, and Dark magic. She had been sorely tempted to bring back his entire library.

Her rebuttal gave him momentary pause; was she actually attempting to assert her domination over him? Remind him of his status, his reliance on her goodwill? She couldn’t be...joking? His response bubbled up, ready to spill forth, but all that emerged was a gasp. His left forearm flared white-hot, his right hand clamped down hard over the offending Mark, and pain skittered up and down the nerves in his arm, leaving him momentarily breathless. Quickly he marshalled his old defenses, and his face relaxed from a grimace to his normal dour expression, but the tightness around his mouth and eyes belied the burning sensation that plagued him still, waves of it crashing and receding.

She couldn’t help but notice his white-knuckled grip on his own arm, the widening of his eyes before he slammed his shields into place. “He’s calling you, isn’t he?”

He spoke through gritted teeth. “No, not precisely. He knows I will not answer.”

“But if he knows you won’t respond, why would he summon you? Just to...to torture you?”

He found her naivety both humorous and frightening. “The Dark Lord does enjoy his petty torments. It is a bit of a drain on him to focus the Call on a single individual for a prolonged period of time, but he appears willing to make the sacrifice for those who displease him most. I, unfortunately, fall into that category.”

Only tiny spasms betrayed him still, and he found her presence while he silently battled the pain oddly soothing, like a balm on raw flesh. He saw horror and compassion in her eyes and felt a small surge of animosity. He had no use for pity, he did not deserve her compassion, but the very idea that another person

cared for his health, his pain, was foreign to him. Few ever had; even Dumbledore, Snape often thought caustically, cared only because of his value to the Order, inquired after his well-being only to ensure his spy, his weapon, continued to fight.

“Does he do this often? Hurt you?” She noted the tiny flutters in the flesh of his face, the flexing of his fingers, and knew the affliction had not passed, but was merely contained, partitioned and controlled. She was struck anew by the knowledge of the enormity of this man’s sacrifice through the years and was amazed that he endured still.

“Not as often as before. I am accustomed to pain, Miss Granger. Do not concern yourself unduly on my behalf.” His voice was gruff but there was no venom in it. There was no guile in her he could find, no ulterior motive for caring what happened to him, and it warmed an unfamiliar part of him even as he scoffed at the sheer Gryffindoriness of it.

“If I can help at all, tell me, I’d be more than happy to do so.” On impulse she reached out, insinuated her fingers between his own, and the sudden twitch in response was not related to another pang from the Mark. Absurdly, he was suddenly wracking his mind, trying to recall the last time a woman had touched him with concern, clasped his calloused hand in her own, and he could not remember. It was just a hand, palm and fingers cupped gently with his own, but it paralyzed him nevertheless. He simply stared at their joined hands, the pain in his arm all but forgotten, until she squeezed him once and then pulled away. It felt as if a spell had suddenly been lifted, and he experienced an irrational urge to either scream at her, or reclaim the touch of her flesh. Surely his isolation was affecting his mind, that was the only rational answer, he must be losing control of his faculties for such a mild tactile sensation to rattle him in the slightest.

“That won’t be necessary,” he murmured. “However, it would be unwise for me to brew any potions at this time. If you will excuse me.” He walked rigidly back toward the hidden room, retrieving his clothing and other personal items she had brought him, and retreated to his sanctuary, feeling numb and yet oversensitized at the same time.

She watched him leave with a sinking feeling in her chest. She shouldn’t have touched him, she knew better than that, he was not a friend to console with kind words and embraces. He was probably livid and had retired rather than lash out at her. She was mindful that he had been more polite of late, and while she appreciated that he had not accosted her verbally for her familiarity, she felt chastised all the same.

Quietly she unpacked the rest of the materials she’d brought down with her, shelving ingredients and ensuring that the rarest and most volatile were properly contained. She checked on her batch of Polyjuice Potion, then decided against any further brewing that day, wanting to give him his space and privacy, to apologize for her lapse by not subjecting him to her presence any more for now. Repacking the books she wanted to peruse, she left the basement loaded down with tomes of dubious magic and chagrin.

She spent the rest of the day beginning the process of scouring her new resources for the answers she needed, the answers they all needed. But as she immersed herself in the daunting task, every so often her thoughts strayed to Snape, his distaste for her, and the feel of his fingers against her own.

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A/N: As school has restarted, chapters may be a bit slower in coming. Still, rest assured that I'm far more invested in this story than I am in my schoolwork. Thank goodness I'm a genius at time management.

## Chapter 12: Prodigal Son

Two days later the majority of the Order, the Ministry, and indeed the wizarding community of Britain were in attendance at Arthur Weasley's funeral. Hidden from the Muggle world just on the outskirts of London was the official Ministry cemetery, rows and rows of white headstones and monuments. The ones in the back were weatherworn and pitted around the edges but smooth on their face, like hard candy sucked clean, the names and dates barely legible. Nearer the front were names more familiar to those present, victims of the first war, dozens of them, those who were found to have died in direct service to the Minister. Then recent casualties like Amelia Bones, and then the tomb markers stopped, leaving the row half finished. Hermione shivered to see the blank space stretching down the row, wondering how many of those plots would be filled, and how many of the dead she would know.

She and Harry were seated up front with the Weasleys. Molly was on the far end, trying to be stoic and composed, though her eyes were already red and tears kept welling and spilling over her cheeks; then the boys from the oldest on down, an empty seat where Percy should be. The twins in particular had been castigating their absent brother, their emotions flaring as they unleashed their pain on him verbally, and Molly was too broken to defend her prodigal son. Ginny sat between Ron and Harry, sniffing softly while Ron kept wiping his face on the sleeve of his somber black robes. Harry was pale, and he felt like a great chunk of his viscera had been scooped out, leaving a jagged wound that he could never imagine healing. It hadn't gone away when Sirius had died, or Dumbledore, and the void in his heart just kept widening with each new death, each fresh loss. Ginny's hand was hot in his, and Hermione's was tucked in the crook of his other elbow, and while he found their touch comforting the empty place inside still throbbed.

It was mere minutes before the service was scheduled to start when Percy arrived. Ginny's soft gasp alerted them all to turn their heads, watch him walk hesitantly toward the front, glasses glinting in the mid-afternoon sun. Fred and George were on their feet in an instant, glowering darkly, while Molly gave a stifled cry and pressed her hands to her chest, tears flowing freely.

"What are you doing here?" snarled Fred, poking a finger in Percy's chest.

"We're no family of yours, remember? You turned your back on Mum and Dad, on all of us! You weren't even there, you didn't attend your own brother's wedding, you broke Mum's heart, you did!" George was shaking in his fury and indignation.

Percy stood mute under their assault, looking pasty and withdrawn, and the barrage would have continued had Ron not stepped between the twins and the object of their scorn and rage. "Everyone's watching," he hissed. "This isn't the time or place, this isn't what Dad would have wanted."

Fred and George remained standing, glaring and flushed, until Ron forcibly pushed at their shoulders, prodding them back toward their seats. Bill and Charlie sat stone-faced, refusing to meet Percy's eyes as he slowly moved to stand in front of Molly. Hermione was riveted, unable to look away as the black sheep of the Weasley clan waited trembling before his mother. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, and swallowed hard before trying again.

"Mum, I...I don't know where to start. I tried...I couldn't..."

Molly shook her head, tears still pouring from her eyes, and the whole galley of mourners were silent,

guilty observers of the family's private drama, their secret agony.

Percy's eyes glittered behind his spectacles, and his voice was thick with remorse. "You were right all along, but I thought you'd never forgive me so I stayed away. I wanted...I never stopped caring about you all, but I was so...so ashamed..."

His shoulders were shaking, and his head dropped as he tried to hide the flow of his tears. He couldn't say any more, couldn't speak past the smothering regret. Everyone held their collective breath as Molly stood, looking up at her boy with an unreadable expression on her face before pulling him into her arms. "My son," she whispered, and he cried more loudly, his broken sobs filling the gathering. She was still angry at him, yes, angry and hurt by his choices and his rejection, but he was still her child, her blood, and she would not turn him away.

Gradually the other mourners resumed their quiet conversations, found their seats and waited for the service to commence. Without a word Bill stood and moved to sit between Charlie and Fred, leaving Percy the chair next to their mother. When Molly released him from her embrace they sat, her hands clenched tightly in the crook of his arm, and they too waited in heavy silence for the funeral to start.

It was a mournful but dignified affair, as Scrimgeour himself had overseen the arrangements and was in attendance as the service proceeded. Hundreds of people were there, and dozens of friends and family stood to give tribute to his memory; shrunken old teachers remembered a young man full of exuberance, co-workers told halting tales of his fairness and decency, and friends recalled how he always had a kind word for everyone, magical and Muggle alike. McGonagall, Lupin, Shackbolt; the number of speakers was testament to how Arthur Weasley had touched so many lives, and their grieved voices and sincere praise revealed how deeply he would be missed.

Some of his kin rose, too. Charlie talked through his tears about a father who always made time for his children, no matter how busy; George spoke softly of his love for Muggles and his obsession to understand how they coped without magic. Ron and Ginny both tried to say something, anything about the man who meant so much to them, but neither could get out more than a few words before collapsing back to their chairs.

Ginny threw her arms around Harry and he held her close, his own tears falling soft and damp on her bent head. He was touched beyond measure to hear all of the good things others had said about Mr. Weasley. He wished he'd known all these stories while Arthur was still alive, wished he had appreciated the kind and generous man more, and now it was too late. Any words he might have said seemed pale and feeble. He simply mourned, his heart breaking again with the pain, the void inside raw and aching. He was dimly aware of more small sad speeches before they all stood, and Harry forced himself to watch as the casket rose from its platform and drifted slowly into the hole gouged in the soft dark earth. Vision blurred, he saw the simple wooden box disappear beneath the horizon of the grave, saw his friend's father vanish from their lives, and he almost doubled over with the agony of it.

The rest of the service passed in a haze. Harry and Hermione stood back a bit as the crowd walked past the tomb in a somber line, murmuring to the dead or tossing a flower onto the casket, lurid splashes of color against the brown wood, brown soil. They pressed warm hands and wrapped comforting arms around the family, uttering words of solace and condolence, sincere but ultimately meaningless; words could not bring back the dearly departed, and could ease the sorrow only a little.

The members of the Order were last to pay their respects, the last to hug Molly and her children, swallowing their own tears to offer what little comfort they could. "We'll be at the Burrow when you're done," McGonagall whispered to Molly before they turned to leave. The closest friends and family had agreed to meet there after, to replenish their physical bodies and draw strength and consolation from each other. With a few final embraces and tears, the remaining mourners left to allow the family some time alone at the grave. And so the Weaselys along with Hermione and Harry stood around the final resting place of their father, husband, friend. Bill had his arm around his mother, supporting her as she wept softly, his own eyes burning. Ginny had returned to Harry's arms, trembling and hiding her face in the front of his black dress robes. He couldn't swallow past the mass in his throat.

Percy stood a bit removed from the family circle. He looked painfully awkward; the twins had resumed shooting him icy glares, and he was well aware of his status as an outsider. It pained him that Harry and Hermione seemed more welcome than he in the wrenching family tableau, that the familiar warmth he had always felt around his mother and siblings was gone, frozen by hurt and mistrust.

Molly's voice was so soft and strained they barely heard her. "Are you coming back to the Burrow with us, Percy?"

His eyes flicked nervously from brother to brother. None looked pleased to see him, and Fred and George looked downright hostile. "I...I don't know if that's a good idea, Mum."

"Nonsense," she replied, and she turned wounded eyes to each of her other sons in turn. "You're family, Percy, and you should be with us during...this time." Her voice trembled, but quickly regained a steely note. "We all want you to come, isn't that right, boys?"

Loathe to deny her anything today of all days, they all muttered and shuffled their feet, acquiescing with varying levels of grace. Percy still seemed nervous, shifting his weight from foot to foot, anxiously licking his lips, worrying the loose sleeve of his robe, bunching the fabric up past his wrist.

They all took one last moment to look down into the cold ground, to let their tears water the earth that now entombed their beloved. As they turned to walk slowly to the designated Apparition point, focused only on their grief and each other, a sharp crack startled them.

Too late, again, just like the wedding, and before any of them could draw their wands they were disarmed, three masked and robed figures holding them captive. Another whirl of movement and the man closest to Hermione grabbed her upper arm and hauled her hard against his own body, his other hand clutching a wand he pressed against her temple. "Silence!" he hissed as she cried out in pain and panic, the tender flesh of her arm bruising under his iron hold.

Helpless, Harry and the Weasleys could only stand and watch in terror, watch the horror in Hermione's eyes as one of the other Death Eaters cackled with evil glee and ran his palm over her cheek, across her throat, down to roughly squeeze her breast. "Filthy little Mudblood. You aren't fit to lick my boot, you are nothing to me or my Master. There's only one use you are good for, one reason to keep insects like yourself alive..."

The third one, shorter and broader than the others, pushed him aside, still keeping his wand trained on the

horrified spectators. “We have our orders! Not this time...watch them!” Harry and Fred both stopped suddenly, caught in their attempt to lunge at the bickering villains while they were distracted. But they were wandless, defenseless, and with two wands still leveled in their direction there was nothing they could do but watch and hope.

The one holding Hermione laughed cruelly as they backed off. His stale breath assailed her nostrils, close to him as she was, mingled with the rank odor of sweat and blood and unwashed skin. She fought the urge to vomit from nausea and nerves, fought not to tremble with fright. But she found it impossible to remain utterly still and her captor chuckled again, forcing the tip of his wand a little harder against the soft unyielding skin of her temple as she shivered in abject fear.

“We have a message for you, Harry Potter, a message from the Dark Lord,” the shortest Death Eater said, harsh and gloating.

“Let her go and I’ll listen,” Harry replied, no trace of the raw emotions he was experiencing breaking through to stain his voice.

“As if you are in any position to bargain. She is part of the message, and I would not fail my Master by failing to deliver it in full.”

“Get on with it then!” Ron bellowed. He could not school his voice; it was high and wavering with his dismay.

“So eager, so brave. Harry Potter, the Dark Lord wishes to meet you on the field of battle. Only you can spare the misguided people who thwart him further punishment for their insolence. Say you accept his challenge and this pointless conflict can come to an end. There will be peace for those who accept his rule. Beg his pardon, and he may even grant you a painless death.”

“And if I refuse?” Emotion now, and a familiar one at that – anger.

Though they could not see it through his mask, they could hear the smile in his voice. “Then everyone you know and love will suffer for your cowardice.”

Harry nearly laughed at the ridiculousness of it. Weren’t they already targets, those he cared for, already suffering from their association with him? He was poison from the day he’d become the Boy Who Lived, a walking bulls-eye, and those who chose to stand too close invariably paid the price. Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Arthur...

“That’s a generous offer, especially from someone who sends his minions to do his dirty work instead of meeting face to face like a man.” Harry reveled in the indignant gasps of the Death Eaters, reckless in his rage. Some part of his mind was shouting caution, and of the danger to Hermione, but he couldn’t stop the words. “I will meet him when I’m damn well good and ready, and not a minute before. You tell that snake...”

“You dare!” said the man holding Hermione, and his grip tightened so painfully she thought the bone in her arm might break. “You dare mock the Dark Lord...”

“I dare,” Harry replied coldly. “You’ve delivered your message, now let her go.”

Their attackers were restless in their wrath, tense and menacing. “You have been warned, Harry Potter. Your friends will suffer all the more for your offense until you agree to his request. Starting with this one...”

Abruptly Hermione was thrown to the ground. She landed in a puddle of cloth and limbs, momentarily stunned, and looked up into the tip of a wand. She was vaguely aware of the cries of others, Harry and Ron and the rest of the Weasleys, but her world was narrowed to the slender shaft of wood, the leering mask above. This was it, the way her short life would end, and as she squeezed her eyes shut she could see her Mum and Dad, Harry and Ron.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye...’

And then she was screaming, over and over, before her world faded to black.

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A/N: Bwah-hah! Another cliffie. Sorry, I just couldn't help myself.

## Chapter 13: Insight

Snape jerked awake with a gasp, struggling to break free of the tendrils of dream that threatened to tug him back into sleep. Caught in the twilight world between slumber and full consciousness, it was a few seconds before he was able to process what his senses were telling him. Gradually his subconscious grudgingly released its hold and he sat up, fully aware, the sheets of his narrow cot wrapped around his legs and his chest heaving as though he had been running.

“*Lumos*,” he muttered, blinking owlishly as the tip of his wand ignited from its place on the small table near his bed. Wrenching free of the twisted, slightly damp cloth binding his lower extremities, he retrieved the wand and pointed it about the room, illuminating each crevice in turn. He knew logically he was alone and in no danger, but years of habit were hard to break, and he would not feel truly at ease until he had checked for intruders or other threats.

When he was satisfied he sat back down on the bed, ran a shaky hand through lank hair. ‘This is becoming most tedious,’ he thought, sighing and lying back down on top of the bedclothes, staring up at the blank gray ceiling. Still the nightmares came, Dumbledore and Draco and failure, but it was the new variations that had him unsettled and reluctant to go back to sleep. She wasn’t faceless anymore, Dream Granger, and she kept watching him as he relived some of the worst moments of his life. Watching with soft emotion clear in her eyes, on her face, an emotion he could not recall ever seeing on the face of someone looking at him. And she touched him, her palm and fingers warm and soothing on his face, tender against his own hand, and it was this that woke him on this night.

He growled softly, pressing the heels of his palms into his closed eyes, exasperated and disgusted with himself. He was seriously beginning to doubt his own sanity. Was it possible he was beginning to lose his hold on reality? He had been through far worse, suffered much more in his life than simple confinement, but this was different, and he did not like the things this difference made him think and feel and dream.

Yet he could not keep these new and bewildering ideas out of his head, and they began anew, currents of thought drawing him inexorably toward places inside himself he thought long dead. Dark dusty corners with ideals of contentment, shards of dreams that had died in his youth, died when he’d become twisted and bitter and cold, died when he’d taken the Mark and pledged fealty to evil.

Snape was a unique man, but also very ordinary. As a child, even one with as gloomy and lonely and turbulent a home life as he had experienced, he still had aspirations and ambitions much like any other boy. Simple at first; he’d imagined that he could change his parents, his family, that if he were a good enough son they would be happy with him, with each other. As that dream strangled and expired he’d had others, equally innocent, equally doomed. He had envisioned himself at school, popular and revered, his intelligence and thirst to prove himself envied. Cruel twist that he was sorted into the one house the others abhorred – he could have been in Ravenclaw, at least. But the distant aloof manners he’d cultivated to maintain his sanity at home hurt his ability to make friends, and the general mistrust of Slytherins from the rest of the student body sealed his fate. He was small and dark and odd, his fierce love of knowledge, his fascination with the more primal magics, his affinity with potions and hexes made him stand out even amongst his own house, and not quite in the way he had hoped.

Seven years of dreams and disappointments further twisted his already warped sense of self. He had been tormented by the Marauders, rejected by Lily, scorned and mocked by countless others, ignored and

mistrusted by his own housemates. Over those long lonely years new dreams had been born to replace the dead, and these were bitter and angry and sharp as shattered glass. Revenge, accumulation of power, the ability to force those who spurned and humiliated him to suffer, these were the visions that drove him as childhood gave way to adolescence and early adulthood. It was these new ambitions that finalized his descent into darkness - thoughts of vengeance and the subtle manipulations of Lucius Malfoy and his ilk feeding the seething turmoil in his soul until he found himself kneeling to the Dark Lord, embracing the hatred while silently mourning the burial of the Light inside.

Other hopes had not been replaced. No one who knew him now could have imagined that there was a time Snape contemplated something akin to a normal life. A career he enjoyed, a family who cared, a wife and even children who loved him, whom he could love in return. Those hopes, so typical and simple and universal, had withered slowly and painfully. He longed for what no one seemed willing to give him – a chance, a glance, some shred of kindness and compassion. He thought that person might be Lily for a while - Lily with her simple beauty and ready smile, Lily who never teased or berated. It had been easy to become infatuated, easier still to hex himself in the foot with spiteful words born of embarrassment, and as he watched his fantasy implode and his enemy claim the prize, it made sour hatred and a contemptuous mien the easiest choices of all. Then her death at the hands of his sometime Lord, and he felt some part of him, the part that yearned still for affection and acceptance, die that day, too.

It had been almost sixteen years since that day, years filled with a job he merely tolerated, the mistrust of most around him, and the looming specter of the Dark Lord's return. He had ceased looking for someone who might tolerate him long ago, ceased to hope and dream like other men, devoted himself to study and solitude, penance for wrong turns and poor choices, penance for his part in the demise of the only woman he had ever imagined in his happily ever after. He had acquaintances and coworkers he could keep at a distance with cutting words and a disdainful curl of the lip, and he pretended he preferred it so, preferred no social or emotional entanglements. And so the dark odd boy became the cold acerbic man, and it had been so long since he started playing the sarcastic, sneering spy that he no longer knew where the persona ended and the man began.

His thoughts meandered still, random wisps coalescing into pictures and memories. He saw James and Sirius laughing, Lily smiling, Potter shouting, Dumbledore dying. And now a new image – Hermione, eyes wide and open and soft, her hand on his, unguarded and unflinching. And it reminded him vaguely of another time when he still had hope that his life would be good, when he was a different person. Before the Dark, before the wars, before he sold his soul for petty vengeance and fickle power.

His eyes were closed now and his conscious mind relaxed; neither asleep nor awake, he retained some ability to direct his thoughts, analyze the disparate fragments to create new realities. He was not ignorant of his own flaws and faults; he knew well, for example, that he was neither handsome nor pleasant, and acknowledged that these shortcomings did not endear him to others. Even when he was young he was so very different, and children often do not embrace those who are not the same. Still, like any man there were blind spots in his self knowledge, things he could not see or fathom, so it was not particularly surprising that it took some time before he was able to formulate a cogent theory as to why he experienced such strange reactions around Hermione, why she upset the carefully balanced potions cart of his mind.

There were similarities, after all. Highly intelligent Gryffindors both, Muggle-born, kind and trusting. And he was vulnerable now, once again despised by one and all, friendless and alone. There was nothing more to it than that; she reminded him in small ways of a woman long dead, childish fantasies long buried, that



was all, stirred thoughts and dreams and hopes he believed were long since dust. He was isolated, and she was young and pure. He was not crazy, merely weary and possessing far too much time to think and reminisce. She was not Lily, and he no longer held even a speck of idealism. There were no happily-ever-afters, no songs and laughter and dreams fulfilled. At least not for him.

Mystery solved, at least to his satisfaction, he drifted back into restless slumber. For his own peace of mind, it was better he did not recall any more of his dreams that night, for despite his insight and dismissal, the person of Hermione Granger still figured prominently, watching his struggles with those sad clear eyes, watching while he replayed past horrors again and again.

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The first thing she became aware of was a white light that encompassed her entire field of vision. For a second (or was it a minute, or an hour?) that frightened her. Was she dead, moving toward the proverbial celestial radiance, leaving her friends and family behind? But then she noticed something else, the grating pain in her skull, and she relaxed incrementally – the dead feel no pain.

She moaned softly, trying to blink away the fuzz that blanketed her sight and the pounding inside her head. Slowly things came into focus – the white light was a candle, and she was lying in a bed. She was at the Burrow, she surmised, as the surroundings didn't match her bedroom at headquarters. Also, there was a poster of a Quidditch team on the wall to her left, small violently orange-clad figures swooping and cavorting on the edge of her peripheral, and while she harbored no love of the sport herself she knew what team Ron and his brothers rooted for. She was just struggling to sit up when she felt gentle hands on her shoulders.

“Easy, Hermione, easy.” Hushed familiar voice, low and rumbling.

“Harry?”

“I'm here, too,” Ron chimed in, and as she blinked back the haze their faces came into focus. Smiling and looking greatly relieved, Harry sat on the bed near her head, while Ron was perched on the opposite side near the foot.

“What happened?” she croaked. Her throat was sore, scratchy. Without being asked Ron retrieved a glass and filled it with water while Harry propped a pillow behind her head and helped her to sit upright. The liquid was cool and soothing as it slipped over parched membranes, and when she spoke again her voice was clearer.

“Thank you. What happened?”

“Right down to business, I see,” Harry smiled ruefully. “How much do you remember?”

She took a moment to consider. As she concentrated, flashes of memory coalesced and recent events came flooding back. “We were at your Dad's funeral, Ron. We were just getting ready to leave when Death Eaters came, they grabbed me and threatened us. They had a message for you, Harry, and then...and then...” Nothing, a blank slate where memory should be.

“You don’t remember, then.” She shook her head dumbly, noted the somber expressions on the boys’ faces. Why couldn’t she remember?

Harry cleared his throat. “It’s probably for the best you can’t recall clearly, ‘Mione. They tortured you, first one then two of them at once. We thought...I was sure...they were going to kill you.”

A blurry mental snapshot of a wand tip swam into view, then phantom screams. Her screams. She shuddered violently, muscles rippling in a pale parody of the Cruciatus Curse. She remembered pain, pain like nothing she’d ever dreamed possible. She swallowed hard, suddenly numb and detached. ‘I should be dead...’

“How did you stop them?” Funny, she didn’t remember thinking that, or planning to speak. She could see Harry’s lips moving in reply, but the words weren’t penetrating her senses, and she was reminded of a bad Muggle movie, the dubbed translation wildly out of sync with the actor’s mouths.

“It wasn’t us, Hermione. We would have, before...but Shackbolt and Tonks showed up. Death Eaters went to the Burrow, too, looking for Harry, but the Order was too quick for them this time. They ran off again before we could catch one, but they went back to the cemetery to check on us, and they fought them off before...while you were still...anyway, our bunch Disapparated, too.”

She nodded slowly, still feeling dazed and unreal. Harry and Ron were watching her too closely, and she realized they had been hiding their fear and guilt all along. Eyes too wide, deep creases in the forehead, stubble crusting chins and cheeks. Clearly they had been very worried for her, and knowing them both as she did she assumed that they were blaming themselves for what had happened to her. She understood, though; she’d have felt the same if it had been one of them, if she’d been forced to helplessly watch as one of her best friends writhed, wailing on the ground.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said gently, the fog around her senses starting to dissipate. She was thankful – she hated feeling shocky.

Harry and Ron exchanged startled glances. “How did you know...”

“Oh please, Ron, how long have we been friends? I’d have felt the same.”

He grinned sheepishly, and Harry patted her hand. “You don’t know how scary it was, though. You were thrashing around and shrieking, and then when the second one joined in you just went rigid. We thought that was it right then, and you wouldn’t wake up...” Harry’s voice trailed off, lost for a moment in remembering her lying so still, and his fear that she would never open her eyes again.

“Wait, how long as it been?”

Ron glanced at the ceiling while he calculated. “It’s what, six in the morning? About fifteen hours now.”

She groaned softly. Fifteen hours? She experienced a flash of concern; she had provided extra food for Snape yesterday, but hadn’t anticipated being away from the house this long. “When do we head back?”

“Not until you’ve had a chance to recover. You’ll be weak, prone to uncontrolled spasms for a few days at least.”

“What? No, I want to go back today, this morning, all our research is there. I’ll take it easy, I’ll be fine...”

“Absolutely not!” Molly exclaimed from the doorway. All three of them started, Harry and Ron jumping to their feet and pivoting to face her while Hermione turned her head.

“But I’m fine, really.”

“You aren’t fine!” Molly shrieked. “You were nearly killed! If I had my way none of you would be going back to that house, or fighting in this war, you’re too young!” She was near hysterics now, eyes wild and bright.

“Mrs. Weasley, I’m fine, honest...”

“Mum, its okay, we’re really careful...”

But it was Harry’s voice that cut over the others, stern and a little cold. “We’ve been over this before, Mrs. Weasley. I’m an adult, and I choose to fight. If they want to fight with me, I’ll never turn them away. Besides, do you really believe if we, if I hid away, tried to stay out of it, it would make one damn bit of difference? It’s me Voldemort wants, and this will never be over until one of us is dead.”

Molly stood there stunned, bottom lip trembling, and Harry softened. She looked so lost, and broken, and it tore at something deep in his chest to see that look in her eyes. “I can’t imagine how much pain you’re in right now. I don’t want to add to it, really, but I have to be involved in this. You see that, don’t you? I wish it didn’t have to be like this...” And he did wish that, so fervently it was an ache in his heart. How much different would his life have been, would it be now, if he wasn’t Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived? Would he be more troubled by the closing of Hogwarts than the return of Voldemort and the war? Would he even want to fight if the choice hadn’t been taken away when he was but a small child? Part of him hoped so, hoped he would have still chosen to resist such evil, but a small shameful part deeply resented that he’d never had the option of staying out of the conflict, staying safe and alive.

Molly was shaking her head, visibly trembling from head to foot. She turned to Ron, and his face was crumpled with too many emotions, many conflicting. He remembered that he’d once thought a person could explode if they felt too much at once; he still wondered, his insides roiling with the turmoil, so much of which he couldn’t seem to understand or articulate properly. “I have to help him, Mum, he’s my best mate. I couldn’t live with myself if I wasn’t involved with this, if I let others battle and bleed while I sat back like a coward.”

She knew all this intellectually, knew her sons and daughter and the other children she loved as her own would not be dissuaded, but she was so shaken and overwhelmed and scared. To see one of them tortured, injured, dying was a blow every time, and she was too wounded to fend off many blows just now. They were just children.

But they weren’t, and she knew by the grim slash of Harry’s mouth, Ron’s refusal to look her in the eye, the shine of tears in Hermione’s eyes that they would have their way and depart whenever they so chose,

leave her. Not alone, of course, Ginny was still at the Burrow, and the other boys were sure to come around on a daily basis, but it still wrenched inside that they would choose to go, choose to acknowledge that there was something bigger out there than Arthur's death.

"We'll stay for breakfast, alright Mum?" Ron offered. "That'll give you a chance to rest up a bit more, Hermione."

It was a quiet meal, Harry and Ron keeping a close eye on Hermione, who kept twitching at random moments while Molly dabbed at her eyes every few minutes. Hermione struggled to hide her flailing limbs and her exhaustion, swallowing her pride and letting Harry know that while she wanted to go back, she didn't quite feel up to Apparating herself. All too soon they were saying goodbye for now, Molly clinging to Ron, Harry and Ginny to each other, and it felt like another loss, like more than a normal farewell, though none could have said why. All they knew was that as the three friends Apparated back to Bitterwing Way, everyone felt a heavy sense of gloom and foreboding, as if far worse things lay ahead, and far greater losses were in store.

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A/N: I hope my Snape introspection makes sense. There will be a bit of a delay between this chapter and the next (not a huge one) as I take a small vacation. I plan to return refreshed and ready to add to the tale.

## Chapter 14: Malum Defaeco

It was late afternoon now, and Hermione was lying on the couch in the sitting room, a blanket stretched over her legs and a book propped up against her bent knees. A few of the books she'd retrieved from Hogwarts were piled neatly on the floor beside her, and she was so thoroughly engrossed by the material she was reading that the faint sonances of the house, the low undercurrent of Harry and Ron's conversation, were nothing but white noise.

The boys were sitting over by the window, talking and casting covert glances at their friend every time her body twitched, an after effect of prolonged exposure to Cruciatus. She'd taken a nap after lunch, dozing off with a book resting on her chest, but otherwise had spent the day reading voraciously, absorbing the content of the fascinating tomes to which she had access.

"We're going to scrounge up some grub, do you want anything?" It took a minute before she realized Ron was talking to her, that they were in fact standing right by the couch, looming over her.

"No, I'm fine, thanks," she replied automatically. They shrugged, moving toward the entryway, when she spoke again. "How did they know, do you think?"

"What?" said Harry, puzzled by the non sequitur.

"The Death Eaters, how did they know when to strike? They got there when the rest of the Order had left. The timing was perfect."

Harry and Ron walked back over to her, the redhead perching himself on the arm of the sofa down by her feet. "We were talking about that earlier. We figure there must be spies at the Ministry. He had them before, Voldemort, spies in the government, and it's not like the funeral was a big secret, not like the wedding."

"Yes, but the timing..."

"They sent people to the Burrow, too," Ron reminded her. "Someone could have hung back, left the service toward the end and then reported to You-Know-Who. Then they just guessed a good amount of time before they struck, I guess."

"I suppose that's possible," Hermione muttered slowly, brow furrowed. "Something just doesn't sit right." Something was tickling at the back of her mind, but she couldn't seem to pull it forward.

"None of this sits right," Harry replied darkly. "I hate not knowing who to trust, being suspicious of people."

"We should talk to Shackbolt next chance we get, right? He and Tonks can keep an eye out at the Ministry. Or more of an eye, I reckon."

She murmured noncommittally, still frowning, distracted by the idea she could not quite tease into full awareness; it bothered her as she resumed her reading. Long since accustomed to her somewhat curt behavior while she was studying, Harry and Ron left her to her thoughts and her books, their own attention

quickly diverted by the rumbling in their stomachs and the recollection of leftovers in the kitchen.

Only half concentrating on the pages as she skimmed through various incantations and treatise on Dark magic and how to defeat it, she almost skipped a page, thin, aged paper sticking together slightly as she turned to the next section. She would recall that, later, remember how she absently rubbed the pages between her thumb and forefinger, felt the tell-tale slippage of two fragile parchment leaves rather than one, turned back the paper to glance at what she had missed. She blinked, momentarily disbelieving her own eyes, unable to grasp that the answer was here, right in front of her, in black and white and faded color illustrations. She read the entry through once, twice, effects and complications and ingredients, and her mind reeled with calculations and hypotheticals. Had she really done it, found the answer in a ragged ancient text, the way to destroy the Horcruxes and save Harry?

She was up and walking before she realized it, bare feet padding silently over carpet and wood and stone as she made her way to the basement. It was complicated, true, immensely so, the most intricate potion she'd ever seen or heard of, ten times more volatile than the Polyjuice Potion, but if it worked, if she could pull it together, it might be the key to victory.

She laid the text down on the main table in the basement, the surface already stained and marred from the past few weeks of potions brewing. With the book open to the formula she'd discovered, she immediately began skimming through the herbs and murky liquids organized neatly on their shelves, mentally noting items she would need. There were enough dried nettles for sure, but her stores of crushed garnet were low, and the pure greater celandine was hard to come by...

"I expected you would come down sooner." His low rough voice startled her, lost in her musings as she was, and she turned around to find him standing behind her, familiar dark coat and trousers leaving his pale face looking all the more pallid above the high collar, stranded in a sea of black cloth and lank black hair.

His eyes narrowed as he allowed his gaze to travel the length of her. He was used to seeing her in Muggle clothing now, as it was her customary attire at the house, but he had never seen an ensemble quite like this. Loose pale pink pants, an equally baggy white T-shirt festooned with pictures of three bizarre looking cartoon characters, and her hair in complete disarray, all frizz and untamed tendrils sticking out at gravity defying angles. As she flushed under his scrutiny, his nostrils flared slightly, taking in her scent. She usually smelled clean, Muggle shampoo and a subtle hint of what he assumed was her own unique scent – tonight her own odor was more pronounced, and he detected the familiar notes of *Agrimonia gryposepala* and cajeput oil.

"What has happened?" he asked shortly.

Her blush drained. "What...how did you know?" Illogical to argue, and her prevarication skills had never been the best. She could lie quite effectively when prepared, but when faced with the unexpected she tended to stammer, burn red, and give the game away.

His lip curled in a ghost of a sneer – or was that tiny smile? "While my familiarity with Muggle attire is somewhat lacking, you appear to have just climbed out of bed. You have also ingested a potion designed to alleviate pain."

She felt her cheeks grow hot again as she looked down at her clothing. She'd been so engrossed in her reading, in the discovery she thought she might have made, that her state of dress never even crossed her mind. She was deeply embarrassed, though she wasn't entirely sure why. She was certainly covered adequately, and why should she care what he thought of her pajamas?

"It's nothing, sir. I'm fine now," she offered, rather thinking he would let the matter drop. After all, he was hardly known as the caring, sympathetic sort.

"If it were nothing you would not require a potion to counter it. If you are unwell, it is inadvisable to work with any volatile substances." Of course, not concern for her well-being, but for his own safety. She sighed quietly.

"Death Eaters paid us a visit at the funeral yesterday. They had a message for Harry. They...I was tortured with Cruciatu." Her voice was flat and calm, trying not to betray the conflicting feelings that plagued her still.

"I see," he responded softly. He remembered the first time he had experienced the searing torment of that curse. He hadn't known someone could feel that much pain and live to tell the tale. He was soon to become well schooled in exactly how much pain a man could endure, again and again.

He walked over to a small table in the corner of the basement where they stored the finished potions. Beakers and phials containing various colored fluids, all carefully labeled, lined up in neat rows. He found another dose of a standard pain reducer and palmed it, taking out his wand and waving it over the potion after he uncorked it. "*Quietus nervus*," he murmured, watching with a practiced eye as the liquid glowed briefly with a faint amber hue. Knowing she had observed his actions, he proffered an explanation along with the slender glass tube.

"I've found the addition of the spell helps the potion target and reduce the frequency and severity of the muscle spasms."

She looked at him quizzically, and the question slipped out before she realized it. "How did you bear it, sir? I can't remember it well, but what I do..." She shivered, not from the chill or the effects of the curse, but from the sheer memory of the pain. She didn't expect an answer, was faintly mortified she'd asked at all. But much to her surprise he responded, his voice vaguely rough and distant.

"I didn't bear it, Miss Granger. There was never a time it didn't affect me. I learned to hide the signs, afterward, but it never became easier." And it never had, each bout of the curse leaving him twitching and screaming despite his resolve to endure without sound. Of course, it was never a single quick application of Cruciatu; rather, it was multiple hexes until his voice gave out and he thought all the muscles in his body had been rent asunder. Experience had forced him to concoct stronger pain relievers years ago, remedies that would render another man senseless but allowed him to function almost normally until the worst of the damage healed. The students never knew or suspected how many of his foul moods were born of those trials after the Dark Lord's return. It had certainly interfered with his attempts to teach the Potter brat Occlumency, though Snape doubted it had made any difference in the long run. The boy had no subtlety, no discipline.

"I didn't realize."

“Of course you didn’t, Miss Granger, I would have been a poor teacher, not to mention spy, if mere children could detect my weaknesses.”

His waspish tone didn’t offend her, and she couldn’t help the surge of pity she felt. He had suffered so much and done so silently, finding no gratitude from the very people he was trying to protect. Of course, his general demeanor precluded any soft sentiments from being directed his way, and his temper was often foul just because, but it still roused something in her to know that he had endured so much pain without recognition or reward.

He offered her the potion, expression inscrutable. She nodded and took the phial, downing the contents in a single swallow. She grimaced reflexively at the taste and subtle burn – obviously the alteration did nothing for the taste. She felt a faint warm tingle spread from her abdomen outward.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. He nodded once and observed her silently as she Scourgified the tube, placed it with other empty clean containers for future use. It was then he noticed the book lying open on the table. He glanced down at the yellowed paper and faded illustrations, and his eyes widened perceptibly.

“You cannot possibly intend to brew this potion,” he stated, noticeably incredulous.

“I know it’s tricky, but it’s exactly what we’ve been looking for. I have to try, it may be the only way to save...” She gasped and cut herself off, but too late. She had told Snape nothing specific of her work with Harry and Ron, and she was suddenly fearful he would press her for more details than she was willing to divulge.

His gaze seemed to be burrowing its way under her skin, she could feel it, hot and prickling. “Regardless of whom or what you would save, Miss Granger, the fact remains that you cannot successfully brew Malum Defaeco. No one has done so in millennia.” It gave him no pleasure, he discovered, to dash her ambitions so. Why wasn’t he delighted at the opportunity to quash the girl’s outrageous and presumptuous plans?

“Never? But...I thought since it was recorded that someone must have figured out a way to obtain the blood.” She winced inwardly at the decidedly desperate inflection in her voice, a horrid sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. With a jolt she realized that she had hoped he would know the answer; she had come to find him, turned to him instinctively for a solution. She could not recall a time he’d failed to know something potions related, and she felt the warm bubble of hope bursting, leaving her all the more disappointed and despairing of finding a way to destroy the Horcruxes, defeat Voldemort, save Harry.

“I believe the instructions for Malum Defaeco were recorded simply to preserve the knowledge of what was. I have never seen documented, nor heard so much as a hint of the last time a unicorn foal willingly donated blood.” And that was the insurmountable obstacle. The potion called for a single drop of an ingredient that could not be obtained.

“But I could try, sir, there are unicorns in the Forbidden Forest, Hagrid must know where to find them...”

“It cannot be done!” he thundered with vehemence. Surely she of all people, the girl who read every book



she could get her hands on, must know this. “Miss Granger, only legend speaks of a time long past when a deserving witch or wizard could petition the animal for such a gift. But there are those who abused it, used it to develop potions of unspeakable horror.” Those, too, were lost to history, but the tales persisted – an elixir that slowly rotted the victim from the inside, the unicorn blood enough to keep the unfortunate alive until the organs were liquefied. Another that allowed the subject to drain the magic and life from others. One or two others, all terrible and evil, and wars were fought for the power such potions bestowed. “After the creatures discovered what had happened, they would no longer hear requests for their blood. You know the properties of this substance, Miss Granger, it cannot be taken by force and produce the intended effect, and no unicorn, adult or foal, has consented to donate their blood to a human since our kind betrayed their trust.”

He watched as her face fell, the animated light in her eyes dimming, and he realized that he irrationally wanted to be able to provide an answer, be the hero, save the day. He squashed the impulse fiercely; he was not one to tell comforting lies, and he owed her no special consideration. That he felt as if he did was a trick of his mind, no more.

Crestfallen, she turned away from him, staring down blankly at the pages that minutes before had held such promise. Absently she fingered the thin fragile parchment, reading again the introduction:

*Whilst ordinary charms and potions can often cure a victim of the Dark Arts, some enchantments are so vile as to leave a remnant behind, a trace of evil, a stain of Dark Magic that resists all attempts to purify. For those afflicted with the foulest of curses, there was developed long ago the most powerful of purifiers – Evil’s Purge (Malum Defaeco), a potion against which no hint of Dark Magic can endure...*

She was struck by the unfairness of it, to have found the answer only to have it ripped away by the treachery of others long since dead. A single drop of blood given freely by a unicorn foal was all that stood between victory and defeat, she felt, and she could not let the idea go, even if it was impossible. They had done impossible before, hadn’t they?

“I’d still like to attempt it,” she said finally. “At worst I’ll waste time and resources, but I’ve got to try it. We haven’t found anything else yet, nothing even close. I’ve got to try.”

Snape was struck by the absurdity of it. Of course she would not let the fact that the task she had set her sights on had not been accomplished since before anyone could remember, until there were nothing left but stories and fables to serve as guide, deter her. Bloody Gryffindors, all blind passion and stubborn bravery, too blind to see the problems and pitfalls, charging headlong into danger and death. Granted, he could discern no imminent threat in this, save the certain scent of failure, and he felt that unfamiliar surge again, to provide another way, to give her an answer, to help her. To make things better for her. And he recognized that his own foolishness was far worse; he saw her folly when she could or would not, yet still experienced a compulsion to aid her.

Insight was worthless if he could not prevent these feelings, ghosts of the past, remnants of a man he had not been and could not be again.

“Why is this so important to you, Miss Granger? What is it you hope to accomplish?”

She realized then that in the weeks that had passed since his arrival he had not once asked what precisely the Order was planning, what it was she and Harry and Ron were doing. He'd asked about events that she referenced, like the Death Eater attacks, but never had he pressed for specifics on what she was researching, the advantage they hoped to gain. Where once he would have demanded knowledge and answers he was now silent, and she wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

She also wasn't sure how to answer his question. Part of her wanted to spill it all, the burden of keeping the secret of the Horcruxes from all the adults in the Order a weight in her chest. She wasn't used to keeping all these secrets – the presence of Snape, Dumbledore's mission, there were times she felt like she would just erupt from the pressure of words that sought to tumble forth. But she couldn't betray Harry and Ron anymore than she could betray Snape.

“Well, sir, we're trying to defeat Voldemort...”

He hissed, face contorted in anger and...fear? “Do not speak that name in my presence,” he said harshly, the fingers on his left hand flexing convulsively. “His Mark...”

“Oh. Well, um, we're trying to stop You-Know-Who, and I think this potion would help.”

“Leaving aside for a moment the fact that the potion cannot be completed, I fail to see how it would be helpful. It is designed to assist victims of Dark magic, and the Dark Lord is hardly a victim. And surely you don't believe you could force him to ingest it somehow.”

But then Snape didn't know about the Horcruxes or Harry, and it was all right there in the crumbling pages, how no trace of a Dark curse could survive an infusion of Malum Defaeco. It even stated expressly that it would work on the living or inanimate objects, it was perfect, the potion that could eradicate the taint of Voldemort's soul, bound to the Horcruxes and her best friend by foul magic, the blemish of evil.

“Sir, you just have to believe me, this is exactly what we've been looking for.”

His face seemed to still, and a distant look touched his coal black eyes. “I see,” he said, clear and hard, and Hermione knew what he was thinking.

Without thought she stopped his move to turn away with a touch of her hand on his, and he seemed frozen he was so still, but he vibrated with tension. She flinched a little, hurt somewhat that he found a simple touch from her so repulsive, but she didn't remove her hand, something inside her compelling her to maintain contact. “It's not you, sir. We – Harry and Ron and I – we can't tell anyone exactly what we're doing. No one in the Order knows, Harry said that's the way Dumbledore wanted it...”

And it was Snape's turn to flinch as if struck, hearing that name, but he heard the truth in her voice and relaxed somewhat. It sounded like something he'd do, the brilliant, infuriating wizard, tell only a hand-picked few of another of his intricate schemes and swear them to secrecy. Never mind the price that secrecy might demand of them.

“You hardly owe me an explanation, Miss Granger,” he responded with cool severity, but she saw his posture uncoil just a bit. “I was merely curious. Given the futility of the task, it matters not.”

“I have to try,” she repeated desperately. “But I don’t know if I can do it myself, it’s the most complicated potion I’ve ever seen, and if I screw it up...will you help me, sir? Please, I know you think it can’t be done, but if I can get the blood and I screw this up, our best chance...” She was aware how close she was to begging, and this was Snape, what was she thinking, he would scoff and refuse and she would be all the more humiliated for having presumed to entreat this man to aid her in a task he himself declared unattainable.

He had a curious look on his face, one she couldn’t decipher, and seemed rather at a loss for words. She could not see his internal battle, Slytherin sensibility and years of caustic façade warring with a desire to help her, young earnest Gryffindor, so like and yet not like another long dead. “Miss Granger...very well, I will ensure your experiment is successful until you fail to procure the crucial ingredient.” He barely believed he’d uttered the words, and he was both content and confounded by the decision, and decidedly displeased with himself for his own weakness. Yet he did not take back the words, could not bring himself to do so, even as he mocked himself in his own head.

Eyes wide with complete surprise, Hermione responded with a muffled squeak of delight, throwing her arms around his neck in a quick startled hug. “Thank you!” she gasped against his shoulder, breathing in the complex scent of crushed herbs and something else, earthier yet clean, before she remembered herself and moved to pull away, embarrassment and giddiness flaming her cheeks.

But his hands rose up to her arms so that he was grasping her elbows lightly, her hands on his biceps. Neither seemed to be thinking, only reacting as they stood facing each other, oddly breathless and disconnected. There was that look again, the foreign complicated one that she couldn’t read, and his eyes seemed to be getting larger and darker, and the most bizarre thoughts were storming through her mind...

They both gasped audibly as a sensation not unlike pins and needles prickled across their skin, and in a swirl of black cloth he was gone, hidden away as the door at the top of the basement steps opened.

“Oi, Hermione, are you down there?” Ron’s confused voice sounded thick and slightly muffled; she’d have laid Galleons on his mouth still containing part of his dinner.

“Yes, Ron, I’ll be right up.” Feeling slightly flustered, she retrieved the copy of *Eliminating Evil: Enchantments and Elixirs* from the table, quickly refocusing on her discovery and the plans they would need to make. But as the evening progressed and their excitement and doubt gave way to the tedium of logistics, she found herself distracted, again and again, by the recollection of deep black eyes, that intense odd look on Snape’s face, and the peculiar sensations both invoked.

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A/N: Most of the potions ingredients listed herein are actual plants/stones with documented or theoretical purifying/pain relief properties. Information can them can be found (where else?) on the good 'old internet. Same for my Latin translations.

Now we're getting into the meat of the story, so please review and let me know what you think so far...

## Chapter 15: Hagrid's Help

The next few weeks flew by, alternating spurts of boredom and drudgery punctuated by frantic flurries of activity and fear. Two more Death Eater attacks were largely responsible for the later, as there appeared to be little rhyme or reason to their frequency or location. McGonagall was ambushed on her way to the Ministry, Neville and his grandmother (both Order members now) outside her home just after returning from Diagon Alley. It had been a shock to hear of the elder Longbottom's demise, and they'd had no success at figuring out how Voldemort's followers were able to catch Order members at vulnerable moments.

These spates of anxiety only heightened Hermione's resolve to brew the potion, this key to turning the tide. Harry and Ron had both voiced their concerns about her ability to complete the project, both due to the complexity of Malum Defaeco and the necessity of obtaining unicorn blood, but they had quickly learned that bringing up their doubts made Hermione shrill and somewhat hyper. So they helped as best they could; she had done so for them, after all, criticized and chastised their reckless plans in the past, but she had always put aside her misgivings and tried to help, and they owed her the same. Ron had contacted Charlie to acquire an immensely rare ingredient (a dram of the tears of a year old male dragon, Chinese Fireball or Spanish Softscale, born on the night of a blue moon), and Harry had eased Hermione's fears that McGonagall would quash the plan by refusing to pay for the ingredients by insisting on providing the funds out of his own vault.

"I've got more than enough," he answered her astonished protests. "And I can't think of anything more important than this." He didn't mention his own obvious stake in the elixir. He could not allow himself to get his hopes up, given the likelihood of failure, and his own dilemma and mortality gripped him at the worst moments, burning in his gut and leaving him shaken.

There was, of course, one more thing as important as Malum Defaeco – the location of the last (they hoped) Horcrux they needed to locate. Based on what little they knew of Voldemort's life, almost all of which had been relayed to Harry by Dumbledore, there seemed to be only one logical place.

"But surely Dumbledore would have found it if it were hidden at Hogwarts," Ron muttered tiredly for what felt like the millionth time.

"He didn't even suspect they existed until after the diary and Voldemort's return, and he didn't know how many to look for until he saw Slughorn's memory," Harry replied automatically, the familiar guilty sting prickling sharp then fading. If only he'd tried harder, gotten the memory sooner, would it have made a difference? Impossible to know.

"And Dumbledore said he didn't know all the castle's secrets," Hermione mused. Secretly she was becoming impatient, weary of circling the same points again and again. "Besides, we'll have to go to Hogwarts, anyway, to the Forbidden Forest to find the unicorns when its time to collect the blood." Her stomach clenched despite her outward confidence. If she failed...

"So we just search the entire castle for an item we won't recognize, have no idea where it may be, in a place with hidden rooms and too many secrets to count? Bloody brilliant. It'll be just like the Chamber, then," Ron snapped. It wasn't that he didn't want to go, but the waiting and uncertainty were wearing on his already frayed patience.

“Well, if you’ve got a better idea I’d love to hear it,” Hermione sniped back.

“Quit it, you two,” Harry barked. “We’ve been over and over this; we won’t know for sure until we look so that’s what we’ll have to do. Even if it takes all bloody day and night, even if those giant spiders now live in every tower...” He didn’t hear Ron’s angry whimper, a sudden revelation taking his breath away, leaving him looking vaguely stunned.

“Harry?”

“It’s not in the castle, he wouldn’t risk Dumbledore finding it and recognizing the trace of powerful Dark magic. And he wouldn’t have had the time, the interview didn’t take that long, and the portraits would have told the Headmaster if he’d been sneaking around before or after they met. But there aren’t any portraits outside!”

“Outside the castle, you mean?”

“Right! He could have hidden it on the ground, in the lake or...the Forest! It’s dangerous in there, he wouldn’t have to worry about too many people tramping about, but it’s close enough to the castle to still be a part of Hogwarts, the first place that felt like home to him.” And Harry understood that; Hogwarts felt like his home, too, the first best home he’d ever known.

“You may be right, Harry,” Hermione said slowly, analyzing the idea in her head. “But how will we find it, none of us have mastered any of the detector spells yet, and it is rather dangerous to just wander in and search.”

“Easy,” Harry replied with an excited grin. “We’ll ask Hagrid.”

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A quick note with Hedwig and the three arranged to meet Hagrid the very next day in Diagon Alley. Lupin’s eyes narrowed when Harry let him know about their plans, but he refrained from launching into a lecture about danger and security. “Constant vigilance” was practically the Order motto, even with Moody still unresponsive in St. Mungo’s. Besides, he grudgingly conceded to himself, the short notice may actually be the best course, not allowing their enemies enough time to know and plan another ambush.

So they departed quietly the next morning, glancing about furtively and allowing Hermione to use a Disillusionment Charm on all of them. It was early yet, the sun barely peeking over the horizon as they Apparated in turn to just outside Fortescue’s boarded up shop, all of them agreeing that it was better to meet before the usual bustle of the day began.

“Good ter see yeh all,” Hagrid boomed after releasing them from his bone-crushing embrace. Hermione gasped in reply while Ron waved feebly. “What yeh bin up to? Minerva told me yeh all got some sort o’ secret mission.”

“We do,” Harry replied solemnly. “Dumbledore left it for us, and it’s crucial to defeating Voldemort. Will

you help us, even though we can't tell you exactly what we're doing?"

"O' course, don' be daft! As if I'd say no. So, what'll yeh be needin' from me then? Protection?"

"No, nothing like that. We need information," Harry said, his voice lowering conspiratorially even though he had seen Hermione cast *Muffliato*. They weren't exactly inconspicuous, the famous Harry Potter and Friends talking with a half giant. He wasn't sure if it was paranoia or vigilance, but he thought he could feel concealed eyes burrowing into the skin on his back, and the creeping shadows of the rising sun appeared to shift with hidden spies.

"What sort o' information?"

"Are there any parts of the Forbidden Forest that the creatures who live in there avoid?"

Hagrid chuckled loudly. "Well, o' course there are. They mostly steer clear of Aragog's brood," he sniffed a bit, while Ron and Harry both shivered, "an' the ruddy Centaurs guard their part pretty fierce. Grawp's calmer so I think some of 'em are startin' to move back in there..."

"But Hagrid, are there any particular areas all of the inhabitants of the Forest avoid?"

"Well...er, I don' think so..." Hagrid looked confused, his huge face clouding as he thought, and Hermione was struck with an idea.

"Will you draw us a map, Hagrid?" she asked, pulling out her wand and conjuring parchment and quill. "It doesn't have to be perfect, just sketch out the general territories of the most dangerous...er, the creatures that take care of themselves best," she amended hastily, cutting off the huge man's automatic protest of the good nature of the monsters.

He huffed a bit but good naturedly began scribbling on the parchment. The Acromantula cave, a distant corner inhabited by a werewolf, an area wherein dwelled the last of a specific breed of tree demon. As more and more of the map was filled with the domains of the various forest dwellers, the trio noticed that there was an obvious void, just south of the center of the forest, a patch barren of any species, friendly or otherwise.

"What's there?" asked Ron excitedly, pointing at the blank spot on the parchment.

"Nuttin' special, I guess," Hagrid mumbled, confusion again twisting his massive, bearded face. "At least...let me think..."

"Have you ever been here, Hagrid?" Hermione questioned gently.

"O' course, I've bin in every bit o' the forest, I just can' seem to remember...it's right on the tip o' me memory..."

Hermione smiled grimly and patted Hagrid on the arm. "Don't worry about it, I'm sure if it were something scary...um, interesting, you'd remember." A quick gesture to the boys compelled them to hold their tongue, though she could almost see the questions stamped on their eager faces. She retrieved the

map from Hagrid's massive slack fingers, his consternation still visible. "Oh, Hagrid, where would we find the unicorns?"

"They mostly stay in this part, near the Centaurs," he replied, eyes clearing as he answered the query. "It's a small herd, o' course, though a touch larger now – the new foals were born recently, two of 'em I've seen." Hermione had hoped as much, recalling what she knew of the creatures breeding habits from Care of Magical Creatures, but was glad to hear it confirmed.

"Great," she said warmly, noting the area he'd indicated and folding the map neatly before placing it in her pocket.

"We'd better get going," Harry muttered furtively, eyes darting as he tried to pick out any skulking figures in the shadows. The creeping sensation of unseen others watching was growing stronger, there was someone out there, someone dangerous...

"So soon? I was hopin' we could grab a bite ter eat or sumtin', I don' get much company at Hogwarts these days. Course I'm not complainin', mind..."

"No, I'm sorry, Hagrid, we need to get back," Harry blurted. Ron and Hermione both looked at him strangely. He hadn't exhibited this much anxiety in quite some time, he seemed to have developed a cooler, more controlled reaction when angry or upset, but now he was jumpy and on edge.

"Harry's right," Ron agreed, smiling sympathetically at Hagrid's obvious disappointment. "We'll come around as soon as we can, though..."

He never finished the thought, the sudden crack of Apparition rending the still morning air. But Harry was ready this time, red light bursting from his wand before the Death Eaters had even gotten their bearings, finding and striking his target, and then he was tearing across the cobblestone street, another spell just missing as a startled figure jumped awkwardly out of the way. A third cursed loudly and spun into nothingness just as a curse from either Ron or Hermione sailed by, and now it was only the prone body Harry had Stunned and the one who had leapt aside, and the later was moving toward his (her?) fallen comrade, surely intending to effect an escape for them both. Two curses, Harry's and Ron's, blew the enemy backward with such force he (she?) slammed into a shop window; the person staggered as the Unbreakable Spell held, nearly collapsed, then Disapparated with no time to spare, Hermione's *Incarcerous* ricocheting off the panes of glass and binding an unfortunate goblin on his way to work.

"Sorry," she stammered, releasing the glaring creature. Harry and Ron were panting and flushed, grinning wildly as they advanced on the unconscious Death Eater on the ground, wands at the ready.

"That was brilliant, Harry, how'd you react so quickly?" Ron said enviously, prodding the stocky man on the ground with the toe of his trainer.

"I felt like we were being watched," Harry replied rather grimly. "They must have spies everywhere, and sent for reinforcements as soon as we were spotted. Got one of them this time, though, didn't we?" His voice was cold yet eager, and Hermione thought she saw something dark and nasty flicker through his eyes, shining bright behind his glasses.

“Too right yer did, Harry,” Hagrid exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulder so hard he pitched forward, tripping over the black-cloaked body on the ground. “Sorry ‘bout that. Looks like the rest o’ the cavalry has arrived,” he commented, picking Harry up just as Tonks and another, unfamiliar Auror arrived.

“Wotcher, Harry,” Tonks grinned, lemon yellow hair tufted into long spikes on the top of her head. “Heard some of You-Know-Who’s boys were causing a ruckus. Good of you to nab one for us this time around.” Thick chains soon bound the still insensate man, and then he was bobbing upright, head lolling forward rather like a puppet with severed strings. With a wave and a wide smile Tonks made to leave, the other Auror continuously scanning the perimeter with hard watchful eyes.

“Wait,” said Harry, and he walked slowly toward the prisoner. He had to know, and Tonks make no move to stop him. Wildly he thought of Snape and felt hatred boil in his veins, but the incarcerated man was too short and thick, he simply had to see...

He yanked off the mask, heard Hermione’s soft intake of breath and Ron’s hiss. Not Snape, but familiar all the same. With a disgusted sneer, Harry turned and walked back to his friends, not needing to watch as the Aurors spirited Gregory Goyle away.

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The Order meeting that evening was animated and slightly jubilant. Death Eaters had attacked yet again, but this time the hunted had become the hunter, and they had managed to apprehend one. Harry wasn’t particularly pleased; familiar as he was with Goyle from school, he highly doubted the Aurors would get much useful information out of him. Harry had often wondered how the cretin managed to fasten his robes without assistance, and he highly doubted Voldemort or his cronies were foolish enough to trust essential data to such an obvious imbecile. And he was right, they found out later, Goyle wasn’t even a true Death Eater, having been deemed unworthy to bear the Mark. He, Vincent Crabbe, and Blaise Zabini were Death Eater groupies, it seemed, and had jumped at the chance to prove their mettle by fighting Harry and the rest. More fool them.

The meeting was more crowded than most, even with the absence of Tonks (Auror business), Lupin (full moon), Shackbolt (Minister surveillance), and Mundungus (irresponsible git). Harry had been pleasantly surprised by the arrival of some of the new Order members: Lee Jordan, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, and Michael Corner. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan came as well, and it rather felt like an evening in the Gryffindor common room. Or it might have, were it not for the sober reminders of the war, personified by the grieving.

Neville was pale and withdrawn, eyes dry but puffy and swollen, and he barely spoke above a whisper. Terry Boot was mentioned in hushed tones, he and his entire family having vanished without a trace, only an empty house and an ominous scorch mark on the front door remaining. And then, of course, there was the Weasley clan, having just that morning suffered a fresh loss – Bill’s new bride, Fleur, had succumbed to her injuries despite the best efforts of the Healers. Bill sat on a chair in the corner, noticeably distraught, while Molly hovered nearby, the odd tear sliding down her face. Only Bill had truly loved her, but the rest were still reeling from the death of their father, and this new blow now seemed brutally unfair.

The biggest surprise, at least to Harry, was the arrival of Percy. Still looking stiff and uncomfortable



around his family, he nonetheless appeared eager to help, volunteering everything he knew about the Minister's schedule and ideas, about various other officials. Harry gathered this wasn't the first time he'd passed along some information; he'd probably been doing so since the funeral. The other Weasley boys seemed much more tolerant of Percy's presence, too, no glaring or snide comments, though he could have sworn he saw Fred slip something in Percy's unattended butterbeer. Apparently they'd all reached some sort of truce, and for that Harry was genuinely glad. Anything that brought some measure of peace to Ron and his family was worth it.

As the meeting progressed they discussed how things were going with various aspects of Order business. Recruitment of new members, following suspected Death Eaters or minor servants of Voldemort, observation of potential spies in the Ministry. Harry soon found his thoughts drifting back to their morning meeting with Hagrid and the empty patch on the Forest map. After the dust had cleared from their altercation with Goyle, they had returned to Bitterwing Way and Hermione had explained her theory on why Hagrid couldn't remember what was there. If Voldemort had planted a Horcrux in the Forbidden Forest, surely it made sense that he would protect it with the most powerful concealment charms possible, and there were spells that could create fear and menace around an object. Harry thought this made a great deal of sense, and although he had no idea of how to get near an object so shrouded, the mysterious barren patch on the map Hagrid had drawn seemed to confirm his suspicions that the final Horcrux was at Hogwarts.

Just as the meeting was about to disperse, Percy's tentative query made the gathering instantly tense, though perhaps Hermione's reaction was for different reasons. "Has anyone heard anything about Snape?"

That pulsing void in his chest was suddenly raw and exposed, and Harry's voice took on that cold, clear tone Ron and Hermione recognized as his new way of expressing anger. "Why do you want to know?" he challenged aggressively.

"Harry," McGonagall admonished gently.

His jaw clenched, but he did manage to tone down his rage. "He slithered back to his master, so far as we know. I haven't seen him since the wedding. Since he killed Fleur."

It was Hermione this time, her voice thick with anguish. "Harry..."

"There have been no definitive sightings of Snape since he ran away from Hogwarts the night of Dumbledore's murder. May I inquire about your interest?" McGonagall was her typical austere self, only a crinkling around her eyes indicative of her continued distress surrounding this topic.

"I just..." Percy swallowed hard, eyes darting around the room. "I was curious. No one seems to know, and I've heard rumors that the Death Eaters are looking for him as well."

"That's impossible," Harry countered flatly. "Or someone is spreading false reports for some reason. Maybe they think we're thick enough to take him back if he shows up with some bullshit story..."

"Enough, Mr. Potter." He glared at his former Head of House, biting back a sharp retort, but McGonagall's tone brooked no argument. "Thank you for the information, Mr. Weasley, but we have no inkling of his current whereabouts. If you hear anything useful, you'll be sure to pass it along, won't you?"

Nervous energy filled the silence until Lee Jordan broke the tension by suddenly sprouting a duck's bill ("Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, witches and wizards!"), and the meeting began to break. In twos and threes the Order members Disillusioned themselves and exited out the back to Apparate. Harry stood and watched, his boiling emotions reducing to a simmer, and he listened to snatches of conversation.

"...surprised to see Neville, poor bloke..."

"...bloody ward's useless, they definitely know we're in this area, it went off twice tonight..."

"...and Dung'll have to take the shift, he owes me twice over now..."

And before he knew it they were all gone, all but Flitwick (who was spending the night) and Hermione. Ron was getting ready to leave, spend the night at the Burrow, and Percy was waiting by the back door to Apparate with him. "Charlie sent me an owl last night, Harry," Ron murmured to Harry as he pocketed his wand. "Said he'd have the ingredient we needed next week. It sure wasn't cheap, though, are you sure about this? I mean, I trust 'Mione," he lowered his voice to a whisper lest she hear him from the kitchen, "but this is some serious gold we're talking here, and if she can't get the blood..."

"I know," Harry said wearily. "But if it works...and other than the Galleons, it can't hurt to try, right?"

"Sure," said Ron. "I'm off, then, Mum's been pretty lonely lately, and I promised I'd spend more time over there."

"Yeah, I know. Tell Ginny hello for me. And tell your mum..." But Harry couldn't think of anything suitable, and the emotions he felt became large and clumsy when he tried to find the words.

"I will." Ron understood.

Harry waved to Percy as the brothers left, and he heard Hermione as she came to stand beside him. The house felt colder now, the soft noises of the outside world suddenly eerie and ominous.

"Charlie'll have the dragon tears next week. Ron told me before he left."

"Great!"

"When will you be able to start working on the potion?"

She checked her mental figures. "Without knowing exactly when the tears will arrive, it would be safer to start once they get here, they need to be added seven days into the process."

He nodded and looked at her, trying not to get his hopes too high. The odds were so against this, but if it worked, did he dare to believe he might be free of the shadow of death that lay over him like a fog, clouding his future? "Do you really think you can pull this off?"

He didn't realize he'd spoken the thought aloud until her arm slipped around his waist, her soft confident voice a balm that soothed his doubts, if only for a little while.

“Yes, Harry, I believe I can.”

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A small gathering of Death Eaters formed a loose knot in front of their Lord, watching with varying levels of interest as he tormented one of the two men lying on the cold stone floor. “*Crucio!*” he hissed again, and the unfortunate soul flexed and twisted violently, raspy squeals the only noise he could push through raw vocal cords. Another minute and the curse was lifted and reapplied to the other prone figure. It had been going on for the better part of an hour, and both victims were barely conscious, their bodies nearing the limits of endurance.

“Let this be a lesson to all those who serve me – I do not tolerate failure.” With that he turned his back on his followers, ascended a short flight of weathered stone steps that led to an ornate throne. He seated himself and surveyed his audience, piercing red eyes seeing more than mere bodies. He observed their thoughts and emotions as well, ruffling through their minds, searching for weakness or dissent.

There, trying to hide behind the others, he found the sniveling coward, his fear a thick choking miasma about his trembling form. He pointed and beckoned, no discernable emotion on his flat serpentine features as the man crawled, shaking, toward him, awkwardly climbing the dais on hands and knees to press bloodless lips to the hem of the Dark Lord’s robe.

“Well, spy, what news?”

“Nothing of importance, I regret to report, my Lord. They recruit new members, trail our Ministry contacts.”

“What of Potter?”

“They only reference his mission, my Lord, but do not speak on it directly. He searches for something, that much is clear, but what he seeks is unknown.”

“I see.” This was old information, and he was greatly displeased that he still lacked crucial data on the boy’s activities. He desired more intelligence, he needed to understand why the boy had not yet charged recklessly to face him, to avenge Dumbledore’s death. Was he looking for a weapon, did he actually believe there was some spell or potion or sword or wand that could help him? There was nothing, he, Lord Voldemort, was immortal!

“He is a coward, my Lord, afraid to face you.” Proud and condescending, another Death Eater dared to speak. Bella, of course, she never passed on an opportunity to flatter her Master.

“Silence,” he commanded lazily, but still she cowered, subtly shrinking back into her mask and robes.

“I am most displeased. Perhaps those fools in the Order are wiser than we gave them credit for. Perhaps they do not trust you, and I should dispose of your worthless hide before your incompetence ceases to amuse me.” Cold and smooth and dispassionate was his voice, and as the Dark Lord’s pale spindly

fingers toyed with his wand, the prostrate Death Eater shuddered and cringed.

“My Lord, I beg you, give me more time. They grow more accustomed to my presence every day. It is only a matter of time before they let something crucial slip.”

“We shall see. Now rise and remove yourself from my presence.”

Panting and relieved, the man kissed the hem of his Master’s robe again and stood on shaky legs. With as much dignity as he could muster he descended the stairs, knees and palms aching from being pressed against the unforgiving ground. He could feel the icy disdainful sneers of his comrades, feel his own clammy sweat pooling across his back and torso, sticky on his brow. As the small crowd parted for him, the sibilant tones of Voldemort stopped him in his tracks, his heart again beating swift and strong inside his chest.

“And the traitor? What news of him?”

“Nothing, my Lord, they deny any contact with him.”

Silence thick and black filled the chamber. His rage pressed down like a musty blanket, smothering and rank, and all of the Death Eater’s felt the change, the air weighty and harder to breathe. “Leave, all of you.”

Only too glad to obey, Voldemort’s soldiers dispersed like mist before the sun, Crabbe and Zabini levitated away. And the Dark Lord was left alone with his thoughts and his rage, contemplating plans and strategies for defeating his two greatest enemies: Harry Potter and Severus Snape.

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A/N: A little duller, perhaps, but since I have this pesky plot I have to follow through on it. But the next chapter is chock full of Snapey goodness and UST. Patience...

## Chapter 16: On Impulse

Another month flew by, and autumn was now in full swing. The air had a bite in the early morning, frost thick on grass and the blanket of flame colored leaves lying on the ground. Harry and Ron found their thoughts dwelling on the fun they would have been having were the world a different place; their final year at Hogwarts, Quidditch practice and Hogsmeade trips, the annual Halloween feast. Instead they were mired in tedium, days spent researching defensive spells and counter-jinxes, noses buried in thick dusty tomes trying to find ways to break through the protective charms surrounding the Horcrux. In between study sessions they practiced their dueling with each other, a certain seriousness to the activity now that hadn't been there before, each knowing their skills with a wand would probably be tested again by real enemies, and very soon.

Hermione, on the other hand, was much too busy to spend time dwelling on what her seventh year might have entailed, or to practice her spell work a great deal. She had other things to tend to. First there had been the collection of the remaining ingredients for Malum Defaeco, then the painstaking preparation of the same, everything shredded and skinned, diced and pulverized, measured and weighed. Snape was immensely helpful with this, of course, deft fingers guiding the blade to sever tender stalks just so, his practiced eye ensuring the powders and herbs were weighed with precision, the appropriate stasis spells set up to keep certain items fresh.

Then the dragon tears had arrived and the brewing had begun. She was surprised at just how exhausting the process could be; hours of stirring and counting, monitoring and adjusting the flame, adding new elements from the correct height above the cauldron, or touched only with her left hand, or levitated with eyes closed while chanting an archaic spell. The amount of concentration required was incredibly taxing, and she was now spending almost all of her waking time in the basement, either completing the next phase in the brewing sequence or keeping an anxious eye on the cauldron while pretending to read a book. She had a whole new respect for how difficult a task potions work could be, and for Snape that he had become a Master.

He had been so helpful through it all. He checked and double-checked her measurements and schedule, observed her closely as she toiled over the steaming cauldron, even offered an occasional word of assurance when her tendency to second guess herself seemed on the verge of driving her insane. She had invested so much of her hope in this idea, convinced herself that success was essential, and failure a death sentence for Harry, herself, the entire wizarding world as they knew it.

She was on edge, nerves frayed, and the stress of working on the potion, trying to figure out the best way to approach the unicorns, and the looming dread of the next Death Eater attack were all conspiring to overwhelm her, making her feel stretched to her limits, young and foolish and naïve. And it didn't help that he was always there (though where else he could go was a mystery), silent and watchful. She felt as if he were just waiting for her to screw up, to fail, and the additional pressure and relief that she experienced from his involvement had her watching him almost as obsessively as the Malum Defaeco.

Most unnerving, at least once a day she would catch him with that look on his face, the one that was plaguing both her conscious and unconscious thoughts, his dark eyes gleaming with some strange intensity and his severe features softened with some idea or emotion she could not recognize. He was careful, of course, to resume his normal closed expression when he knew he'd been caught, but more and more frequently the look lingered, as if he could not bring himself to suppress whatever internal processes were

responsible for this outward manifestation of his private discourse.

The more she saw the look the more she searched for it, tried to analyze it and her own reactions. It made her warm, the look, flushed and fluttery and distracted. It seemed to draw her in, suck her into a swirling vortex where her thoughts were not her own and her body betrayed her uncertain excitement. That the images and sensations provoked were not as foreign as she first thought troubled her greatly; she had felt similar flushes and experienced similar intrusions into the well-ordered flow of her thoughts, and the notion that she was capable of reacting in this manner here, now, with Snape of all men, was more disturbing than the actual feelings.

She tried to pinpoint how it had happened, her developing this thing, this crush (though she hesitated to call it that). She recognized the swoopy, light-headed tingle, the preoccupation with where he was, what he was doing. After all, she'd felt much the same with Krum (mixed with the heady realization that she could be attractive, the acknowledgement of her own unique feminine power) and Ron (although that was flavored with friendship, exasperation, pain, and finally extinction). This was the same but different; she did not delude herself into thinking that the expression on his face was indicative of any desire on his part, nor did she wish it so. It was her reaction, something inside her, and she was mortified by the very idea he even suspected the way her emotions had decided to betray her intellect.

But she was forced to concede that her perceptions of him had evolved, even if she could not tease out the when or why. Just as adults often have difficulty seeing the grown men and women in the children they once knew, so she had never really seen her professors as full adults, witches and wizards with lives outside of school, ideas and sentiments independent of the pupils they taught. She was aware of him now, aware of his presence in a way she never had been when he was simply her teacher. And while she knew there was no reason for her to sit in the basement hour after hour (a watched cauldron never thickening and all that rot), she could not seem to stay away.

At least there was a good reason for her to be in the potions lab today – the brew required the penultimate ingredients before the final step, the single precious drop of unicorn blood that she didn't have and was not at all sure, despite her internal pep talks to the contrary, she would get. Time to think of that later, though; now she sat quietly in the armchair she had conjured, trying to concentrate on her book of revealing spells and surreptitiously watching Snape out of the corner of her eye.

He had Transfigured himself a small desk, and he sat at it perusing the books she had brought from his personal library while making notations on a piece of parchment. While he expected her to fail, he was fascinated by the combination of ingredients used in the base for Malum Defaeco. He thought there might be other applications, particularly in poison antidotes, and he found that delving into study provided some distraction from his more disquieting interests.

Still, he caught his attention drifting periodically, his eyes pulled off the paper as if by magic just to look at her. She positively radiated tension, a sort of jittery energy that had only escalated as the potion developed. Of course, his logical mind supplied, it was only natural she would be nervous, for as each successive step was completed and the mixture looked and behaved exactly as the text described, she was drawing one step closer to ultimate failure and distress. And he was loathe to see that happen.

He had hoped she would fail elsewhere, contemplated sabotaging it himself, and he wished that the damnable potion would have been destroyed at the beginning, or never found at all. As it was, her

preparation and execution had been flawless (and he had assisted!), and the gradual build-up of her hope was almost unbearable to watch.

But watch he did; it seemed all he was capable of doing, watching her as she worked and read, watching her as she watched him. Was it pity that prompted her to haunt the basement so much of late? Concern that he was bored or restless? Something else entirely?

The hourglass on the potions table gleamed a subtle red, and Hermione jumped to her feet, then moved to stand in front of the cauldron. She had time, of course, five minutes to be precise, but her cautious nature led her to charm the timepiece to warn her well in advance. She went through her familiar ritual, checking she had the proper ingredients in the proper amounts, lined up just so on her left, so she could stir with her dominant hand without fumbling for the next herb or mineral.

When the hourglass glowed again she was ready, and a Sickle's weight of powered ivory was sprinkled onto the surface of the potion. She began stirring immediately, medium-fast, five clockwise, three anti-clockwise, and watched as the pale white flecks fluoresced briefly before dissolving into the deep purple liquid. Another seven minutes, then the quinine, and then another fifteen minutes of stirring and that was it. Finished, completed until the last step, the one she had to accomplish, and wasn't sure she could. It was all on her, she felt, this was her idea, her plan – her triumph or defeat.

She didn't miss a beat even as she reached out confidently with her left hand, tipped the container just as the timer glowed. The potion shimmered briefly, settled into a strange greenish-purple color, and with a weighty sense of finality she lowered the flame and continued to stir. She could almost sense the time slipping away from her, tumbling her inexorably toward success or doom, and she found herself wishing she could just stop, freeze her life in this moment, anything to prevent her from letting down her friends, Harry, herself, anything to avoid being exposed as a fraud, the know-it-all who hadn't been able to figure out a way to do what needed to be done.

She startled visibly when he spoke; she hadn't noticed him rise to stand behind her, observing her work. "I believe congratulations are in order, Miss Granger. You appear to have succeeded in brewing Malum Defaeco. At least..."

"You don't have to say it, sir, I'm well aware there's one more step, one final ingredient. The foal's blood. I know..." Desperation and panic clogged her throat, but her hand was steady as it gripped the glass rod, and she didn't allow her rhythm to falter.

"Yes. But you did well to get this far."

"If I don't...it won't matter. And you helped." She wasn't sure if she was expressing gratitude or accusing him.

"I did. You requested my assistance. Are you regretting that now?"

"No...I don't know. I don't know." And she didn't know – what she was doing, what she was feeling, she felt as if her whole world was shifting, unsteady, a house of Exploding Snap cards that could detonate at any moment. Had she given up too early on finding some other spell, another way to save the world? If she failed in this now, would the delay she caused by pursuing Malum Defaeco cost them more than time

and Galleons?

Snape could hear the fragile uncertainty in her voice. He knew she was determined to try, knew just as certainly that she was terrified of the consequences of failure. Equally as distressing was the fact that he did not want her to fail. He was convinced she would, and he felt his insides twist and grind at the thought of her returns from Hogwarts three days hence, her tears and anguish. The idea ate at him, her suffering, her disappointment, and for what? Why did she affect him so?

He chose to focus on the first question. "I know you and the Order are dedicated to defeating the Dark Lord, but I am truly at a loss to see how this potion will assist you. How do you plan to utilize it? You must know that your plans, your motives will be sensed by the unicorns. They are ancient magical creatures, Miss Granger, and if your motives are not pure..."

"They are! This isn't for personal gain, we're just trying to win this war, and I want to save..." Just in time she caught herself, he had heard this much before, but this time he pressed the issue, would not let it drop, determined to get to the root of her stubborn insistence on attempting the impossible, the underlying motivation driving her toward misery, and him as well.

"Whom do you intend to save, Miss Granger?" His voice was low and intense, and she could feel his eyes on her, the heat flooding her face and neck. She kept her own eyes on the potion, blending continuously, feeling the slight burn of fatigue in her forearm and shoulder.

"I can't tell you that, sir, only that it's important."

"You are, in fact, capable of disclosing the intended usage of Malum Defaeco. You choose not to do so."

She could hardly agree with that logic. "I promised."

"To whom did you swear?"

She felt feverish, the heat of the cauldron and her emotions conspiring to betray her confusion in pink cheeks, cherry ears. Again she felt the weight of secrets pressing inside her chest, and she was not a secretive person by nature. She was more Gryffindor than not, forthright and honest, and the truth was she wanted to tell someone, an authority figure, a real grown-up, about this burden Dumbledore had laid at their feet. But could she betray her friends, confide in another, and worse yet a man they despised?

It was all racing her in her brain, and she felt vaguely disoriented, and a sudden throb twinged deep in the center of her forehead. "I promised Ron and Harry."

He knew that, of course, and it made his work infinitely easier. "And their plans have always been sound, no doubt." He allowed every ounce of the contempt and disdain he felt for the meddling fools to coat his voice, and saw her blush impossibly deeper.

"It's not like that, sir, Dumbledore is the one who gave the task to Harry and told him to keep it secret." She embraced the surge of irritation his words created, used it to try and chase back the desire to let the truth tumble out, and the dancing shivers that tripped through her stomach and chest as he leaned in closer.



Snape hadn't anticipated her words, but had a ready answer nonetheless. "I see. He had his reasons, I'm sure, just as he did when he withheld the plan that required me to kill him from the rest of the Order. I regret I cannot see his rationale, but I'm sure it was quite compelling."

And the worst of it was she had entertained similar thoughts, and felt like a traitor for doubting the wisdom of the deceased. But what had he been thinking, letting Snape suffer like this, or entrusting such a vital mission to three teenagers, urging them to cut themselves off from the advice and support of all save themselves? Or was this just another mistake, had he run out of time to orchestrate things before Snape had been forced to kill him?

Hermione was a very intelligent witch, but she was still rather young, trusting, and it never occurred to her that he was manipulating her to get the information he desired. She might have been angry had she suspected, but ultimately she wanted to tell someone, anyone. No, more than that, she wanted to tell him; he was intelligent, cunning, extremely knowledgeable about Voldemort and the Dark Arts, and she wanted his input. She trusted him. She wanted to hear his thoughts on their plan to search Hogwarts, wanted her deductions about the potential for this potion validated by someone other than Harry or Ron. She wanted him to think well of her, craved his admiration and respect.

She didn't realize how long she'd been struggling with these thoughts until the hourglass glowed one final time. Time to stop stirring, she'd done all she could for now, and suddenly it hit her, the weeks and days rushing toward this self-imposed, momentous task, and it was almost here, and now she had little other than her own building dread to occupy her, and her hands began to shake.

His own insides wrenched at the stricken look on her face, and before he could talk himself out of it he clasped both her trembling hands in his own. Startled, she turned to face him fully, eyes wide with stress and anxiety. But those other thoughts fled when she realized he was meeting her gaze with his own and he had that look again, that exasperating, exhilarating expression that made her think and feel things she shouldn't think and feel, not about him. Desperately she closed her eyes, tried to halt the renewed flush flooding her face, but she was suddenly enveloped in his scent and his heat, and she couldn't prevent the yearning that washed over her (though for what, exactly, she could not articulate), nor the dread that he would realize her dilemma and mock her, young foolish girl, and she would never survive the shame.

He watched as her pink cheeks were suffused with additional color, watched her eyes shutter closed, and his own blood was a heated throb in his veins. How did she do this, unman him so, make him momentarily discard years of pretense and bitter lessons long enough to recall innocent dreams, simple ambitions long abandoned? She made him long to forget his dark painful choices, long to embrace past ideals, but he wouldn't, he could not alter his past, or change the man he'd become. But if he could...

Her eyes were open again, and she'd never seen his expression so mobile and raw. Her mind couldn't process the reality of his warm, calloused fingers sliding between her own, the naked shifting emotions playing over his face. She was confused and breathless and aching, and she opened her mouth to ask him something, anything, but the words were swallowed by the swift surprising press of his lips on hers, and she surrendered all thought and reason for a bright brief moment.

Snape didn't recall a conscious decision to lean forward, claim her mouth with his own, but he obviously had because her hot tender flesh was firm against his own, and he made no move to pull away. It was soft and sweet, and for a moment he could pretend he was young and earnest again, full of an emotion

suspiciously like hope, and she might come to want him, Lily, want to touch him as he did her.

She gasped softly into his mouth, lips parted, and he could not resist the urge to dip his tongue inside and taste her, and reality came crashing down around him. She tasted different than he expected, than he had imagined, because this wasn't the girl from long ago but the woman he wanted now, Hermione, and then he was crushing her to him, warm pliant body lush against his own heated limbs, and she was kissing him back, her hands clutching at his shoulders, tangled in the black cloth of his robes and pulling him closer.

It was over as abruptly as it began, consternation rising as his brain reminded him what he was doing, overriding the intense physical reactions drugging his senses. With an audible pop they separated as he yanked himself away almost violently, eyes feral and haunted. She looked utterly gobsmacked, face still flushed and lips now slightly reddened, and she took a blind step forward, responding to her own internal drive to do it again, and again.

Snape was at a loss to understand why he had kissed her; he prided himself on controlling his emotions, never allowing sentiment or wishful thinking to cloud his judgment, but in that moment he had acted on pure impulse, on half-formed dreams and fantasies, and now he would have to deal with the aftermath. Her outrage and anger, his chagrin and shame. She was young and attractive, he was old enough to be her father, and he had no doubt she was affronted by his unwelcome advances.

He wanted, needed to explain. That he hadn't meant to touch her, that he would not presume to do so again, but before he could form the words her expression changed from shock to something else, something conflicted and complex, and then in the blink of an eye she had turned and fled, her feet clattering loudly on the stairs, and he was left alone to berate himself for his foolishness, and wonder how he could make amends.

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A/N: You wanted more SS/HG interaction? Never let it be said I can't deliver. Next chapter is almost exclusively our dynamic duo as well, so stay tuned...

This story is now in excess of 100 typed pages, and will easily exceed the combined total of both my bachelors AND masters theses. How come writing them was such a struggle? :P

## Chapter 17: Secrets Revealed

It was the evening before their trip to Hogwarts, and Hermione was at her wit's end. The boys were nervous too, worried about getting around Voldemort's enchantments, finding the Horcrux, even about the potion's ingredient, but Hermione had taken anxiety to a whole new extreme. Over and over she paced, reciting the few Dark Detector spells they'd managed to locate (though none of them could yet perform the complex magic perfectly or consistently), muttering basic Healing charms, and pleading with imaginary foals. She'd barely eaten or slept the past two days, and her escalating tension had Harry and Ron alarmed.

Of course, they didn't know the additional concern gnawing at her mind. She hadn't gone down to the basement since the kiss, couldn't bear to face him with her embarrassment at running away still fresh and hot in her veins. She was supposed to be braver than that, but she hadn't been, and part of her dreaded seeing him again, though she knew she must. The other part of her wanted to see him again so fiercely it was an ache in her chest, and she kept vacillating between fear and anticipation. It was draining, exhausting, to have her emotions so volatile on top of everything else, and she felt taut, stretched to breaking.

She stopped pacing long enough to look at her friends. They were in their meeting room, though the table and books were currently absent. They'd Transfigured comfortable chairs even though none of them seemed capable of sitting for any length of time. Harry was pale, his scar dark and vivid against the white flesh of his forehead, while Ron looked oddly serious, occasionally flushing or blanching a delicate shade of green, depending on the direction his imagination took.

"I think we should tell someone, Harry." Her voice sounded strained, excited, yet eerily hollow. They hadn't spoken to each other for a bit, and Harry had to wrench himself away from thoughts filled with darkness and death.

"Tell who what?"

"Someone, McGonagall or Lupin, someone else needs to know about the Horcruxes. Dumbledore can't have meant for it to be like this, Harry, for us to be alone."

His lips thinned into a tight slash. He'd wondered the same thing, but was unwilling to admit it, too conflicted to vocalize his doubts about Dumbledore, about himself. They'd come this far while keeping their knowledge of the Horcruxes a secret, and the information was dangerous, but he caught himself wishing he had someone to talk to the way he used to confide in Sirius, in Dumbledore. And what if they fell while completing this task – who would stop Voldemort then?

"I dunno, Hermione, they'd flip. You figure they'd let us traipse off to Hogwarts knowing what we were really looking for? McGonagall wasn't too keen on our going tomorrow what with all the Death Eater attacks." Ron had a point, she'd tried to insist on a whole slew of guards to accompany them when they'd let her know about their planned excursion to the school.

"I know, but...it shouldn't be like this. Just us, it's too much. Don't you feel overwhelmed at all, don't you wish we had someone to go to?" Someone adult; none of them said it, but it hung there unspoken all the same, and all three of them acknowledged in their hearts that while they had fought so hard to be treated

as equals, they did not quite feel equal. Hermione sounded so plaintive, giving voice to thoughts Harry had been struggling with, but he felt trapped by his allegiance to Dumbledore, by his own voracious defense of their independence and maturity.

“We’re so close, though. This could be over with tomorrow. I think we have a good plan, if we can find the Horcrux and you get the unicorn blood...”

She suppressed a sob as hopeless despair rose bitter in her throat. “Those are some pretty big ‘ifs’, Harry.”

His face looked somehow serious and sad at the same time. “I know. But we’ve succeeded before, and I promised Dumbledore...if something goes wrong tomorrow we’ll think about it, alright?” He was a little surprised when she just nodded, when she didn’t argue more, but he was relieved as well. He was afraid if she pushed the issue hard enough, he’d crack under the pressure, and there was a wide stubborn streak in him that quailed at the thought of surrender, at acknowledging there was something the three of them couldn’t accomplish alone.

She paced a bit more, mulling things over in her head, but the decision had already been made, really, but she was just torn by her conflicting emotions. Gathering the tattered threads of her courage, she steeled herself and headed toward the door. “I’m going to check the potion,” she said tersely. She stopped when she saw Ron grimace and Harry grin widely, his hand held out to the redhead, palm up.

“Pay up,” Harry said cheerfully while Ron grumbled good-naturedly. “He thought you could hold out until morning. We’re both pretty impressed you resisted checking this long.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled as the small amount of gold changed hands, then walked out of their room and toward the basement door, heart hammering in her throat. She paused with her hand on the door, too many thoughts and feelings warring for dominance, and before she could lose her nerve she turned the knob and descended into the waiting darkness.

A simple incantation filled the room with soft light. He wasn’t there in the main room when she reached the bottom of the steps and she waited, waited until the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding escaped in a pained gust. Her gaze was riveted on the door only they could see, and she knew he knew that she now stood on the other side, but as a minute, then two crawled by, the churning anticipation numbed and sank inside her. Apparently his disdain for her actions was stronger than she had assumed, and she felt a miserable burn in her throat, behind her eyes.

She went to stare at the potion, allowed herself to become mesmerized by the occasional bubble expanding and bursting on the surface, the sweet-smelling steam rising into the air. Her mind was blank, empty and calm, the subtle shifting colors of the potion allowing her to briefly disconnect from her worries.

She sensed him before she heard him, a familiar masculine presence behind her, and the fear and nervousness came flooding back. Her hands were braced on the table on either side of the cauldron, and she pressed them hard into the flat unyielding surface to stop them from shaking.

“Miss Granger.” Just her name, and her surname at that, but his deep voice was soft, almost uncertain. She

felt like she was being torn in two by the desire to turn and face him and the wild urge to run again, or at least pretend everything was normal when she felt anything but.

But it wasn't normal, something had definitely changed, and she wondered if it were possible for her heart to beat any faster. "I need to tell you something." She latched onto her reason for coming to see him tonight, used it to calm her racing thoughts, though she still couldn't quite work up the courage to turn around and face him.

Snape was very still behind her, considering his options. Two days since he'd seen her, touched her, tasted her, and he couldn't decide if he was elated she was finally here in front of him, annoyed that she'd waited so long, or dismayed that he had to face her at all. He'd been sorely tempted to stay in his hidden room, the sanctuary she'd provided (was it months ago, now?), but then the sneering voice in his head reminded him that avoidance was tantamount to cowardice, and he detested cowardice. So he had gone out to her, the very sight of her causing an uncomfortable tightness in his chest, and his hands were clenched into fists to prevent himself from reaching out, spinning her to look at him, or to pull her in close.

He's been replaying their encounter over and over the past two days. It was the first time since the death of Dumbledore and his subsequent torture and escape that some other scene had taken to flashing through his head, pictures and sensations almost real in the reliving. While ruminating on the feel of Hermione's lips, her body, against his own was certainly more pleasant than recalling his former employer's broken body, it was no less disturbing in its own way.

He had pulled back from her warm, soft figure plagued by guilt and some other wrenching feeling deep in his gut. The flash of guilt he understood; his entire adult life he had worked at Hogwarts, watched children develop into young men and women. When he started he was not much older than the seventh years, youth who had started school before he had graduated and pledged loyalty to the Dark Lord. It was normal he would notice them, boys who could have been acquaintances or enemies, girls who may have caught his eye. It was awkward for him to now be their instructor, to hear the whispers and the sniggers, Snivellus a teacher, the greasy unpopular Death Eater in a position of power over others. He saw the arrogant sneers on the faces of the popular Quidditch players, heard the condescending twitters as the pretty girls gossiped and pointed.

At first he ignored it, struggled to hide the painful jealous flush on his pale face, but then he discovered a way to strike back he had never possessed as a friendless, awkward student. He found petty satisfaction in their anger when he assigned detention, took away House points, pointed out their mistakes and ignorance in his classes, in front of their friends. His cruel, sardonic style had mushroomed from there, and though the pleasure it brought him quickly grew sour and hollow, he was accustomed to his solitude, and it eased Dumbledore to know Snape could believably again embrace his role as a spy – people doubted his goodness on a visceral level, finding it difficult to believe that a man so vindictive was not rotten to the very core, and so they would not even blink to discover he had never renounced the Dark Lord all along.

It was difficult for him to spend seven years searching for the tiniest flaws in his student's work and then view them as anything other than imbeciles. As he had no use for idiots and slackers, he did not find it at all difficult to resist any physical attraction he may have felt toward the occasional young lady that caught his eye while still in school. Invariably their lack of intellect appalled him, no matter how comely the

package, and he had never been tempted to break school rules and pursue an illicit relationship with a female student (and there was always one now and again, drawn to his reputation and unapproachable demeanor). He found his distaste for most of his former pupils did not fade at graduation, and had never sought out the company of school alumni for social or recreational purposes. Easier to meet whatever physical needs he had with his own hand; memories of frantic young encounters or fantasies of his own making could not talk back, could not disgust him with insipid chatter or inane discourse.

But now he found himself drawn to this one, Hermione Granger, a student of his less than a year ago and an annoying one at that. Not unintelligent, though, her mind sharp and eager, and she resonated with him in a way no one had for a long time. He was no longer under the mistaken impression that his reaction was solely a vestige of long buried dreams, a feeble shadow of his unrequited desire for Lily Evans. No, this was unique to her, Hermione, it was her he had kissed and not some pale memory, but years of ingrained habit of seeing students as taboo had risen to battle the warm unfamiliar reactions he had experienced when she returned his kiss, so he had pulled away, and she had fled in disgust before he could say a word.

He was tempted to revert to his sardonic, nasty demeanor; her flight was a rejection, and though he rationally would have expected nothing less, it still stung. Rejection he understood, could handle, he faced it often enough (though not in this area, not for years – you cannot be rejected if you never approach someone), and it would be so easy to say something cutting and caustic, watch the hurt flare in her eyes...

Which were on him now; she had turned at last while he stood silent as if Langlocked, and those open, puzzled eyes were searching his. There was a roiling in his chest, and as much as he may have theoretically desired to say something snarky, the words lumped in his throat and died, and he again fought successfully to keep his hands at his side.

She hadn't been able to bear the heavy, leaden quiet any longer, swallowing her trepidation and turning to look at him. He was staring down at her, face composed but eyes just a little too wide, and as she observed the subtle play of muscles under the skin as he clenched his jaw she was struck by the realization that he was feeling something too, something he couldn't or wouldn't express. If he wanted to berate or humiliate her, surely he would have done so by now, wouldn't he?

“Miss Granger...”

“No, let me get this out first,” she blurted, too nervous in that instant to allow him to speak. She had made this decision but it was hard, and she was afraid if his words were too harsh she would falter.

He nodded once, short and sharp. He wasn't entirely certain what he wanted to say, anyway. “Very well. What is it you wish to tell me?”

She took a deep, bracing breath. “You asked about what we intended to do with Malum Defaeco...”

And then it was her turn to spill her tale, her secrets. It started with Harry's revelations about his lessons with Dumbledore, the Headmaster's theories about Voldemort and the Horcruxes. She told him about finding Slytherin's locket and the disturbing reaction of Harry's scar when they'd open the jewelry. Her voice trembled slightly when she related her deductions about his scar, his fate, then finding the potion in that old faded book, almost as if she were fated to discover it, and how she believed it could be the answer they'd been searching for; the way to destroy the fragments of Voldemort's soul, the way to win

the war, the way to save Harry. She finished by telling Snape of their belief that the final Horcrux (save Nagini) was in the Forbidden Forest, of the map Hagrid had drawn, and of her own mounting fear when she thought of the tasks before them; fear of failing to persuade the unicorn, of not being able to get around Voldemort's protective spells and retrieve the Horcrux, of the danger and uncertainty. Unlike when Snape had told his story, she made no attempt to edit her emotions, allowing her frustration and anxiety to color the tale, acknowledging her struggle and guilt in trusting him with their secrets, betraying her oath to Harry and Ron. When it was done she felt lighter, cleaner somehow, and even with the lingering sense of shame she felt when she thought about the boys, she knew she'd made the right decision, and waited calmly for his reaction.

He had startled visibly when she mentioned the Horcruxes, the secret to the Dark Lord's seeming invincibility, his immortality. He'd heard of them, of course, his own education in the Dark Arts having progressed far enough that he was familiar with many evils he would rather have no knowledge of. There were whispers, rumors on occasion that some depraved witch or wizard had discovered the secret and torn his or her fragile soul in two; that some heinous, brutal killing was connected to the Darkness; that a man known to be dead was resurrected. But these were myths, legends, unverified and almost certainly false. Until Riddle, and he had embodied them all, the man who left a trail of corpses and despair, the man who could not be killed. Still, it had never occurred to him that the Dark Lord had sunk to such depths, embraced such unnatural and twisted practices, had gone so far as to shred at the fabric of his very humanity, and Snape felt tainted, unclean that he had once consorted with such vileness.

It did answer many questions he'd once pondered, though, about the sources of the Dark Lord's power, the secret to his inhuman appearance, his ability to cheat death. And now these children were tasked by Dumbledore to track down and destroy these objects of pure, unadulterated malice and blood magic, hidden and protected by a creature so steeped in depravity that the enchantments around it were almost certainly as loathsome and dangerous as the Dark Lord himself? It was beyond unconscionable, unfair to lay such a burden at their feet, and unfair to the rest of wizarding society as well, for if they failed, and the world fell into Darkness, what then?

His mind was racing, recalling the traps and hexes he'd seen his former master employ, trying to guess what might be waiting for Hermione and the others. It was lunacy, he could not imagine them succeeding, and he had the wild thought that he should go to Hogwarts in their stead, that if anyone would be able to disable the Dark Lord's enchantments and reach the Horcrux it was he, Snape, former trusted servant turned spy and Dumbledore pawn. But even as he imagined finding it, the savage joy on doing something concrete to defeat the enemy, he recognized his position as reviled traitor twice-over made this a mere fantasy. If he left, successfully found the Horcrux without being seen, how would Hermione be able to explain its sudden presence? Still, the temptation to leave this safe place, do something, play the hero and save their world (and the girl?), was undeniable.

"What are you thinking, sir?" Her soft query pulled him out of his reverie, and he looked at her with glittering black eyes, his features hard and intense.

He could not say what he was really thinking – that he wanted to take this duty from her, relieve her of a burden too heavy to bear. He was accustomed to shouldering the harshest responsibilities, and he would not see her bow and break under a load that should never have been given her, or her friends, in the first place. But he was not practiced in that type of honesty, and it was easier by far to allow some of his disgust and anger at Dumbledore, his revulsion and horror at the thought of what the Dark Lord had done,

to bleed through the concern and make his response abrasive, sarcastic.

“I would say that I disbelieve your grandiose tale if I did not know first hand how the Headmaster liked to operate,” he replied with venom. “I find it appalling that so much has been entrusted to mere students.”

“Now hold on, we’ve been doing a pretty good job so far. And we aren’t children anymore, we’ve done more than most adults!” she bristled. She wasn’t quite sure what reaction she had expected, but it wasn’t to be belittled yet again for her youth, her inexperience, even as a little voice in her head argued that she herself questioned Dumbledore’s wisdom on that score.

“I did not call you a child, Miss Granger, I referred to you as a student, which you most certainly were when Dumbledore entrusted you with this knowledge, and would still be now were Hogwarts still open,” he responded with a sneer. “Further, you cannot expect me to applaud this alarming turn of events, nor be thrilled that the future of our world must now rely on the questionable abilities of Potter and Weasley.”

“We’ve been battling Vol...You-Know-Who since our first year! If not for us, he would have returned then!”

“Actually, Miss Granger, it was the misguided involvement of you and your friends that nearly unleashed the Dark Lord on us all at that time. Had the three of you not penetrated the faculty’s defenses in pursuit of Quirrell, Potter would never have come into possession of the Stone, for the Dark Lord would never have broken Dumbledore’s enchantment.” This was better, familiar, calm factual recitation and condescending tone. This felt normal, comfortable like a well-worn robe, better by far than trepidation and admiration and the pulsing undercurrent of this thing between them he was trying so hard to ignore.

Her cheeks were dark red now, eyes snapping, and she felt the truth of his cool words burn the tips of her ears. “Yes, well, what about when I figured out Slytherin’s monster was a Basilisk, and Harry killed it? And he got away from the graveyard, and all three of us fought Death Eater’s at the Ministry and at Hogwarts...”

“None of which would have been necessary had Potter deigned to keep the Headmaster fully informed, or had any of you actually followed school rules! But then the rules never applied to Potter and his friends, did they? And need I remind you that your little adventure in the Ministry was a trap, a lure for ill-equipped, impulsive children!”

She spluttered unintelligibly, and they stood toe to toe, her face scarlet, his sharp and pale. “I didn’t tell you about the Horcruxes so I could listen to a lecture,” she said finally, concentrating on breathing deeply, calming her anger and indignation.

“Then why, precisely, did you reveal this secret, Miss Granger?” His voice was bland and smooth, devoid of emotion, but she saw the tension in his jaw, the tendons in his neck corded with strain.

She deflated then, flushing anew as the answer rose almost unbidden. Why indeed? “Because I thought someone else should know and...well, with your experiences, I thought you may be able to help us,” she finally muttered meekly. It took quite a bit of her courage to admit that after his stinging barbs about her ability to handle the demands this war had placed on her, on her friends. But he was right, for the most part, and it was hard to admit her uncertainty, her fear that she and Harry and Ron might not be good



enough, smart enough, strong enough, not for this.

He seemed surprised by her willingness to show weakness; no Slytherin would openly admit their need for help so, and his interactions with countless students, Potter in particular, suggested young Gryffindors were too stubborn and proud to acknowledge their limitations, especially to him. And now she stood there, admitting she did not have all the answers, leaving herself vulnerable to his censure and scorn, and he lost all desire to drive home just how ill-prepared and foolish they were.

“Exactly how do you think I can assist you? I am stuck here, and even if Potter and Weasley were convinced of my trustworthiness, a dubious possibility at best, the rest of the Order would have me arrested, or the Dark Lord’s minions would capture me, a fate I hope yet to avoid.”

“I know all that, I wasn’t asking you to help physically. It’s just that you know more about Dark spells than any of us, sir, you could give me some idea of what type of defenses we might be up against, or teach me some spells that could prove useful. Something, anything...I felt like you were the best option I could turn to.”

It occurred to him suddenly how much faith she had in him, and the large amount of trust she was demonstrating by telling him about their task and their plans. There was no suspicion left in her, no holding back; she had laid it all out for him and asked nothing similar in return. It was heady, her simple, forthright trust, and the last of his irritation seeped away, leaving him oddly light, empty.

She watched as his features softened, grew thoughtful, and his eyes flickered rapidly as he searched his mind for something helpful, something that might give them an edge. She was conscious of his body, tall and lean and warm, very near hers, and she felt a little dizzy, a combination of exhaustion and nerves and hormones giving reality a faintly surreal blur, an otherworldly pallor.

After a minute or two his eyes gleamed with satisfaction and he focused on the young woman still standing in front of him. “I believe I can help you, Miss Granger. I know of a spell that should allow you to penetrate the web of terror and avoidance which may be protecting the object, and another that will allow you to pinpoint its precise location.”

It was worth it, worth his virtual imprisonment, worth knowing he was helping Potter to see the bright smile light her face. He could almost feel her gratitude and trust like a blanket, warm and comforting. He welcomed it even as he distrusted its sincerity, and the memory of their kiss and the ruminations of the past two days came back with a vengeance, the air between them suddenly alive and crackling.

She felt it, too, and her heart resumed the frantic pace with which it beat when she had summoned the determination to face him, confide in him. Her mind was wiped blank, and the silence became unbearably loud, filled with their misperceptions and assumptions.

“Thank you, sir, I’d be grateful for anything you can do to help.” She knew she sounded as if she’d been running, breathy and tremulous, but she was still new to dealing with this sort of situation, and she was over stimulated and raw from everything that had happened, from the looming specter of the future. The urge to say something else, apologize for her shameful flight after their moment, was strong, but her confusion kept her mute.

The tension between them was building, an almost palpable charge filling the space between them. He could almost see the discomfort in her eyes, the way she fought not to step back away from him, and he thought that it was best to take this opportunity to clear the air, to try to defuse this thick uncomfortable wall. He didn't want her concerned for her safety, her peace of mind in his presence, and he was willing to do a great deal, even admit some level of fault, to fix what he perceived to be broken.

“Miss Granger, I believe there is something else we need to discuss.” He felt a sharp pang when she stiffened at his words, her body drawing tight under his gaze. He could recall with vivid clarity the feel of her, soft and lush under his fingers, and the memory burned.

She couldn't look into his eyes, her heart a hard, fluttering lump in her throat. Where was her Gryffindor bravado now, why couldn't she just say the words, acknowledge her poor choice in fleeing, request his pardon? Maybe even explain why she had felt the need to run, though she wasn't quite sure herself. She had been overwhelmed, afraid he would see the emotions coursing through her, and laugh at her naivety.

The oppressive quiet grew too loud, past words said and unsaid a cacophony of sound, a riot of perceptions old and new painting the canvas too bright, too real, too difficult to sort out. It seemed like neither could find the words to either explain themselves or dissipate the squeezing tension, and as each second passed it seemed less likely that either would be able to speak.

But again his inner demon screamed at his cowardice, and he cleared his throat awkwardly. “It has never been my intention to impose upon you in any way, Miss Granger. You have my assurance that I shall not do so again.”

It seemed to Hermione that she would never be able to predict in advance what he was thinking or planning to say. “Wait, you aren't mad at me?” she said in a rush, her sense of relief at not being castigated loosening her tongue.

His face was a mask, still and unreadable. “Why should I be mad at you?”

Her answer tumbled out before she could censor it. “I ran away. It was...rude,” she finished lamely. She would have been pressed to think of a time she felt more embarrassed than she did at that moment. Why had she run?

Snape was at something of a loss himself, unable to fathom why she would have thought he was mad. “Miss Granger, I am, or was until very recently, your teacher, and certainly mature enough to keep any... baser impulses I may experience under control. That I subjected you to an inappropriate advance is inexcusable, and I believed you left when you did to remove yourself from an unwelcome situation. I... regret the incident, and assure you it will not happen again.”

She understood, then, and her mind was swimming with the implications. He thought he had offended her, and nothing was further from the truth. He didn't think less of her, nor had he discerned the traitorous and mortifying craving that plagued her still. But what if he did know, if he discovered the strange yearning that shivered across her even now – what would his response be then?

Before she could stop and think, sanitize her words, she allowed them to escape. “That's too bad, sir.”

He blinked, then his face darkened. “You dare to mock me?” he hissed, taking a threatening step toward her. They had been standing close before, and now the edge of his robe brushed her jumper when she refused to give ground, blushing furiously but forcing herself to meet his gaze, forcing herself not to flinch or cringe.

“I’m not mocking you,” she said softly, mouth trembling but voice steady. “I wasn’t offended by...by your kiss. I...I liked it,” she whispered before she faltered and allowed her eyes to slide away from his, staring instead at the hollow of his throat. She could hear the rush of blood in her ears, threatening to drown out everything else. If nothing else, she mused rapidly, at least now she could be assured of his ire.

He loomed over her, allowing her words to sink into his consciousness. She had not left that evening because his advances were unwanted. She had liked it, his kiss, his mouth and body pressed against hers. This had not occurred to him, not in his wildest dreams, and he felt a sudden rush, a feral impulse to grab her again, feel her again, hot and soft and tender under him. But he squelched the urge mercilessly; a kiss, yes, he could see an innocent young woman welcoming that, but he could not allow it to go further, and taking her in his arms again would surely test his resolve, tempt him to do things he wanted, but did not think it honorable, of him to do.

He shivered almost imperceptibly before he stepped back, taking all the strange delicate stirrings in his chest and crushing them ruthlessly, drawing a dark curtain around the feeling. Useless to pursue that line of thought, worse than useless; what good would it do to stir up wishes and desires he hadn’t felt since he was in his youth, dreams that wouldn’t survive now in the harsh reality of the man he was, in this environment of war and deception? Better to lock it away, now. Better to ignore the warm glow he experienced with the knowledge that she was not repelled by him.

“I think it better we not discuss this further, Miss Granger. Now, if you like, I will teach you the incantations I mentioned before.” Her face fell for a second before she smiled, a small, almost sad quirk of the lips. He was not mad, she could tell, and that was a good start, but now was not the time to push him to explore this rare simmering feeling. She listened as he spoke, practiced the enchantments he taught under his eagle eye, but underneath the give and take of instructor and student the current still swirled, and they both tread water, feeling the gentle tug of the undertow and wondering when and if they would get sucked under again.

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A/N: Next up - the Forbidden Forest. There will be more of a delay than my regular readers are used to between this update and the next - a variety of life factors have cut down significantly on my free time this past week or so. But I expect things to return to normal soon, and I am working on it, so it won't be a huge delay, just longer than normal. Plus, it's a large chapter. Patience...

## Chapter 18: Forbidden Forest (Part I)

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat silently in Hagrid's hut, chipped china mugs of tea growing cold on the table in front of them, the plate of rock cakes in the center untouched. Hagrid kept trying to start a conversation with each of them in turn, but their throats were dry and their minds frozen. The importance of this night was a suffocating cloud, and the trio shivered at random moments despite the roaring conflagration in the fireplace and the heavy cloaks they wore to ward off the chill night air.

Fang whimpered quietly, massive head resting on Ron's knee as he absently scratched behind the dog's large, floppy ears. Harry fidgeted restlessly in his seat, checking for at least the tenth time since their arrival that his Invisibility Cloak was safely stowed in an interior pocket of his cloak. Hermione picked up her teacup, lifted it to her lips but lowered it again before taking a sip, the chatter of cup against saucer betraying the small tremor in her hands. Time had been flying by since sunrise, huge chunks slipping by like a Snitch from a Seeker, but now it seemed suspended, thick torturous seconds and minutes refusing to pass. All three of them were both anxious to go and full of trepidation of what lay ahead.

Finally the tip of Hermione's wand glowed red, the signal they had been waiting for and dreading. They had planned out this evening as best they could, and now it was time to head out into the cool black night, into the dark forbidding forest, and they rose as one to their feet.

"Are yeh sure yeh don' want me teh go with yeh?" Hagrid asked, huge bearded face creased with worry.

"No, I don't think so, Hagrid. No one's supposed to know what we're doing, remember?" Harry thought his voice sounded different, strained and at least a note or two too high. He had already debated this with himself and his friends, but they had ultimately decided against it. They thought they may require stealth or discretion at some point during the night, and neither were the gamekeeper's forte. They had, however, set up an emergency signal; if any one of them sent up red sparks, the massive man would alert the Order and then come charging to the rescue.

"Alright then. I'll be waitin' fer yeh, and if yeh aren't out by midnight, I'll let the Order know an' come lookin'." Fang whimpered again and let out a single, mournful bark. "Good luck teh yeh," the giant of a man said softly, and one by one the three friends nodded, assurances and hopeful farewells caught in their throats, and exited the warm, comforting hut into the cold uncertain night.

Without talking they approached the edge of the Forbidden Forest, peering into the inky blackness. They could make out nothing more than a few feet into the tree line, the pale light of the quarter moon unable to penetrate far into the dense canopy of limbs and leaves, and the soft rustle of wind and foliage and small unseen creatures sounded eerie and sinister.

"Ready?" whispered Hermione, the homemade map clenched tightly in her left hand, wand in her right. She watched the taut pale faces of her two closest friends bob sharply in the moonlight, their own wands gripped tightly in sweaty hands.

"Okay, then. This is it. Unicorns first." And then she turned, shaking only a little, and plunged into the woods.

"*Lumos*," she whispered after a few steps, the wan light of her wand tip illuminating just enough of the

ground ahead for her to see the path ahead.. She heard one of the boys mutter the same incantation, the other curse softly as their cloak caught on some brambles, but while she was aware of them, the solid presence and soft rustling of cloth allowing her to track their movements behind her, her mind was only on the task ahead.

She had been planning this since she had found Malum Defaeco and convinced Snape to help her, and she must have envisioned this night hundreds of times. In her mind she had reasoned, cajoled, reassured and pleaded with the animals, trying to find the right combination of words and emotion to convince the foal to part with a single drop of precious blood. She had cried and begged, attempted to fathom how the mind of a unicorn might work, what it would need to hear to make the sacrifice. She knew, though, that all her rehearsals could be for naught, that they could walk away this evening with no means still to destroy the Horcruxes, only a ruined cauldron of potion and bitter regret.

The forest was dark as pitch, only the gleam of their wands providing any consistent illumination, the faint scuttle of dry leaves and nocturnal creatures oddly loud to their hyperaware ears. Deeper and deeper in they walked, single file and guided only by Hermione's reading of the map Hagrid had drawn. When they left the main path they had to push their way through thick undergrowth, thorns and branches snatching at their clothing, scratching exposed hands and necks.

It was slower going now, the tree trunks closer, their limbs and clothing getting tangled in the brush. Hermione could hear her own breathing becoming labored, the sound of fabric ripping, and her cheek stung where a trickle of sweat trailed over a thin cut left by a nasty thorn bush. Still she made her way forward, cognizant that Harry and Ron were just behind her, when the light from the tip of her wand changed, pulsed red again, then faded back to white.

She paused briefly, eyes squeezed tight as she swallowed the hard lump that had swollen in her throat. In her mind she saw an hourglass turn over, grains of fine sand begin to tumble and fall. Time a factor now, three hours to get the blood and return to Bath, and Hermione felt the pressure more keenly than ever, panic fluttering in her chest.

The blood of magical creatures rarely becomes less potent with time, and the blood of unicorns was no exception. For another potion she might have gone to the Forbidden Forest these past weeks and tried to collect the vital fluid, found other herds if unsuccessful. Malum Defaeco, however, specified that the blood must be added within three hours of collection, exactly seventy-seven hours after completion of the prior stage. And so they had carefully planned this excursion, tried to time their arrival at the part of the forest the unicorns inhabited with the start of the deadline, and now as Hermione stumbled through a prickly patch of briar she saw the marker Hagrid had said to look for, a small clearing with a big rough boulder and an obvious, and distinctive, mark: an outcropping that resembled a large, hooked nose, and she came to a halt near the rock, waited for her companions.

They tumbled through shortly, leaves and bits of bark clinging to their hair, their cloaks. Ron was rubbing at a reddened and watering eye while Harry muttered an apology, having just allowed some shrubbery he'd pushed aside for himself to slash back into his friend's face by accident.

*"Point me,"* Hermione intoned softly, watching as her wand spun to indicate due north. Hagrid had told them the small group of unicorns liked to bed down in an area north of the Snape-nosed rock, and as the wand tip showed her the direction she stared into the trees, trying to catch a glimpse of white or gold.

“Okay, you go on ahead, ‘Mione, Harry’ll go with you until you catch sight of them,” Ron whispered. It was the best idea they’d come up with to keep her in sight, stay relatively close together, without scaring the creatures, the foals in particular becoming skittish with males around. While the trio felt old enough now to be better prepared for the dangers lurking in the rustling dark, none of them relished the idea of being found alone by a centaur or worse.

All three of their wand tips were lit now, and with a hard quick clasp of hands with Ron, Harry and Hermione began to pick their way northward, frequently glancing behind them to see if the redhead’s light was still visible. They hadn’t gone far at all, Ron’s wand still sporadically in sight, a dancing bit of light that winked at them from behind tree trunks and vegetation, when Hermione saw a flash of snow white and heard a soft uncertain nicker.

With a simple touch she stopped Harry. She could just make out his face, wand light from below causing his neck and chin to glow pale yellow-white while his eyes were sunk in shadow. He smiled encouragingly and squeezed her hand where it rested on his arm. He would go no further. It was all up to her from this point forward.

She inhaled, deep and shuddering, and as she crept toward the slight, anxious movement ahead she felt alive in a way she rarely experienced, each sense heightened. The bite of the crisp night air turned her breath into wreaths of steam; the tug of the evening breeze whipped through her hair, chilling her fingers and turning the tips of her nose and ears into little chips of ice; the sounds of the forest, insects and animals and growing things created a symphony; and the smell of wet earth cut through the sniffles the cold air had spawned, damp soil and leaves and the distinct tang of wind and rain. As she drew closer she detected new things, scent of dung and the unique clean odor of animal hide, the sound of air passing through the nostrils of a muzzle with a distinctive snort. A quick glance over her shoulder assured her that Harry was still nearby, and then she pushed aside a thick clump of branches and froze, the thud of her heart fierce and loud, surely audible in the still, vibrant clearing.

Two foals, tiny and golden, lay huddled against the warm, gently rising flank of a pure white adult unicorn, their spindly legs folded awkwardly under their bodies. Another adult stood off a bit, watchful but calm, pale sides gleaming in the wan moonlight, eyes glittering like jewels, shining with intelligence. Hermione felt the weight of their gaze, sentient and alive, as she stepped fully into the small patch of clear ground, copses of towering trees a canopy spreading over their heads, the faint light of nighttime celestial bodies giving the whole scene an edge of unreality.

She was shaking, a fine tremor coursing through her body from nerves and the cold. For a single, terrible instant she felt her mind go blank; she felt like she was facing the single greatest test of her life and hadn’t cracked a single book, and panic seized her heart, squeezed it tight so that it thumped painfully fast. But then the stakes of this mission flooded back to her, all her plans and schemes, and a sudden calm descended.

Slowly, so slowly she approached the two foals, knelt a short distance away on the cold uneven ground, ignoring the press of small stones and sticks under her knees. The foals shifted, large soulful eyes following her every move, but showed no evidence of fear. She placed her hands on her thighs, palms up, her wand stowed safely in the pocket of her robes, and she met the creatures’ steady gaze with her own unwavering eyes.

She waited a moment for the family (for she immediately labeled it as such, assuming that the children were nestled with their mother while their father stood watch) to inspect her, watching noses twitch and flare as they caught her scent. The father shook out his mane, emitted a soft whinny, and the others tossed their heads in response. It seemed suddenly as if they were expectant, waiting for her to state her purpose, and she swallowed awkwardly, her mouth and throat filled with cotton, before the calm embraced her again, and the moment was upon her.

“I have a favor to ask of you,” she began, startled by how loud her voice sounded in her own ears. “I know I have no right to ask, but you may be our last hope.”

She could feel their attention and interest like a palpable touch on her skin. It was a little unnerving, the steady appraisal of their stare. “You probably know there’s a war going on right now, a war consuming the wizarding world. If Voldemort wins, it will impact all magical creatures. He won’t be content to simply subjugate Muggle-borns and half-breeds. He would use anyone or anything if it furthered his agenda, if it meant he could gain more power.”

The father, still standing, pawed at the ground angrily when she said Voldemort’s name, and the golden foals seemed to draw back, press harder into the warm flank of their mother. That was good, she thought, they knew of the evil threatening to envelop the outside world, feared it, feared him. She wondered what they thought of these strange two-legged animals that walked upright, battled each other for such insignificant reasons, turned the world of men and nature alike on its ear. No wonder they chose to isolate themselves from that peculiar violent species, humans, no wonder they did not trust their actions or their lies.

“We’re fighting him, some of us. It’s not going so well right now, we’ve lost a lot of good people. Professor Dumbledore, for instance,” she said softly, and the unicorns dipped their heads at the name. They knew of him, too.

“Before he died he figured out why Voldemort didn’t die all those years ago. He made himself immortal, but at a terrible price. He tore his soul apart, ripped it into pieces and hid those pieces in different places. We, my friends and I, we’ve been trying to find those pieces and destroy them so that Voldemort can finally be defeated, too.”

The silence now had an intense, focused feel to it, as if the forest itself were listening, waiting for her next words. She had no doubt that the unicorns were listening, pairs of luminous intelligent eyes fixed on her as she knelt on the cold, uncomfortable ground. She knew they understood every word she said and were waiting for more.

“These pieces of soul, they’re very well protected, very hard to eliminate. We don’t have Dumbledore anymore, but we found a potion, an ancient one, whose sole purpose is to purge evil from objects and people who’ve been infected by the Dark. I brewed it, the potion, but it needs one more ingredient. That’s why I’m here.”

Her throat felt thick with her anxiety, the dread rising now, overriding the calm, as she approached the apex of her carefully designed plan. “I really believe this potion could be the key to stopping Voldemort. We can use it to neutralize the black magic tethering those pieces of his soul to the object or...person. I

can use it to save my best friend, Harry Potter, he's been carrying around a part of Voldemort's soul since he was a baby, and he doesn't want to die, but he would. I don't want him to die, and this potion could save him, allow us to get rid of the soul without killing Harry. I'd do anything to save Harry." She didn't realize she had started crying until she felt the cold splash of a tear on her hand. She had been visualizing Harry's face as she spoke, his smile, and she felt something break deep inside of her at the thought of his death. She wiped the tears from her face before she continued, continuously mindful of the watchful gaze of her audience.

"The last ingredient...it's a single drop of your blood. The blood of a unicorn foal. It...I know you've been betrayed, long ago, that witches and wizards lied about how they would use gifts you donated. I know that's why you stopped trusting us, magical folk, and I know I have no right to expect you to change that for me. I just...I had to try. I don't know any other way to save Harry from Voldemort's soul other than to kill him, and I don't think I can bear to see that happen. I know this can work, if you help..." Her speech had broken down; it was her heart talking now, laid bare to these creatures, and she could only hope they believed her words and her sincerity, because when it came down to it, she was doing this to save Harry. She cared about the war, defeating Voldemort, but that seemed distant and intangible, even with the losses and the fear they had all suffered. But to lose Harry, that was real, and had seemed painfully imminent since the truth about his scar was revealed, and it was for him she was doing this, his visage she saw when she contemplated the horrors of what might be if she failed.

She tried to find something more to say, something eloquent and compelling, but there was nothing more. She'd tried to spell out the importance of this, how essential the potion could be for all of magical society, but it all paled in comparison to the selfish yearning that they do this for her, for Harry. She tried to push it away, her fixation on her friend's plight, the idea that he might literally have to lay down his life to save the world, but it loomed large in her mind, and fed the flow of tears that refused to be staunch.

Leaves crunched underfoot as the male unicorn approached his family, rubbed his muzzle across the top of the foals' heads before whinnying softly and nuzzling the mother's neck. One of the golden young snorted questioningly, and it seemed the family spoke volumes in glances and gentle touches. Hermione only wished she had the faintest idea what they were saying.

A few minutes passed, and Hermione shifted restlessly, feet tingling as the circulation slowed, tension building as the animals nickered and nuzzled, talking in their own unique way. She felt shut out; they now seemed to be paying no more attention to her than to the wind, and she felt panic at the idea that this was their decision, and she had been dismissed without her knowledge. She'd considered this, of course, what it would feel like, what she would do if her initial plea was ignored, and she began formulating new approaches, different angles of attack, there must be something she could do to change their minds, she must not fail, not at this...

She was about to speak again when the unicorns as one turned their heads, fixed bright steady eyes on her. One of the foals snorted, breath a white wreath of condensation in the cold night air, and everything was suspended for a single frozen moment as she waited, hope and dread and terror exploding in her chest as she looked into the luminous orbs of the unicorn's eyes, then found her gaze drawn to one of the foals in particular, waiting, waiting.

And then, almost in slow motion, the tiny animal rose, thin bony legs trembling slightly, golden flank rising and falling with every breath. Hermione knelt motionless, everything else around her faded into the



background; the knobby packed earth under her knees, the barely perceptible flicker of Harry's wand on the edge of her peripheral vision, the cold and the scents and the sounds of the forest, it all faded away as the youngling stepped tentatively toward her, parents and sibling ever watchful.

He (Hermione somehow received the forceful impression that the foal was a male) took only a few steps before he was close enough to touch, sides rising a little quicker, and Hermione could feel the warmth of his breath on her face. She looked fully into bright azure eyes, saw the individual strands of fine golden hair on the muzzle, and automatically she reached out to stroke along the nose, marveling as he shyly accepted her touch. She could feel the hope bubbling inside her as the foal pressed his soft wet nose against the flesh of her palm, nipped lightly at the sleeve of her robe. Surely the unicorns would have retreated into the woods if they had meant to deny her, but instead one of the babies was standing directly in front of her, friendly and accepting. Did this mean she had succeeded?

And then the hope swelled and burst, flooding her soul; the night felt warmer, the air sweeter, and she nearly cried with relief as the animal pulled back his head, whinnied a soft, almost mournful note, and lifted one of his front legs a few inches off the ground, clearly proffering the limb.

The enormity of the moment did not sink in for days afterward, this thing she had accomplished, a feat deemed impossible, something no one had done in centuries. But her pride and elation in the moment were not that she had managed to do what couldn't be done, but that she had surely saved her friend's life, and that victory was the only one that crowded her mind as she fumbled with the small glass phials she had brought (more than one, for though she had wrapped them carefully to prevent them from cracking, she couldn't spell them Unbreakable; the blood could not be contaminated by direct contact with magic before it was added to the potion, and she wasn't foolish enough to bring a single container and risk catastrophe if it were to prove unserviceable for some reason), carefully opened it with trembling hands, and withdrew a small, obsidian blade.

"Are you sure?" she asked reverently, gently laying the edge of the knife against the skin of the animal's foreleg.

Hazel eyes met blue, and with a single deliberate nod the foal acquiesced. Just the tiniest bit of pressure and the blade pierced the flesh, silver-blue blood welling from the split, and quickly Hermione positioned the vial so that the precious fluid trickled over the lip, flowing into the receptacle. She sealed it quickly, wrapping it with a piece of soft, thick cloth before sliding it into an interior pocket of her robes, then drew her wand to tend to the mound she had made. To her amazement it had already healed, the tender skin smooth and unblemished, and the foal lipped at her hair gently before returning to his mother's side.

"Thank you," she called after him, watching as he once again settled against the warmth of his mother's body. Giddy, still not quite believing her luck, she stood on feet that tingled with the sudden rush of blood and made to stumble back into the brush toward Harry when a sharp exhalation of air stopped her, the distinctive sort of an equine.

The adult male was approaching now, brilliant ivory coat gleaming in the flicker of moon and starlight. Again Hermione found herself drawn into a pair of brilliant eyes, these emerald green and full of feeling. She shivered, but not from the cold; the creature's stare seemed to penetrate her body and soul, peel back defenses she was not even cognizant of, lay her emotions and intentions naked and unadorned by logic or reason. It felt like a test, and she was not at all sure of the results when the connection melted gently away,

she and the unicorn both blinking rapidly in unison. Had she been judged unworthy after all? She felt the panicked compulsion to run.

She was momentarily confused when he raised one of his front hooves off the ground, the gesture identical to the one his son had made only minutes before. Realization hit quickly, though, and she stammered. "Oh, no, the potion only requires the one drop from a foal!"

Still the animal kept his forefoot in the air, tossing his magnificent mane and exhaling once, short and sharp. It sounded like a command, and Hermione was flustered by the sudden turn of events. It seemed obvious what was being offered, but why?

Cautiously she knelt again, looking up for confirmation as the blade was drawn, placed, pressed to pierce the skin. Another vial opened to the thick flow of blood, then sealed, padded, and secured, a small cut made in the soft cork stopper so that she would not confuse them later. She watched this time as the incision closed itself, the flesh smoothing to a thin bluish line which disappeared seamlessly, like ripples into water. Standing, she searched the creature's gaze, her own confusion and uncertainty plain, but there was no answer forthcoming, only a final confirming shake of the head before the unicorn returned to the others, the small family now focused on each other, dismissing the human in their midst as if she had been rendered invisible, or they had.

Staring for a bit longer, still dazed and in disbelief about what had happened, she waved uncertainly to them before turning to go. "Thank you," she murmured, taking in the tranquil familial tableau one final moment before she dove back into the trees, finally experiencing elation as she moved toward the dancing light of Harry's wand. He'd be so happy, so impressed, she had done it!

Her face, even illuminated poorly by flickering wand light, gave away her success before she could even open her mouth. "I don't believe it!" he whispered, eyes wide with shock and relief. "I mean I hoped, but..." But he hadn't dared allow himself to count on this, because had she failed...he pulled her into a smothering embrace, clung tightly to her as something dark and cold uncoiled inside his chest, relaxed the stranglehold it had maintained on his heart since he caught his own reflection in the mirror, saw the poisonous green pulsing of his scar.

Green eyes and hazel both were over bright when they separated. "Let's go tell Ron and get the Horcrux so we can get the bloody hell out of here," Harry said quickly, squinting into the distant foliage to pick up the flicker of their friend's wand.

"Because that'll be the easy part of this trip," she retorted to his back, but he was already moving, and she fell into step with him as he moved back into the trees, following the tiny speck of illumination in the distance to find their friend. The night seemed warmer somehow, the task ahead easier now that half their mission was complete. Harry in particular was struck by how fortune seemed to smile on him during the darkest hours; he was invincible, he and his friends, at least until the prophecy was fulfilled. It seemed the only way to explain how the stars always aligned just so, dangers arising then overcome, how they continued to perform feats that surely would have thwarted older and more powerful men and women.

Ron was predictably boisterous when they reunited, the anxiety on his face melting to jubilation while his voice echoed like a thunderclap in the quiet. He flushed as they shushed him quickly, but he couldn't resist grabbing up Hermione and swinging her in a fiercely happy circle. "I knew you could do it!" he

whispered against her hair, and she tightened her arms around him briefly before he let her go and slapped Harry soundly on the back.

“If you’re done assaulting us we’d best move on, the sooner we can finish and get back, the better,” Hermione breathed, surreptitiously patting her robe, feeling the thick cloth bundle still secured therein. There was time yet, of course, she had managed to get the blood much sooner than she’d hoped, but their night’s work was not yet done, and she would not rest easy until they had found the last Horcrux.

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A/N: This was originally intended to be one long chapter, but then I felt the strong desire to give my faithful readers another installment before Thanksgiving, so here you go. The rest of this chapter is partially complete and should be up shortly after the holiday. Happy Thanksgiving. Oh, you know what would make me thankful? Feedback. :D

## Chapter 19: Forbidden Forest (Part II)

A/N: I've posted this warning before but it bears repeating. This story is NOT DH compliant. This story has and will continue to feature character death. Read on, gentle reader...

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“Lucky for us you found those spells last night,” Ron remarked. She was suddenly grateful for the dark, the flushing of her cheeks hidden by the forgiving night. That was what she had told them, that she had stumbled across the spells Snape had taught her in one of the books she’d retrieved from Hogwarts. They were so accustomed to her extracting just the right information from her vigilant studies that it didn’t occur to them to question their luck or the timing. Fortune had been smiling on them, protecting them for such a long time, and Hermione’s ability to dredge up the perfect spell was just another facet of that.

The first of the incantations Snape had taught her was archaic, almost forgotten, known only to a few academics who sought knowledge for knowledge’s sake. It was only moderately complicated but required a rather high level of raw magical power. Fortunately, Hermione possessed the necessary magical strength; for all her dedication to absorbing the proper techniques and theories about spell work, she also possessed a great deal of raw talent. It was the combination of the two that allowed her to excel in her coursework, though most of the students probably thought her prodigious intellect compensated for only average power. Neither Harry nor Ron had been able to work the incantations she was about to use in the short amount of time she had worked with them, though whether this was a result of lack of sufficient power or their less rapid grasp of the technique involved was impossible to determine.

The boys stood side by side, waiting as she raised her wand. She breathed in slow and deep, clearing her mind and focusing internally, feeling the warm, pulsing thrum of her magical ability; it was always there, of course, a background hum, but spells that utilized more raw power were easier to produce and control while centered. She could sense the power swelling as she concentrated, eager and alive, and privately thought that the reason her friends couldn’t master this type of magic quickly was an inability to concentrate on nothing, on their internal being, for longer than a few seconds.

She turned her attention to Ron first, flicking her wand with sure, precise movements. “*Os recidivus*,” she intoned, feeling as much as seeing the flow of energy through her arm, her wand, bathing Ron with a cool blue light. She held the connection until the glow had fully engulfed him, then swung her arm towards Harry, the magic trailing like a streamer with the movement before wrapping around the second young man as well. Finally she lifted her arm, the spell trickling like rain over her head, down her arms, and just as she felt the first twinge of weakness she relaxed her control over the spell, felt the magic trickle and stop, and though the azure glow faded she could still feel the enchantment, a layer of warmth over her skin.

“And this will allow us to get through any barriers Voldemort has around the Horcrux?” Ron worried, rubbing his fingers over his face, trying to touch the magic.

Snape had explained the arcane magic as best he could, but as the spell had not been widely used in ages there was some ambiguity about the exact effect. “Well, the translation wasn’t exact, but this should allow us to tell when enchantments of misdirection or diversion are in place.”

“How?”

“I’m not really sure,” she answered honestly.

“We need to get moving,” Harry muttered, Hagrid’s map having been passed to him from Hermione. He balanced his wand in his palm, said the Four-Point Spell, and watched as it pointed north. “We need to head in this direction.” He pointed into the thick tangled underbrush, peering intently as though the object they sought would guide their path.

“Just one more, Harry,” she reminded him. Again she pointed her wand at Harry, recalling the exact movements and words. A relatively simple locating spell, but she would never have thought of using it this way. Like finding like, one fragment used to track another part of the whole. Normally used for inanimate objects, here used to (hopefully) use one part of a shattered soul to trace another.

“*Locus conserco*,” she said softly, and the light from her wand this time was white. Harry’s scar flared and pulsed faintly but visibly in the dark, a beacon now using the Horcrux imbedded in their friend to track its brother.

“Bloody brilliant,” Ron said enviously. It was hard for him, sometimes, to live in the shadow of Harry’s destiny and Hermione’s intelligence. He wondered what his role was, his specialty, his destiny. But it was a fleeting thought; he was mostly content (or had grown to be so) to be the helper and friend, confidant and support, happy to be a soldier in this battle if not the leader.

“This way,” Harry urged, and without another word the trio pushed back into the brush. It was Harry in the lead this time, wand tip lit as he pushed aside limbs and forced a path through brambles. Stopping periodically to check the map (he wasn’t sure how the spell would help; he really didn’t *feel* as if he were being led), they tramped on, not talking but hardly quiet as they crunched leaves underfoot, snapped branches that blocked their way, or tore fabric from their robes as it snagged and snarled in the forest growth. Ten minutes, twenty, then thirty had passed, and it seemed as if the path was getting more difficult. The tree trunks appeared closer, the canopy of leaves thicker, almost completely obliterating the sky. The light from their wands barely penetrated the thick cloying dark, and the air felt colder, sharper, dangerous. Even with the strenuous task of fighting the unforgiving undergrowth, Hermione could feel her toes going numb, the tips of her ears and nose stinging, and she became aware of her own growing sense of unease, of dread. They were going the wrong way, she was sure of it, she could feel the very wrongness of this path in the marrow of her bones.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Ron asked finally, and though he was careful to speak softly his voice sounded very loud; it was then Hermione noticed that the normal forest sounds of insects and nocturnal animals were gone. Even the breeze was absent here, and as they all came to a halt, the sound of their quick, anxious breath was the only one audible.

“I was wondering the same thing,” she responded, eyes darting as if she could make out the dangers lurking outside the small pool of light their wands provided.

Harry frowned. While he’d noticed the increased density of the foliage, he was untroubled by any rising sense of trepidation. “I’ve been checking the map all along.”

But Ron was shaking his head, eyes a little too wide. “No, this is wrong, can’t you tell? There’s something out there waiting for us, we’ve got to turn back.”

“What? We can’t turn back, we’ve got to find the Horcrux!”

Harry stared disbelieving at his two friends. Ron had gone pale, freckles stark in contrast to his milky complexion, and Hermione was biting her lip, fear evident in her eyes. They both looked tense, on edge, bodies coiled to strike, or flee. They were spooked good and proper, but what had they seen or heard that he had missed?

Through the growing, clamoring terror Hermione struggled to think. This had to be part of Voldemort’s enchantments, she knew that rationally, but the knowledge did not quell the shrieking panic in her head, the certainty that only pain and death lay ahead. Fiercely she fought, struggling to force her senses and emotions to trust her brain, and then she noticed something that startled her enough to push back the fright.

“Harry, your scar! *Nox!*” Ron emitted something that sounded suspiciously like a scream as the strength of Hermione’s command extinguished all of their wands and the trio was plunged into total darkness. Or they should have been, but as the light from their wands died Ron saw it, too.

They hadn’t noticed with Harry in the lead, but his scar shone much brighter now, the white light a strong glow almost equal to the luminescence of their three wands combined. Harry could make it out now, too, a source of illumination just above his eyes, and he thought he must look like a Muggle explorer with a portable torch strapped to his head.

But that wasn’t the strangest thing. From the glowing scar a thin, shimmering tendril of light snaked its way into the snarl of prickles and bushes, a clearly visible path into the inky uncertain forest.

“I guess you were headed the right way after all,” Ron said weakly, still trembling slightly with cold and nerves. “But I’m telling you, mate, I’ve never felt more certain about anything.”

“Look,” Hermione squeaked, voice high and breathy. All around them were wraiths, blue-grey shadows of Dementors and werewolves, Inferi and banshees, vampires and even an enormous Acromantula that caused Ron to visibly cringe. Transparent, without substance or abilities, they were nonetheless terrifying specters, ghostly manifestations of the worst of nightmares, floating demons that chilled Hermione and Ron to the bone. The crowd of horrors stretched as far as they could see, and in the direction of the shining tendril leading them deeper into the forest.

“They aren’t real, are they?” Ron shuddered, deathly pale now and sweating.

“No, I think the spell just allows us to see some form of the incantation. These creatures aren’t here, they can’t hurt us, they’re just designed to keep people away.” Even though she knew it was true, the visions still made her heart hammer, and as the insubstantial fingers of a nearby Inferius trailed over her cheek she had to fight the almost overwhelming urge to run screaming.

“Are you two okay to go on?” Harry asked. He could see the gruesome figures, too, but he didn’t find them as fearsome. Perhaps it was the interference from the white light streaming gently from his brow; it

made the shadowy monsters less vivid, more peripheral, and he felt the compulsion to go on, to follow the light, much more strongly than the fear. Perhaps the interference was not the light, but rather the Horcrux itself, sensing now its twin out in the dark, and being a part of the magic that spawned these spells of fear helped insulate Harry. But this did not occur to him; he felt only the drive to continue.

“Not really,” gulped Ron, clenching his wand so tightly his hand shook. “But we’ll manage, right?”

Hermione didn’t want to risk speaking over the lump jumping in her throat, but she did her best to nod convincingly. It did help to see the spell manifested, in a way. The figures were obviously not corporeal and therefore incapable of actually inflicting the violence they threatened with snarls and fangs. On the other hand, seeing a Basilisk approaching, even one composed of vapor, wasn’t exactly conducive to courage, either.

It did get easier as they proceeded, her body gradually registering what her mind already knew, that the fear was artificial, a cheap ploy, and as the trees got even closer together and the specters even more numerous and terrifying, they ceased to cause the same level of fear, became more an annoyance than anything else.

“Bloody things keep hiding the big ones,” Ron complained as another thick branch scraped along his face, the wailing face of a banshee having interfered with his ability to see the impediment until too late. Hermione only grunted, waving absently to vanquish a ghoul with one hand as she struggled to free her trousers from a nest of thorny vines.

“We’re almost there.” Harry sounded almost strangled, and his friends noticed now that the light emanating from his brow was brighter, the strand thicker, and just ahead there appeared to be something, small and low to the ground, and full of light.

The trio entered a small clearing surrounded by deadened trees, and inside there was a bright blue, crystalline barrier. Behind the translucent wall an object sat, indistinct with the brightness of its glow, and the Horcrux was connected to Harry by a shining rope that throbbed in the air between them. The still lingering fear dissipated as they entered the area, and Hermione glanced behind her, saw the shadow nightmare figures waiting like sentinels but unable, it seemed, to enter the place where the Horcrux lay.

Without conscious thought or plan they spread out around the glowing artifact and its shimmering shield. Intuitively Hermione knew the barrier was made of something different than the wraiths that had hunted and stalked them, that tried their best to distract and divert. Though mostly transparent and not corporeal in the traditional sense, the barrier seemed more energy than smoke, solid and real, and she noted that the boys were keeping their distance as well, analyzing but not yet touching. Perhaps they really had grown up. She did not see the glassy look in Harry’s eyes, the hunger.

Cautiously Hermione lifted her hand, palm toward the obstacle, and felt magic pushing back, hot, angry magic stinging across her hand, up her arm, like insects with fiery bites. Gritting her teeth, she pressed her hand more forcefully against the wall, struggling against the pain, but soon it was more than that, the magic matching her increase in strength and building, and before she could pull back, the power flung her through the air, catapulting her head over heels. She felt the air leave her lungs in a rush as she hit the ground and for a few seconds she couldn’t breathe.

“Are you insane?” Ron hissed, hovering over her as she wheezed and tried desperately to suck in air. “Who knows what that thing could do to you!”

“Testing...it,” she managed. “Strength...of the...energy. Powerful...”

“What energy?” Harry queried. He was still standing by the Horcrux, eyes bright and strange.

“Can’t you feel it? It crawls like pins and needles all over your skin the closer you get.” Ron helped Hermione to sit as he spoke, rubbing her back while her sides hitched and spasmed.

Harry frowned and looked again at the barrier. He could see it, of course, the spell had given them all the ability to sense the magic hidden in this place, but what he could not know was that the shimmering wall looked and felt quite differently to him than to his friends. Where they saw an almost solid energy field, he perceived a fine wispy curtain, and where they felt discomfort, even pain as they approached it, he felt nothing at all.

Curious, he again stood directly in front of it, raised his hand to press against the obstruction, but where Hermione had been repelled he experienced no tactile impression. Encouraged, eager, he tried to touch the barrier itself but found he was unable to do so, his hand passing through directly with no more effort than passing through air.

“Harry, wait, we don’t know what it is yet...” She had gotten her full breath back, but now she felt breathless with fear as she watched her friend, imagined what violence would happen to him as he stepped right up to it, against it, through it...

And then the barrier dissolved with a shrill, audible scream. It was one of the most chilling sounds Ron or Hermione had ever heard, like the call of a banshee or the death shriek of some tortured wild thing. As Harry walked completely through the barrier spell, the glow from the waiting Horcrux flared and died, the light dimming to reveal the object. Curiosity burning, the two stood and went after Harry, desiring to see the Horcrux, but they stopped in horror as Harry suddenly turned to face them.

His eyes were like emerald flames, the pupil and white swallowed in color, and his scar too burned with unnatural green fire. “Stop,” he said simply, and they froze, unable to move another step closer. His voice echoed and hissed, threaded with power not his own, and as his friends struggled and squirmed against the power binding them, he watched from inside himself, part of him laughing, part of him aghast.

It was his hands reaching down to cradle the precious artifact, his fingers caressing the smooth familiar surface fondly, almost reverently, tracing the characters and symbols on the foreground, but Harry had never owned this object. He had seen it, though, or one like it, many times, on the robes of older students, proudly displayed by his best friend’s brother. It was a Hogwarts’ Head Boy badge, and some part of him claimed it as his own while the other recoiled, recognizing what these feelings and memories meant.

He understood, now, why he had experienced little fear in the forest, and how he had been able to cross the barrier. It was one of recognition, keyed to allow only one man to pass uninjured, and the fragment of Voldemort’s soul that resided in him had come to the forefront, allowed him to gain entrance. But now it did not want to recede back into the recesses of Harry’s mind, into the scar; it wanted to be free of its mortal moral shell, wanted to join with its brother to increase its power, and wanted to punish the



usurpers who had dared to threaten this sacred resting place. Harry was there but not, fighting to regain control of his own arms, his own thoughts, but that part of Voldemort's soul he possessed was drawing strength from the fragment contained in the Head Boy Horcrux, and once he had voluntarily ceded control to cross the magical threshold, it had latched onto the dark part inside Harry that all men carried and inflamed it with whispers of reward, promises of power.

Hermione and Ron could only watch helplessly as their friend approached with strange glowing eyes. He was surrounded now by a fine whirlwind of vile green light, the cloud fed by streams of illumination from his brow and the Horcrux clasped tenderly in his hands. His lips pulled back in a smile, but not the familiar easy grin they knew so well; it was more grimace, and spoke more of evil than pleasure.

"You should not have come here." Harry's voice but distorted, with none of Harry's warmth. Rather he sounded eager, as if anticipating something, and Hermione didn't think it was something either she or Ron would enjoy.

"Harry, please, it's us, me and Ron. Fight it, Harry, fight it..."

"Silence." Again a simple command, but the magical force behind it compelled obedience, and Hermione found herself mute, capable only of pleading mentally.

"You seek to defeat us. It cannot be done. We will be victorious and lead the magical world to a glorious new future. It is inevitable. We will give you this final opportunity to join us."

Harry's body stood directly before them, and was very close. Ron and Hermione, still thrashing uselessly against the magic holding them immobile and silent, desperately searched the eyes, the familiar face, for any trace of their friend and despaired. He was a mere shell, a terrible caricature of himself, and they sensed neither mercy nor compassion from him now.

"You are hopeless, we think," Not Harry said dispassionately as he coldly surveyed Ron. "You cannot hide your true nature from us, boy. You are frightened and weak and full of useless sentiment. There is nothing noble or courageous about you, despite what you may think. You are useless to us."

He turned his scrutiny to Hermione. "You, on the other hand, intrigue us. Unharnessed power and formidable intelligence you possess, and these could be most useful to us. We know of your great love for these pathetic youths; your love is your greatest weakness. Serve us and we will spare them. Deny us and they both die, this one now," he motioned to Ron, "the Chosen One later, and painfully, though you will not be alive to know. Save them and yourself and join us. What is your response?"

The clearing filled with the sudden frantic sound of Hermione's breathless sobs as the spell was lifted. This was all too sudden, too much, and how could she possibly answer? Sentencing herself and her friends to death was unthinkable, her worst nightmare, but so was the alternative. Was it even possible that an hour or so ago she was full of hope and joy, on top of the world? How had things fallen apart so fast?

She found, ultimately, there was only one thing she could think to say. "Fight, Harry, fight him! Fight, fig..."

“Enough. We assumed as much, but it amused us to offer a witch of your talent, even a Mudblood, the opportunity to serve us. Your fate is sealed, and that of your friends. So be it.”

Wand raised and pointed at the trapped, doomed pair, Harry watched in horror from inside his body, watched his hand swing the slender shaft of wood to target Ron, felt the vile murderous surge within, saw the frozen screaming eyes of his best friends. His own scream echoed in his mind as he remembered happier times, flying with Ron, studying with Hermione, laughing with them both in the Gryffindor common room, and now he was to be the instrument of their deaths, and that was something he could not bear. Their friendship had bolstered and sustained him for over six years, and he allowed the love and affection he felt for them both to swell up inside him, to consume him, because he remembered now what he had not known at the Ministry, that neither Voldemort nor his wretched soul could abide these emotions, the sensation of love.

He heard shrieking again, a horrible piercing sound, and realized it was only in his mind. The black disfigured piece of the evil wizard’s soul could no more bear contact with such pure emotion than could the man himself, and with a sickening, disorienting lurch Harry found himself once again in control of his body, the phantasm in his scar retreating, and the Horcrux too lay quiescent in his hands. Dizzy, he collapsed to his knees, eyes closed against the violent sensations of vertigo and nausea, but all seemed right again as he felt cool anxious hands on his arms and face, the large rough hands of Ron and the smoother, slender ones of Hermione.

“You all right, mate?” Ron’s voice sounded far away, tinny. Harry had experienced enough injuries playing Quidditch and just generally being Harry to recognize the symptoms of mild shock.

“I knew you could fight him off, Harry, I knew it!” Hermione’s fingers soothed his feverish brow, fluttered like tiny Snitch’s wings across his scar.

“Just give me a second, guys,” he panted. He was exhausted, like he’d been running for hours. His bones felt like water, and he was sore all over.

“Maybe you should let me take that, Harry.” He felt Ron’s fingers gently prying at his own and he realized he was clutching the Horcrux so tightly that the edges of the badge were cutting into his palm. With reluctance he himself did not understand, Harry tensed briefly before allowing Ron to take it from him, flexing his aching fingers painfully.

Harry sat for a minute or two, gulping in air and regaining his bearings. Soon he opened his eyes, smiled wanly at the pale worried faces of his friends. How often had he seen those looks? Too often.

“He’s gone for now. I had to let him in to pass the barrier and I lost control. It was...different, it wasn’t him, it was the part of his soul in my scar, and I didn’t recognize what was going on until it was too late. I’m sorry,” he apologized lamely, grimacing as he thought of how close he had come to murdering them.

“Forget it, Harry. It worked, didn’t it? We could have spent hours trying and failing to figure out a way through his spell. And you fought him off when it really mattered.”

Hermione’s reassurances rang a bit hollow to his troubled mind. True, he had pushed Voldemort’s soul back before he had killed, but he couldn’t help but wonder why it had taken him so long to use his

knowledge of how to drive him away. He was scared, terrified by the part of him that seemed to recognize and embrace the Dark, the seducing, tantalizing promise of power and prestige. He sincerely hoped Hermione's potion worked, that he could rid himself of this thing once and for all. He wondered how big a difference it would make.

Gradually Harry felt his strength return, stood hesitantly on only slightly rubbery legs. He adjusted his glasses, which had slid down to the tip of his nose, and looked out into the trees. The vaporous creatures were still there waiting, threatening and snarling, but somehow they were not intimidating or terrorizing anymore, merely sad shadows. "Are you ready? Let's get back so Hermione can finish the potion and we can destroy the Horcruxes."

"Too right," Ron responded. He too wondered how he could have found the ghostly creatures frightening, but his skin still crawled when he caught sight of an insubstantial Acromantula.

"We're pretty deep in, but we should get back in time. This way," Hermione motioned, checking her wand for the direction before putting it safely away. Their eyes had adjusted to the dark while they waited, and none felt the burning need to ignite them. Oddly enough, the phantoms provided a decent amount of spectral light as they reentered the trees.

The trip out seemed to take much longer than the journey in. Though pleased beyond measure with the outcome of the night, all of the activity and emotion had drained them, and they plodded along tiredly, grateful that the evening was almost over. Branches seemed to be reaching out just to wrap in their robes, roots thrusting out of the soil to trip them as they stumbled steadily onward.

"Almost there?" queried Ron wearily. Silently he vowed to never set another toe in the Forbidden Forest if he could help it.

"I think so," Hermione called back. "I think I see light from Hagrid's hut."

"Finally." The boys saw it now, too, a steady point of light growing gradually larger, and the trees were thinning out. Their ghostly entourage had long since disappeared, and more moonlight was now filtering through the leaves overhead. They found new energy as the end drew into sight, leaden legs bouncing with a new spring in their step, hearts lifting as their success began to sink in. Once again the Golden Trio reigned triumphant!

They could see the edge of the tree line now, the dark shadowed outlines of Hagrid's garden, the warm inviting glow of firelight through the window of his hut, the distant looming castle of Hogwarts. Their excitement mounting, they picked up the pace, and they were only a few yards away from the edge of the forest, still among the trees but not far in, when Hermione realized there was movement near the hut, the solid shifting movements that could only be people. People, plural...

Ron saw it, too, but didn't make the connection quite as quickly. "Is that Hagrid..." He was cut off suddenly as Hermione clapped a hand over his mouth and crouched down low, dragging the redhead with her. Startled, Harry came to a halt and looked at the pair with confusion, but then a voice pierced the night and he was coiled near the ground with them in an instant, alert and tense and afraid.

"I'm telling you, I heard something over here," snarled the voice, low and rough and male. The trio

huddled, still as stone, breath frozen in their throats, as a tall lurking figure paced at the edge of the trees directly ahead of them.

“You’ve been hearing things since we got here.” Another figure, shorter and squatter, hissed a reply, and the high raspy voice was immediately familiar to them. Bellatrix LeStrange.

“I will ask you only one more time, half-breed, where are they?” This third voice, another male, was further away, near the hut, high and cold and commanding. But it was the answer to the question that horrified them, wrung a muffled strangled gasp from Hermione’s lips.

“I’ll not tell yeh,” Hagrid croaked, voice thick and wet.

“We know they came here tonight.”

“They didn’. Or if they did they didn’ tell me. They musta left already.” Hagrid sounded terrible, like his throat was clogged with blood or worse, the slight wheeze to his speech leading Harry to believe his nose might be broken. Clearly he’d been tortured for information of their whereabouts. Tortured for him.

“I’m telling you, I heard them, they’re in the woods...”

“Quiet, you fool. If they are, do you want them to know we’re here? Our orders...”

“Silence, the both of you.” The squabbling stopped at this man’s command. Without another word they both moved back toward the hut, and the trio took the opportunity to creep closer, wanting and fearing a better view of the scene before them.

It was worse than any of them thought. Hagrid was kneeling near his home, clearly bound hand and foot, the dim lighting doing little to obscure the blood coating his face. It gleamed black in the moonlight, red in the light from the window, and a tall, thin man stood behind him (though only his head and shoulders were visible; even kneeling Hagrid was as tall as most men), the wicked silver gleam of a blade steady in his hand and held against the gamekeeper’s throat. And there were more than just the three Death Eaters they had heard; at least a half dozen more were scattered around, watching the forest and castle.

”*Sonus.*” The high cold voice again, and their hearts thumped painfully against their ribs. That voice boomed out, magnified, and they could only listen with mounting dread.

“Harry Potter, we know you are here. You were warned what would happen if you refused the Dark Lord’s command. He awaits you in battle, and like a coward you hide, forcing this war to drag on. Now you will suffer for your impudence. You have five minutes, Harry Potter, to come out and respond, to agree to meet the Dark Lord and end this. If you do not, the half-breed dies, and his blood is on your hands.”

“No! Don’ do it, Harry, get outta here. Harry...”

”*Silencio!*” Harry watched, sickened and shaking, as Hagrid thrashed in his bonds, mouth opening and closing with silent shouts. For the second time tonight he was watching a friend threatened with death, all because of him. Blood on his hands.

“Five minutes.”

“*Muffliato*,” whispered Ron, and Hermione was certainly not going to object to using that particular spell now. “What are we going to do?”

“We’ve got to save him!” Harry’s eyes were wild, his voice desperate and panicked.

“Harry, think! We have the Horcrux and the unicorn’s blood, if we’re captured now it would be disastrous.” Hermione’s own voice was shrill in the air, and though she knew the enemy could not hear she felt a surge of fear.

“We can’t just leave him like this, they’ll kill him! We’ve got to do something. We can fight them, just give me a second to think...”

“Harry, she’s right, we can’t get caught, and we don’t have the time.”

“I can’t believe you two! I’ll go alone, then, I won’t let him die because of me!” He lurched to his feet, mind buzzing with fury and adrenaline, but Ron grabbed him roughly and pulled him back into a crouch.

“Hang on, Harry, I’ve got an idea. Here, Hermione, take this.” Confused, Hermione looked down to see Ron thrusting the Horcrux into her hand while he fumbled with something else in the pocket of his robes.

“What? Why do I need this, Ron...”

“Harry, give her your Invisibility Cloak.”

“What? Ron, what the hell are you on about, we’ve got to save Hagrid...”

“Shut it, both of you, and listen to me! We don’t have much time. I brought one of the twins’ Decoy Detonators with me, thought it might come in handy if we needed a diversion. ‘Mione, you Disillusion all of us and get under the cloak. I’ll Banish this out by the lake and when it goes off we can run for it.”

“Ron, no, I won’t leave Hagrid to die...”

“Harry, listen!” Ron grabbed his friend by the shoulders and shook him, his own eyes wide but hard, and his voice held a seriousness and confidence they had never heard before.

“We can’t risk taking them on like this, Harry, but if we get back to the Order we can get reinforcements and come back. We aren’t abandoning him, but it would be suicide to fight them now. You know I’m right. I care about Hagrid, too, but he wouldn’t want us to die in a futile attempt to save him. You know we can’t do it. You know I’m right.”

Harry and Hermione gaped at their friend. He seemed so calm and assured, so unlike the sometimes confused and bewildered boy they had grown accustomed to over the years. Ron didn’t come up with the brilliant plan, he helped execute, yes, faced many challenges with a bravado Hermione secretly thought bordered on insanity, but this cool strategist was a stranger.

“What, you don’t think this’ll work?” That sounded more like the Ron they knew, wounded and a little unsure.

“Actually, it’s bloody brilliant,” Harry said softly. It hurt, though, the knowledge that they were right, it was foolish to mount a rescue now, but it felt like a betrayal. A betrayal of the man who had introduced him to the magical world, befriended and protected him. If Hagrid were killed...

“Listen, Hermione, this is very important. No matter what happens, no matter what you see or hear, you have to keep running. That’s why I gave you the Horcrux. You have to get beyond the gate and get back to the Order no matter what.”

“But you two are faster, one of you should take it...”

“No, it has to be you. Neither one of us can finish the potion, and you are the best at Apparition. This isn’t just chivalry,” he joked weakly.

Again, he was right, and her vision was suddenly blurred with tears. This was the Ron she had fallen for, pined for, mourned for, selfless and sweet. She felt her love for him keenly at that moment, like a brother only a little more melancholy, and she threw her arms around his neck.

“You can do it,” he murmured in her ear. “You can do anything.”

She nodded against the crook of his neck before pulling back, embarrassed and wiping furiously at her eyes. Harry looked on, pale and scared, and then the three friends shared a final, heavy gaze.

“We’re all set then?”

Tight, jerky nods and the claspings of sweaty, shaking hands. “Let’s go then.”

Quickly they crept as quietly as possible to the very edge of the trees, aided in their stealth by the continued mutterings and self-absorption of the Death Eaters. Hermione rapped each of her friends over the head with her wand before enchanting herself and the Decoy Detonator, threw Harry’s cloak over her head and waited, waited in the thick trembling dark, heartbeat a thundering staccato in her ears. As if in slow motion she glimpsed a flutter of leaves as Ron sent the diversion on its way, and she imagined it flying through the jet black night as she waited, waited...

The small explosion was impossible to miss, and the followers of Voldemort turned instinctively toward the sound before most of them started running that way, wands drawn. And then she was running, feet pounding over the grass now wet with dew, her trainers soaked through with the icy chill, but she didn’t slow or turn, only ran.

“You fools, they’re over there! There!” the head Death Eater screamed, and then the air was filled with jets of light, wildly off target but surely that would change as the grown wizards and witches gained ground, aimed toward the outer gates. All it took was one lucky shot to find its mark, and she ran faster, breath a tortured burning in her lungs, her side.

“Harry Potter! His blood is on your hands!” And she slowed, turned, they all did as their enemy cried out in his rage. Much further away now, and with figures closing in, but they couldn’t turn away, couldn’t stop the horror they watched, helpless as the distant man closed on their kneeling friend, wrenched the knife from the guard, and drew it across Hagrid’s throat.

“Hagrid!” Harry bellowed, started to return, his own disbelief and anger blinding him to reason. The distant blade reflected the moonlight as it flashed in the air, descended again and again. “Hagrid, no!”

“Harry, run!” Ron’s voice was cutting through the bloody din in his mind. “We’ve got to go, they’ll catch us, run!”

Hermione had already taken off again, but she realized with a flash of unbridled terror that they were doomed. The other Death Eaters had closed the gap, their spells singeing the air above her head, and her legs were weighed down now with more than fatigue, but with the terrible vivid scene of death they had just witnessed. All the magic of discharged hexes crackled in the air, weakening the Disillusionment Charm protecting Ron and Harry, her own feet surely visible as she tore onward, fire lancing her ribs, running, running toward a goal that was not close enough.

The boys had started firing curses blindly over their shoulders, forcing the pursuing attackers to duck and dodge, an explicative and a thud suggesting at least one had hit its mark. “Don’t...stop...’Mione,” Ron panted, not knowing exactly where she was, eyes focused on the gate. Closer...closer... “Don’t stop!”

She felt as if she couldn’t take another step and yet she continued, throat and chest a blazing throb of agony as she sucked in the chill October air. Were the boys still with her? Surely the Death Eaters must be tiring, too, they were older and heavier, and had run first toward the lake, maybe they could make it, she was almost there now...

And then she heard something that nearly caused her to stop again; a thump very close by and just ahead of her, and a groan that sounded like Harry. Was that a body on the ground? She had to stop, to save him, she couldn’t leave Harry behind, her friend, their only hope, not Harry!

“Run!” Ron again, and she saw a blur move toward the prone hazy form, drag it upright and then she was past them, the gate just ahead.

“Stop them, they’re getting away!” Bellatrix shrieked, but it was more a shrill gasp, and most of the Death Eaters had fallen back some, unable to keep pace with three teenagers fueled by adrenaline and abject fear, but still flinging curse after curse in that direction. Their own dread of the Dark Lord’s wrath if they failed to bring back Potter yet again pushed them onward.

But they were not destined to succeed, not this night, and as Hermione cleared the gate she turned, watched the fuzzy outlines of her friends drawing near, another few steps they’d be outside Hogwarts’ rounds as well, able to Apparate to safety. A terrible price they had paid this night, but they had succeeded, and they would win, and with bitter triumph she prepared to turn into the squeezing darkness, her friends only a step behind.

Then they were there, too, and everything seemed to slow down, each moment distinct and clear and seared into her mind forever. Harry first, with his hand pressed to his temple and Ron’s hand pushing him

from behind. Then Ron, features fierce and proud, mouth open on a shout, and then a flash of green that haloed his head, and his face went slack, eyes unseeing and he fell hard against Harry, who caught him instinctively, confused. Unthinkable, impossible, but the enemy was still closing, hexes still flying, and she was twisting into the constricting dark, to safety and a world that would never, ever be the same again.

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A/N: Do you absolutely hate me now? I feel compelled to say that I don't hate either character (though I did grow weary of Hagrid after a while and didn't care about his fate one way or the other) or the Weasley family (though they are taking a beating in this story). I just always felt that the story would be more powerful with the death of one of the primary three, and with Harry being Harry, and Hermione being the only female, Ron to me was the logical choice. He never seemed (at least to me) to have as defined a purpose.

Please let me know what you think about this turn of events...feedback!



## Chapter 20: Revelations

Snape was growing concerned. Time was running out, there were only five minutes remaining to add the unicorn blood and still no Hermione. But he had heard their return, noisy with thuds and distraught voices followed by more shouts, scuffles, bangs. Clearly something had not gone according to plan, and he found his own dread rising as time passed without Hermione's appearance. Muffled by the floorboards above there were heavy rapid footfalls and indistinct anguished words; in the basement there was only the soft bubbling of the cauldron, the muted rustle of cloth as he stirred, and the quickly disturbing direction his thoughts were taking.

The whole mission was foolishness, sending teenagers into the Forbidden Forest at night to track down Horcruxes and plead with unicorns. He still experienced a chill, the fine hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, when he thought of the evil, the pure black magic the Dark Lord had harnessed, and to what end. As a younger man he would have professed a belief that there was no price he would have been unwilling to pay for the type of power his master wielded. He knew differently now, though this knowledge had come at its own great price, great sacrifice.

Dangerous to send children after such a vile object. Who knew what protections the Dark Lord had erected? Snape had done the best he could to prepare and advise Hermione with what little time he had to think everything through, and he wondered if it had been enough. The sounds above suggested not.

What if she had been injured, or worse? What would happen to him then? He clung to that line of thought, his own future, his own fate, refusing to acknowledge or examine the blossoming kernel of worry for her safety except as it applied to his own situation. He refused to contemplate that he might be worried about her for any other reason save a self-serving one.

Another minute, then two, and he was staring at the steps leading down to the lab, barely thinking, barely breathing. Then steps in the hallway above, approaching the door, stopping in front of it, and as the knob squeaked and the door creaked open there were no alarms, no tripping of the wards. So she was safe, then, or at least mobile, and soon he would have his answers. She was upset, most likely, emotional and embarrassed by her failure, and he was surprised to feel a subtle sick sinking in his belly. He had assumed she would not succeed, so why the sensation that a tiny flame of hope had been snuffed out?

There was mud splattered on her trainers, up the legs of her pants and painted in drips and splotches on her cloak. As her torso descended into view he observed the bits of forest that clung to her, arms and shoulders dotted with soil and foliage, leaves and twigs tangled in her wild, disheveled hair. Then her face, reddened and streaked with tears, and he quashed the grinding twist in his chest and waited impassively for her to speak, to admit how she had failed, that she had gotten her (his?) hopes up only to watch them plummet back to Earth. She didn't say a word as she moved toward the table, toward the cauldron, and began to fumble with something in her pocket.

He watched closely, eyes narrowed with suspicion and disbelief, as she pulled a cloth bundle from inside her robes, carefully unwrapped it and examined two vials containing a silvery substance. She set one of the containers aside before gently thumbing the cork from the other. Impossible, that she had done this where so many had tried and failed, that this mere slip of a woman had accomplished this feat, and he was on his feet beside her without willing it so. She never so much as glanced at him, staring instead at her wand, watching the tip, waiting for the signal, then adding the single drop of unicorn blood at the perfect

moment. No more stirring or dicing, measuring or grinding required. It needed only twenty-four hours more to simmer, and Malum Defaeco was finished.

The potion glowed the instant the blood touched the surface, shimmered, then slowly morphed into a silvery-blue, slightly viscous looking fluid. It appeared rather like a whole cauldron full of unicorn blood, she thought dully, only the surface was more reflective, shinier somehow, like a mirror that revealed nothing but its own shifting colors. It was beautiful, and everything she had hoped for, planned for, and right at this moment she did not care.

Ron, dead. The thought lay foreign and heavy in her mind, unreal, untrue, impossible. Ron, the faithful friend, the one who only rarely got a chance at center stage, second fiddle to older brothers and famous friends. He wanted so much to prove himself, she knew, distinguish himself, and now he would never get the chance, and the utter unfairness of it flooded her, drowning her, and the anger and cresting sorrow filled her eyes with hot unrelenting tears.

Ron. Dead.

He filled her thoughts, his face, his laugh, his mannerisms. The way he would whine about school work or skive off lessons; the engrossed, excited expression that graced his features when he talked about Quidditch or flying; the lost painful grimace when he struggled to master things that didn't come easily to him. She was too hard on him, condescending and superior; had she ever apologized for all the times she bossed or scolded? As if she was better, somehow, because school came easily. There were other qualities that mattered far more. She wasn't sure she had fully appreciated his. Until now. Until too late.

So engrossed was she with her thoughts and memories that she failed to respond when Snape spoke to her once, twice. She heard something, vague and far away, but what did it matter now? What did any of it matter?

Snape's brow was creased in a frown as he watched her; he was tempted to snap his fingers in front of her face to see if that would elicit some reaction. Why did she say nothing, do nothing, fail to answer in response to his query? He could not remember seeing her look so stricken, so vacant, and he wondered if she had been addled in some way, spell damaged. But then how would she have known to come to the lab and finish Malum Defaeco?

And now she was turning, placing the other vial in a receptacle on the ingredients' shelf, walking back toward the stairs, never having spoken or even acknowledged his presence. What game was she playing, did she actually believe he would allow her to dismiss him in such a fashion? Incensed, he strode after her, grabbed her firmly by the shoulders and turned her back to face him. Her slack face and stormy eyes served only to confuse and irritate him further.

"You will do me the courtesy of answering when I speak to you, Miss Granger. I may not be your professor anymore, but I do not take kindly to rudeness. Now, what happened this evening?" Her eyes seemed to focus on him finally, losing some of their glassy haze, sparking with darkness and pain.

"What happened?" she repeated, and she could see it again in her mind's eye, flashing bloody knife and Ron's face gone empty and still. "We got them both. The potion's complete and the Horcrux is upstairs. I have to go now."

But his hands tightened on her shoulders when she tried to turn. Temper flaring, he struggled to control the urge to shake her, force her to divulge the information he sought with raised voice and cold intimidation. Was he her pet now, worth only pitiful scraps of information and barely a word of acknowledgement? He thought he was resigned to his current position of useless, untrustworthy ex-spy, but it galled him anew to be ignored in this fashion. What was wrong with her?

“How did you obtain the blood from the unicorn?” he managed through gritted teeth.

“I asked. I have to go now.” Her voice was devoid of feeling, of life. She felt as if she’d left her life at Hogwarts with Ron. How can you remove an important piece of your existence and then go on?

“Out of the question,” he snarled shortly, and abruptly steered her unprotesting figure onto the nearest stool. Wand out, he performed a quick diagnostic scan, scowled when it detected no injuries, no damage.

“Are you injured? What defenses of the Dark Lord did you encounter?”

“What? No, I’m fine. Barely a scratch.” And she laughed then, mirthless and with a maniacal tinge. She was fine, and yet so not fine that there was an element of perverse humor in it. “I have to go.”

“Not until I am satisfied you have suffered no ill effects from your activities this evening. You are not behaving normally, Miss Granger, and I am concerned you may be suffering some subtle aftereffect of Dark magic.” And he was concerned, a growing tightness in his chest as her responses continually failed to meet his satisfaction, worry replacing the anger. It did not occur to him that it was out of character for him to be so invested in the welfare of another. Especially someone so young, and female, and Gryffindor.

Another, more complicated sensing spell as she sat placid under his scrutiny, and he used his own innate magical ability to try to detect any lingering trace of the Dark Arts. He knew the feel, the taste of such power, his own more than a little tainted by long association with the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord for so many years. There, a faint shadow, like sour smoke that clung to her own energy, but such a miniscule trace was of no consequence and could not be causing her current condition. Whatever that was. The creases around his mouth deepened; if she was not injured physically, then the cause of her odd behavior must be psychic, and he knew he was woefully out of his depth when it came to healing, or even recognizing, such wounds.

“Ron needs me.” She didn’t remember planning to speak, but the sudden thought of his body, lying cold and unattended, propelled her to do so. So cold and alone.

“I am sure Potter can attend to Mr. Weasley.” This explained it, then, one of her irksome friends had been hurt, and probably rather severely to prompt such a strong reaction.

“No, Harry went with the others to take care of Hagrid.” Take care of Hagrid, as if he could be fixed up, patched up, made well. Unlikely. Another body on the ground, cold and alone. Another friend beyond the veil. Had it hurt when the spell struck home? Had Ron suffered as Hagrid surely had?

“Mr. Weasley and Hagrid were both injured, then? Do you require supplies from our stores? Blood Replenishment or Coagulation Concoction, perhaps?” What had she seen, to be so shell-shocked? Her

inability to express herself rather reminded him of when Arthur Weasley...and then it clicked, and something hard and icy settled into the pit of his stomach.

“Miss Granger, how badly are they injured?” But her eyes had lost focus again, her mind turned inward on her own jumbled thoughts, and Severus Snape was not as patient a man as one might suppose, given his years of deception and subterfuge. Perhaps it was his distaste for being cut off from the fount of information, a fact that still burned after all these weeks. Or perhaps it had something to do with the shaken young woman on the stool in front of him, vulnerable and hurting, and his secure belief that she would not retaliate if he took the liberty of getting the answers he felt he needed. His wand was pointed again, and he peered intently into her distant gaze. *”Legilimens.”*

She made no attempt to stop him; even had she possessed the skill, she doubted she would have used it now. She wanted him to know, and was grateful that he had taken matters into his own hands. This way he could see the facts without her needing to speak them aloud. If she said it, verbalized the words – ‘Ron is dead’ – then they could never be taken back. They would be out there forever, irretrievable and undeniably real. She did not want to say the words; easier by far to watch the pictures in her head flicker past, pretend they were just a horrible, horrible dream.

When he finished he stood back, sifted through the memories. Not a full, coherent story of events, of course. Legilimancy did not work that way, it was more scenes and ideas than a linear progression. But it was all still very fresh in her thoughts, raw and unshielded, and he had seen more than enough to comprehend the reason for her current atypical behavior.

He again found himself battling irritation. This was war; surely she knew the logical consequences of the dangerous path they had all chosen, that death would surely come to claim some of their numbers, and respected no one. Childish to be so overwhelmed by the harsh reality of their situation, to be rendered close to speechless, useless, how would she function in the hard times still to come?

But then it occurred to him that she was still very young, and he had not handled his own first intimate exposure to violent death particularly well. He remembered being so confident, certain that the casual violence of his youth had rendered him immune to true horror, torture and murder in the flesh. He was a brand new Death Eater then, brash and eager to demonstrate his loyalty and competence, desperate to impress and belong. He could still hear the derisive laughter, taste the sweet-sour tang of vomit and bile, smell the stench of iron and raw meat and waste, the sight of a human body ripped open. Nothing had prepared him for it, or the humiliation that he had felt at his own weakness. She had just witnessed two friends, one very close, executed before her eyes – would he have handled it any better at eighteen? Had he cared about anyone enough to be so shaken?

“I am sorry for your loss, Miss Granger,” he said softly. And he was, sorry that she was hurting, that she looked so lost. Why should her sorrow affect him?

Her eyes flashed again, a spark of life ignited and her chin quivered as she gathered herself. “Don’t you dare pretend for a second you care about what happened to Ron. You always hated him, and Harry, too. You’re probably glad he’s...” She choked on the word, but embraced the righteous anger. Nice to feel something other than numb, or that soul-sapping anguish she could feel lurking, waiting to explode.

“I did not hate Mr. Weasley,” he responded automatically. Which was certainly true; he barely thought

about the boy, and when he did it was usually as an annoying adjunct to The Boy Who Lived. The youngest Weasley male was an afterthought, not smart enough to earn his attention, dull enough to earn his continual ire, or boisterous enough to supplant the twins.

“You could have fooled me. Hell, you fooled us all! Did it make you feel good, belittling students, scaring them into incoherence? You hated anyone fortunate enough to escape being placed in Slytherin!”

“Just as you and your friends automatically distrusted anyone so honored. Too good to even imagine being anything other than an insufferable Gryffindor, the most arrogant and boastful of the Houses,” he sneered in retaliation, even as he pondered how inane this exchange was, and how quickly he had allowed her temper to draw him in.

“At least we...how can you even...” she spluttered, unable to think or retaliate. Ron was dead, and he resorted to insulting their House?

“Miss Granger...Hermione, stop. You are not mad at me. You are in shock over the loss of your friend.”

As soon as he said the words her anger evaporated and the yawning chasm of grief loomed, bottomless and dark. Ron, dead. “I have to go to him.”

He would not stop her, now that he knew. What questions remained unanswered by his foray into her mind would wait. “If you wish. There is nothing you can do for him now. What do you need?” He surprised himself with the softly spoken inquiry, the emphasis on the word ‘you’. He didn’t have time to berate himself before she answered.

Teetering on the edge as she was, his gentle voice broke her in a way no shouts or harsh words ever could. “I need Ron to not be...he can’t be...he’s d-dead...”

It hung there in the air, dead, dirty, poisonous, but also real and true and the barrier she had erected to enable her to function long enough to talk briefly with McGonagall and Lupin, to complete the potion, was demolished, and she was falling into the abyss, the fathomless crevasse swallowing her whole. It consumed her, crushed her, welling up from the depths of her soul and pressing down on her from all angles. Dead, Ron, dead, and the tears were a scalding torrent, burning her eyes and cheeks even as she screwed her eyes closed tight, trying to shut out the world, trying to stay ahead of the grief, but she had given it voice and could no longer repress her reactions.

She was blind with the enormity of her emotions, vision swimming in hot fluid and shifting colors, her limbs leaden with the weight of her despair. She would have left, walked away if she could, but she could see nothing but the suffocating red pain. Her arms were wrapped around her middle as if she could contain the misery within, embrace and soothe it somehow, but it poured up and out in gasping sobs and searing tears.

Snape could only watch as she unraveled before his eyes, transforming from the intelligent, confident young woman he had come to know (and even respect?) over the course of these long weeks into an empty weeping shell, and the twisting ache in his chest thrummed, painful and strong. Something inside him had awakened over the months of flight and isolation, then rescue and solace. His only contact with the rest of the wizarding world had been this teenager, this woman who had somehow wormed her way under his

skin, penetrated some chink in his metaphysical armor he had never even known existed. It galled him, infuriated him; he felt weak, flawed, but however much he reviled his own faulty self, it did not change the fact that he hurt when she did, her pain triggering a reaction he would rather not experience but was powerless to halt. He found himself watching her as she cried, torn between an awkward desire to comfort her (his own ineptitude in such matters notwithstanding) and a competing urge to withdraw from her, cover his confusion with his usual cool, aloof mask. He wanted to do the latter, but he was already moving, albeit with a stiffness and uncertainty that was alien to his normal fluid movements, toward her to offer what sympathy he could. He wished he could pretend it was only to alleviate his own roiling gut that he did this, that he was merely doing the best he could to force a hysterical woman to get ahold of herself so that the drama would subside. But there were other drives at work, her welfare superseding his own, her feelings more important. She needed someone to comfort her, and he would do his best to be that person for her here and now.

So once again he found himself drawing her into his arms, holding her as she shook and wept. Little by little he relaxed, allowing his arms to cradle rather than just touch, to enfold and protect. He wanted to protect her, take away the shattering grief he knew engulfed her, but he couldn't, and that sat like acid in his stomach. He pushed that away, though, pushed it all deep inside where he hid those parts of his life he hadn't the time or inclination (or courage?) to deal with, and focused on her, the fine slender line of her shoulder blades, the smell of her hair mixed with forest as she pushed her face into his chest, the sound of her voice hoarse and rough as she cried and murmured.

It seemed like an eternity, or perhaps only a moment, and then she was pulling away, wiping her face on the sleeve of her robes and sucking in air with great, shuddering breaths. She felt odd, light, not quite real. There was no embarrassment in her, though, as she looked up at Snape's severe features, noted the damp patches on his shirt where she had cried. Why wasn't she the least bit ashamed at having emoted all over her former Potions professor, and for the second time? But she wasn't; in fact, she had felt safe when he touched her, held her. Not better, exactly, the loss of Ron still too fresh, but there was something when he touched her, something solid and warm, soothing if only for a moment.

"I'm sorry for what I said, sir..."

"Your apology is unnecessary. You are not yourself."

"I still need to go to him," she said, voice thick and tired.

"Molly is here now," he replied quietly. He was certain he had heard her voice, muffled but penetrating.

"He still needs me." She knew it was illogical, but it was how she felt, and she needed to honor that right now.

He tilted his head in acquiescence. "The potion will finish simmering tomorrow night. I will tend to it. We can discuss matters at your convenience."

She nodded, mind already upstairs with Mrs. Weasley, with Ron. Ron's body. "Of course," she muttered absently, her legs shaky beneath her. She moved towards the stairs, and he watched her go, hollow inside. She would return to the world, to friends and comrades who would help assuage her sorrow, share her grief, while he skulked below in the shadows of duplicity and mistrust. He felt foolish, abandoned, and

weak again, disgusted by his own regression into emotional vulnerability. She needed to be with them. He wanted her to need to be with him.

But when she turned before ascending, smiled weakly and whispered, "Thank you," he failed to suppress the bubble of pleasure, his dark eyes burning as they followed her path up the steps and away from him. For now.

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There were far more prone figures than those left standing in Voldemort's circle as the Dark Lord finished venting his rage. Three of the bodies lay very still, unconscious or worse; the others twitched and groaned, shuddered as they tried to rise to their knees and kiss the hem of their master's robes, cringed as he swept away from the grasping fingers. His black robes flared dramatically as he moved from the circle to his throne, seating himself with a cold imperious manner that masked his continued boiling fury.

One by one, the chastised Death Eaters slowly pulled themselves to their feet. All except the three who could not rise, and one who remained kneeling by choice, forehead pressed to the cold stone floor. His whole body shook violently, his choked breathing echoing off the walls.

"You have something to say?" Voldemort hissed as he surveyed his prostrate servant.

"My Lord...I mean no disrespect..."

"I should think not," rasped Bellatrix, her voice rougher than normal, inflamed from her screaming.

"Silence," Voldemort commanded sharply, and she flinched. "Let him speak."

"My Lord...you promised..."

"I myself fail to understand how this happened. You were under instructions to bring Potter to me alive. Flinging fatal curses in his direction would seem a direct violation of those orders." His sibilant voice was light but dangerous, suggesting impending doom.

One of the other Death Eaters in the circle dropped to one knee, head bowed. "My Lord, I instructed them to use only as much force as necessary to capture the boy."

"They were fighting back, and we were aiming at the girl..."

"You were stupid and careless..."

"*Crucio*," the Dark Lord barked casually, and the Death Eater who had defended his use of the Killing Curse shrieked and fell to the floor. "Be most grateful your mistake did not strike Potter, or you would have followed him to the afterlife."

"My Lord," cried the hunched, miserable man, brow still touching the ground. "My brother..."

“It is done. There is nothing I can do. I have mastered death only for myself.”

“He was young, he could have been made to see reason, he didn’t need to die…”

“He was with Harry Potter. There was always a risk. It cannot be changed.”

He knew that, of course, the kneeling, shaking man, knew there was nothing that could be done, but he couldn’t stop seeing it, reliving it. The streak of green erupting from a wand only a few feet away, the bolt of light as it struck Ron in the back, his brother’s body as it went rigid, then fell forward, limp and boneless, out the gate and into Harry’s arms.

It was crowding his brain, making it difficult to think, to breathe, and he ripped the formless mask from his face, exposing himself to the circle. It didn’t matter, really, his identity was no real secret, and their condescending sneers as they looked at his tear-streaked face meant nothing to him. He knelt upright now, beyond pride, beyond fear of reprisal, overwhelmed with his sorrow, facing his master with his grief naked and exposed. “I could have brought him to you, my Lord. He was young…”

“Enough. He befriended Harry Potter, fought with him against me. You should have brought him to me sooner, if you could. I will hear no more of this.” His eyes, cold slits of malice, watched dispassionately as his servant’s shoulders heaved, his shiny, red face contorted. Weak, he was, so weak as to be near useless despite the information he provided. He would have to be dispatched soon. No matter; there were always others willing to serve the Dark Lord.

Another Death Eater spoke, relating his news, and then the meeting ended, Voldemort sweeping imperiously from the room, Nagini slithering at his heels. She paused to flick her tongue at the broken man who knelt still, cried still, mourned in unnoticed anguish long after the rest of his comrades had glared down contemptuously at him and departed. Alone on the cold stone floor, contemplating his life, his choices, and his future, Percy Weasley wept for the younger brother he had helped to kill.

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It had been a horrible day, the worst Hermione could ever remember. She had sat with Molly as they kept watch over Ron’s body, tried so hard to be a strength and a comfort when inside she had utterly collapsed. He was so still, pale and unmoving, unable to care for the shattered lives his death had touched. Unblemished and whole, Hermione almost could have pretended he was merely asleep, but she had touched his cool lifeless flesh, gently kissed the mouth from which no breath moved, and whatever essence Ron had possessed was absent. She could not feel his presence when she looked at his immobile form. He was well and truly gone, and that reality had settled in with cold, hard finality.

Later Harry had returned with the others, and she went to him, and they held each other for a long time, hugging and crying and unable to speak. But maybe speech wasn’t all that important right now. They both know what they had lost.

He wouldn’t discuss his trip back to Hogwarts either, except to say that they had moved Hagrid’s body to a safe place. It was only after Harry had gone to see Ron, and Hermione had gone to get some tea that she overheard Lupin talking in a sad, serious way to Shackbolt. She didn’t want to listen and yet she



couldn't move away, frozen outside the kitchen door, horror piling on top of horror. Massive pool of blood. Poisoned knife, so that even a half-giant could not survive the wounds. So many wounds, dozens of them. Another friend gone, another open sore inside her chest.

It was a gritty, surreal day. Too tired for sleep, the hours passed in agonizing chunks of despair and hazy gaps of emptiness. Order members came and went, hands on her shoulders, warm arms embracing her that couldn't penetrate the cold, dead ache inside. Luna and Dean and Neville paid their respects, their own tears watering her shoulders as hers watered theirs. Others stopped by with heartfelt but meaningless words. Words could not heal this. Such loss never heals completely, only becomes easier to bear over time, the pang less sharp.

She drifted off finally in a chair in 'their' room, the place they had schemed and planned. Books still open, parchment scattered. She felt him in here much more than in that awful room where his too still body lay. Ron was never that still.

She woke suddenly, the room dark, thin slices of moonlight creeping past the edges of the drawn shades. She rubbed her eyes, which still felt heavy and prickly, and checked the time. It was just past midnight. The potion was complete.

It seemed like a dream; one moment she was waking, the next she was in the basement, watching as Snape finished carefully measuring out the last dose. Four slender beakers filled with silver-blue liquid gleamed at her from the countertop.

"I did not expect to see you this evening." Another bit of time gone missing. She hadn't noticed him move to stand in front of her, dark eyes hooded and cautious.

"I thought I'd check on the potion." Her voice sounded funny to her own ears – how long since she'd last spoken?

"I have monitored it throughout the day. It matches the description in the text precisely. I believe congratulations are in order, Miss Granger, you have successfully brewed Malum Defaeco."

"Thank you, sir," she replied automatically.

"Have you decided when you will proceed with your plan to destroy the Horcruxes?" He was encouraged by her responses, however rote and dull they seemed.

"We haven't discussed it. I want to destroy the objects first. I'm worried about what will happen when its time to try it on Harry." She sounded more animated now, her concern for her friend bleeding through the haze around her senses. It made her nervous, giving an ancient potion to her friend to purge Voldemort's evil from his system. The book hadn't been specific on how that would work. Would it hurt? Could it kill him? It seemed unlikely, but since no one alive had ever seen it used there was some room for concern.

Snape had been pondering this as well. It was rare for a potion to be intended for use on both persons and objects. While he despised Potter, he did not truly wish him dead. Tortured, maybe; humiliated, that would bring him some measure of pleasure. But not dead. Not only would the boy's death be a severe, probably crippling blow to the Order, Snape had no desire to see Hermione mourn the death of another

close friend.

There was another option, one he hadn't brought up for discussion. He was not inclined to cogitate possibilities with anyone else, and he was wary of what her reaction might be. She could try to refuse him, argue that it was better to have a dose as backup. It was a good argument. He didn't care.

It had been fermenting in his mind for some time now, this idea, that IF she succeeded (and he had to admit that the very development of this plan indicated he had been more hopeful of her success than he was comfortable acknowledging) there might be a chance. A chance for something he had never dreamed possible. If only...

"I have considered this as well. While I am confident the potion was made specifically as explained here, we have no way of knowing if this was the perfected version or some variation, or even perhaps a copy from another text of unknown origin."

"Do you think we'll know it's safe for Harry by the way it interacts with the inanimate Horcruxes?" She didn't think she could take more danger or heartbreak right now.

"Possibly, but likely not enough to be one hundred percent certain. For that, we would need to test it on another person infested with evil."

His answer was so unexpected it momentarily stunned her back into full contact with reality, the distractions of death and sorrow pushed back for a bit. "But...we don't know anyone like that. Vol...You-Know-Who only made one human Horcrux, and that was an accident. Who would we test it on?"

Partly disappointed she hadn't seen the answer immediately, partly relieved there would be no argument, he looked at her fully, allowed the surge of still uncertain feelings to swell and fade. A chance worth taking, and if it helped her by helping Potter, so much the better. A ghost of a smile, a real one, played on his lips before he set himself mentally for the unknown.

"We will test it on me," he responded quietly, and before she could speak or stir he opened a vial of the silvery-blue potion, raised it to his mouth, and swallowed it down in a single gulp.

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A/N: This was harder for me to write - I felt oddly let down after the last chapter. Let me know how you think it's going.

The next chapter is in the writing phase, but I have finals this week, and while I'm generally nonchalant about my school work, I think I should pay attention for this part. :P

## Chapter 21: The Return of Albus Dumbledore

Harry was sitting with McGonagall in the room the Order used for meetings, a fire crackling cheerily in the hearth. Neither spoke as they contemplated the dancing flames. Harry was clutching a glass of firewhiskey like a life line, sipping only occasionally, lost in the depths of his own thoughts, which circled endlessly around Ron, Hagrid, Voldemort, and the Horcruxes. Himself as a Horcrux, a channel for depravity, and a part of him had embraced the Dark, had not fought back in the forest when Voldemort had threatened his friends through him. He shivered despite the warmth from the fire, lifting the glass to his lips, feeling the heat of the alcohol burn a path from his mouth to his stomach. Blood on his hands. McGonagall, exhausted with grief and concern, kept a watchful eye on the young man as he sat and brooded, sipping her own glass of blood red wine, embracing the faint warming trail in her own chest that crept out to her limbs. Pity she couldn't drink away the previous day.

Both turned bleary eyes toward the doorway at the violent explosion of sound from somewhere in the house, shouts and a distinct thud followed by a flurry of hard, fast footfalls. Sounds rising from below, not above, where mourners still gathered with the dead, so neither were surprised when it was Hermione who burst into the room. What did surprise them was the wild, petrified look on her face. Adrenaline immediately flooded weary legs and brains, Harry and McGonagall both on their feet in an instant, the distinct crash of breaking glass a testament to the speed with which they reacted, the level of their concern.

“What has happened, Miss Granger?” McGonagall asked sharply, unnerved by the sheer desperation and terror on her former student's eyes. She had never known Hermione to be anything other than mildly flustered (her reaction to her third year DADA exam notwithstanding). McGonagall felt dread choke her throat – how much more could they all stand?

“Please, you've got to come with me! I don't know what's wrong, I think he's dying...”

Harry's heart lurched painfully. “Who's hurt, Hermione? What happened?”

“You've got to come, quickly!” she reiterated, unadulterated panic now evident in her voice. Without another word she turned and ran from the room. Harry and McGonagall exchanged glances before following, both scared of what horror might await, both uncertain of their ability to cope.

First McGonagall, then Harry hurried after Hermione, their anxiety mounting as they crossed the threshold of the doorway to the stairs descending to the basement. What was down in the basement that could have Hermione so terrified? She had spoken of another, injured, dying, but who?

As fearful as they were of what they might find at the bottom of the basement stairs, neither was prepared for the scene that awaited them. Severus Snape, unconscious and seizing on the floor, lank blank hair spilled like ink on the grey stone, his normally sallow complexion deathly pale; Hermione hovered over him, knelt by his side, one hand on his shoulder, the other shaking and clamped over her own mouth; and on the work table, encased in glass, a small black *thing* that flailed and thrashed, not liquid or solid but somehow both, and it writhed and flung itself against its transparent prison as if it was sentient, alive.

Two wands were out and pointed, fixed on the unresisting target on the floor. McGonagall was shocked but regaining her calm quickly, her agile mind dissecting permutations and possibilities, analyzing what

she saw, what she knew, and what she thought she knew.

Harry was beyond thought. The sight of him, the traitor, helpless before him, ignited something hot and violent in his head, and the hatred welled up pure and strong. He had never felt anything so strong, so sudden, even when face to face with Voldemort. With that there was always fear mixed in, fear of death and pain and failure. But now, he felt nothing but raw, unadulterated hatred for this man who had betrayed his parents to Voldemort, this teacher who had tormented him throughout school, this turncoat Harry himself had watched murdering Dumbledore.. He saw Snape's face on the tower that night, the disgust etched on those greasy, sniveling features, and the Headmaster's broken body on the ground. Who knew how many more deaths were piled on this vermin's head? Harry already laid the corpse of Arthur Weasley at Snape's feet – had he been one of the cowards who had tortured Hagrid? Had it been his wand that spewed green death, taken Ron away from them?

“How did he get in here?” Harry snarled, not taking his eyes off the twitching body of his former professor.

“Please, I'll explain everything, but he's having some sort of reaction and I don't know what to do.” Her voice was tremulous and pleading, her own gaze flickering back and forth between Harry and McGonagall then back to Snape. Snape, body wracked with spasms, his brow like fire under her fingertips, like the potion was burning him alive from the inside. Again she touched his flushed cheek, and he groaned feebly but remained blissfully unaware of the drama playing out around him, the drama with him at center stage.

“What is he having a reaction to, Miss Granger?” Clearly the girl had no fear of him, and her sharp eyes noted Snape's outer robes draped casually over a stool, that the parchment on the small desk in the corner was covered with his cramped, spiky scrawl. She was suspicious, furious, but also intensely curious; there was definitely more going on here than met the eye, and this was one secret about which she was determined to know the truth.

“He tested the potion we were working on. I was worried about how it would affect Harry...”

“You've been working with him?” Harry yelled, voice shrill, hand gripping his wand so tightly his whole fist shook.

“Harry, please, I can explain everything, but he may be dying...”

“Good!” he roared. His whole body was trembling now, a fine tremor that rippled across his muscles. What was she saying, what was he hearing, what the FUCK was going on?

“Mr. Potter...”

“No! I won't listen to it, not again! I won't listen to how I don't understand, or how Dumbledore trusted him, or how he's not an evil, traitorous bastard! I watched him kill Dumbledore. I saw it with my own eyes!”

Harry's face was flushed red, eyes maniacal, and he could feel the cold hatred pulsing through his veins, thick and heavy and powerful, his heart hammering against his ribs, unable to think of anything but

revenge. He felt the dark place inside him swell, fueling his drive, his power, but this time it was untainted by the Horcrux; he could sense no trace of Voldemort, no inkling that the vicious desire to unleash his rage on the prone body of Snape was coming from anywhere but inside his own head, his own heart.

Hermione was frightened by the emotions contorting Harry's face, by the violent energy she could practically feel rolling over her in waves. "Harry, please," she begged, tears prickling behind her eyes. This was what she had feared, why she'd never been tempted to reveal what she had done to either Harry or Ron. Their mistrust and revulsion of Snape was so strong, so blind she knew they would not really hear her out, trust her instincts and judgment and proof over their own.

And the pure venom in his face, the way it hardened and contorted at her feeble words, told her that her fears had been realized. There was no reason in him now, nothing but self-righteous rage and surety, fed by loss and pain. Voldemort was almost faceless, a distant specter of evil, and it was hard to maintain hatred for a target so removed. But Snape was here, now, it could all be piled on his greasy, worthless head, and Harry was glad to do it, thrilled with the opportunity to strike at a man he loathed with impunity.

Hermione had been speaking but he had not heard the words, not really, only the tearful whine as she proffered some vile lie on the traitor's behalf, some weak reason for justice to be delayed. The betrayal hurt, badly, a cold, sharp shard piercing his soul, that this so-called friend would consort with Dumbledore's murderer, try to tempt him from doing what needed to be done. The darkness inside was hot now, burning his blood, filling him with power and magic, stealing pity, corrupting reason.

"Stand aside, Hermione," he ordered, words sharp and jagged like a blade.

"Mr. Potter, have you been listening? We need to discuss this, there are questions we need answered..."

"I know the answers. Step away from him."

"Harry, will you listen..."

"He deserves this. He deserves to die."

The two women were shocked momentarily speechless by his words, his intentions, the icy, contemptuous poison in his voice. "You...you can't, Harry, you don't know, you don't understand..."

"Mr. Potter, we are neither judges nor executioners," McGonagall interrupted, her own voice hard, brooking no opposition. She could not recall seeing someone so determined, and she had to get through to him. "We will turn him over to the Aurors if necessary, but no one will summarily pass judgment here."

So they were all against him, and he alone had the fortitude to do what needed to be done. A thin, weak voice in his head was starting to clamor now, but it was overwhelmed by the surging, searing void. His tremor was gone now, his wand steady, and pointed directly at the face of Severus Snape.

"Get out of the way. I don't want to hurt you," he warned, and he entered a still, calm place in his mind, the energy like white noise, and he was focused and sure.

“Harry!”

“I won’t let him get away again. He won’t hurt us again, betray us again.”

“Put that wand down this instant, Mr. Potter...”

But he didn’t hear her, so focused was he on the hot flush of power, the rightness of it, so alive, and his vision narrowed to the man on the floor. He was aware in a distant, removed way that Hermione was still near Snape, gesturing and bobbing in and out of his line of fire, but he had warned her, and nothing was more important than ending this threat here and now....

“*Incarcerous!*” McGonagall shouted, and Harry yelped, surprised and angry, his wand clattering to the floor. Hermione was sheet white, eyes wide and perfectly still, the rapid rise and fall of her sides as she sucked in air the only visible sign of life. Harry struggled futilely, infuriated, but succeeded only in toppling to the floor, his left shoulder bearing the brunt of the fall.

McGonagall stood over him, terrible in her anger, and Harry suddenly felt as if he were eleven again, looking up at the strong, stern face of his Head of House after the incident with the troll, her wrath about to rain down.

“I have never been more ashamed of a Gryffindor in my life,” she proclaimed, glaring down at the bound and silent young man. “Threatening a helpless man, putting another’s life in danger, the life of your friend. Think, Mr. Potter! You would cast Avada with Hermione so close? And on an unconscious, possibly innocent man?” She, unlike Harry, had actually heard Hermione’s rushed, somewhat hysterical, and incomplete explanation, and the implications left her staggering. She did not believe it, could not believe it, and yet if it were true it would validate the faith she had placed in Dumbledore, and in Snape by proxy, for all those years.

“Innocent? Innocent!” Harry raged, twisting against his magical bonds.

“Are you so arrogant as to dismiss the notion out of hand? So dismissive of Dumbledore’s opinion, of the trust he placed in Professor Snape? We must be certain of our facts, Mr. Potter, lest the blood of the innocent be on our hands!”

These words poured through him like ice water, so cold it seared. Too much innocent blood already spilt, crimson on his hands. He wanted no more part of death or destruction, war or pain, and yet he did! This was Snape, and he deserved pain, deserved torment, deserved to die!

Still, he was calmer, and deeply ashamed of his loss of control, of placing Hermione at risk. He pressed his hot, red face to the cool cement of the floor, felt the darkness inside recede just a little. Enough to think.

As if she could sense the change in him, McGonagall released his bonds, and he scrambled to his feet, grabbing up his wand and rubbing his sore shoulder. Hermione wouldn’t meet his eyes, and she hovered still over Snape, touching him gently, whispering too low for him to hear. It stabbed him in the gut, that she would help Snape, speak for him, when she *knew* what he had done, knew he had murdered Dumbledore...

And then the answer struck like lightning, and he was running, the shouts from behind him more no important than the wind, and though he was conscious of another close on his heels it didn't matter, nothing mattered save the truth he sought. He pounded out the front door, ignoring the reverberation of wood on wood as it rebounded and slammed into the wall. There was only one thing on his mind, one possibility to unravel this mystery. Hogwarts. Dumbledore.

He heard the sharp, shrill voice of his former Transfiguration teacher behind him, but he was determined in his recklessness, focused on this single idea, and he had Apparated almost before he finished the thought, fighting off an extreme surge of nausea as he stumbled now towards the gate of the school, patting his arms and torso as he went to make sure he hadn't left part of himself behind. It didn't surprise him in the slightest when he heard a crack behind him, McGonagall's breathless shout following him over the threshold, across the lawn, up the front steps and into the Entrance Hall. His footsteps seemed to echo too loudly in the unnatural stillness, the normal sounds of students and teachers and life absent, only his own ragged breath and the strong, swift thump of his heart in his ears.

When Harry reached the stone gargoyle that led to the Headmaster's office he skidded to a halt, one hand pressed against a painful stitch in his side. He realized he hadn't thought this idea all the way through; he didn't know the password, and while there was always a chance he could guess whatever sweet Dumbledore had selected to bar the way, he hadn't the foggiest idea what type of password McGonagall would use.

So he waited, glaring furiously at the impassive sentinel while he watched for McGonagall. He expected her to arrive quickly, expected that she had tried to stay close on his heels, and his frustration mounted as she did not appear immediately around the corner. He had regained his wind by the time she did come into view; her robes were dark blue, not black, and her normally severe bun looser, a few strands having escaped, but otherwise she looked every bit the commanding, authoritative professor, and Harry shrunk a bit inside, feeling more like a wayward student than he cared to, and for the second time this evening.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Potter?" she queried coldly, and though they were almost the same height now, Harry received the forceful impression that she was looking down at him. He felt that familiar guilty, shameful surge he had experienced often as a student at this school, and knew his cheeks had reddened under her scrutiny.

"I came to ask Dumbledore's portrait about Snape," he muttered, half sullen, half defiant.

"I surmised as much. Have you taken leave of your senses? First you threaten an unarmed, defenseless man..."

"A murderer! Have you all gone mental? This is Snape we're talking about here, I saw him slaughter Dumbledore..."

"Interrupt me again, Mr. Potter, and I will bind and gag you until I believe you can behave like the reasonable adult you claim to be!" she thundered fiercely, and her brandished wand lent weight to the threat. He swallowed hard, a half dozen hasty retorts forming a hard, bitter knot in his throat along with his vaguely wounded pride.

“Now, as I was saying. First, you threatened an unarmed, defenseless man, refusing to even listen as your best friend tried to explain. You nearly jinx her in your blind, unthinking fury, then you run out into the night without telling anyone where you are going or what you are doing. You refuse to heed my request for you to stop and wait, instead placing yourself at risk. No protection, no thought. What if Hogwarts were being watched? What if I had failed to realize where you were going? Would you have stood here, shouting passwords until they captured you, took you to Voldemort, executed you?” Her tirade seemed to fizzle suddenly as she contemplated a reality with Harry gone, Voldemort victorious.

Harry was vaguely stunned, the enormity of his actions and reactions finally hitting him. He saw Hermione’s white face and wide eyes and felt ashamed, but also angry and confused. Snape was a traitor, everyone believed that, what had changed, what was different now? He was reeling from everything that he had heard and thought tonight, the darkness inside warring with his confusion and inherent goodness, and he became aware of a throbbing spot of pain in the center of his forehead that had nothing to do with his scar and everything to do with his inner turmoil.

“I...I need to know,” he said quietly, and suddenly things became clearer. How many of his trials and tribulations, disagreements with friends and self-doubt, had been driven by this very sentiment, the burning need to answer every questions, solve every riddle? Curiosity and a search for the truth had never seemed like a negative force in his life, but then he had never really stopped to count the cost.

McGonagall sighed deeply, feeling every one of her years quite keenly. While still angry with the young wizard, she also understood his desire for answers, and she ached knowing there were none to be had. “You will not find what you seek here, Mr. Potter.”

“What do you mean? I just need to talk to Dumbledore, his portrait. He’ll know, won’t he? He’ll know what happened the night he died, right?”

“Normally, yes, the portrait of a deceased witch or wizard retains the knowledge they possessed when they died. However, Dumbledore has yet to wake.”

Startled, Harry stammered, tripping over his words as he incorporated this surprising information. “But... I thought...how is that possible?”

She sighed again, removed her spectacles and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I wish I knew, Harry,” she said bluntly, her formality slipping as she allowed a tiny portion of her own burden to slip out. The de facto leader of the Order since Dumbledore’s demise, she often felt as if her own concerns and worries should be hers alone, not added to the loads that the others had to bear. Of all her personal worries, this was a small one, but it often weighed on her, Dumbledore’s continued slumber, his silence. She had visited him often even after the school closed, talking to his gently snoring picture, inviting his counsel, but to no avail. “While it is normal for magical portraits to take some time to wake for the first time, as far as I know it has never taken so long. No one I have consulted can tell me why.”

Harry’s face fell, and he felt deflated. As soon as the idea had struck he was certain it would provide what he needed, certain his belief in Snape’s treachery would be vindicated. He was reluctant to give up so easily.

“Can I at least try?” he asked, slipping easily into deferential, pleading student mode. He needed this,



needed it, and if playing on his former instructor's fondness for him as a student helped, he was not above using that. Turn about for her using her teacher role to intimidate.

Not that it was necessary, really. McGonagall had no problem allowing Harry to try and rouse Dumbledore. She herself had almost given up, visiting him less, trying to wake him more out of habit than any confidence she would be successful now, after all this time. Besides, it would do no harm to allow him to attempt it, and she knew him well enough to know he would not let the plan rest were he denied now.

So she nodded, turned to the gargoyle. "Haggis," she said with a smirk, noting Harry's reflexive grimace of distaste. Students never guessed foods they detested. The guard hopped aside, and the familiar moving, spiral staircase appeared. McGonagall gestured for Harry to lead the way, and then he was ascending the steps, standing outside the door, entering the office that felt so familiar and yet different, the cold, dark atmosphere striking a discordant note with his memories of this place. No Fawkes in his cage or on his perch, no flames crackling in the fireplace, no wizard with long, grey hair seated behind the desk, no twinkling blue eyes gazing at him from behind half-moon spectacles.

Instead, Dumbledore, or at least his likeness, sat in a picture frame on the wall, head tilted forward at a slight angle, chin in his chest, glasses resting on the very tip of his nose. His shoulders rose and fell slowly with the rhythm of his deep, even breathing, and as Harry watched he shifted subtly, breath expelled with a sharp snort, before he settled once again into his perpetual slumber.

"He's not woken, not once," said Dilys Derwent from her frame.

"Shameful, shirking his duty to the current Headmaster," a prim, stuffy looking wizard sniffed.

"Seeing as how Hogwarts is currently closed, I think he can be excused," McGonagall replied tartly.

Harry couldn't take his eyes off the sleeping form of Dumbledore. He'd seen the portrait before, of course, after that night, talking with McGonagall here in this office, discussing the arrangements for the funeral. But it was something of a shock to see his picture after all these months of seeing him only in memories and nightmares; he was too sharp, too real, more solid and lifelike even sleeping in a frame than in mental images that had begun to dim and blur.

He walked to stand directly in front of Dumbledore, ignoring the whispers and murmurs from the other frames. He was quiet for a long moment, barely breathing, somehow hoping that his mere presence would be enough, that Dumbledore would someone sense him and awaken, smiling and twinkling.

Instead, the old wizard snoozed on.

"Sir, it's Harry Potter. I really need to talk to you."

Nothing except his the gentle, steady rise and fall of his chest.

"Professor, we need to talk to you. You have to wake up."

Still no response.

Frustrated, Harry pursed his lips, frowning as he thought. He was slightly chagrined to discover he had believed Dumbledore would spring to life as soon as he heard Harry's voice. It was not so much that he thought he was that important, it was more that Dumbledore had never truly let him down before, and he thought that maybe the knowledge that he, Harry, still needed advice might be the key to waking him. He wasn't about to give up yet, though.

Absently, he pushed his glasses up his nose, contemplating how best to proceed. He was nervous about mentioning Snape by name; if Snape was, as Harry firmly believed, Dumbledore's murderer and a traitor, that might be the topic most likely to keep the old wizard sleeping.

"We have a problem, sir, with the mission you gave me," he tried. Not the truth, exactly, though he would value the opportunity to discuss the Horcruxes with someone, anyone, make sure they were on the right track, and now Ron was gone, and his faith in Hermione badly shaken.

Dumbledore twitched, inhaled with a gurgling snort, and snored more loudly.

"Sir, it's me. Harry. You gave me a mission, don't you remember? Please, I need your help!"

He tried for another few minutes, different variations of the same theme, his desperation and frustration mounting, bleeding into his voice, until he felt like sobbing or screaming.

And still Dumbledore slept.

"It's no use, Mr. Potter. I've tried everything I can think of. The only conclusion I can come to is that he somehow triggered his portrait to awaken under very specific circumstances, and whatever those are, they have yet to come to pass."

Harry was shaking again, his body and mind unable to fully contain or cope with everything he had seen, heard, felt in the past two days. He had been so certain Dumbledore would be able to assuage his fears, validate his anger, set his unbalanced world to right. A foolish hope, perhaps; the great wizard more often set his head spinning than he provided concrete answers. Now dead, his portrait unresponsive, no answers were forthcoming.

His face hardened as he gathered himself, turning away from the picture, ignoring the disapproving looks the other former Headmasters and Mistresses of Hogwarts graced him with as they saw his lips twisted in a thin, ugly line. "Alright, then. I don't need him, anyway," he lied, knowing the tiny kernel of uncertainty would never subside. "I know the truth. I know what I saw. Snape killed Dumbledore, and he must have tricked Hermione somehow."

There were shocked murmurs from the people on the wall, much shuffling and waving of hands. "Have you no respect, lad?" hissed a sour-faced older woman, an ear trumpet pinched nervously in her hand. "We don't speak of it, though he isn't awake, it's not polite to discuss the manner of his death."

Was it just a figment of his imagination, or did Dumbledore seem more alert somehow? No, he was still deeply asleep, his face slack and peaceful. "But it's what I need to talk to him about. We've found him, Snape, but he's spouting some lie about what happened, and I need to be sure." But he was sure, wasn't

he? He had been there, he had seen it, and he had known, he had always known Snape couldn't be trusted.

"I always wondered about that," Phineas Black remarked arrogantly. "Dumbledore always had complete faith in him, he often confided things to Snape he never told anyone else."

McGonagall looked at the man sharply. "Did you hear them plan that night?"

"No, not as such, but they seemed to always be planning something or other..."

"This is ridiculous!" Harry exploded, eyes wild and intense. "Professor, you have to believe me, I was there, I know what I saw, what they said, what he did. There isn't...there can't be..." The tension in the room was palpable as the tiny seed of doubt in Harry's mind began to bloom, past times when he was sure but wrong surfacing in his mind's eye, haunting him as he struggled to understand. Hermione seemed confident, but he knew, he *knew*, he couldn't be wrong about this, could he?

"Is it possible..." he whispered, raw and anguished.

"...that Severus Snape is innocent? That he isn't a traitor?" McGonagall finished the thought for him, her down doubts creeping, her own sense that something about that night did not fit, had never fit, finally given voice.

"Of course it's possible. It is, indeed, an accurate assessment of the situation."

They turned as one, already knowing what they would see. Dumbledore, awake and aware, a small, sad smile on his face, eyes sparkling more with tears than with humor.

It was McGonagall who broke down crying, though, her normally calm voice quavering with emotion. "Why didn't you say something, Albus? All these months you sat sleeping, silent, why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, Minerva," he said, a tear of his own trickling down his lined and bearded face. "You never asked."

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A/N: I'd like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a happy Holiday season. I personally have requested reviews from Santa as my present. :) An especially vigorous thanks to all those who have been faithfully reading and reviewing as this story has developed - you help keep me going. Merry Christmas!

## Chapter 22: Growing Up

Less than an hour later, the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix held one of its smallest and strangest gatherings. In the cold, grey pre-dawn light, Harry and McGonagall returned to the house, pale and with red-rimmed eyes, Dumbledore's portrait carried carefully between them. They had learned the truth about the night Dumbledore had died and Snape's role, verified by Pensieve memories hidden in a secret compartment in the bottom of Fawkes' cage. He explained how he had bewitched his portrait to remain aware but unresponsive until Snape's name was spoken with a sincere desire to know the truth, and the openness to believe. He knew things would be difficult for the younger wizard who had sacrificed so much, and he knew there were many, even Order members, who would be willing to use his death to vilify Snape. Dumbledore did not express his disappointment aloud, but both McGonagall and Harry felt his despair that it had taken so long, and his silent displeasure radiated when Harry again verbally abused his former Potions professor by sulkily noting that if he hadn't been so surly and mean, people might have been more inclined to entertain the idea that Snape wasn't a completely evil git.

Harry was completely out of sorts, his entire universe turned on its ear. He felt as if something more monumental should have changed, the earth itself should have ceased to revolve, because nothing felt real, nothing was the same. Ron and Hagrid were dead and Snape was good and Hermione had hidden stuff from him and he was a Horcrux and there was something dark and disturbing inside him even aside from the Horcrux and he thought as though his head might explode from it all. Everything had a sharp, surreal edge, a disjointed, ragged fracture splintering through his life, and he had no idea how to put things back to right.

Dumbledore had insisted on returning to Bath with them, clearly distressed when they described Snape's condition. Harry was irritated that Dumbledore didn't ask about the Horcruxes, about how he, Harry, was doing. But he didn't have time to pout before McGonagall was lifting the frame from the wall, requesting Harry's help in transporting it back to Headquarters. Silently, he complied, the heavy gilt frame biting into the tender flesh of his palm, his sore shoulder twinging in protest under the weight, his breath a wreath of vapor against the waning black night as they gingerly crossed the lawn, frost crunching under his feet while mutinous thoughts swirled through his brain.

When they entered the quiet house they found that Hermione had moved Snape to one of the rooms upstairs. Resting now in a big, comfortable bed, he was still too pale, too still, his black hair a stark contrast to the crisp, white linen. With a wave of her wand, McGonagall secured Dumbledore's portrait to the wall to the right of Snape's head, and the old wizard peered down at him anxiously, taking in the pallid complexion, the shallow, rapid breathing.

"I understand Professor Snape is having a reaction to a potion of your creation, Miss Granger," he said gently, taking in the sight of the grim-faced young woman sitting by Snape's bed, nervously worrying the blanket, fingers occasionally darting forward to touch the other's hand.

"Yes, sir, we brewed *Malum Defaeco*. It's an ancient formula that is supposed to eliminate all traces of Dark magic from an object or person."

Dumbledore's eyebrow quirked upward. "I'm generally familiar with the potion, Miss Granger, and may I express my admiration that you were able to acquire the crucial ingredient. While Mr. Potter's tale was somewhat sparse on details, I gathered that it was by your efforts that the blood of the unicorn foal was

obtained."

Ignoring McGonagall's astonished gasp, Hermione blushed fiercely and focused on the picture of her former Headmaster. "Yes, sir, but Professor Snape helped me prepare it. He also...um, volunteered to test it once it was finished. I was worried it wasn't right, and since Harry would need to take it I was concerned about the effects."

"You intend to use it on Harry?" Dumbledore asked, glancing at the sullen, dark-haired young wizard standing, arms crossed, against the wall in the corner.

"Well, yes. You see, I think Harry's scar is a Horcrux as well." And out spilled the story of how he had reacted to the necklace, the green light, and his possession in the forest when they had discovered the badge Horcrux. Dumbledore looked saddened, but not surprised, while McGonagall looked almost sick.

"Horcrux?" she whispered, horrified. "You sent these children out looking for Horcruxes?"

"Minerva," Dumbledore said, a pleading note in his voice. "I can explain..."

"You knew, didn't you?" Harry challenged suddenly, face twisted and hard as he pushed away from the wall with a thump, the heel of his trainer leaving a mark on the pale paint. "You knew about my scar."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "I wondered, Harry, I suspected. But I did not know for sure."

Harry laughed, a sharp, brittle noise. "You could have mentioned. You should have warned me. But then, why would I expect that?"

Dumbledore's eyes flashed, and he turned in his frame to focus on Hermione. "Can you describe for me what occurred after Snape took the potion?"

She shivered delicately, squeezing Snape's hand hard. How to describe it? The surge of elation, hope, and confusion as he swallowed and nothing seemed to happen, then his face, thin and white and shocked, as he convulsed and trembled. She could only watch, helpless, as something dark and horrific ascended through his body, writhing like tiny snakes under his skin, visible as his flesh crawled and bulged. On his hands and knees, gasping and screaming soundlessly as the potion worked inside his body, she watched in abject horror as something black and foul began to pour out of his mouth, his nose, even his eyes, an evil substance that flowed and pooled as it dripped on the floor. It seemed alive, this liquid, obsidian ooze, contracting and spreading and moving in an impossible way, with purpose and menace. As Snape collapsed to the floor, body wracked with spasms, Hermione backed against the ingredient shelves as the roiling, quivering *thing* seemed to sense her somehow, and began to flow toward her. She felt frozen, mind unable to process what she was seeing, so it was pure instinct that prompted her to draw her wand and imprison the unknown entity in a conjured, Unbreakable glass container.

Dumbledore listened as she relayed the story, hearing much more than the words she used. He hadn't missed the attentive, worried manner in which she hovered over Snape, and the fear and misery in her voice as she told of how the younger man suffered as the Dark magic was purged from his body spoke volumes. It surprised him, these reactions from this young woman, and he silently pondered what it might mean.

"Has there been any change since he lost consciousness?" McGonagall asked. It felt odd to be in the room with him, Snape, after mentally castigating him for months. Part of her still distrusted, a knee-jerk reaction born of years of uncertainty, and her conviction of his duplicity and betrayal in the death of Dumbledore. Except she had been wrong, they all had, and while their reaction was understandable, she had already mentally reconciled her mistake. Her feelings would take longer, though, so she tried to hide the surge of anger she felt as she saw him laying there, sallow and still.

"He stopped convulsing completely right after you left, and woke up briefly after I got him up here. I gave him some Strengthening Solution, but I was worried about trying anything else," Hermione offered, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. Truthfully, she was afraid she shouldn't have even given him the one potion, but instinct had prompted her to do something when his eyes had fluttered open, and it hadn't seemed to effect him adversely. Then again, it hadn't seemed to help, either, his eyes sliding closed again almost as soon as he had finished swallowing.

"A wise decision, Miss Granger. It may take us some time to figure out if this is a normal reaction to Malum Defaeco, or something else entirely," Dumbledore mused.

"I am still uncertain as to the exact nature of this potion, which I have never heard of, or why you made it in the first place. Or why, if it was intended for Mr. Potter, it was Professor Snape who consumed it, or how it relates to your mission. Or how you even came into contact with Professor Snape, Miss Granger, and how you decided to aid him." McGonagall felt her curiosity burning, the answers to mysteries finally at hand, and she was determined not to be denied this time.

"I'd like to hear that myself," Harry said shortly, cold anger evident in his voice.

Hermione glared at him, her own emotions sparking in her eyes. "Shouldn't we be trying to help him?" she asked, her cheeks and neck flushing as she felt the combined scrutiny of the others bearing down upon her. While she knew they would listen, now, she still feared their judgement. Harry's especially, though she was angry with him. He was still her friend, and she wanted him to understand, and knew he would not.

"He does not appear to be in any immediate danger," Dumbledore answered. "And I believe it may help us all understand certain events if we hear the story from the beginning."

She nodded, tight-lipped, and looked down at Snape. Though unconscious, there were still fine lines around his eyes and mouth, creasing his forehead, as if even while insensate he was still weighed down by pain or stress or worry. Absently she squeezed his hand, hoping for but not expecting a response, and there was none. How to explain? The facts were easy enough to relate, but how could she verbalize what she had never really understood herself, that gut certainty that Snape was being truthful, that he could be trusted, all evidence to the contrary? She closed her eyes, gathering her thoughts, and began to speak.

Once she started it became much easier, a relief to pour out these secrets that had plagued her mind, plucked at her self-doubt. She held very little back, and her audience listened raptly without interrupting. They learned of that fateful day in Knockturn Alley, how she had found Snape being tortured by Death Eaters and decided to transport him to her parent's house and hear his tale; how she had opted to believe him and performed the Nested Fidelius Charm to conceal a room in the basement; and how they had discovered Malum Defaeco, Snape's agreeing to help with the potion despite his conviction that it could

never be finished. She told them of how she had convinced the unicorn foal to part with his blood, and how, when she had expressed her concern aloud about what could happen to Harry if the potion wasn't right, Snape had swallowed the concoction, testing it on himself.

She tried to concentrate on facts, events, but in her mind she was seeing more, feeling more. Like Snape's face as he glanced at her from behind his curtain of black hair, that strange, intense look penetrating her defenses, confusing and unsettling her. Or that squirmy, fluttering feeling in her chest as she watched him when she hoped he wouldn't notice. Or the pleasant warmth between them as they worked together in companionable silence, slicing and crushing herbs, weighing and measuring powers. And the sensation of his mouth on hers, his arms around her, the buzzing warmth in her head and belly she still experienced when she remembered their kiss, and the tentative promise of something more.

No, she certainly didn't tell them the whole story. But she told them enough.

They were all silent for a bit when she stopped talking, each with their own thoughts and reactions. It was McGonagall who broke the silence, eyeing her former star pupil with equal parts admiration and exasperation. Nowhere near as blindly reckless as her friends, but the risks she had taken made the older woman wonder. Still, she couldn't help but be at least a little impressed with Hermione's resourcefulness and determination. And more than a little impressed with her intelligence and abilities. "Well, Miss Granger, as the current Headmistress of Hogwarts, I believe I will be recommending you be allowed to skip your seventh year studies and sit for your N.E.W.T.s directly. Honestly," she suppressed a proud smile, "you successfully performed an advanced Fidelius Charm, brewed a supposedly impossible potion, and utilized an apparently perfect Memory Charm, as Lupin has exhibited no signs of memory tampering. I somehow doubt there is much left for you to learn in a school environment."

Hermione flushed, pleased with the praise, and noted Dumbledore's twinkle and nod. Harry, however, remained silent, face closed, and she felt her ire building again. After all they had been through, after all the times she had supported and stuck by him even when she wasn't convinced his plan represented the best (or sanest) course of action, how dare he simply stand there, silently condemning? She deserved better, deserved equal measures of support and loyalty, and that he seemed unwilling to give it was a physical pain, a hot, burning ache in her throat.

"Well?" she asked, looking directly at Harry.

He shrugged, pushing away from the wall again and jamming his clenched fists into the pockets of his jeans. He truthfully wasn't sure what he was thinking, his thoughts a jumble, his emotions an exposed nerve that thrummed with the slightest touch. "Well, what?"

Her lower lip trembled, and she stood and faced him fully, suppressing the desire to scream. "Harry, you...I...well?!"

He growled in frustration, and suddenly all the confusion he felt was evident on his face. "What is it you want me to say, Hermione? That I understand what you did, that I agree with it? Do you want me to lie and make you feel better about risking all our lives, the safety of the Order, everything we've been working for, for a murderer?"

Something inside her snapped, and she felt the color drain from her face, leaving her pale in her fury.

Dimly she heard Dumbledore sharply chastising Harry for labeling Snape a killer, but she was beyond a simple rebuke, and years worth of resentment reached the boiling point and spilled over.

"How dare you!" she hissed, her vehemence cutting off Dumbledore's lecture mid-sentence. "You arrogant, hypocritical prat! How many times did you go off half-cocked, drag Ron or me off on some dangerous adventure on little more than a hunch and your own conviction that you were right? And we always helped you, always, even when we didn't agree we stuck by you. Even when I thought you were wrong, against my better judgement, I always stuck by you!"

"You never gave me a chance to help you! And I was usually right, wasn't I, and it's not like I ever held a wand to your head and forced you to help me," he yelled back, face flushed and hot. "If I hadn't done those things, if I hadn't acted on what I believed, who knows where we'd all be..."

"Oh, get over yourself," she snarled, taking a small, guilty pleasure as he blanched at her harsh, cold tone. "How do you know the world wouldn't be better if we, if you, hadn't interfered? You didn't always believe your own hype, but you obviously do now. Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One!"

"I hate being Harry Potter!" he raged, ashen and shaking. Who was this creature lashing out at him, hurting him? "I hate it, but what was I supposed to do, what should I do now, turn away from fighting Voldemort, not do something I know is right..."

"And that's the real issue, isn't it? You expect everyone else to believe you when you're sure about something. You pout, cajole, threaten to go it alone, make everyone else feel guilty for having doubts, for wanting proof other than your gut instinct. But what about our instincts, Harry? What about when I'm sure I'm right? Would you support me despite your own doubts, your misgivings, your prejudices?"

She felt the anger bleeding away and the grief and hurt flooding in to replace it. She sometimes wished she could hang on to her anger for longer, hold on to the strength it provided, however artificial. As tears pricked at her eyes, she felt weak, ashamed, as if her emotions diluted the truth of her words, and she struggled to blink them back.

"Hermione," Harry said more softly, her words hammering against his conscious. "I've always been there for you, I've always stood by you. How can you think otherwise?"

"Because, Harry, you've never trusted me above yourself," she responded, barely louder than a whisper, and she couldn't prevent the tears from spilling down her face. "Do you know how hard it was for me to do this, to hide this from you? Do you know how much I wanted to talk to you and Ron, how alone I felt? But I knew, *I knew*, you would never trust my instinct that Professor Snape was telling the truth, that he was still on our side, over your own beliefs."

"It wasn't a belief, it was a fact! I saw him, Hermione, I saw him murder Dumbledore in cold blood..."

"Except things weren't what you thought, were they? You were wrong. Just like you were wrong the night we went to the Ministry."

Harry stood there as if he'd been Petrified, heart pounding painfully in his chest, and a tense, awkward silence filled the room like an oppressive fog. He hated being reminded of that horrible mistake, and for



an instant he was back there, watching Sirius fall through the Veil. Blood on his hands. "I had to save...I was sure..."

"I know you were, Harry. And sometimes you were right, but sometimes you weren't, and you could never admit that possibility, never hear another side or listen to another point of view. If I thought there was even a chance you would listen to me, really listen, I never would have hidden this, I would have come to you and Ron, but you hate Snape so much, so blindly, and you would never have given him a chance. You never would have given me a chance."

She felt heavy, resigned, and Harry's stricken features stabbed at her tender heart, but she knew he needed to hear this as much as she needed to say it. "I love you, Harry, and I'll always be there for you. I just wish you were there for me in the same way."

Harry was truly speechless. His whole universe had been broken apart; had he been sure of anything anymore, he might have been able to withstand her words and the fierce prodding of his conscience. He felt stripped and raw, shame drowning him as he contemplated what she had said, admitted to himself that he had never valued her input when it didn't agree with his own ideas, and that she was right, he never would have listened had she ever approached him about Snape. He recalled how she had pleaded with him right after Arthur's death to reserve judgement, to see reason, but he hadn't, and he had been furious with her for daring to defend Snape when he knew...

But he hadn't known, and even things he had held as immutable facts were now so much dust at his feet. Up was down and black was white and Snape was not a vile, traitorous murderer. He found the very concept sour and unpalatable, an arid lump in his throat that refused to go down. He had to force it down.

"Hermione, I'm...I'm sorry. I'm sorry I haven't been the type of friend you need, the type of friend you've been for me." He tried to sound as sincere, and he really was sorry, but he felt numb, dazed, and without another word he turned and left the room.

"Harry..." Hermione began, starting after her friend.

"I would advise giving Mr. Potter some time, Miss Granger," McGonagall said kindly. "He has had quite a few shocks in the past couple hours, and he may need some time to process it all."

"I know, but I didn't want to hurt him..."

"Such pains are part of growing up, Miss Granger," Dumbledore observed. "Harry needed to hear how his behavior has effected you. I dare say he'll survive unscathed, and much improved if he takes your words to heart. Often it is only our closest friends who can make such painful truths known, and it is a sign of true maturity to face our faults." She nodded, but kept her eyes on the door, squelching the urge to chase after him, console him, soothe the pain she had caused.

"Perhaps we can turn to the other matter at hand," Dumbledore offered, gesturing towards Snape, who remained quiescent in the bed. Hermione blushed a little, flustered that she had forgotten about the sick man in order to quarrel with Harry, and returned to her seat by his bed, looking at both McGonagall and Dumbledore with sad, tired eyes.

"Yes, in order to heal him we will need to determine the exact nature of his malady," McGonagall said briskly, drawing her wand to perform a diagnostic spell.

"I don't believe a standard test will reveal the source of his illness, my dear," Dumbledore remarked, his sharp gaze watching Snape, watching Hermione watch Snape. "If you had to offer an opinion as to what ails Professor Snape, what would your guess be, Miss Granger?"

She looked at the portrait of the old wizard, startled. How did he know she suspected the cause of Snape's reaction? "I think...he's losing his magic. It's like a wound that won't close, and his magic is seeping from the wound."

Dumbledore nodded slowly while McGonagall's mouth formed a thin, white slash across her face. Muttering something under her breath, she performed a complicated series of movements with her wand over Snape's prone form, a pale yellow field of light surrounding him. They watched as the light pulsed with a gentle, rhythmic throb, like the beating of a heart. But the light was marred by a spot over his left arm, the pale flesh visible below the cuff of his rolled up sleeve covered by a dark void in the light, and around the edges curled wisps of energy like smoke, roiling tendrils escaping from the whole, rising a few inches into the air, and dissolving like mist in the sun.

McGonagall's arm dropped, and she swore softly, much to Hermione's mild shock. "Just this once, couldn't you be wrong?" she sighed, removing her glasses to rub at her eyes, the bridge of her nose. It was late; rather, it was very early, the air in the room taking on the heavy, swollen feel of morning, a slow, creeping dawn breaking over souls who had yet to find rest. Whether too late or too early, there was never a good time to discover this. The flow of blood could be staunched, but a person's magic was not meant to bleed.

"Isn't there something you can do?" Hermione asked, once again finding Snape's hand on the cover and holding it with her own. She knew that the loss of magical energy was serious, tied as it was to a witch or wizard's life-force, but her knowledge of this type of injury was shaky at best.

"There are things we can try, and we can certainly replenish his strength for a while with potions, but unless we find a way to close the wound, the loss of magical energy could prove fatal."

Fatal. She knew that, of course, knew that for magical folk the loss of that magic was debilitating, interwoven as it was with their spirit, their life-force, the very essence of their being. Hermione suspected there was some difference in the physical make-up of witches and wizards, something at the cellular level that set them apart from Muggles, but the magical world generally shunned Muggle sciences, so she had never read anything that definitively explained why some people had magical ability and others did not. The fleeting thought that exploration of this topic would be fascinating dissipated as she once again looked down at the man whose magic was, even now, escaping into the air around them.

McGonagall's eyes narrowed; she had finally taken note of Hermione's attention toward her former colleague, and her maternal, protective instincts were squawking. "How did you know what was wrong with Professor Snape, Miss Granger? If you knew, why didn't you mention it when you first came to me for help?"

"I didn't know, not until you went after Harry. When I was getting him ready to move up here, I...I felt it."

Like wind, or...I don't know how to explain it," she finished lamely. And she didn't; she only knew that when her hand had passed over that spot on his arm, she had felt something, a sickly, cool flow against her palm, like air made fluid, and she had just known it was his magic leaking out.

"You've felt his magic before?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, right after he started hiding here. He lost control, released a wave of wandless magic." That she had understood; it was common for children with magical ability to release it in unexpected and uncontrolled ways, and that type of unpredictable outburst was the reason magicians had begun using wands, which allowed them to channel their natural abilities. Consequently, magical outbursts were rare in adults, as they used their powers in a controlled manner daily. She had surmised that Snape, recently wandless and under extreme stress for weeks, had simply vented his magic in the only way available to him at the time.

"His arm!" McGonagall exclaimed, staring down at Snape, grabbing his left wrist and turning it to fully expose his forearm. The skin was smooth, white, no evidence of the psychic gash allowing his magical energy to drain from his body. No evidence, either, of the Dark Mark, Voldemort's brand into the flesh of his followers gone, leaving Snape's arm unblemished and whole.

Snape's eyelids began to twitch, and with a small moan he clawed his way upward from the crushing, velvet darkness. His whole body felt like he was weighed down, each limb heavy and sluggish, as if he was buried in sand. The darkness was a sucking, swirling vortex, pulling him back into the warm, safe cocoon of unconsciousness, but the voices would not let him rest. First there was just the one, familiar and comforting, but then others intruded. One filled him with shards of anger and loathing, and another with guilt and fear.

But he couldn't make out the words, and eventually curiosity drove him upward, through the clinging black and the layers of his own thoughts and emotions, until he could open his eyes to the light which, soft though it was, made his eyes water and sting. He blinked rapidly, felt cool, soothing hands on his hands and arms, on his face, and he forced himself to open his eyes fully. It took a few seconds for him to focus, and he frowned with confusion. Why had he thought Harry Potter was here? Had that been only a dream, like Dumbledore's voice?

"How do you feel?" It was almost as if there were some sort of time-altering spell at work; he saw McGonagall's lips form the words before the sound reached his ears, and he shook his head slightly to clear the effect while he contemplated the question. How did he feel? Fuzzy, almost drugged, a little sore, but there was no real pain. He was grateful for that; he remembered pain, recent pain, huge, crushing slabs of it, tearing him apart from the inside.

"As well as can be expected," he croaked, and Hermione conjured a glass, filled it with water from her wand, before sliding her free arm beneath his neck to lift his head while she held the glass to his lips. Embarrassed by his weakness, he nonetheless appreciated the cool fluid, and her warm, relaxing presence. He could smell her, she was so close, and once again something stirred inside him, startling him with its suddenness and potency.

He coughed slightly as she withdrew the glass, clearing his throat. It was coming back to him now, the events of the evening blooming in his memory as the haze surrounding his brain began to evaporate. He remembered deciding to take the potion, the strange tingle that had spread through his body, first a gentle

buzz, then a searing, ripping flame that started in his arm and lashed outward. Not much after that was clear, just the agony, the sensation that his viscera was being torn up through his gullet, burning his throat and mouth as it emerged, and a foul taste in his mouth, like death and decay.

Snape struggled to push himself up in the bed, taken aback by the dizziness that assailed him, the appalling weakness in his shaky arms. Sinking back, he raised his hand to push his hair out of his eyes. His mind registered that something was wrong, different, before he stopped and stared, hand trembling, eyes fixated on his pale, unmarked flesh.

"It worked," he whispered, too stunned to feel much beyond surprise and a timid, tremulous joy. Gone, the Dark Mark, something he had not dared dream was possible. For years, the brand had served as a daily visible reminder of his youthful arrogance and stupidity, a life destroyed. It had literally marked his descent into misery and evil, had prevented his myriad actions since that fateful day from ever fully wiping clean the slate of his life. How could he be other than what he was, a hard, cruel, lonely man, when the biggest regret of his life was literally tattooed on his skin for all to see and abhor and condemn? How could he move forward when the past lived on him, inside him?

"Congratulations, my boy," Dumbledore said quietly, watching the younger man as he trembled and stared. He knew how much Snape had suffered over the years. It had weighed on him many times, the role Snape was forced to play, the stigma he faced, the huge error in judgement that dangled over his head ever after. Dumbledore could remember the sensitive boy Snape had been, small and stringy and so eager to fit in, and so hurt by his failure to do so. Then the young man, desperate and broken, the Mark still fresh on his arm, and remorse evident on his proud features. Years had followed, years of solitude and whispers, of mistrust and indifference, and Dumbledore carried his own guilt, that he had cultivated Snape's isolation, used his status as a reluctant convert to the Light, to keep him as a weapon, and a potent one at that, in the fight against Voldemort. That Snape was free, finally and irrevocably free of Tom Riddle, was a bittersweet victory indeed.

Snape's eyes darted wildly at the sound of that wise, gentle voice, fluttered closed after he found the portrait on the wall. So much he wanted to say but couldn't, so much he felt that would never be expressed. "It wasn't a dream," he murmured.

"No, not a dream."

"Headmaster..."

"Just Albus, my boy, that honorific belongs now to Minerva, I think," Dumbledore replied with a smile.

It didn't sit right on his tongue, to call the older wizard by his given name. "Albus, I..." But nothing else emerged, and he doubted he would ever find the words to express his guilt, his remorse, his anger, and finally his gratitude.

"Think nothing of it, Severus," Dumbledore said gravely.

"Well now, Severus, since you helped Miss Granger develop the potion perhaps you can offer an opinion on how to set you right," McGonagall stated after a small silence.

Absently he rubbed at the newly clean flesh of his left forearm with his right hand. "Of course, Headmistress, how may I be of assistance?"

Dumbledore's portrait and McGonagall exchanged concerned glances. How to explain that he was not yet out of the woods, that though the potion had freed him of the Dark Mark, of the black magic corroding his soul, it had also opened a wound that had not healed, a wound from which his own magic was seeping even as they talked? "Given what you know of the ingredients, what potential side effects would you anticipate for an individual who consumed Malum Defaeco?"

He frowned in concentration, recalling with perfect clarity the components of the brew, how they were combined. "Nausea would not be uncommon. A sensation of heat, perhaps. Most of the ingredients were relatively common, with well-known medical or purifying properties. I can attest that a certain amount of pain is possible as well," he added wryly.

When these responses caused the others to look more grim, he realized something else must be amiss. "Dissembling about my condition will gain nothing. I am no child that cannot bear the truth. Speak plainly - what has happened? What has the potion done, other than its job?"

It was Hermione who answered, voice anxious and full of sorrow. "Sir, you seem to be losing your magic," she whispered.

They would not have thought it possible for him to look paler, but what little color had returned to his face fled as he absorbed this news. "You are certain?"

"I'm afraid so, my boy. I would surmise that Tom's power was intertwined with your own for too long. When the potion did its job and removed all traces of Dark magic, the source of your own power was damaged as well."

"I see," he answered shortly, his mind already racing. Spells and poisons that damaged another's magic were rarely used in their world; though it would seem an obvious weapon, the risks of others being effected, and the devastating impact that even a small mistake could mean, had led to an unspoken law among magical folk that even the Darkest witch or wizard normally abided - no tampering with the source of another's magic. As a result, remedies for loss of magical energy were obscure and often experimental. Records of true cures harkened back to ancient times, more legend than fact, just like the potion that had resulted in his affliction. He racked his brain, trying to recall something he read, however old, however untested, however unsure.

"You've read about a way to fix this before, haven't you, sir?" Hermione asked. "I've been trying to remember something from all those books I borrowed from the school."

"As am I," he answered shortly, recalling and discarding remedies from the index of his mental library.

"We'll figure something out, Severus, there is still some time," Dumbledore assured, hoping that he would not be made a liar.

"Perhaps it is a side effect of the potion. You said most of the ingredients were relatively common, but clearly not all, as this potion contained unicorn blood, a substance that has not been utilized as a potions

ingredient for millennia," McGonagall offered logically.

"While that is true, Headmistress, there is no record of it interfering with an individual's magical energy..."

"That's it!" Hermione shrieked, jumping out of her chair with such force that it shot back and clattered against the far wall. "The unicorn blood!" And with that she ran from the room, leaving the other three occupants rather befuddled in her wake.

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A/N: Guess what television show I was a huge fan of? :P If you watched it at all, the imagery should be fairly familiar. I had originally intended for this chapter to include all the way up to Snape's cure, but it was getting longer than I anticipated, so I decided to post it at this juncture. Rest assured that I will tackle and resolve Snape's malady very soon.

## Chapter 23: Dreams

Years later, Snape would insist that he would have discovered the remedy himself to restore his magical ability within an 'acceptable timeframe' if he had known about the unicorn blood. It was certainly true he had read the text in which Hermione found the potion, and he of course possessed much greater knowledge about medicinal potions, the properties of various herbs and ingredients, and magical medicine in general. He persisted in the belief that, had she ever expounded upon the second vial of unicorn blood, donated by the adult male, he would have hit upon the answer before her.

It was a long time, though, before they were comfortable with that type of interaction, the sort of gentle, teasing banter indicative of a long-established relationship, the intimate give and take between friends or lovers. The interaction between Hermione and Snape when she returned to his room several hours after she had bolted out to pursue her own inspiration was somewhat less cordial. Snape, Dumbledore, and McGonagall had not come up with any ideas after she left, and while he knew that standard potions would keep him stable for the time being, his mind was furnishing false sensations, as if he could literally feel his energy escaping, feel his life slipping away, and he was understandably not in the best of moods when she returned.

Ironically, a large component of his foul mood was his preceding lack of a foul mood. As he spoke with his colleagues and the remainder of the cobwebs cleared from his mind, he became aware, slowly, gradually, of something terribly wrong. Words flowed from his mouth automatically, his usual terse comments, sarcastic observations, biting barbs. But even as his lips formed the syllables he knew something was amiss. The irritation, the bitterness, the flares of fury and misery – they were gone, or so weak and fleeting as to be mere ghosts. The venom, the sting was gone, and as this reality crept over him he silently panicked, tried to resurrect them from the dead, but they refused to rise to his satisfaction. It did not help when, as his mood darkened (because his mood refused to darken), Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged not-so-subtle glances and suggested that they could resume the discussion when they (though they clearly meant he, Snape) got some rest.

He was tired, drained and weak, but his mind kept chasing in circles, refusing to allow him sleep. Even as Dumbledore drifted off in his portrait, once again snoring gently, Snape lay awake, struggling to comprehend what was happening. He could not remember a time he had not been serious, sour, quick to anger and judgment, even quicker to lash out at those who offended with their glances or their smiles. And, in the coming weeks and months, he would rediscover his darker, surly side, would reconnect with the still black reservoir inside him, inside us all. But it seemed inaccessible now, a trickle rather than its usual torrent, and the sheer unfamiliarity of not being angry, not being sullen or annoyed or resentful, was distressing, and more than he cared to deal with at the present time.

And then Hermione bounced into the room, her normally unkempt hair a riot of frizz, her cheeks red and her eyes bright. From these he deduced she had been standing over a cauldron (having observed first hand over the past few weeks what the warm, rising steam and fumes did to her tresses), and that she was insufferably pleased with herself. He waited for it, the burst of annoyance he should feel at having an exuberant teenaged Gryffindor in his presence, and it did not come. He wanted it, wanted to feel normal, like himself, and as she flounced into the chair next to his bed, holding (what else?) a thick, old book, it was suddenly more than he could bear.

It failed to occur to him that maybe the reason her arrival did not inspire the usual irritation that other

pupils, former and current, usually roused was because he had other, confused, conflicted feelings that kept stubbornly raising their heads to make mischief. He only knew that nothing seemed right, seemed real, and she presented a very convenient target for his frustration.

“I think I’ve found the answer, sir,” she said brightly, balancing the book and flipping it open to the page she’d marked with a spare bit of parchment.

“Do not insult my intelligence, Miss Granger. You do not ‘think’ you have found the answer, you are convinced of it, and you have already begun working on it if that Kneazle’s nest of a hairdo is any indication,” he practically snarled, ignoring the prickle of discomfort he felt at her startled expression, the way her smile shrank.

“I’m sorry, sir. I should have discussed it with you before I started, but I thought you’d want the potion as soon as possible,” she responded uncertainly, turning the text so he could see the page. She felt somewhat deflated; it had been weeks since he had snapped at her, cut her with that acerbic tongue, and consequently her immunity to his venom had weakened.

“Assuming what you’ve found would indeed help my situation rather than poison me,” he snapped, his thin hand shaking only a little as he pulled the text toward him, eyes narrowing dangerously as he read the entry. He looked at her fiercely, and for a second he thought he was being mocked, and finally, finally, the anger ignited, and he fanned the flames, desperate to bask in the warmth, heedless of the risk of burns.

“What is the meaning of this, Miss Granger?” he growled, low and dangerous. Every warning bell in her head was clanging that something was wrong, horribly askew, and yet she plunged ahead.

“It’s a modification of an aura amplification potion, sir, but it was used successfully to help victims of Theseus the Terrible...”

“I know what it is, you stupid chit, I still possess the powers of reading and comprehension, and I can assure you I was familiar with this particular book before you were even born. Do you think they will respond to you again? You are as arrogant as Potter.”

“What?” she blurted, a confused mass of offense and bitter disappointment. She thought he would be pleased, maybe even proud, that she had found the answer yet again, started the brewing process immediately so that he could recover as soon as possible. But this, this was like Professor Snape, Classroom Snape, only infinitely worse, because they had worked together and more, and to have him revert to his snarky, biting, hurtful self felt like a betrayal.

“Headed back to the forest, then? And if this time you are not so fortunate, it will be only myself that suffers and not your precious Potter. I wonder how you will even motivate yourself to ask this time. Can you conjure up fake tears of pity for the slimy Slytherin?” he sneered. Why didn’t he feel the usual tainted pleasure at the sight of her stricken eyes?

“Oh! No, sir, I already have the unicorn blood, one of the adults donated another drop after the foal was done. I didn’t ask, he just offered. Isn’t that wonderful?” She experienced a foolish relief, thinking she understood Snape’s sudden mood now, his concern that the potion wouldn’t work, and so the news bubbled out with much of her former enthusiasm. When he paled impossibly whiter, though, his dark eyes



a flashing storm, her heart sank.

“You received two drops of unicorn blood that night?” he asked rhetorically, his deep voice a rasp of cold rage. “And you hid this from me? Did it not occur to you to mention the availability of an exquisitely rare and powerful healing agent when we discussed ways to cure my ailment? Or before, to ensure it was properly stored, properly protected? Or perhaps you simply wanted the glory all for yourself. How typical of you and your friends, that you think only of the benefits to you and ignore the danger to others.”

“But I didn’t hide it!” she protested. “It’s right on its own shelf, protected by a Stasis Charm, and I was sure you saw me put it there the night...when we got back from the Forbidden Forest.”

“I saw no such thing,” he denied flatly, even as he searched his memory. Had there been another vial of blood? His recollections of that evening seemed to consist only of her; waiting for her, watching her, consoling her, and this did nothing to improve his disposition. What was the matter with him, that he was fixated so much on this child?

“Well, I didn’t hide it deliberately. And I would have mentioned it, but as soon as I remembered...well, I got a little excited and wanted to check on my idea. Then I just started brewing. I came up as soon as there was a break in the instructions.”

“I believe you merely wanted the spotlight for yourself, Miss Granger. But then, I would expect nothing less from a friend of Potter’s,” Snape bit out sourly. Were she less rattled, less stung from his earlier barbs, she might have noticed his insult lacked the requisite fire, so jumbled were his own thoughts and emotions. As it was, she rose from her seat, confused and wounded by his sudden change in demeanor towards her, and silently she wondered if she would have another loss to mourn.

“I hope you feel better, sir,” she said simply, voice catching only a little, and quietly she left Snape to stew in his own fractured thoughts.

His eyes slipped closed after she left, trying to shut out the world, trying to turn off his brain. At least one thing remained constant – his ability to drive others away appeared to be intact. He tried to believe that was a good thing, something he desired. It was a desire of his, not so long ago; keeping others at a distance meant they could not learn his secrets, betray him, hurt him. For a double agent this was as much a physical necessity as an emotional one, for if someone knew him, really knew him, his usefulness as a spy was gone at best, and a slow, agonizing death in his immediate future should the wrong thing be said to the wrong person at the wrong time. But he was not a spy any more, and part of him already regretted his harsh words, his impatience, her absence, more pronounced now that he had pushed her away.

“She is a remarkable young woman,” Dumbledore remarked, his voice carefully pitched to convey neutral curiosity.

Snape sighed silently, turning his head on the pillow to look up at the old man as he sat gazing down from his portrait, blue eyes light and interested. Snape tensed a little, wondering what his former boss knew, or thought he knew, but he saw no reproof or guile in the kindly, aged features.

“You would know better than I, Head...Albus,” he replied carefully. Old habits died hard, and he was not about to reveal the extent of his impressions about Hermione to anyone, especially as he had not worked

them all out for himself.

“Actually, I had little personal contact with her during her schooling. Another regret I shall have to endure, I’m afraid. However, if my understanding of events is accurate, she has been your only human contact for a number of weeks. Surely you have formed some impression of her in that time,” Dumbledore said congenially, gently prying. Snape could feel the start of a fairly large headache behind his right temple, and he was too tired, too unsettled, to engage in much verbal sparring.

“As much as I normally enjoy our repartee, if you have a point, perhaps you would be good enough to present it,” he said shortly, rubbing the offending spot on his brow.

Dumbledore smiled, not at all offended or surprised by the younger man’s curt tone. “Things are not as they were, Severus. You can make different choices.”

“Are you trying to torment me? What does my failure as a spy or the removal of the Mark have to do with Miss Granger?”

“You play the fool poorly, my boy. You are no longer an alienated young man with limited prospects.”

“No, I am now a bitter, despised man with limited prospects,” Snape interjected sardonically.

Dumbledore chose to ignore the interruption. “You have more than paid for the mistakes of your youth, Severus. I know you cultivated this aloof, prickly persona for many reasons, and that I encouraged you in your solitary and taciturn ways. It would be fruitless to apologize; I was acting in what I believed to be the best interests of everyone, and I knew, as you did, that Riddle would return. I would not expect you to change who you are, who you have become, but perhaps now would be an excellent time to evaluate who it is you truly are, my boy, and who you would like to be. We are not often given second chances. I hope you can make the best of yours.”

Snape sighed wearily. He did not feel like explaining that, right now, he was no longer at all sure of himself, of his identity. If you don’t know who you are, can you decide who it is you will aspire to become? “I’ll think on it, Albus,” he replied shortly, but his voice was soft, and he was immensely relieved that the old wizard had asked no direct questions about Hermione. He didn’t feel up to effective subterfuge.

“I think it would be wise to do so.” Dumbledore nodded sagely. “You may have more prospects than you imagine, more choices, ones that you thought dead and buried long ago. If you shun them again, they may not come around a third time. I hope you can be happier this time, Severus. I hope you can make different choices.”

And though he could not say so aloud, Snape hoped so, too.

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Hermione stepped back from the cauldron after dousing the flame, shifting her weight back and forth on her aching feet. The cure she had found for this kind of magical wound was, ironically, rather simplistic,

nowhere near as complicated as Malum, and it took only two days to complete. Were it not for the infusion of unicorn blood and the need to work with it, at the critical final juncture, for twelve consecutive hours, it would not have been an inappropriate potion for students to practice on.

Having just completed the marathon portion of the brewing, she gratefully eased onto a chair to wait while it cooled, her feet throbbing gently as she settled back. She was rubbing her heavy, gritty eyelids when the creak of the wooden stairs alerted her to the arrival of another. She thought it would be McGonagall; the older witch had checked in on her periodically as she worked, keeping her updated on Snape's condition (weak but stable), while dropping subtle hints and less subtle, probing questions about Snape's time in hiding. She obviously suspected that there was something yet to be revealed about Hermione and Snape's relationship during that time. Hermione found it easier to deflect the inquiries than she would have guessed, perhaps because she herself was so confused about the state of things.

However, when she saw a pair of battered trainers descend into view, she quickly deduced the prim witch was not her visitor. She watched somewhat nervously as Harry came down the stairs, noting with some satisfaction that he, too, seemed uncertain, a tightness around his eyes betraying his jittery insides. He offered her a small, sheepish smile, and she couldn't help but notice the dark circles under his eyes, the patchy shadow of stubble on his fair cheeks.

"Hullo," he said, the soft, tentative tone enough to break Hermione's heart. She hated that he should be uncomfortable around her, and yet she couldn't bring herself to regret the things she had said.

"Hi, Harry," she answered softly, watching him closely as he pulled up a chair next to hers, the legs scraping and bumping against the concrete floor. He sat down, looking mostly at his hands as he clasped them in his lap, but he glanced at her sidelong frequently, trying to gauge her mood.

"Is now a good time?" he asked, motioning towards the still bubbling cauldron.

"Perfect, actually, I just finished. It just needs an hour or so to cool before I can give it to Professor Snape." She watched his face, searching for some flush or scowl when she said Snape's name, but he only nodded.

"Looks like you saved the day again," he quipped, turning his head to look at her fully. His bright green eyes were pleading behind his glasses, a half-smile quirking his lips. His whole posture seemed to be asking her to go easy on him, to forgive him, but it was a moot point, really – she already had. Still, she wanted very much to hear what he had to say.

Harry stood abruptly, raking his hand through his hair. He had always found that movement seemed to help him think, helped him focus. "I want...I wish I knew how to start," he muttered, blowing out his breath in a loud huff of air. "I've thought a lot about what you said."

"I know," she replied quietly. McGonagall had told her as much, relayed her own brief conversation with Harry, and the fact that he'd barely left his bedroom since he'd fled Snape's room.

"It's just...I never really thought about things that way before. I never realized how much I went with my own gut and just expected you to go along. When I'm sure, you know, so sure, it's hard to think I might be wrong. It seems like all I've ever had is my instincts, this voice in my head pushing me..." He paused,

noting the significant look on her face, and couldn't help but laugh.

“Not that voice. But it seems obvious, you know, at least obvious to me, and it's hard to understand sometimes that it's not obvious to you, too. I guess what I'm trying to say is that you were right. I do follow my instincts and expect you guys...you to follow. And it hardly seems fair that I don't extend you the same courtesy. But...” He stopped suddenly, looking pained, lost.

“What about when our instincts are telling us different things,” she finished for him.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I mean, you know what I saw, Hermione. Everyone believed Snape murdered Dumbledore. Even you, at first.”

“I know. But I'm willing to listen to other view points, other evidence, and at least consider that I might be wrong. You...maybe if it had been about something different...”

“Maybe. I'm willing to admit I may not be entirely...rational on the subject of Snape.”

“Professor Snape,” she corrected automatically.

“Sheesh, Hermione, he's not our teacher anymore. Anyway, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'll try harder from now on to listen to your point of view. Even when I don't agree. And...I'm sorry,” he finished, looking at her with wide, earnest eyes.

“I know, Harry,” she smiled back.

“No, really, I can't imagine how hard these past months have been for you, having to hide this, having no one to talk to.”

“It wasn't a picnic,” she replied dryly, resisting the urge to tell Harry that she had had someone to talk to – Snape.

“Well, I'm here to listen to you now,” he offered, and she could tell that the offer was genuine. Again, stronger, she felt the desire to spill out her thoughts and emotions to him, her best friend, but how could she? About her tumultuous feelings for the greasy git? She had no doubt he would try his best, but she had no delusions about Harry's willingness to discuss Snape calmly. Saying he was sorry for not being there for her was hardly tantamount to an endorsement of Snape's virtues.

“I'm not really up to talking now, Harry, but I do appreciate the offer,” she responded warmly. “I just want to finish this up and get some sleep.” Just saying the word ‘sleep’ made her aware of how tired she was, her eyes thick and gritty, her feet still aching.

“Sure,” he answered, a little relieved. Things still felt tight, awkward between them. He wondered if it would ever be the same.

She stood up then and put her arms around him, pulling him into a friendly embrace, and the remaining tension eased a little. She ruffled his hair affectionately as he pulled away, and he grinned fully for the first time in what felt like forever.

He had just turned to leave when another question popped into this head, one that had bothered him a great deal. "You don't really think I believe my own hype, do you? That I'm...I dunno, conceited or something?"

She smiled a little sadly. "I know you hate a lot of what comes with being you. But sometimes it does seem like you use being...well, being Harry Potter to your advantage. I don't think you do it on purpose, though."

"Oh. Well, um, I'll try harder with that, too," he said weakly.

She laughed. "I was angry, Harry. I think what I said was true, a little, but it doesn't bother me nearly as much as the listening thing."

"Okay, then. We're okay, right?"

She gave him another quick hug, torn by the anxiety stamped on his face. "Yes, Harry, we're fine. Now, I need to decant this potion and take it up to Professor Snape. Unless you'd like to help?"

His own laughter echoed against the walls and up the stairs as he waved and bounded away. She shook her head, smiling, and got to work. A few minutes later she was knocking tentatively on Snape's door, listening for rumble of voices or the rustle of cloth inside, a pewter goblet filled with the thick, purplish-green concoction, her heart an unsteady, rapid drumming inside her chest. She dreaded more lashing words, and yet still felt drawn here by more than the promise of healing Snape, hoping, yearning, but for what?

There was no answer and only the faintest of noises, so she quietly turned the knob, opened the door with the slightest creak of the hinges, and peeked inside. The noise was the heavy, steady pulse of Dumbledore's breathing from his portrait on the wall; otherwise, the room was quiet in this early morning hour, dawn only having recently crested the horizon. Snape, too, slept, his features still pale and drawn, and as she approached the bedside, she noticed his mouth forming soundless words, his hands twisting the fabric of the quilt as he clenched them into fists.

Sleep had come slowly the previous evening, a day's worth of rumination having proven no more successful, and much less satisfying, than a toothless dog worrying a bone. He had pondered much and settled on nothing, his mind a mess of thoughts and memories, Dumbledore's words and Hermione's face intruding at odd, disquieting moments. He had finally succumbed to slumber well past midnight, the heavy, drug-like sleep of the ill, deep but troubled, the wounds in his body and psyche realized in hazy, red, strange dreams.

Dumbledore, shattered on the ground, and Draco's body, too, eyes open in that final shocked moment of his life. Snape knelt between them, the keening pain in his chest choking the air from his lungs, sorrow raw and burning in his throat. Dumbledore's head rolled on the ground, rolled toward him; a ghastly sight, this head moving independent of the frozen stillness of his broken body, his eyes open but vacant and clouded. Snape moaned, in the dream and in the real world, shaking as the dead wizard began to speak.

"Use the power of the Dark. He does not know."

"Headmaster?" Snape choked.

"A power the Dark Lord knows not."

"I don't understand."

"Darkness begets Light," another voice intoned, high and clear, and Snape turned horrified eyes to see Draco watching, a milky white film coating his vibrant blue eyes, face still frozen with surprise. Snape trembled as the young man continued to speak. "Use the Believer to give power to the Light."

"Please," Snape whispered, while in his bed his fingers curled painfully in the quilt. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"The Betrayer betrays the Master. The Believer and the Betrayer can harness the Dark for the Light."

"Sir?" Not her, not here, to witness his crimes and his failures. Hermione watched him with clear, sad eyes, while in his room she crossed the floor, looked down on Snape's tensing, mumbling body with pity and concern.

"Hermione," both Snapes whispered. Dream Hermione had no reaction; Hermione's eyes widened in surprise, and she placed the goblet on a small table by the bed, taking one of his hands in both of hers.

"Yes, sir?"

"You must choose," Dream Hermione said gently.

"Choose what? I don't understand!" Dream Snape cried desperately.

"The Betrayer must chose for the Master to fall. The Darkness breathes life into the Light, and the Light into Darkness. Choose well," she replied simply, and turned to walk away.

"Wait! Don't go," he pleaded, but she was dissolving from view before his eyes, and Dumbledore and Draco were turning away, and he was alone with his dead and his memories, alone...

Hermione watched, feeling helpless, as his eyelids twitched and another moan escaped his thin lips. Whatever dream he was having did not seem like a pleasant one, and it stirred things within her to imagine what horror he might be reliving, how he must be suffering. Fearful of his reaction, she still summoned her courage and decided to try to wake him, hoping both to get him to drink his potion and save him from his nightmare.

Standing, she squeezed his hand firmly in one of her own while she bent over his prone torso, gripping and shaking his shoulder just slightly. "Wake up, sir," she said softly but firmly. "I have the potion ready for you, but you have to wake up."

With a gasp his eyes flew open, and his large fingers clamped down tightly on hers, feeling the warm, soft flesh of hers trapped within his grip. His eyes were dark, fathomless, and she thought she saw something

akin to relief pass through them.

"You're here," he rasped.

"Yes, sir," she said, surprised but relieved that at least he wasn't sniping at her. "The potion is ready, sir, you should drink it now." Ignoring the painful pulse from the hand he was still clutching, she reached for the goblet, held it to his mouth, watched as he swallowed the liquid with noisy gulps. A huge shudder rippled through him and he sighed, his eyelids already starting to droop again, the warm, sinking darkness dragging him back into slumber.

"Hermione," he mumbled, eyes fluttering.

"Yes, sir?" she asked, surprised by his use of her first name for a second time.

"Don't leave me...I need to...choose..." And sleep reclaimed him, an easier, calmer rest as the potion began to work.

Rattled by his words and his demeanor, she gently pried his fingers loose from his grip, her mind trying to make sense of what he had said. He seemed afraid that she was leaving, anxious for her to remain, but what did that mean? Was it just a remnant of his dreams? Was he even really aware she was there?

"You will have a difficult road ahead, I believe," Dumbledore's portrait said, and Hermione gave a little start and a yelp.

"What do you mean, sir? I mean, we all will, won't we? It's war," she replied.

"I'm not speaking of the fighting ahead, or at least not directly. It takes great courage to care for someone others do not trust, despise even, and who often despises himself."

She felt a warm flush creep up her neck to flame her cheeks and ears. She looked shyly at the old wizard's painting, somewhat surprised to see him with a small smile on his face, and more than a trace of that familiar twinkle in his bright blue eyes. A sudden rush of relief flooded her; he knew, or at least suspected, that her feelings for Snape had grown beyond those of a student for a teacher, and he seemed supportive, pleased.

"Harry would have a meltdown if he knew," she blurted, then blushed harder.

"Yes, I believe he would," Dumbledore chuckled.

"It's not what you think, sir."

"Oh? I dare say that is a possibility. What do I think, my dear?"

She would have thought it impossible to blush any more, her entire face now hot with embarrassment. "It's not...we didn't...what do you think?" she stammered.

His smile widened. "I think you care for him, Hermione, and I think that is a wonderful thing. So few are

able to put aside prejudices and see beneath the surface. But he is not an easy man to know, and it will take great perseverance on your part if you wish to have any part in his life, even that of a friend."

"I see," she said slowly.

"Be sure that you do, Hermione. He is in a vulnerable place, and I believe dangerous decisions are still ahead. He will try to push you away if you try to get close, and he will do so with his usual violence. He is a proud man, and proud men are often the last to embrace change, even change that is necessary, or change that will lead to happiness."

She nodded thoughtfully, trying to process it all. She knew Snape was far from an easy man, of course, and capable of running hot and cold in the blink of an eye, capable of lashing out so viciously that most kept a considerable distance, fearful of suffering the wounded feelings and bruised ego that so often resulted from bearing the brunt of his wrath.

But Dumbledore implied that were Snape to choose to let her nearer, let her care, perhaps even return her feelings (whatever they were), it could make him happy. Could she make Snape happy? Was that what she wanted? And was he even capable, after so many years of solitary misery, of making such a choice?

"If you'll excuse me, sir, I'm exhausted. I'll check on him after I've slept," she said, punctuating the sentence with a jaw-splitting yawn. Engrossed in her thoughts, she shuffled off to her room on autopilot, toeing off her trainers and almost collapsing into her bed, her eyes closed before her head had even settled on the pillow. Later she could decide on a course of action. Later she could make her own choice. For now, sleep came swiftly, deep and restful, and untroubled by disturbing dreams.

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A/N: So there you have it, the use for the adult unicorn blood and Snape is on the mend. As for the rest, stay tuned. :)



## Chapter 24: Harry's Horcrux

“What do you think it means, Albus?”

It was three days after the dream, after Snape had swallowed the cure Hermione had prepared for him, and he had spent much of the intervening time resting and regaining his strength. That the potion had worked was unmistakable; McGonagall's spell had revealed to their eyes what he already knew to be true, that the psychic wound had been sealed, that his magical energy was no longer bleeding from him. This, however, did not negate the reality that he had suffered a considerable loss of strength when the Dark Mark, with its insidious tendrils of blackness threaded throughout him, body and soul, was ripped from his body, and he had been unable to begin recuperating until the gash in his magical field was repaired.

As he healed, he had also begun to reconcile the shocks that the removal of the Mark had dealt to him mentally. Given his life, his history, he had never thought to question why he was so quick to anger, so slow as to be almost incapable of feeling real joy on those rare occasions that things in his life were going well. Now, it seemed almost laughably obvious that the Black magic invading his system from the Mark had influenced him more than he had ever known; like a slow, insidious poison it had sickened part of him, weakened his ability to feel or think with true freedom, thereby helping to assure his loyalty to the Master who had branded him. It galled him to think that his moods, his thoughts, his opinions and actions may not have been entirely his own, may have been influenced since the day the Mark had been seared into his skin, and though Snape prided himself from not shirking from unpleasant truths, this one left a bitter tang in his mouth.

But if it was true, then the absence of the Mark meant he was now experiencing life and his reactions to it with clear eyes for the first time in eighteen or so years, and it was, if nothing else, an informative experience. He was not entirely certain he wished for the greater exposure that interacting with more people would surely bring. He was not sure he was prepared to learn that everything he thought about himself and others was skewed.

His interactions thus far had been limited to Dumbledore (via his portrait, of course) and McGonagall. Fortunately, he had always respected them both and thought of them, if not as friends, than at least as colleagues, so the realization that he did not find Dumbledore's constant merriment as irritating as he remembered, nor found McGonagall as pretentious and overbearing as he had previously, was no more unsettling than the now normal internal jolt that came when a thought or feeling he'd been expecting failed to materialize.

Snape had yet to test his reactions to Hermione, however. As promised, she had checked in on him on occasion since she had delivered the potion. He had twice feigned sleep to avoid interacting with her, his pride pricked by his own lack of courage, and he could feel her presence like a radiating warmth through his pores, her softly spoken words to Dumbledore caressing him as he lay, heart pounding, afraid that she knew of his cowardice, knew he was awake, or that she did not care. He could also sense Dumbledore's humorous regard when she left, but he needed more time to sort things out before having any sort of significant dealings, or even a conversation, with her. What he could not honestly determine was which he dreaded most – that his feelings for her, whatever they were, had changed, or that they had not.

Now, though, he was discussing his troubling dream with Dumbledore. He was not a man who put a great

deal of stock in prophesy, in definitive answers beyond that which could be seen, could be verified, but only a fool would disregard a message as powerful as the one he had received. It had remained etched in his memory after he awoke, the words he had heard, the overwhelming feeling that he had to uncover the meaning in order to defeat the Dark Lord. Dumbledore, however, seemed more skeptical, and more than a little cautious in interpreting the nighttime vision.

“It could mean many things, my boy. True prophesies are difficult to untangle.”

Clad once more in his customary black robes, Snape paced the strip of floor in front of Dumbledore’s painting, impatiently pushing his hair back when it flopped forward into his eyes. If he didn’t know any better, he would think that Dumbledore didn’t believe his dream meant anything significant. He was forced to admit to himself that if someone else had revealed such a vision, he would scoff and doubt. But he knew this dream meant something, something important, and the sooner he could unravel the meaning, the better.

“The Dark Lord is clearly the Master, and I the Betrayer. If we could extrapolate the identity of the Believer, we may be able to discern what choice it is I am supposed to make, and how we can use it to assist the Light.”

“I have found that presuming to know anything of this nature for certain to be dangerous, at best.”

“What, then, do you suggest? Should I pretend it means nothing? I cannot do that, and I refuse to do so. I am convinced this could be the key to unlocking a power strong enough to defeat the Dark Lord, a power he neither has nor knows about.”

“That may be, but if misinterpreted your dream could lead to even greater hardship, or even disaster. We simply do not have enough information.”

Snape’s response was cut short by a knock on the door, a soft but confident rap he immediately associated with Hermione. His nostrils flared, as if he could smell her behind the wood, and Dumbledore fell silent, an oddly satisfied smirk on his face, eye bright and sparkling. Snape shook his head, felt that odd but now less disconcerting sensation that he should be irritated by the old man’s presumptiveness, and crossed the room to open the door.

“Miss Granger,” he said softly, opening the door fully to admit her.

“You’re up,” she stated, pleased, doing her best to ignore the flutter that had taken up residence in the pit of her stomach. “How are you feeling?”

“Much improved. I would estimate I will have recovered my full strength within another day or two.”

She could feel his inscrutable, dark eyes on her, the weight of his gaze making her feel warm. “Good,” she replied, feeling awkward, lame, things said and unsaid, the uncertainty of the present and the future generating a disconcerting friction between them. She did not know what to say, and neither did he, and so they simply stood, he staring at her face, an uncomfortable pressure in his chest, she trying to avoid his intense, unreadable eyes.

“What brings you here this fine evening, Miss Granger?” Dumbledore inquired from the wall, catching a fleeting shadow of relief on Snape’s features as the tension was broken, at least for now.

“Well, as you know, Harry and I have been destroying the Horcruxes.”

“You’ve been what?” Snape exclaimed, surprise clearly evident on his face.

“Destroying the Horcruxes with Malum Defaeco. That was the whole point, after all,” Hermione responded, nonplussed.

“You were asleep when the decision was made, my boy, and Minerva supervised the project every step of the way,” Dumbledore assured.

Snape raised an eyebrow, mentally chastising himself for having been sick, weak. Surely his expertise in the Dark Arts could have been useful during the process – could they not have waited? “I see. And were you successful?”

As usual when describing the accomplishments of herself or one of her friends, Hermione’s exuberance bubbled to the surface. “Oh, yes, sir. As far as we can tell, it worked perfectly, there is no remaining trace of Dark magic in either that we can detect.”

“Would you be averse to allowing me to verify that?” he inquired politely.

“No, of course not.”

“All that remains, then, is for us to deal with Harry, correct?” Dumbledore asked.

Hermione sobered immediately. “Yes, sir. We thought to do that today, but I think he’d be more comfortable doing it in here with you,” she remarked, looking anxious.

“Of course,” Dumbledore answered immediately, while Snape’s features hardened. “I believe it would be best to have Severus present as well, given his experience. I do not wish to take any chances in removing the Horcrux from a living being.”

“Do you think Harry’s reaction will be the same as his?” Hermione queried, worrying her lower lip as she imagined her friend prostrate and contorting, his face a grimace of pain.

Dumbledore looked serious, thoughtful, and Snape’s face, too, took on a contemplative mien. “I am uncertain. While both the Horcrux and the Mark incorporate Dark magic and a portion of Riddle’s power, the Mark was not a piece of his soul. Also, while I believe that there is evidence the Horcrux has influenced Harry at different times in his life, I have no way to gauge if it has become intertwined with Harry’s own magic.”

“But You-Know-Who has possessed him,” Hermione fretted aloud.

“I freely admit I do not know exactly what will transpire, Hermione. I only know we have limited options, and that your potion may be his only chance to free himself of the Horcrux and live,” Dumbledore tried to

reassure her.

“You still have the restorative potion you used to aid me, do you not, Miss Granger?” Snape asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Then even if the worst occurs, we are prepared. We have a potion that eliminated my symptoms, and I am confident we will be able to deal with any unforeseen circumstances,” Snape stated confidently. Hermione was warmed by his use of the word ‘we’, its implication that he believed she could be useful if something befell Harry. He seemed so different from when they had last spoken, when he had snapped and berated, his tone now cordial, bordering on warm. Then there was the mystery of his other words, the multitude of things suggested. If only she knew what they meant, and if he meant them, asleep or awake.

“I concur, Severus. In fact, I see no reason to delay any longer. The sooner the final Horcrux is destroyed, the sooner we can prepare for the final confrontation with Riddle. Hermione, would you be so good as to find Harry and invite him to join us?”

She nodded and left; within minutes she had returned, Harry and McGonagall with her. McGonagall was her normally composed self, but those who knew her well could detect the traces of anxiety in her face, her posture. Harry could do nothing to hide his discomfort and fear; while he knew the potion worked, and even being reasonably certain it was not lethal, he couldn’t help but imagine the worst, his brain conjuring horrible images of torment, of his own choking terror as he felt himself dying, and he could hear Voldemort’s laughter echoing in his ears.

Snape watched carefully as they entered, somewhat pleased when he felt a familiar rush of disdain at the sight of Potter, slouching and rumped as the boy was. Granted, the feeling was nowhere near as strong as he might have felt before, but at least his dislike of the bloody Boy Who Lived was real. He wasn’t sure he would be able to bear feeling anything other than contempt for a Potter.

“Potter,” he said coolly, lip curled in a small sneer.

“Snape,” Harry replied, fighting to keep his tone and expression neutral. Since he couldn’t very well hex the git, he was determined to at least try and be civil. Part of his personal makeover Hermione had shamed him into trying. He had a feeling this would be one of the more difficult aspects.

“Harry, you know why we’ve asked you to come here now,” Dumbledore said, his kind blue eyes serious, his voice grave.

“Yes, sir,” Harry responded quietly, unable to suppress the fine tremor that ran up his spine, left his arms and legs feeling weak, watery.

“You’re going to be fine, Harry,” Hermione said softly, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “We’re here, and nothing is going to happen to you.”

“Well, I’m sort of hoping something happens,” he joked weakly, regretting (and not for the first time) that he had insisted she tell him, in full detail, about Snape’s responses when he consumed the potion. He thought he’d been preparing himself, but his imagination was running wild with visions of agony.

“You may rest assured, Mr. Potter, that in the event something unpleasant does occur, everyone in this room will do their utmost to reverse the effects,” McGonagall said crisply, her own worry betrayed by the nervous way she was fingering her wand.

Harry couldn't help glancing at Snape, trying to see him as a potential help and failing to do so. While he knew the Slytherin had saved his life before, he always seemed to resent having to do so, and he had a hard time picturing the greasy, taciturn man rushing to his aid, especially when there were others around who would do so.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Yes, Potter, even I will do what is necessary to save your ungrateful hide,” he barked unpleasantly. Harry flushed but held his tongue, fixing his eyes on the carpet so that he didn't glare at the snarky bastard, earning a small, encouraging smile from Hermione

“Shall we?” Dumbledore interjected, ever mindful of the animosity between the two.

Harry took a shaky breath, ran trembling fingers through his hair. “I guess so,” he said, trying to sound braver, more confident than he felt. In truth he was scared, a bone-deep terror; afraid of the pain, the risk, the possible consequences known and unknown. His infamous courage was a pale, fluttering flame in comparison to the black, crushing fear. He tried to focus on the goal, of ridding himself of the fragment of Voldemort's soul that had clung to him for most of his life, and his revulsion and anger at having that bit of evil inside him helped him face down the fear as Hermione handed him a glass vial filled with silvery-blue liquid. He fumbled with his glasses, handed them to Hermione for safekeeping, and stared at the potion clasped in his sweaty palm. His heart was racing so fast he felt nauseous, and the weight of their eyes made it worse. He closed his eyes, steeling himself, ignoring the horrible screeching he could hear in his mind, and swallowed the fluid in one hasty, choking gulp.

Though he knew the potion was room temperature, his tongue and throat were telling him he had ingested liquid fire. It scorched a path through him, pooled hot and heavy in his belly, and he could feel sweat breaking out on his face, the heat spreading outward from the center, radiating through his arms, his legs, burning, burning. The heat was just this side of overwhelming, licking and singeing his nerves, the flames lapping at his flesh, caressing, purifying...

And then the fire crept across his head, and it crossed that fine line and became a screaming, blinding pain. He was unaware that he had collapsed to his knees, the dull crack of bone against wood sharp in the tense, hovering silence. His hands were pressed to his forehead, to his scar, trying to hold the bones of his cranium in place, convinced it must be shattering from the agony of it. He could almost see it inside his head, the red-hot potion swirling and enveloping a struggling green ball of light in the center of his skull, and surely his ears were bleeding from the screaming, the horrible, high-pitched shrieking that was tearing him apart from the inside even while the blood in his head was boiling, boiling him alive...

And then it was over as quickly as it began, and the sudden cessation of feeling, the retreat of the fire and the pain, was too much for his overwrought system, and his stomach rebelled violently, a sick splash over the floor. He retched until he was empty, past shame, past embarrassment, until he was left shaking on all fours, his gut cramping and sore, his head an aching, throbbing lump on his shoulders.

It was hard for all of them to watch, though for different reasons. Dumbledore, even as a portrait, felt an

ache deep in his chest, a sorrow that Harry had to endure yet another trial, another tribulation in this war he had been forced into as a mere child; as a baby marked for murder, having survived through ancient and powerful magic, somehow dispatching one of the most feared wizards in history, Harry had never had a chance at a normal childhood, and Dumbledore had helped to take it away, steer him to a path that, though necessary for the good of all, stripped the boy of so much and gave so little in return. McGonagall, too, felt a raw pain as she watched the boy struggle, useless to help, and in her mind's eye he was that scrawny, lost first year, orphaned and uncertain, learning to adapt to a world he knew nothing about. She had always felt a maternal protectiveness toward him, more so than other Gryffindor youth, and to watch him suffer was like having something inside her torn along with him. And then there was Hermione, watching someone she cared for crying out hoarsely in agony, knowing it was her potion, however necessary, that caused this pain. All this was compounded by the knowledge that this was her remaining close friend, Ron dead and cold and gone, unable to comfort her, and she wiped furiously at the tears that broke free and tracked down her cheeks, determined to be strong to support Harry.

Even Snape felt...something. He stood silent, face impassive, as Harry retched and moaned. He found himself experiencing a most unfamiliar sensation - empathy. He knew first hand the pain ripping through the boy, the agony of something imbedded deep inside being forcibly torn out, forcibly expelled. Quite unlike any pain he had ever known, like a piece of his soul excised, a part of his core violated. Against his will he felt a sense of understanding, of kinship, with Potter, and it irked him to have anything in common with the Boy Who Lived, the son of his worst childhood enemy. The irritation didn't reach his face, though, and it vacillated with the cloying sense of sympathy.

Watch they all had, though, watched without interfering as Harry shouted and struggled. They had seen nothing, heard nothing but Harry's thrashings and vocalizations until, just before he became ill, a poisonous green mist began to emerge from his eyes, his ears, his mouth. Vaporous like smoke, it seemed to be sucked from Harry, wispy fingers stretching back, clinging to his face, desperate to reinvade, to go home. Finally there was a thin, ethereal scream, a sound that raised gooseflesh on all of their arms, and the mist vanished as if by magic, the eerie scream lingering in the air in its wake, echoing in the small room until it, too, vanished.

Harry was still on all fours, trembling so violently that Hermione rushed forward now to support him, a quick wave of her wand Vanishing the puddle of vomit on the floor, though the sickly sweet odor persisted for a few minutes. He slumped to his elbows, his body flexing as another, lesser wave of nausea rolled through him, while Hermione wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulders.

"Are you okay, Harry? Is it over?" she asked, rubbing his back in soothing circles. Snape felt something hard and hot blossom in his chest. Harry could only shake his head, too weak and shaken to do much else.

"Did it work?" she said anxiously, looking up at McGonagall, turning pleading brown eyes to Snape.

"There was no expulsion of a substance such as I experienced, but then the nature of the contamination was not identical," Snape responded analytically.

"If you will move aside for a moment, Miss Granger," McGonagall said more gently, scowling at Snape. Hermione scooted back while the older witch waved her wand, using the same spell she had utilized to illuminate Snape's magical field, and they all watched as a faint light surrounded the prone young man, pure white and solid but barely visible, and it flickered even as they all watched. Hermione gasped and

returned to him, as if her touch could someone bolster his obviously flagging energy.

Snape approached the pair on the floor, knelt on the other side of the still-shaking young man, an unstoppered vial of Strengthening Solution in his hand. "Take this," he said, his voice low and with none of its usual edge. Harry's head lolled weakly, and with a small, long-suffering sigh Snape helped push his upper body upright, allowed the unruly black-haired head to tip back onto his shoulder, and slowly poured the potion into Harry's mouth.

"Miss Granger, the restorative you brewed for me, please," he asked. Though he had seen no breach in the boy's magical field, he thought the potion may still assist with the weakness, in soothing the raw, empty place he knew must be inside where the Darkness had been excised. Hermione handed it to him, and he aided Potter in swallowing it as well.

Harry spluttered and coughed, felt the potions begin to cool the conflagration still burning throughout his body. He still felt horrible, worse than any time he'd ended up in the Hogwarts infirmary, but at least he could now lift his head from Snape's shoulder, and the feeling that his head would split apart at the slightest movement died down to only the worst headache he could ever remember.

"How do you feel, Harry?" Dumbledore asked anxiously, and through his blurry vision he could see the worry on the portrait's face, the whiteness of McGonagall's pinched features.

"I've been better," he mumbled, laughing once before the renewed throb in his temples let him know that laughter was a horrible idea.

"Are you in any pain?" McGonagall queried. Harry tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace, and he rolled his head forward once in assent.

Snape reached into his pocket, withdrew another vial, this one filled with a powerful pain reliever. "Can you manage on your own this time?" he said, his normally sardonic tone gentler than it would have been months ago.

Harry held out his hand, still trembling but not nearly as badly, and Snape pressed the slender tube into his palm. Harry had just downed the contents, a long, relieved groan pulled from his throat, when a door slammed, and a hard, distinctive thud reverberated through the house.

"What was that?" Hermione said sharply, wand already clenched tightly in her fist.

They all waited, the silence growing heavier, until a muffled shout filtered through the air, followed by more heavy, clumping noises. Closer, the sounds drew, and Hermione knew she had heard that noise somewhere...

"Oh, bloody hell," Harry said weakly, struggling to stand, leaning on an extremely startled Snape for support.

And then the door to the bedroom was flung open, and a triumphant Alastor Moody stood silhouetted in the doorway, wand out and pointed at Snape.

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A/N: My apologies for the slight delay - my flash drive file containing this entire work was corrupted, and it took a very nice ITT guy and some panic on my part until I managed to retrieve a humorously formatted version of it. So I had to retype this chapter. Enjoy! :)



## Chapter 25: Rejoined

There was a shocked, heavy silence, the type where everyone is waiting for someone else to make the first move, to do something, to say something. Snape was tense, utterly still except for the slight movement of his chest and shoulders as he breathed, all too certain that Moody would be overjoyed to unleash the nastiest hex he could think of if he made the smallest move. Hermione had her wand out but was reluctant to point it at Moody, who was, after all, an Order member and one of the good guys. McGonagall was simply speechless from the surprise of it, having received no notification from St. Mungo's or anyone else that Moody was even conscious, let alone ambulatory. Harry was still too weak to do much, upright but obviously shaky, his physical condition forcing him to lean on the closest person for support, and that person just happened to be Snape. And finally there was Moody, eyes gleaming manically, his own chest heaving from his rapid ascent up the stairs, quite pleased with himself that he had caught one of the most wanted fugitives in the wizarding world.

"Bet you thought you'd get away with it again, eh, Snape? You never did plan for the unexpected. Don't worry, Potter, he won't be running away this time," Moody gloated, while Snape merely scowled, his eyes never leaving the tip of Moody's wand.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Alastor, do you really think Severus got in here without our knowledge or consent? The house is Unplottable and protected by the Fidelius Charm," McGonagall retorted sharply. "Do lower your wand and allow us to explain."

"Oh, he's conned you all again, has he? I tried to warn Dumbledore about letting bad seeds into the school, but he always was the trusting sort. Some spots just don't wash off, eh, Snape?" Moody jeered.

"No one has conned anyone," Dumbledore said sternly from his portrait, Moody's eyes bulging slightly as he recognized the voice from the wall. "Severus was acting under my express orders when he killed me. It was absolutely necessary."

Moody's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I don't believe it. Where's your proof? How do I know you aren't all Death Eaters?"

"Oh, enough of this," McGonagall said tartly, and with a flick of her wrist Moody's wand went flying, his outraged expression almost comical. "You are the most suspicious man I ever met, Alastor."

"How do you think I managed to live this long? Constant vigilance," he snarled, tromping across the room to retrieve his wand. Snape took the opportunity to covertly draw his own, still wary of the paranoid ex-Auror, and guided Harry into a chair.

"Besides, you have to admit it was mighty suspicious looking, Snape forcing potions into the boy, the rest of you standing around like you'd been Petrified. I might be a bit out of the loop, but once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater, that's what I say."

"And, as usual, you fail to grasp the totality of the situation," Snape said coolly. "Your grasp of subtlety and nuance is appalling. It's a wonder you have survived this long."

"At least I've never been in league with anyone who calls himself the Dark Lord," Moody retorted

angrily, magical eye spinning and fixating on Snape's left arm. The eye locked, quivering slightly within the socket, and Moody's mouth opened and gaped, shut, opened again.

"Impossible," he said hoarsely. "It's some sort of trick. You've camouflaged it, concealed it somehow."

Snape pushed up the sleeve of his black robes, baring his unblemished white arm to Moody's scrutiny. "You know as well as I do that the Mark negates all attempts to hide or diminish it. It is gone, and I free of the Dark Lord's grasp."

"But how..."

"I have Miss Granger to thank, though her intent was not to help me directly," Snape responded, calmly allowing his sleeve to fall back to his wrist.

Moody's gaze seemed to penetrate her to the bone, and she had the distinct feeling that she was found lacking. "Trusted him, did you?"

She tilted her head up slightly, meeting his eyes without revealing her nerves or her indignation. "Yes, I did. I do."

"As do I, Alastor," McGonagall added, while Dumbledore nodded from his portrait.

"Me too," Harry said abruptly, and everyone turned shocked expressions to where he sat, exhausted and weak. "What?"

"Forgive me for sounding surprised, Mr. Potter, but you've never verbally leant any support to Professor Snape before," McGonagall said gently, a small smile curving her lips.

He felt the warm prickle of embarrassment across his neck and ears, but soldiered ahead. "That's true. Maybe I don't trust him fully, but Hermione does, and her judgment on the subject has always been better than mine," Harry replied thickly, too many emotions warring for dominance. It pained him to speak up for the git, and in a way he had never hated him more in his life, but he also knew in his head (if not his heart) that he had never been right about Snape, never had his suspicions validated, and clinging to them now seemed like the worst kind of stupidity.

Snape surveyed the young man coldly, not trusting his sincerity. It was too easy to see the elder Potter in the boy's features, but the eyes were Lily's, and while he saw something hard and bitter in their green depths, he also saw veracity. Again, he felt an unwelcome surge of something other than animosity, and he was tempted to say something sharp and cutting, anything to at least preserve his reputation as a sarcastic, caustic man. But the requisite bile was lacking, and there was something in Harry's eyes begging for a reprieve. So he simply nodded, his lips tightening into a thin line, and turned his gaze to the astounded Moody, whose magical eye had yet to leave Snape's forearm.

Moody glared at him balefully, then snorted and shrugged. "You'll forgive me if I keep an eye on you just the same," he said shortly before stumping loudly over to another chair and making himself comfortable.

"When did you wake, Alastor? Neither St. Mungo's nor any of the Order members who have been visiting

reported any change in your condition,” McGonagall inquired briskly, the tension in the room still high despite the lowered wands.

“Oh, I came to last night and left this morning. Didn’t want them Healers poking around any more than they already had. Never know which of them is working for You-Know-Who,” Moody said airily, pulling a flask out of his pocket and taking a cautious sniff of the contents.

“Are you sure you’ve recovered. You were unconscious for weeks!” she commented, looking him over with keen, probing eyes.

“Oh, they wanted to keep me around, run some spells. I left OHO,” he replied blithely, taking a small sip from his flask and smiling.

“Over Healer Objections,” Hermione whispered to Harry, seeing the confused look on his face.

“Told ‘em I’d leave OHDB if they didn’t quit prodding me with their wands,” the ex-Auror said emphatically, his magical eye once again whizzing apparently at random. Hermione thought that it seemed to pause over Snape with some regularity, and she bristled at the unfairness of it.

“So, what’s the plan these days? What does You-Know-Who have up his sleeve?”

Dumbledore and McGonagall filled him in on the latest intelligence, the most recent reports from Order members and Ministry associates. Harry sat quietly, pain-free now but still feeling weak and shaky from his ordeal, a little lightheaded. Snape, too, remained silent, feeling no particular need to converse with Moody, and a little left out. He had not contributed to the Order’s body of knowledge in months, and now that at least some of the members knew of his unflagging loyalty, he wondered how useful he could be. It was not a feeling he was accustomed to, having been at the center of so much knowledge as a double agent, and he found he did not like the change one iota, the increase in his safety a small, insufficient comfort.

“Right, so we know His Evilness wants to meet Harry one-on-one, but what is the actually plan?” Moody gruff voice cut through his reverie, and he turned his attention to the conversation at hand, hoping that if nothing else, he could be of use in terms of planning for the future, his knowledge of the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters providing necessary information for strategic purposes.

“Until today, planning for such a battle has not been feasible,” Snape offered, noting Moody’s frown as he spoke.

“And why’s that?” Moody challenged.

Snape’s eyes flitted to Dumbledore’s portrait, observed the tiny shake of his head in the negative. “The timing was not right. Harry required more training, and the Order as a whole more information before such a mission could be carried out.”

Moody snorted derisively. “I suppose you’ve been instrumental with that, have you? Been torturing the boy for kicks again?”

Snape's face hardened. "Quite the contrary. I have had nothing to do with the Order until quite recently."

"So they had some sense then, not allowing a traitor like you..."

"Enough!" McGonagall said loudly, cutting through Moody's tirade. "Isn't enough to know that Severus has been with us all along? Whatever misunderstandings may have occurred, he has remained loyal to our cause, and will undoubtedly be instrumental as we proceed."

Moody continued to glare at the tall, sallow man. "Not much use as a spy now, though, are you?" he jeered.

McGonagall sighed. "If you wish to continue this foolish discussion, be my guest. I am going to escort Mr. Potter to his room," she said firmly, Harry's feeble attempt at a protest squashed before he could utter it. "There is a meeting of the Order this evening. Perhaps it would be best if we hash all of this out with everyone present. I, for one, do not relish having to discuss it endlessly while You-Know-Who takes over during the argument," she finished tartly.

Snape felt a flutter of panic at the idea. Familiar faces, hatred etched on their features, and his own inability to muster the sort of haughty indifference, the cold, arrogant anger that had allowed him to flourish under their gaze rather than wither, would leave him defenseless. "Minerva, I'm not certain that is a good idea..."

"Nonsense," Dumbledore agreed from his painting. "I'm only disappointed I didn't think of it myself."

"It will be disruptive at the very least. The Order has more important issues to discuss than my allegiance or my whereabouts these past few months."

"Afraid, are you?" Moody sneered. "Afraid someone besides me will see you for who you really are?"

Hermione had, of course, been observing the squabbling the entire time. Her temper rose with Moody's hard, condescending tone, his inflammatory words, and she thought of the quiet man who had never once complained while living in exile, the intelligent man who had helped her and guided her as she labored on her potion, the brave man who had risked his life for the Order, and for Harry. Now this sour, bitter old man wanted to flay him verbally, castigate him for past mistakes, without weighing his sacrifices? She was still young and idealistic, and the unfairness of it made her hot and angry. But now, when she heard Moody taunt Snape for being afraid, and saw the flicker of humiliation and embarrassment in his dark, hooded eyes, her indignation flared too brightly to stop the small voice in her head, the one that usually told her to mind her own business and allow the adults to settle things themselves.

"Professor Snape has nothing to be afraid of," she retorted, and she felt the eyes of everyone in the room suddenly shift to her.

Moody's eyes narrowed dangerously. "We'll just have to see about that, won't we?" And with that ominous statement he rose and stomped from the room.

"Well, tonight's meeting should be interesting," McGonagall remarked, her voice clipped and a little harried. "But I do think it's for the best that you be there, Severus."

“I respectfully disagree,” Snape replied.

“No, you should be there,” Harry said suddenly, and once more found himself the recipient of their surprised scrutiny. “All the hiding and the secrets, don’t you think it should stop? That’s one of the reasons I could never believe Dumbledore when he defended you; I knew there were things I didn’t know, and I thought they were bad. And I know we’ve all had reasons to keep secrets, to protect each other or to help the cause, but if we can’t start telling the truth now, when will we? We need to unite to stop Voldemort, and we can’t do that without trust. And we can’t trust each other if we keep secrets.”

The others in the room looked at him for a long minute, weighing his words, searching their minds for things yet hidden, and what it would be like to resurrect them to the light of day. “You may be right, Harry,” Dumbledore finally said solemnly. “I admit that in this I have often been the worst offender. While I don’t think it is wise to reveal everything to everyone, I think a more forthright environment may be important.”

Harry nodded and stood, teetering only slightly as he regained his feet. “So will you be there tonight, sir?” he asked respectfully, candid green eyes turned to Snape, voice neutral. “You’ve been such an important part of the Order, and now that we know we were wrong, I think the rest of them deserve to know, too.”

Again Snape searched the younger man for guile, for an ulterior motive. He was tempted even to use Legilimency, so strong was his suspicion, and his desire to know what trap may be lying in wait. How ironic it was Potter who spoke of trust, a desire to reveal secrets, when it was in large part due to his father and the other Marauders that he had learned to hide, to conceal, to never risk exposure, never invite humiliation. But again he saw nothing in Harry’s face to suggest duplicity, and he could feel the pleading gaze of Hermione warm his face. She wanted him there, too, and he was drawn to her, to be where she was, to fulfill her wish, even as part of him resisted.

His body answered for him before his mind had worked out all the angles. “Yes, Mr. Potter,” he sighed, resigned. “I will be there.”

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Voldemort paced restlessly around his bedchamber, trying to understand how the impossible had taken place. He was growing increasingly impatient with his minions, weak, simpering fools who understand neither the grandeur of his vision nor the elegance of his methods. They understood only power, and it was only by force and intimidation that his will was carried out. This was not how he had envisioned things so long ago, not what he had meticulously planned for, his well-crafted ideologies so much dust.

He had resigned himself to using the tools at his disposal now, molding his followers and the world to his vision once his supremacy was secure. But even this was frustrated, his followers constantly fumbling his instructions, failing to deliver the promised prizes, and he found himself weary of the constant cycle of disappointment and chastisement. They had not delivered the boy, nor discovered his whereabouts; the traitor, Snape, was still at large, and again they were none the wiser as to his location. And dozens of lesser goals had been thwarted in the recent weeks, and he was agitated, his fury slowly mounting, relieved for only a short time when he vented his rage against the cowering imbeciles around him.

He had sought today to torment the traitor again, focusing his considerable strength and will on the magic that bound his followers to him through the Mark, sending pain and misery down that mystical line to remind the betraying bastard what remained in store for him once he was found. And he had no doubt Snape would be found, either by his own followers or the Aurors, and he already had a plan in place for the latter. Snape would suffer and die by his hands, and his alone.

But this time something impossible had happened, and the attempt had rebounded to him in a wash of power and pain. Nothing of the sort had ever occurred before; even unconscious, or near death, he maintained that hold over the Death Eaters. Death and death alone could break the binding he had forged, and were that the case he would have felt nothing at all, not a sickening return of the call, his own dark power turned against him for a brief, galling moment.

There was only one possible explanation, and while he would have admitted it to no one, it rattled him to the core. Despite what some of his followers may have thought, he was no fool, nor crazy, and he was well aware that desertion from his ranks would be much more common without the hold the Mark commanded. Few dared risk breaking with him when they knew they could be tortured from a distance, when they knew that the Mark could be used to trace them within close enough proximity. Until now, all who had even attempted to leave had been dispatched, and gruesomely enough to dissuade others who may have been tempted to try.

Was it possible? Had Snape found a way to dissolve the bond through a manner other than his own demise? The promise of such a thing could easily decimate his ranks; he knew all too well that the vast majority of the Death Eaters were not true believers, merely those attracted to evil or violence, bigots and thieves, and that it was only the threat of the sort of punishment he could deliver that kept the faux-devoted in line. If that threat was gone, if Snape could deliver this miracle to the others, how many of his ranks would he lose? How many would turn their backs on him, unable to see the grandeur of his plan?

Voldemort waved his hand, a slash of pale, spindly flesh in the air, and within moments there was a scurry in the hall, then in the room. Pettigrew bowed and scraped before his master, his small, watery eyes downcast, his hands twitching nervously. "You called, my Lord?"

"Find me Weasley. And be quick about it."

Another patter of feet and the servant had fled. His newest spy, yes, what had he been holding back? If Snape had severed the Mark, would he not be once again in league with the Order of the Phoenix? He did not often use his formidable mental powers on the trembling spy, the weak man's mind an open book, but perhaps he should pry deeper now, see if there was something the foolish man had neglected to tell him, or deliberately held back...

"My Lord, Weasley is not here tonight. He has gone to another Order meeting to gather information. Shall I fetch him, my Lord?"

"No, Wormtail, you may go. I will attend to this myself."

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It was a raucous affair, the Order meeting, Snape's entrance after the others had arrived (a dramatic thing, yes, but McGonagall feared that someone would immediately leave to fetch Aurors, and had taken the necessary steps to prevent it) sending the group of theoretically intelligent, mature witches and wizards into an almost violent shouting match. Wands had been drawn, a few spells sparked through the air, but in the end the combined efforts of Dumbledore (from his portrait of course, a revelation that had engendered a much more joyful and teary response), McGonagall, Hermione, and Harry had convinced the others to listen to their evidence. Expressions ranged from complete disbelief to fury, and Hermione found herself the recipient of more than one heated stare and snide remark. The resistance had abated when McGonagall produced a Pensieve with Dumbledore's memories, and though it would be an exaggeration to say that the Order welcomed Snape back with open arms, after a few hours of arguing, debate, and wounded pride, it was grudgingly accepted that he was once again among them, and against Voldemort.

"You understand you may still be arrested at some point if you are discovered. I cannot risk revealing this to the other Aurors or the Ministry," Shacklebolt said severely.

"Of course. I have no immediate plans to reveal myself to anyone outside the Order, and I trust my location will remain as secure as the Headquarters," Snape replied placidly. He had said very little during the commotion, knowing that his words would not be trusted, and while it had been unpleasant to endure the venom of the shocked members, the steadfast defense of his supporters had created a small, warm glow in his chest. Hermione in particular had fought to clear his name, even while suffering the reprisal and rebuke for her own actions, and he found his eyes darting to her every so often, and the warmth would pulse inside him.

"I can't believe you Obliviated me," Lupin grouched, offering Snape a tentative smile while trying to scowl at Hermione.

"I can't believe no one noticed," Tonks said with some awe. "Do you know how hard it is to do a perfect Obliviate, where the subject doesn't know something is missing and no one else notices any odd behavior?"

"It was also she who completed the potion necessary to both eliminate the Dark magic from my body," Snape replied quietly, his eyes again pulled to her. They had still hidden the information about the Horcruxes (a decision Harry reluctantly agreed to after McGonagall had pointed out the danger if Voldemort knew that his links to immortality were gone), but the fact that Snape no longer bore the Mark had come out, Moody's continued insinuations that he had discovered a way to camouflage it more than enough to allow the others to deduce it was gone.

"We still can't figure out how she got sorted into Gryffindor," Fred said, a forced smile plastered on his face. He and George were smarting badly over her betrayal, her trust of Snape, a travesty to imagine any of their House willingly helping the greasy git. They wondered what Ron would have said, and sorrow at the loss of their brother mixed with the anger, an aching, volatile brew.

"Maybe the Sorting Hat knew I needed her," Harry replied a little defensively, hearing the aggrieved thread in the twin's voice, ashamed that he had felt the same.

With all the talking and moving, no one seemed to notice that there was one person who had not joined in,

who had withdrawn to a corner and stood, pale and clammy, from the moment he had spotted Moody (who, for whatever reason, had barely glanced his way the entire evening). Snape's entrance had literally made his heart stand still, terror and elation a choking miasma in his throat, and he watched in horrified silence, knowing this was exactly what his Master had hoped to learn, knowing it would please him, and dreading it all the same. Percy felt as if he had been torn wide open, his fear of being executed for learning nothing now buried under the fear of what would happen when he delivered the knowledge of Snape's whereabouts (though not the exact location, as he was not the Secret Keeper).

He could not seem to avert his eyes from the man, barely registering the amazement that rippled through the others when they learned that Snape no longer bore the Mark, and the implications that could have for him. Like a deer in headlights of a Muggle car, he could not look away, could do nothing to stop the danger rushing it at him full speed. Through the gaps in the milling crowd he watched his former professor, former ally, tried to read the closed, tight features, all the while his mind light years away, with the Dark Lord, and he was spilling his knowledge like wine. Would the Dark Lord be pleased to know, or angry that he had not discovered this before now? Would he be rewarded or punished? He felt sick, feverish, and he could not get away soon enough, and yet he did not want to leave, did not want to face his Master, his choices, himself.

Across the room, Snape was also observing the crowd, mentally noting who returned his gaze, who looked away, who faces were hostile or skeptical or simply confused. His eyes slid over Percy, noting that the boy returned his stare directly, their gazes locked, and that he was sweating and shaking. Suspicion crept across him like a fog, the sensation of something not right tickling at the edges of his brain...

It was then that the Dark Lord signaled to his servant to return and report, and Percy flinched violently, hand clutching instinctively at his sleeve, and Snape knew. He could almost smell the power clinging to the redhead, the telltale trace of black magic and dread. No surprise that his former master had recruited another spy in the midst of the Order, and he knew that his return to the ranks of Light and his newfound freedom from the Mark would be known to the Dark Lord this evening. He was surprised, however, that it was a Weasley who had proved the turncoat; though pureblood, their ideals hardly matched Voldemort's, and their loyalty to Potter and each other was nigh unbreakable, or so he would have believed. But then the Dark Lord always had known how to find the weaknesses in all men, and Percy had always been the black sheep of that clan, prim and unimaginative, fussy and self-important, and Snape knew all these traits could be twisted. He also knew that he could seal the traitor's fate by simply announcing his revelation; if the Order members did not detain him, when the Dark Lord learned that Percy had been discovered, his life would surely be forfeit.

He was tempted to do so, tempted to stride across the room and bind the traitor himself, expose his duplicity to one and all. It was a kindness compared to what the Dark Lord would do, and would help the Order. But then, could he use this knowledge to the Order's advantage, use it to supply their enemy with false information? Could they use Percy? Could he use Percy, he who knew all too well what it was like to serve two masters, please two lords, always trying, never quite fully succeeding?

He allowed nothing of his thoughts or feelings to darken his features, instead letting his eyes rest and then move away naturally, continuing his perusal of the room. From the corner of his eye he saw Percy move stiffly from the corner, approach one of his brothers (Snape never had been able to tell George and Fred apart, mostly from lack of caring) to whisper something into the other man's ear, then rapidly depart.



Another spy in their midst. He wondered what the Dark Lord's reaction would be to the news he learning this evening. Quietly he made his way over to Dumbledore's portrait, his mind heavy with thoughts he knew must be guarded carefully.

“Albus, there is something urgent we must discuss. In private.”

And as the former Headmaster of Hogwarts looked at the serious wizard before him, the twinkle drained from his eye. He nodded without a word, and they waited patiently for the meeting to disperse, each immersed in their own thoughts, each wondering what else would be necessary, and to whom the hard tasks would fall.

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A/N: Yes, I know Moody could have seen Percy's mark through the robes. He just didn't. If you think this is a MAJOR weakness, let me know and I'll tweak it somehow.

## Chapter 26: UST

A/N: Finally, some lemons. Perhaps not the fully ripened fruit, but this chapter is definitely lemon flavored. Lemonade, perhaps. Enjoy!

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Snape lay on his back, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom (the same room where he had recuperated, minus Dumbledore's portrait, Snape not relishing the thought of having the old man around constantly, nor disrupting his sleep with his incessant snoring) without seeing it, his mind a jumble of thoughts. After the meeting had disbanded, he and Dumbledore had discussed his discovery about Percy Weasley, the implications of having another spy in their midst, how it could be turned to their advantage. Dumbledore embraced the idea of using Percy to misdirect Voldemort wholeheartedly, praising Snape for his quick thinking and discretion, for not unmasking the traitor immediately. And while that had been Snape's original motivation for keeping silent, as the conversation progressed he felt a cold dread seeping into his bones, a dull, heavy weight in his throat. It was not the danger to Percy that engendered his sinking mood; in truth, he cared little for the young man beyond his new value to the Order. And it was that fact, the rational way in which he planned and schemed to use Weasley, that gradually left him feeling restless and hollow. He excused himself and went directly to his room, hoping sleep would swallow his confusion, but he was not physically tired, and his mind had better things to do than rest.

How could he be even contemplating using another in this way? As he was used? Was it better or worse that they were planning to use him without his knowledge, use him to feed the enemy misinformation, use him for their own ends, knowing that their schemes could mean his death? He remembered how much he struggled with the indecision and the soul-chilling fear when he had gone to Dumbledore, begged to be allowed to join the fight against his Lord, laid himself prostrate on the altar of his own mistakes. Even then he had resented how quickly the old man had turned him into more than just a double agent, how he had insisted he immerse himself even further into the Dark Lord's circle, make himself indispensable. Further and further he had spiraled downward, until there were times when even he was uncertain for whom he was spying, to whom his true loyalties belonged. He had lived with the bitterness and mistrust, with the constant lying and deceit, and only now that it was over did he realize the overwhelming toll it had taken on him, body and soul. Finding himself in the position to send another down that path did not fill him with even a dark pleasure, and now he lay in the pitch black night with only his thoughts for company, and the sick, sinking feeling in his chest.

Restlessly he forced his mind down another path, and now the dream forced itself back into the forefront of his consciousness. He shuddered inside at the sight of Dumbledore's cloudy, vacant eyes, and Draco's cracked voice wrung a few more drops of guilt from the battered pulp of his conscious. Then her, Hermione, and she was telling him to choose, but choose what? He had been worrying the dream over and over since the night it had come to him, and while he had settled on no conclusions, it seemed almost a relief to contemplate it now. One line in particular seemed to keep pushing its way forward, asking for attention, but what did it mean?

'And the Darkness breathes into the Light...'

It seemed to make no sense - how could dark magic help their cause? Was that even the best way to

interpret it?

'Darkness breathes into the Light...'

Was it literally breath? Or air? Who or what was the Darkness?

'Darkness breathes...'

Was it a creature, perhaps? Or a portent, that someone affiliated with the enemy would provide them with something they needed?

'Breathe...'

And then he thought of something, and he was up like a shot, slipping a robe over his head (black, of course), sliding his bare feet into the boots by his bed (not nearly as unpleasant an experience in the wizarding world, thanks to Odor Eliminators). There was a book he wished to consult, still in the basement with the majority of his belongings. With a whispered word his wand was lit, and silently he made his way through the dormant house, years of slipping through the shadows allowing him to make his way to the basement without disturbing any of the sleeping residents. It was only when he opened the door to the basement that he realized he was not the only one awake at this late hour.

Hermione was down there, a cauldron bubbling on the worktable (Skele-Gro, he deduced from the odor), her head bent over a parchment while she absently chewed on the end of a quill. Instantly he felt something soft and liquid crack open in his chest, spreading warmth through his limbs, and the competing urge to crush this strange invader was almost nonexistent. In that moment he knew at least one thing for certain; his feelings for the young woman, whatever they were, had not been altered by the removal of the Mark. If anything, they seemed stronger, more insistent, though this was, perhaps, merely because the offsetting tendencies toward irritation and self-castigation were that much weaker without the poison of the Dark Lord's power flowing through his veins.

She heard him as one of the wooden steps squeaked quietly under his boot, and her face lifted, open and clean, and he wondered if she could detect any change in him, the increased rate of his breathing, his pulse. Her frizzy brown hair was pulled up in a knot at the base of her neck, stray bits floating down into her eyes, against her cheeks. She was in Muggle clothing, loose, pale green pants and a long-sleeved black shirt with some Muggle band wailing on the front. She smiled at him as he paused on the stairs, and as she shifted to stand from the stool on which she was perched he determined that she was not wearing any supportive undergarments beneath the close-fitting shirt, and he was suddenly very aware that he wore nothing beneath his own robes, the fabric very rough against his skin.

"I would have thought this was the last place you'd want to be, after being trapped down here for weeks," Hermione said quietly, nervously rubbing at the smudges of ink on her fingers. She was very unsure of how to be around him, how to act. Should she be friendly? Cautious? Professional? The many faces and moods of Snape seemed to shuffle through her memory, and she watched him closely for any hint of which one might emerge.

"There is a text I wish to consult. If you are busy, I will retire to my room," he offered, more out of some pretense at courtesy than a genuine desire to do so. He did not wish to leave, nor did he want her to leave.

“Of course not. I hope I won’t disturb you while you work. I thought I’d get caught back up on some of the medical potions,” she replied, well aware that she was rambling slightly.

“You have never disturbed me these past weeks, therefore it seems unlikely you would do so now,” he answered smoothly, walking to the small desk he had called his own.

“I thought the meeting went well,” she said, slapping herself mentally, wondering why now, of all times, she felt compelled to fill the buzzing silence with meaningless chatter.

“As well as could be expected,” he said with a small sigh, the mention of the meeting rekindling that sinking despair, his conflicted thoughts over what should be done with the knowledge that Percy was a Death Eater.

The silence stretched between them, alive and humming, and she was now very aware of the small sounds of his movements, the quiet slide of cloth and flesh and parchment as he sat and began to shuffle things about. Why was this so uncomfortable now? She had been alone with him almost every day for weeks, and now she was on edge, something alive and squirming in her belly, and again she felt the need to speak, to do something to displace the nervous energy, the riot of strange sensations that began to dance along her skin.

“What are you working on? Perhaps I could help you,” she offered, moving to stand behind his chair, peering over his shoulder. He stiffened and stilled, and the atmosphere was stifling, oppressive, filled with an almost palpable charge that shocked them both.

She was there, right behind him, and he could smell her, soft female skin and the clean scent of *her*, and her body heat was a furnace against the skin of his back, blasting through the flimsy garments that separated them. This was not why he had gotten out of bed, to be wracked with these sensations that he did not trust or know how to deal with. He was drawn to her and repulsed by his own desire at the same time. She was so young, and innocent; contact with him would only sully her, and for once he had no wish to drag another down into the dirt of life with him. And yet he did...

His high morals were sinking in a quicksand of thoughts long repressed. As a spy and a bitter, hard man, his time and interest in seeking partners for physical recreation was limited. Sex loosened the tongue, and he had no delusions of his attractiveness to prospective partners. The height of foolishness to contemplate saddling himself with even an occasional partner, and he had long ago discovered that trading coin for pleasure left him physically satiated but mentally unsatisfied and hollow. And Death Eater meetings, despite the wild innuendos to the contrary, were much more about pain than pleasure; any orgies were conducted while he was not around, and while he certainly knew of followers of the Dark Lord whose tastes ran to violent, nonconsensual encounters, he himself had no taste for such pursuits. So he had exercised discipline, living a life that was in many ways more suited to a monk than a man, and rarely took the time to self-indulge in pity that things were as they were.

But he was a man, and felt all of the things a man feels, and now those feelings seemed brighter and louder, wild and struggling against the carefully erected walls of his control. He wanted her in a way he had not allowed himself to want another person in such a very long time; wanted to be in her presence, hear her voice, inhale the fragrance of her natural perfume. And more still, to feel her body crushed

against his, and he could taste her again in his mouth, feel the soft resilient flesh of her arms under his hands, the memory of that one kiss like a dream and yet vividly real, and she had liked it. All this washed over him, and he reeled mentally from the assault before keeling over in defeat, allowing images to flash in his mind of him and her, skin and sweat and heat, and he felt a little like he was going mad.

Puzzled by his lack of response, by the odd stillness in his body, she touched him on the shoulder. He was on his feet as if he'd been shocked, standing so close his robe brushed her cheek, and when she looked up into his face she saw that look again, the one she'd caught him with time and time again, the one that set her heart racing and her mind stuttering. But it was so much better, and worse, now, the memory of his mouth on hers only adding fuel to the fire, and her mouth was suddenly dry, and she stared at the cloth of his robe, watched the blackness rise and fall with his breath, and struggled to think.

She had liked it, his kiss, imagined it happening again with that fervent yearning so typical of youth. The things she felt even thinking about it left her breathless and confused. She felt like she was reaching out for something hidden from sight, seeking an answer without knowing the question. She wanted without understanding completely what it was she wanted, only that whatever it was left her both excited and scared, and the excitement held greater sway.

She had been kissed before, of course. Krum was the first, tentative and fumbling on her part, and his quickly escalating aggression had left her more fearful than aroused, not ready yet to go where he wanted her to. Then there was an old friend from Muggle school the summer after, both of them shy and eager, and while it had never progressed past kissing and caressing, she remembered him fondly, the tremulous rush she felt through her body, the breathless desire for more. It still warmed her to think of his hard flesh, hot even through layers of cloth, and the ripples of pleasure he gave her when his hand skimmed over her breasts and back and thighs. She would catch herself at night, longing for those sensations again, remember the feel of his skin under her hands, his mouth hot and wet against her neck, and those images fueled her nascent self-exploration before they gradually gave way to more complex fantasies with men faceless or well known, bodies pressed together intimately, giving and receiving pleasure.

But thus far her knowledge had not progressed much beyond this point, past the imaginary, the theoretical. The kiss and grope sessions of her peers were something she found distasteful, public as they were, and heavy with overwrought emotions and drama. She had very little interest in a typical school time romance with one of her mates, and the feeling seemed to be mutual. Besides, she had her friends and her studies, and she was no overwhelming beauty, and her intelligence often seemed to scare boys away. So she pined and she imagined, the odd fleeting crushes of adolescence little more than a distraction, and came of age largely innocent, though she was enough of a bookworm to be knowledgeable of sexual congress in the abstract.

Snape, however, was no schoolboy, and his interest left her both exhilarated and terrified. She did want to kiss him again, feel the lean strength of his body against hers, but she suspected that his desires went further than that, into waters uncharted, and the conflict between the urge to experience, to feel, to *know* and the normal unsure panic of contemplating this huge event left her a quivering puddle of warring impulses and emotions. Seemingly unable to move, either to leave or to push forward, she simply stood near him, staring at the cloth hiding his flesh from view and trembling.

More than an impulse this time; he was determined in that, at least. The thought to kiss her was fully formed, looking down at her as she stood so close, observing how she tried to hold herself so still, like a

prey under the gaze of a predator, her breathing a little too rapid, too shallow, for him to believe she did not feel it, too, this pull between them. But feeling it and agreeing to it were two different things, and slowly, giving her a chance to move away, he reached out and touched her, his hand cupping her cheek, drawing those large brown eyes upward, and he could see the torrent of feeling in them. But she did not look away or flinch; rather, her breath hitched just a little, and he swore he could actually see the tiny jumping pulse in her throat accelerate.

"I want to kiss you, Miss Granger. If you do not want this, tell me now," he said hoarsely, feeling the familiar surge of fear, fear of humiliation, rejection. If she turned him away now, he would never approach her again. He did not want to be turned away, not now, not by her.

And for once in his life he was not disappointed, and her small shaky nod of assent broke some element of restraint inside him. Her mouth was as tender and hot as he remembered, her thick, bushy hair surprisingly soft as he thrust one hand into the knot at the base of her neck. His other hand was around her back, and he had been right, she wore nothing beneath her top, his wandering fingers tracing the fine line of her shoulder blades, skimming her ribs, and all the while his lips were on hers, hungry, devouring, the constant, rhythmic release and press of her warm, wet mouth. He swallowed down her tiny gasps of pleasure like firewhiskey, the liquor of her burning through him, and pulled her even closer.

Her back was against the desk now, fists knotted in the cloth of his robe as she surrendered to his advance, surrendered to the rapidly encroaching haze around her senses, the tight, heavy warmth pooling low in her belly. Unconsciously she widened her stance, allowed his lean body to rest between her legs, and again she felt that overpowering sensation of excitement and trepidation when the taut, hot length of his form pressed against the softness of her own. Her breasts felt larger, swollen, trapped against the wall of his chest, and with a dizzying sense of power she realized he was aroused, she had aroused him, the proof shifting intimately against her belly.

Impossible to know, in hindsight, what things might have happened had the timer for Hermione's potion not emitted a soft chime just then. At the sound they both froze, one of his hands resting just under the hem of her shirt, tracing nonsensical patterns on the gently rounded flesh of her stomach. With a rueful smile and a deep flush she pushed away from the desk, and he moved to allow her to go to the brew.

"I'm sorry, sir," she apologized, and he was heartened by the distinctly breathless quality of her voice. "I have to add this infusion of black beetle wings, or the whole batch will be ruined."

"I am familiar with the procedure for Skele-Gro, Miss Granger," his own voice deeper, rougher than its normal timbre. "Please, finish your work."

His face was impassive, but his eyes were dark and full of something that, while she could not identify it, assured her that he was not angry at her for the interruption. It took all her considerable powers of concentration to focus on the job at hand; her mind was decidedly elsewhere, and the continuous blushes and slight shakiness of her hands suggested her mind was instead focused on a continuous replay of recent events. She was oddly devoid of directed thought or analysis, instead simply allowing the scene to start and restart over and over, the sound and smell and heat of him around her, and her heart continued to pound in her veins, her ears, a frantic, bounding rhythm of her own conflicted desire and trepidation.

She forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand, adding the proper ingredients at the proper time,

stirring the concoction just so, straining concentrated armadillo bile and trying to ignore the presence of the fascinating man behind her. Slowly her body began to calm, and she was able to complete the potion without any mishaps, bottling the foul tasting liquid and placing the labeled flask on a shelf with the rest of the medicinal brews. She squeezed her hands into fists, struggling to maintain her precarious control, and turned to look at Snape.

He was bent over his desk, scribbling furiously on some parchment, one large, heavy volume opened next to his elbow, the faded script illegible to her from her vantage point. Half annoyed, half relieved, she once again moved to stand behind him, her hand gently grasping his shoulder, but this time he did not so much as pause in his work.

“Do you need any help?” she asked gently, her stomach sinking as he shook his head sharply, his quill still scratching notations, his eyes never leaving his work.

“That will be unnecessary, Miss Granger. I must attend to this,” he replied absently. Quietly she withdrew, the former giddy, fluttering feeling dissipating with a sour, acidic twist. She had not anticipated being summarily dismissed, and it hurt like a physical blow after what had happened scant minutes ago. Thoughts were already swirling through her confused mind, what she had done wrong, what she had misinterpreted, and she turned to trudge back upstairs.

It took a minute for her words to penetrate his consciousness. He had watched her as she worked, tempted to disrupt her, pull her to him, but his own practical nature had kept his baser instincts in check, reminding him that a botched potion and wasted ingredients were not a wise price to pay for his libido. While he waited, he perused the pile of books on his desk, looking for the one he had wished to consult, and then he had opened it, began reading, plans and computations beginning to form, and very quickly he found himself engrossed, excited by the prospect he saw laid out before him, a way to vanquish the Dark Lord and end the war...

After she turned away he realized with a start that he had been rather brusque. Part of him snapped that he should just ignore the girl; was this not more important, after all? But he felt a frisson of fear that he had hurt her, spurned her, and what that could mean. He did not fully understand their relationship, what he felt or what he wanted, but he knew he did not wish to offend her, and this new, brighter bit of his personality prodded him gently, whispered that taking the time to soothe her now would pay dividends in the future.

“Miss Granger?” His voice caught her on the stairs, and her traitorous heart sped up yet again. She tried to erase the confusion and angst from her features as she turned.

“I believe I have uncovered vital information that will help us defeat the Dark Lord. I know I can count on you for assistance when the time comes. I look forward to working with you,” he said sincerely, his eyes dark and intense. His own heart accelerated its pace as he watched several emotions play across her face.

“It’s Hermione,” she said finally, and with a warm smile she bounded up the stairs.

Snape returned to his work, quickly becoming immersed once again, but for a while a tiny smile tugged at the corners of his own mouth, and he felt more at ease than he had in a long time.

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Miles away, Voldemort smiled as well, a thin, humorless contortion that would have made anyone who saw it nervous. But there was no one there to witness it, his minions having been dismissed, and he stood alone at a window high in the castle where he sought refuge, looking out over the bleak, barren landscape of the valley below.

And so the traitor had returned and was once again ensconced in that nest of simpering fools that was the Order of the Phoenix. He had invaded every corner of his spy's mind, looking for hidden scenes, a forgotten conversation, but there was nothing else to be uncovered, the entire meeting laid bare with only minimal prodding. The Order had not been harboring his one-time double agent, or at least not directly, but now they had taken him back, given him free reign to scheme away with the vestige of Dumbledore's soul that still haunted this realm from that infernal portrait. He had also learned that his suspicions were true, Snape had found a way to free himself of the Mark, but the how of it remained a mystery. Voldemort had dismissed the shaken and disoriented Percy with orders to ascertain how this had come to pass. It mattered not to him if the Order discovered the bumbling fool; he had other sources of information, though none as guileless and unobtrusive as Weasley. They could capture or kill the boy for all he cared – it would save him the trouble later.

Instead he was focused on Snape, and his old nemesis, Dumbledore, and what they would now begin planning. This was why he smiled, in his own mirthless way. They were deluding themselves, the pair of self-righteous hypocrites, and he could conceive of no way they could defeat him even now. Not with that boy as their champion, the Potter child, and when he lifted the dead body of The Boy Who Lived in triumph, all of their plans would be so much ash under his feet. He ignored the tiny creep of doubt, the cold slither of uncertainty that gripped what was left of his heart, and focused instead of what he knew of the boy, and of Dumbledore, and tried to think of another way to draw Potter out into the open, so that his victory could be complete, once and for all.

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Dawn found Snape, haggard but triumphant, locked in the drawing room, talking urgently with a portrait on the wall.

“It all makes sense now. The Dark into the Light, and a power the Dark Lord knows not. I am sure we can count on Hermione's assistance, and with her persuade Potter. As for the Betrayer...”

“Can you do this, my boy? Can you do this to him, knowing the cost?”

“You mean can I do what you have done. What you did to me.”

“I did what was necessary...”

“I know, Albus. And so will I.”

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A/N: Wow, two chapters already this month (and time enough for a third)! Of course, it helps when they get through queue in less than a day. :P Don't get used to this level of productivity...

Allow me use this space to pontificate for a moment. While I certainly enjoy a wide variety of HP fanfic, including stories in which characters have a much more sordid sexual history, that's not the path I chose here. I have a difficult time conceptualizing of the Gryffindor tower as a bastion of debauchery, so it is not my opinion that Hermione would be very experienced. I've chosen to have my Snape relatively reserved as well. I enjoy many stories with widely varying takes on this issue, but this is what works for me and, I think, for this tale.

So, enjoy a little SS/HG UST. :)

One final note - I'm relatively new to the HP fanfic world, so if there are other sites where this story would be a good fit, I probably don't know about it. Archivists are free to post and/or link to this story as long as the author information and e-mail ([sgt-rj@hotmail.com](mailto:sgt-rj@hotmail.com)) remain attached. Also, if anyone is interested in beta reading my next story (a post DH fic), I'd love to hear from you.

SGT RJ

## Chapter 27: Understanding

Later that day, Hermione and Harry made their way to the drawing room with some apprehension, their presence having been requested by a quietly grim McGonagall. Feeling like students called to the headmaster's office for some infraction, they nervously bantered about the reason behind the meeting as they walked down the stairs.

"Another attack, do you reckon?" Harry pondered.

"Maybe, she did look upset," Hermione said thoughtfully. "But why would they need to meet with us in private about that?"

Harry's face went ashen. "Maybe someone else we know died. Someone one of us is close to."

The thought seized Hermione with fear. "Like my parents," she whispered, suddenly terrified to enter that room, to face a reality with another loved one gone.

They looked at each other, and the grief of Ron's death hit them both afresh. A little over a a week now gone by, Ron's body buried in a small, rushed ceremony, the funeral guarded by Aurors and attended only by a select few. Time and enough events had intervened that the loss did not consume their every waking moment. But it was still there, raw and unhealed, and it washed over them yet again, a cold wave of emptiness and despair. The place Ron had occupied in their minds and hearts could never be filled, and right now the hole was a gaping chasm, and it seemed like it would be too easy to crawl inside and let grief consume them.

But they both knew there was too much at stake, so they continued down the stairs, knocked at the closed and warded door. It was Snape who answered, his face as closed and unpleasant looking as it had ever appeared at Hogwarts, which did nothing to ease their escalating fear. McGonagall and Dumbledore's portrait were the only other occupants, and they, too, looked serious and foreboding.

"Did something happen?" Harry asked, his voice breaking a little. "Did someone die?"

McGonagall's face softened in the face of his evident fear. "No, of course not. I'm sorry if we alarmed you, Mr. Potter, but what we are going to discuss is of great importance, and must be treated with the utmost secrecy."

"Oh." Relieved, and a little miffed that they had scared Hermione and him, he frowned at his former teachers. "So what's this all about, then?"

Snape looked at the young man coldly, trying to size him up objectively, without the cloud of past resentments or knee-jerk irritation. Taller now than he had realized, still on the thin side but beginning to fill out with the final musculature of adulthood, wiry and lean. His face, so like his father's, but with Lily's bright green, expressive eyes, and he swallowed down his impulse to cringe, to lash out and humiliate Potter before it could happen to him. He knew intellectually that this Potter had never laughed and pointed at him, never stood at the head of a group of students, jeering and mocking, while others sniggered behind their hands. But knowing this did not stop the punch he felt to look on the boy, so like the father Snape had first looked at with admiration, then jealousy, then hot, humiliated loathing.

He tried instead to focus on those eyes as he looked at Potter's face, hard as it was to see them the face of the enemy. Lily had looked at him with many emotions, he thought, friendship and affection, betrayal and cool indifference. But never with cruelty or hatred, and it occurred to him as he looked into Potter's wary but open eyes, his mother's eyes, that he did not see cruelty or hatred now, and that was a start.

"You must understand, Mr. Potter, that you can reveal nothing of this to anyone," he began, his tone cool but otherwise neutral, no trace of a sneer on his lips.

Harry began to bristle, but Hermione made a soft noise in her throat, and he swallowed his temper. He nodded once, not trusting his voice to not sound resentful or impatient at being treated like a child yet again, and listened as Hermione solemnly verbalized their understanding of the seriousness of the situation. Yep, secret plan, can't tell anyone else. Got it.

"The prophesy about you and the Dark Lord, Mr. Potter, spoke of you possessing a power that he would not know about," Snape said.

"I know about the prophesy. I also know you're the one who told Voldemort," Harry responded, and he could not stop the resentment from threading his voice. That action had led to the death of his parents, his own near destruction, had caused him to become a receptacle for a piece of Voldemort's soul. No small thing to forgive.

Perhaps it was the amount of introspection he had been doing lately; the Snape Harry thought he knew would have made no response, or would have made a caustic reference to Harry's character, Harry's mistakes. But instead the former potions master simply looked at him directly, a shadow moving in his dark eyes, and Harry actually felt a small stab of remorse for making the comment.

"None of us can change past actions, Mr. Potter, however much we may wish otherwise. I would prefer to speak of what we can do to influence future events."

When Harry nodded dumbly, Snape continued. "I know Dumbledore believed that this unknown power was the protection your mother bestowed upon you when she gave her life to protect you. This is almost certainly what allowed you to survive the Killing Curse and your initial encounters with the Dark Lord, but that power was neutralized when he used your blood to regenerate himself."

"I know. He can touch me now without pain," Harry recalled with a small shudder, remembering his confrontations with Voldemort in the cemetery, at the Ministry.

"Indeed. I believe I can give you a new power, Mr. Potter, another that the Dark Lord will not suspect, and will give you a distinct advantage."

Harry carefully turned Snape's words over in his mind, trying to find the part that would cause the serious expression on McGonagall's face. "This is a good thing, right?"

Snape and McGonagall exchanged pointed looks, and Harry scowled. "Look, it's obvious something about this worries you. I can handle it, whatever it is."

Something suspiciously like humor glinted in Snape's eyes. He had predicted almost this exact reaction from Potter, and he was pleased to see he was correct. His bravery would make it easier for him to acquiesce when he was tempted to balk. "I believe you are capable of doing this, Mr. Potter, but that does not make it easy, or pleasant."

"Does this have something to do with the potion you were researching last night?" Hermione asked.

Snape turned his gaze to her, and there was an odd intensity to it that made her shiver, though his tone of voice was identical to when he was speaking with Harry. "Yes. I recalled an obscure potion that was once utilized quite regularly, most frequently in Dark rituals. It is called *Hostilis Spiritus, Enemy's Breath*."

"You want me to participate in the Dark Arts?" Harry asked, his heart sinking a little. He was suddenly back in the Forbidden Forest, watching from inside his own head as he threatened his friends, and he felt that dark seed inside of him welcome the opportunity to flourish.

"Not precisely, Mr. Potter. I will brew the potion; your participation will not be required for that. However, it will be necessary for you to consume the potion in order for it to be effective."

Harry swallowed audibly, trying to focus on the idea that McGonagall and Dumbledore wouldn't ask him to do something wrong or evil. "What sort of potion is it?"

"It incorporates a portion of an enemy's magic. Properly done, it renders the drinker immune to magical attack by the person from whom the magic was taken, at least for a short period of time."

"I have to take part of...of him, back inside me?"

McGonagall saw how Harry paled at the thought, and rushed to reassure him. "It is a temporary effect, Mr. Potter. Voldemort will have no power over you through the potion."

Harry nodded without meaning, lost inside his own head, his own fear of following the wrong path, of becoming someone angry and twisted and bitter, someone like...Snape. He knew the potential was there, knew it from the moment he heard the Sorting Hat whispering in his ear, telling him it could see his ambition, his thirst to prove himself, and with a sudden flash of insight he understood that this drive was part of reason he was so blind to the opinion of others, why he felt slighted when someone challenged his perception of reality. If he was wrong he was smaller, lesser, and he had spent so much of his childhood in the shadows that it felt like he was constantly striving to be seen and heard. Ironic, really, when he considered that he was literally a household name in the magical world.

He took a deep breath, tried to face the others without the gnawing fear evident in his face. "So this is the plan, then? I guess...wait, how are you going to get a part of Voldemort's magic? Is that why this is a dark potion, you have to try to steal another's magic? Is that even possible?"

Snape couldn't resist retorting in a fashion very reminiscent of his classroom demeanor. "Obviously it is possible, Mr. Potter, otherwise the potion would never have been created. Or do you believe enemies routinely go around donating a piece of their magical essence?"

Harry, too, spoke spontaneously. "Well, since I doubt anyone here wants to walk up to Voldemort and ask,

how do you propose we solve this little dilemma?"

"We already have it, don't we?" Hermione interjected.

Snape favored her with a tiny smile, pleased she had deduced this. Harry merely looked confused. "We do? Is it part of one of the Horcruxes?"

"No, it's the Mark. That...stuff that came out, that I collected in the jar." Hermione looked none too thrilled with the idea, having watched the vile, somehow sentient *thing* spill from Snape. Harry looked even less so, considering he was the one who would have to consume a liquid containing essence of evil as a primary ingredient.

"What are the risks?" Harry asked pointedly.

Snape crossed his arms against his chest, frowning slightly. "That is difficult to quantify. Again, this potion has not been utilized in many years, and given its association with the Dark Arts, it is difficult to ascertain if what has been recorded is myth or fact." The myths were spectacular, though; the draught, prepared correctly, rendered one almost invincible, at least against attack from a specific foe, a handy thing indeed when dueling was more common. But the potion had a reputation for instability, which superstition attributed to the rites often performed to obtain an enemy's magic, and there were even accounts of the drinker's own magical force being "tainted" by a foe's more powerful essence. At the very least, the potion had fallen out of favor after the Dark rituals needed to steal another's magic had rebounded once too often with disastrous results, and although practitioners of the Dark Arts sometimes spoke of reviving its usage, there were ultimately safer ways to protect oneself and outmatch an enemy.

"But I believe the danger to be minimal," he continued, slightly amused at the thinly veiled skepticism on Potter's face. "A great deal of the danger was due to the necessity of stealing a bit of another's magic, which we will not have to do in this instance. The power was donated freely, though not for this purpose." A tiny smile actually did quirk the corners of his lips as he contemplated his former Master's reaction if he knew of their plans. To say he would be enraged was an understatement.

Harry was mulling everything over in his mind, trying to make all the pieces of the puzzle fit. It helped calm the Snitches currently circling loops through his gut, although one felt like it had lodged in his trachea. "So you make this potion, and I drink it and fight Voldemort. How do we make sure Voldemort is there, and how do we take care of Nagini? The snake has to be killed first, otherwise this whole plan won't work."

McGonagall's face darkened, and she motioned to two armchairs situated by the fireplace, motioning for Harry and Hermione both to sit. This was the part they had dreaded; Dumbledore had even advocated keeping this information secret, but a surprisingly vehement protest by Snape, bolstered by McGonagall's own reluctance, had convinced the older wizard that they had to tell them the entire plan. Snape in particular had become shockingly angry (though he contained it well) at the idea of more secrets and schemes and plots within plots. But though they had agreed, none had relished the idea of explaining everything, and now faced with it, the mood in the room dimmed.

"We have discovered a spy within the Order of the Phoenix. We intend to use him to kill Nagini. Snape will brew a potion fatal to serpents and use the spy to transmit it to the creature. It is much easier to

destroy a Horcrux within a living being – kill the being, and the Horcrux, too, is dead.”

Both Harry and Hermione wore nearly identical expressions of shock and dismay. A spy in the Order. They had heard whispers, concerns, even speculated about it amongst themselves. The timing of the Death Eater attacks was highly suspect; they seemed to know when Harry was going to be out and about, and where he was going, and given his relative seclusion at the Headquarters, that strongly suggested that Voldemort had a source of information close to the Order. But they had not wanted to believe it, none of them had, and the truth of it clawed its way inside, a cold, cruel thrust.

“Who is it?” Harry asked hoarsely, hands curling into fists in his lap. He didn’t want to know, but he had to. A spy, one of their own, and the dead lay piled at his feet. Arthur and Fleur and Hagrid and Ron. Especially Ron. Blood on his hands.

McGonagall had drawn her chair close to his, and leaned forward now, looming large in his field of vision. "You must promise to do nothing, to say nothing. We cannot risk alerting him that we know. We would lose this opportunity, and possibly the chance to end the war."

His green eyes were dark, stormy, and his composure was held by a ragged, fraying thread. But holding it was, and he nodded with harsh, jerky movements. "I understand. I do. Tell me, please." Strained and dark, his voice, but it still held the edge of reason, and they had decided to do this, and there seemed to be no turning back now.

"Mr. Potter, the spy is Percy Weasley."

He thought he could not be further shocked but he was wrong, and he was on his feet in a violent, explosive motion, face ashen and stomach a lurching pit of denial. "That's not possible," he croaked. "One of the Weasleys...it's just not possible."

"I understand this is difficult to hear, but I'm afraid it is true." The words barely seemed to penetrate, and he pressed the palms of his hands against his forehead, trying to gain some sense of footing in a world that had clearly spun completely out of his ken. First Hagrid and Ron were killed, then Dumbledore revealed Snape's true, honorable colors, and now a Weasley had joined forces with Voldemort? Nothing made sense anymore, nothing, and he felt as if he might implode from the wrongness of it all.

"How did you find out?" Hermione's broken question filtered through the haze, and he turned wild eyes to her.

"I observed Mr. Weasley at the last order meeting. He was Summoned during that time." Snape's answer was soft, restrained, and it prompted Harry to probe further.

"You saw the Mark?" Harry asked desperately.

Snape's eyes were serious and wary. "No, Mr. Potter, I did not. But I did observe Mr. Weasley grasp his left forearm, and his fear."

Relief flooded Harry, warm and giddy. This was all a mistake, a misunderstanding! "Then you don't know. Even if there is a spy, you don't know it's Percy."

"I'm afraid it's the only thing that makes sense. He knew about the wedding, and the funeral, and he asked about Snape. He has been asking questions of Order members for weeks now. I thought it seemed odd, but after the death of his father I just thought..." McGonagall could go no further; whatever she had thought of Percy's sudden interest in the war, in the fine details of the Order, she had never suspected this. No one had, or could, not from a Weasley. She felt as if she had failed him, his family, the whole world - one of her own (and all the Gryffindors were her own) had betrayed them all.

"But it could be someone else. You could have misinterpreted what you saw." Stubbornly he clung to that hope, even as his insides were sinking further and further.

Snape's impatience began to rise. "Even were that so, the risk to attempt this is minimal. If we are incorrect, an innocent garden snake in his vicinity may die, but nothing more. If we are correct, the final Horcrux is eliminated, and the Dark Lord is mortal."

"And what happens to Percy?" Hermione's voice was a little too high, shrill.

He had a hard time meeting her eyes then, and she could have sworn she saw guilt, regret, flit across his dour features. "If it is discovered that Percy is responsible for Nagini's death, willing or no, his life is forfeit."

A horrified silence settled on them all, the ticking of the clock in the room loud, a pounding rhythm that seemed to match the throb in Harry's temples. "We can't," he whispered, his mind oddly blank. "I can't."

"Mr. Potter...Harry, this may be our best opportunity. In war sacrifices must be made. If Percy is the spy, he has betrayed us all. He made his choice, Harry. We are only using him to stop Voldemort. If he is...it will have been for the greater good." McGonagall sounded more than a little desperate herself, desperate to believe the truth of her own words.

But Harry was shaking his head, his face ashen, contorted, but set. "There's got to be another way. Can't we...why don't we try to turn Percy?"

It was Snape who sighed this time, a more exasperated than distressed sound. "Do you think we did not consider this, Potter? Weasley would not last a minute in the presence of the Dark Lord as a double agent. Planting a poison on him might result in his death, but sending him in with the intention in his mind of killing Nagini would guarantee it."

"But you survived for years, you could teach him enough Occlumency to complete the mission..."

Snape laughed, a harsh, incredulous sound. "Teach Weasley Occlumency? As obnoxious and arrogant as I found you, Potter, you have far more talent than that boy, and you failed to grasp even the basics after months of lessons. I began studying Occlumency my second year at Hogwarts, and even then I would have been discovered if I had been forced to have regular contact with the Dark Lord when I first turned. Trying to turn Weasley, then teach him a skill it takes years to learn at even a basic level before sending him on a mission to kill the Dark Lord's pet is tantamount to asking him to commit suicide. Really, Potter, I thought you were fond of the Weasley family," he concluded with a sarcastic sneer eerily reminiscent of his days as Harry's potions professor. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hermione's expression,

disappointed and a little affronted, and groaned internally.

Harry was pacing the floor now, still shaking his head almost frantically. "But if he knew, he could make sure Nagini came into contact with the poison. And if he could learn just enough Occlumency to hide his intention for long enough to get out, or to activate a Portkey, he wouldn't have to die. But even if...at least it would be his choice. He would have rejoined the Order, and he would know the risks and make the choice to take the risk."

"And if we try to turn him and he refuses? We will have lost our link to the Dark Lord's encampment. Or worse, he could feign giving us his allegiance and reveal our plans to the Dark Lord, and then he would know, or guess, that we have learned about the Horcruxes. Our advantage would be gone, for he could make more, and his immortality and victory would be virtually assured!"

"And if we do this to him, what does that make us? We set him up to be killed? I can't...I won't do that to him. No matter what he's done, I can't..." And the guilt clogged his throat, all the things he thought he should have done to save others, like Cedric in the graveyard, Arthur at the wedding, and Ron at Hogwarts. Blood on his hands, and he could not add more, not knowingly. He knew intellectually that there was nothing he could have done to prevent the deaths of the others, the ones that haunted his dreams, but he could do something to prevent this.

"I agree with Harry," Hermione chimed in suddenly, her tone sharp like flint. Snape looked at her with naked surprise, mentally flinched at the steel he saw in her eyes, and the anger. "We have to give Percy the choice."

"This discussion is pointless. We have already decided on a course of action. The risk of alerting Weasley to our plan is too great." Snape's own voice was hard now, and his own ire burned brightly in his eyes.

"And I said I won't allow it. You can't force me to take the potion, you know. If you don't tell Percy, give him the choice, I won't take the potion."

"Mr. Potter!"

"Then you are a fool, and the Dark Lord will have your corpse as his trophy..."

"Harry." Dumbledore's voice cut through the rabble, and Harry turned to face the former headmaster's portrait, shaken but defiant. "Do you truly understand what you are asking? If we don't take the opportunity before us now, the ramifications for the entire wizarding community could be irreversible."

"What made you decide to give Snape a second chance, sir?" Harry asked, and again the room feel silent, but this had a different feel to it. Shocked, yes, but not in disbelief, but rather at the bravery (or audacity, depending on your point of view) in asking the question, and the corollary being drawn.

"The situation is not the same here, Harry. Severus came and offered his services to us."

"But you still trusted him. Whatever he said then, you trusted him, gave him a second chance. And you were right to do it, he's proven his worth time and time again." The silence only deepened, Hermione's mouth literally parting in an astonished gasp upon hearing Harry praise Snape.



"It must have been a difficult choice, all the same," Harry continued, looking directly at the older wizard as he spoke, the man he once looked at with hatred and disgust. "You had to know that if you were wrong about him, it could mean catastrophe."

Dumbledore looked stunned. "While that's certainly true, Harry, it's not the same..."

"Not the same, no. But similar. And I don't know if Percy has joined Voldemort, but if he has...it can't be too late for him. I know him, sir, and so do you," he said, gesturing toward McGonagall and Snape. "He's always been a bit of a prat, sure, but evil? He just needs us to give him another chance."

Snape's mouth was a harsh slash across his face, conflicted thoughts in his head. Complimenting words from the mouth of a Potter was something he would never have guessed to hear in his lifetime, but the boy was still a sentimental fool, and blinded by his damnable Gryffindor loyalty. Hermione, too, who had walked to stand by Harry in support, her own face stricken but set, and he felt something inside wrench painfully at the sight. Why must they complicate things, and after he had finally resolved himself to do what must be done?

"I must be the one to ascertain his veracity," he demanded finally. "If I am not satisfied, we will turn him over to the Aurors immediately. We cannot risk him returning to the Dark Lord. And I will use Legilimency if I so choose."

McGonagall and Dumbledore both seemed to mull it over briefly before both nodded their heads in agreement. "It will complicate matters, but perhaps Harry is right," Dumbledore remarked, though neither looked particularly pleased.

A tense, uncertain silence settled over them all. Snape could not stop himself from glaring at Potter, a roiling, unsettled sensation swirling in his chest. Damn him, and his irksome, noble sentiment! All of their lives could hang in the balance, and the boy wanted to take the high road? His scowl deepened, and for the first time since the Mark was removed he found his mood was truly dark, irate, and part of him embraced it hungrily. So familiar to feel little more than contempt and anger flowing through his veins, to think sourly of wrongs and slights. He barely heard Potter's voice through the dour, grey haze around him.

"Is that all, sir? May we leave?" Speaking to Dumbledore, of course; the brat hadn't called him 'sir' in a long time.

Then the door was closing with a soft click and he realized he hadn't talked to Hermione about the potion. With an aggrieved noise he followed the pair of teenagers into the hall, catching them just before they made their way up the stairs, their heads already bent together, voices lowered as they conversed.

"May I see you a moment, Miss Granger?" Snape asked as politely as his mood would allow. Her own nod was curt, and her eyes flashed darkly as she patted Harry on the arm, stumped past Snape, and entered the small library just across from the main sitting room, the room that had been the favorite meeting place for her, Harry, and Ron. She felt a lump ache in her throat as she saw their three chairs, still drawn together in a circle, and she swallowed it down ruthlessly.

He entered the room behind her and spoke without preamble. "The Hostilis Spiritus potion is quite

complex. There are steps in the brewing that are nearly impossible to complete with only one individual. I therefore request you assist me.”

Her response was just as sparse, and the cold flint of her voice further compounded his bitter mood, and the unsettled feeling inside. “Of course, sir. Is that all?”

“I suppose it is futile to request you talk some sense into Potter?”

“Quite, seeing as how I agree with him.”

The anger was like poison, spreading without check, and it spewed forth in his words, his hard, disdainful voice. “Then I was wrong about you all along, and you are a fool.”

She felt the thrust of his words hit home, felt something soft inside flinch and harden. It was hard to believe that just a half a day had passed since she had kissed this man, this callous, unfeeling creature who could casually plan to use another, send another to his doom. What did that say about her, that she was drawn to him, someone who held no reservations about sacrificing an unwitting accomplice in the name of practicality, necessity?

“Believe what you like, *sir*,” she replied through gritted teeth. “But at least my conscience is clear.”

His hand closed on her upper arm like an iron band. “Do not use that tone with me,” he hissed, ignoring the spark of fear in her eyes. “And do not presume to hold the moral high ground on this. Your stubborn refusal to see things as they are, not as you wish them to be, may cost hundreds of lives. You have no idea of the sacrifices necessary to win this war.”

“I know that it isn’t right to use another human being like you would have used Percy. How could you?” she blurted suddenly, the indignant sorrow winning out over the anger, her voice suddenly raw, anguished. “He would be killed, you know he would...”

“Yes, he probably would! He would die by the Dark Lord’s hand, and the world would be a better, safer place because of it. How can you fail to grasp this?”

She wrenched her arm away from his grasp. “I understand perfectly well. How can you fail to grasp that Harry and I cannot send him to his death, not like that? He’s...Percy, a Weasley, Ron’s b-brother. We lived with him in Gryffindor tower, spent summers with him at his house, how could we betray him like that?” It was all so mixed up in her head; Percy with his airs, so unlike the other Weasley boys but one of them all the same, and Ron was dead and Percy had joined the Death Eaters and nothing made sense any more. She only knew that neither she nor Harry could send him blindly to his fate, that they had to rescue him, save him, bring him back into the fold. Something they could not do for Ron, cold and dead in the ground.

“You choose to see it as a betrayal. I would remind you it is he who has betrayed you, and all of us. You owe him nothing.”

She fought hard against the tears she could feel burning in her eyes, sick of crying, not wanting to do so in front of this cold, unfeeling man. “It’s so easy for you, isn’t it?” she said thickly, turning away so he could

not see her struggle.

There was a long silence, and she was surprised by his reply, by the emotion she could now hear suffused with the anger. "You believe this is easy for me?"

She faced him again, tried to look beyond the hard set of his jaw, the stern, unyielding set of his posture. "Isn't it?"

The anger was slipping through his fingers like water, leaving the unforgiving churn of other feelings, ones that left him choked and numb. A lifetime of habit in holding his tongue battled with the urge to spill himself out to this girl, this woman who had insinuated herself into his head, his life. It both galled and elated him, and the guilt and self-hatred were eating at him still, and above all else he wanted someone, anyone, *her* to understand this, to understand him. No one ever had, for such a long time; so easy to dismiss with a simple phrase, Death Eater, spy, and the necessity of holding everything in left him alone. And in his rebirth as neither spy nor Death Eater, belonging only to himself, whole and entire, he did not want to be alone. He wanted to be understood.

"No," he replied simply, and his control relaxed for a moment, allowing his conflicting emotions to be displayed, bare and wild on his harsh features. "I find myself becoming something I had no wish to become. I know all too well what it is to be used for the greater good, and I resented it even as I acknowledged the necessity. And now I must ask it of another? Become the self-righteous puppeteer? I hate Weasley for his weakness in turning to the Dark Lord, and I hate myself for doing what is necessary. But it is necessary, and what is my self-loathing, or even Weasley's life, in comparison to the suffering and death of hundreds, even thousands? I never wanted this choice, or this responsibility. I never wanted to be Dumbledore, and I would never have wished another into my role as double agent, willing or no. If there were another path I would take it, and gladly. But there is none, and so I do what I must, but I do not like it, and it is not easy."

His words sunk into her consciousness, gave her pause. She had never considered the situation from his point of view, had not been able to see beyond the injustice of using Percy. "I didn't realize," she said softly, slightly ashamed that she had assumed him callous, unfeeling.

He resumed his normally closed expression, but there was a little softness around the mouth. He was tempted to give an acidic retort to her admission of ignorance, but it was only a small temptation, easily thwarted by a competing urge to connect with her. "And I was less than sympathetic to your attachment to Mr. Weasley. I failed to anticipate how the news of his defection, and the possible danger to his life, would impact you and Potter."

It was awkward now between them, the evaporated anger still contaminating the exchange. Only moments before Hermione had been berating herself for feeling something for the uncaring man, and now she was berating herself for failing to see the position he had been placed in. And Snape, torn between his conviction that he had been right to advocate using Percy and his disgust in contemplating doing so, his belief that Potter and Hermione were fools to be so swayed by friendship and his grudging admiration that it was so. Mixed with this was his strong desire to keep her respect, her trust, her affection, and for a moment he rather missed the stark simplicity of his prior life. Miserable and dangerous, yes, but at least not so confusing and complicated.

"I don't know how to do this," he admitted quietly.

"Do what?"

"Be honest with another. Open. Share...thoughts. Feelings." Saying the words made him intensely uncomfortable, and now it was he who turned, shifting his body away from her, staring at the shelves of books, knowing that the curtain of his hair would hide his face from her scrutiny.

"Oh." She could appreciate the difficulty here; they were thrown together with such disparate roles, and neither knew exactly how to act, how to be. Or what the other wanted or expected. Each felt like they were walking in a minefield, never knowing when the next step might result in disaster. "If it makes you feel any better, I don't know how to do this, either."

He turned his head to look at her, allowed his eyes to reflect the wry humor that bubbled up in his throat. "It does not. But I thank you all the same."

Uncertain silence again, and she cleared her throat. "I should talk to Harry. He'll...he'll be okay. And I really do think Percy will come around if we just give him a chance."

He sighed, feeling the gloom settling around him. "I am less than optimistic, but I will give him that chance." The same chance someone once gave him, a chance he had begged for. A chance that saved his life and ruined it all in one fell swoop.

Her approach took him by surprise, her hands cool and soft on his cheeks. She drew his head down and kissed him gently. Not a kiss of passion, but full of meaning all the same, and her eyes were bright when she withdrew, an embarrassed but pleased blush adding color to her face.

"Thank you," she murmured, and then was gone, and though his thoughts continued their dark turn, the gloom around his mood lightened a little, and a small smile slipped out.

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A/N: We may actually be moving toward the end here. I can see it, a dim light at the end of the tunnel, but it seems to be getting closer... :P

## Chapter 28: Two Steps Forward, One Back

Their decision weighed heavily on them all, and it was difficult for other Order members not to notice the cloud of doubt that hung over McGonagall, Harry, and Hermione. Even Snape was troubled; he simply hid it better, or those observing cared too little for his state of mind to notice the subtle differences that revealed his internal dialogue to those who cared to see. He could not shake the sense of futility he felt when he pictured speaking with Weasley, trying to convince him to turn back from the dark path he had elected to follow. He knew all too well the power the Dark Lord held over his subjects, and it was his opinion that the young man had neither the strength of will nor courage in the face of abject terror to defy his new master.

Then again, neither did the two young Gryffindors have the strength to send Weasley to his doom as an unwitting pawn, and while he thought that capitulation to Potter and his whims had been a nauseatingly common occurrence, he also understood, at least on a theoretical level, their reluctance to stoop into the bloody fray. It was a hard thing, to knowingly send another to certain death, to trade lives like Chocolate Frog cards. As hard as they were for their age, as much as they had seen and done, they were not hard enough to look at the face of someone they knew, seal his fate, and not flinch.

But was this a bad thing? It made things more complicated, yes, and he believed that the sacrifice was worth the price, but they had not lived the life he had. Theirs had been easy (by comparison), empty of such shattering moral dilemmas, and he had a difficult time wishing enough violence into their lives to give them the proper perspective. Well, perhaps into Potter's. Hermione, though, he preferred as she was, infuriating innocence and all.

Still, he couldn't help but show his exasperation when Hermione confided in him the next day, sharing, with no small amount of shame, that she and Harry both were experiencing doubts of their own.

"I mean, if it's true...it could have been him that night at Hogwarts. He could have murdered his own brother." The very thought filled her with disgust and rage, and she envisioned Percy, a cold, haughty sneer on his face as he aimed at his own flesh and blood, laughing as Ron crumpled to the ground, and her hands shook so badly that she had to set down the pestle she was using to grind calcified dragonfly wings.

"It could have been," Snape replied carefully, not wishing to anger her further, still a bit uncertain of the best way to act around her without incurring her temper. Denigrating anyone from the House of Gryffindor seemed a bad decision if he wanted to remain in her good graces.

"If he did, and we lose this chance...I don't want to regret not doing everything in my power to bring Voldemort down. Neither does Harry."

He laid down his own knife after wiping it clean with a soft cloth – horned slug viscera had a nasty habit of solidifying into nearly impenetrable goo if left to sit. "I, too, wish to end this, and quickly. Dispatching Nagini will allow us to do so, and Percy Weasley is in the best position to bring this about, wittingly or no."

Her eyes glittered dangerously. "I know, and part of me feels like it's exactly what he deserves. No, it's less than what he deserves, if he had any hand in the attacks."

He frowned down at her. “Surely you know he did. How else would the Death Eaters have known where and when to strike?”

“I know. We know. It’s just...there’s got to be some sort of explanation.”

“For him betraying you? Potter? The Order? For providing information that resulted in the deaths of his own father and brother?” Snape could not prevent the ringing, accusatory tone from coloring his voice.

Her eyes flashed again, but it was more sad and desperate than angry. “No explanation will ever be enough,” she said softly, and the grief and guilt and rage were a horrible, stagnant pool inside her chest. Nothing would ever be enough, really. Not with Ron in the ground.

“If you both feel this way, then can we dispense with this ridiculous farce and simply proceed with the plan as before? Weasley need never know we are on to him, and his death, if it comes to that, will not have been in vain. Think of the others who may die if the conflict is prolonged.” He tried to appeal to her rational side, and a thin thread of pleading wound its way around his words. He was tired of fighting and hiding and preparing for the worst. So tired.

“I know, and we’ve both been torn up about the whole thing,” she responded a little peevishly. “But he’s...he’s Percy, dammit! I know it doesn’t make sense but we can’t...I can’t...I don’t know that I’d ever be able to forgive myself if we didn’t at least give him a chance. And I know that’s selfish, we’re risking lives for the sake of our consciences...” And she couldn’t finish the thought, because there was nothing more to say. It was selfish, maybe, but the alternative felt so wrong that neither she nor Harry, as furious and vengeful as they had become while they talked, could really fathom going through with the alternative.

Snape sighed softly and examined the agitated witch in front of him. Naïve and foolish, yes, but once he had rethought the situation, he realized her reaction (and Potter’s as well) should have been anticipated. And, loathe though he was to admit such a thing freely, he rather enjoyed her less cynical outlook on things, because he enjoyed her, and she would not be the person she was without that lingering touch of innocence.

“I understand,” he said simply, his voice neutral, his eyes soft. “I do not agree, but I do understand.”

She smiled at him then, and he was somewhat surprised when he did not feel a corresponding pulse of warmth in his chest, that small frisson of pleasure he had become accustomed to when she smiled, or looked at him just so. Upon further analysis, he realized that this was because he had felt lighter, happier ever since she had entered the lab. He groaned internally, uncertain which reaction was the more damning.

The next few days felt like some sort of bizarre torture. Snape was accustomed to torment, to pain and loneliness and misery, knew the various subtle varieties of grinding ache and burning agony and every shade in between. Being tormented by the slowly building twist of desire, though, was out of his ken. Again, he found himself working with her daily as they prepared the ingredients for Hostilis Spiritus, her company a soothing and yet agitating presence on the edge of his awareness, but her ability to distract him had increased tenfold. He could not stop looking at her, and his mind insisted on replaying a rather detailed sense memory of her mouth under his as the most inopportune times. Worse yet, he kept catching her looking at him, a shy but fierce expression in her eyes, or with a dreamy, glazed gaze and flushed cheeks, and he very nearly sliced his thumb to the bone imagining what she was thinking about. Him, he

was sure, doing things to her that made his pulse race madly and adjust his trousers discretely.

But it was long hours preparing for a potion this complicated, this delicate, and then there were the hours he spent in the evening researching the rituals surrounding it, determined to ensure there were no surprises. It seemed like she was always near by but too far away, separated by the necessity of work or his discomfort with displaying any sort of emotion without complete privacy. Ironically, his reestablishment within the Order had removed a great deal of that, as now members seemed to find excuses to pop into the basement, if only for a minute or two, to check on the lab. Hermione was of the opinion that they were trying to catch Snape in some sort of compromising position; she was only too aware that she would have been more than happy to be in a compromising position with him, though she knew that wouldn't be at all what the snoops were expecting to find.

So their interactions seemed confined to the mundane, work and research, but underneath their public façade emotions and fantasies simmered to the boiling point. Never before had she been so aware of the timbre of his voice, the cold, sneering sarcasm removed and leaving something dark and heavy, smooth and yet rough, deep and hypnotic. Never before had he been so aware of the fine, heady aroma of her, clean skin and flowery hair products and warm tang of her own scent. They stole glances and the occasional touch of hands, a brush of her lips on his cheek as he sat hunched over his desk, pouring over notes and texts, and the stoked fire raged under the surface, waiting only for a strong gust to cause the flames to flare. It came late one evening as they walked up the stairs to their respective rooms, the first night Snape did not remain in the basement until the hours after midnight. He could find no more useful information, and they discussed their plans for the morrow as they climbed the staircase quietly. It was late enough that some had already retired, though Harry and the Weasley twins were still up, sitting in the drawing room by a roaring hearth while they caught up on each others lives. The twins were more somber now, the deaths of their kin and the war and their business all sobering effects, and they usually spent the night at the Burrow, bringing their grieving mother some comfort with their presence and their capers.

“I still don't see why it must be me that learns the incantations in Gaelic,” she groused, though not with any true ire. In truth, she was thrilled to have such a challenging task, and his confidence in her still had the power to make her feel a little giddy, the approval of a teacher something she had striven for all during her time in school.

“As I stated earlier, the infusion that must take place at the same time as the spell is extremely complicated. There are full Potion Masters who would hesitate before attempting it. While your skill with potions is considerable, the spell is, on the whole, the more appropriate use of your talents at that stage.” His voice was even, but warmth crept in without his conscious intention, and it would have been obvious to even a casual observer that his praise of her was sincere.

They reached the door to her bedroom, the hall only dimly lit, and he was suddenly acutely aware of being alone with her, the rest of the house abed or otherwise uncaring, and his hands itched to touch her. The atmosphere between them was shifting quickly, their roles as workmates dissolving, leaving nothing but their individually uncertain selves, and the smoldering fire.

“So we'll go over everything tomorrow, then, make sure we have it perfect before we start the brewing,” she breathed, a little hoarsely, not immune to the sudden shift in the air. She was staring up at him, watching his face in the shadows, eyes fixated on his mouth. She could almost feel it against her own. She wanted to feel it against her own.

“Yes,” he replied, fascinated by the creeping blush he could just make out as it rose up her neck, to her cheeks. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, and his imagination snared the picture with delight, effortless conjuring a vision of that appendage licking elsewhere, on him, much lower, and he felt as if he could not take much more of this hideously slow torture, this dance of being near her and feeling but not doing. Why was part of him still resisting, when he *wanted* her, and here was an opportunity laid out as if by fate? Something wild and heated was uncoiling in his abdomen, and it seemed imperative now to get her alone, alone in the night with him.

“Your room,” he offered, his long arm reaching over her shoulder to push the door open, revealing the unlit confines beyond. Like the maw of some great beast the darkness loomed behind her, waiting to snare its prey, waiting to pull them inside where prying eyes could not see and nothing else dare intrude. His eyes seemed to blaze in the shadows, his voice tripping over her nerves, and her skin rippled with gooseflesh, first cold and then hot, and her own voice fled, leaving her to nod mutely and step into the dark.

He was right behind her, the door closed and the lamp ignited quickly, and she could hear her own breathing in the thick, pressing air. Wordlessly he stood by the bed, gaze feral, and held out his hand to her. Trembling, she answered with her own hand, and he pulled her into his embrace.

Slow, soft, hungry kisses rained down on her mouth, her neck, like rain, and thinking was sluggish and reacting was instinctual. She tried to respond in kind, demonstrate her own mounting need, her hands caressing the nape of his neck, her lips moving against his own. She gasped when he nipped gently at the tender flesh of her neck, and the sound seemed to galvanize him, his mouth again on hers, his tongue sliding and invading, and his kisses flowed through her veins, wreaking havoc. She felt tight and languorous and excited and just a little afraid, her emotions on overload, her body threatening to join them, and she clung to him tightly, a little overwhelmed but determined to ride the current onward.

He could not seem to stop kissing her, the feel of her lush, pliant lips under his, her shy but unequivocal responses, the tiny, throaty noises she was making all too intoxicating to relinquish. Hot, her skin under his palms as he slid his hands under the loose Muggle shirt she wore, the flesh of her neck under his tongue and teeth as he left his mark, his own blood as she pressed against him. He felt almost reckless, desperate, like a youth getting his first taste of pleasure. Perhaps it was as simple as the fact that it had been so long since he had touched another in this manner, longer still since another had touched him without the inducement of coin, and the desire burned through him like a fever.

Impatiently he tugged at her shirt, up, off, the flimsy, silky material of her undergarment following immediately thereafter, and her breasts filled his hands, hot and soft, the peaks darker and richer, tightening under his fingers, his mouth. Her hands slid through his hair, clutching, grasping, and the high soft cries from her throat went straight to his groin.

She felt like she was falling, unbalanced, ungrounded, but his body and his mouth were anchoring her, and she closed her eyes as the sensations pulsed and flowed. This was that summer with the Muggle boy but more, much more, no slow, tentative moves or trembling hands on his part. His touch was confident and deft, and bright light seemed to flicker on the inside of her eyelids, sparkles that burst as his lank hair knotted in her hands. There, yes, and all the tittering conversations she had ever overheard in the common room, the insipid nattering of her housemates and their illicit, intimate activities, had not prepared her for



these feelings, the hot, wet cavern of his mouth closing and sucking on the erect flesh of her breast, the expanding, aching throb in her abdomen.

He pulled away from her then, face a mask of intensity and something else, wild and fierce. Without preamble he pulled his own robes off, his boots kicked impatiently aside, and he stood before her in only his pants, the soft cotton tented over his straining flesh. His eyes continued to rove over body, her nude upper body painted golden by the lamplight, the flush spreading over her pale skin. Good, she looked so good, pink and rosy and blushing, and the need was like a drug, heightening certain things, her scent, her sounds, while dimming others. The outside world had vanished, gone, the faint noises of the house and its occupants less real, without power.

The heat of his bare skin against hers as he pulled her once again into his arms was a shock. This was new for her, the press of naked flesh, and the part of her mind that wasn't completely addled with spiraling sensation noted the softness of his skin over hard muscle and sinew and bone, the wiry hair on his chest against her palms as she allowed them to roam shyly over his body. A moment's disorientation and then she was prone on the bed, the length of his body pressed against hers, and again she could only whimper incoherently into his mouth. Gods, she could *feel* him, hot and erect against her hip, and again there was a swirl of excitement and trepidation and that awful, wonderful tightness inside, a hollowness that seemed to throb in the dark.

He made his own choked noise as she squirmed beneath him, beneath his touch, the friction of clothing and swollen flesh almost too intense. Too long since he'd had a willing woman, and already his brain was screaming at him to move, and his hands trailed fire down her body while his mouth left its mark on her neck, her shoulder, the hot, ripe skin at the top of her chest. Her stomach bunched and fluttered under his questing fingers, her whole body seemed to be trembling, and he made quick work of the fastenings at the top of her trousers before sliding his hand down, under her knickers, seeking, finding.

Her hips jerked wildly, and her groan was appreciably louder, and all the while her heart was hammering in her ears. There, he was touching her there, manipulating the hard little nodule of flesh at the top of her sex, and she could not stop writhing under his sure, steady touch. With only the experience of her own unpracticed hands, she was dimly shocked that it could feel so good, the heat coiling within, a pulsing, living thing that needed, demanded more. And then his fingers were gone and she was just about to protest when she realized they were moving still, down across scorching, damp flesh, down to the entrance of that secret, throbbing place inside her, and the anticipation and fear and raw desire had swallowed her voice, her mind.

His moans were flowing fast and thick now against her breasts, his fingers trembling slightly as they skated over hot, humid skin. He felt the tension in her legs as he paused, the slight, rhythmic motion of her hips. She was so wet, she wanted him, and he latched onto her nipple with his mouth as he pressed a finger inside. Gods, she was *tight* and hot and other parts of his anatomy were jerking anxiously with hope as he stroked and explored, deeper yet, searching for that spot, wanting nothing more than to hear more of those beautiful noises she was making...

With a start and a hiss he was standing, shaking, looking down at her with wild, haunted eyes. It had never occurred to him, she was well past the age of majority, but he had felt the evidence with his own fingers, and the implications were crashing down around his ears. "You...you are an innocent," he said hoarsely, his mind and his body warring for supremacy as she stared up at him with those wide, wounded eyes,

flushed, naked flesh undulating with her movements, her breathing.

She blushed harder and nodded, and his eye slid closed. It seemed the veneer of impassivity he wore had been stripped away, and expressions were flying across his face too rapidly for her to make them out. What was happening, why had he pulled away, why was he pulling on his robes, staring now at the floor rather than at her? Tears pricked her eyes as shame pricked her mind. His pale features were frozen rather than impassive, horrified, and he would not meet her eyes.

“You don’t...I cannot...”

But there were no words to express what was going through his brain, through his body, the urge to stay and the urge to go ripping through his guts with equal intensity. His mind was howling at the sight of her, half-naked, eyes shining, lower lip trembling, and the blame and self-recrimination and loathing was strangling him to death. And so Severus Snape, former Death Eater and spy, a man who had faced the Dark Lord many times without hesitation, fled the room, the door closing with a soft, sickening snick in his wake, leaving Hermione confused and shaken on the bed, with only her doubts and tears for company.

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Paranoia was a cold, heavy fist in his chest, squeezing his lungs, as he rapidly made his way home, every shadow an assassin, every noise the sound of his impending death. Even when he had entered the tiny, barren flat that was his home, barred the door with the strongest spells and wards he knew, his body refused to relax, his brain refused to stop turning. Thoughts swooped and dodged, and he could never seem to grab one long enough to examine it, to use it, to figure things out.

This was not how things were supposed to be. All his carefully rationalized schemes and choices, the decisions he had made, the things he had done, for what? Almost every day now he was summoned, his mind pried open and examined for information, his Master instructing him to talk to more Order members, gather more intelligence, while all around cloaked figures hissed and laughed. He was terrified of everything, his own reflection when he passed a window enough to start his heart hammering so hard it made him lightheaded, and he could feel the gaze of nameless, malevolent others everywhere he went.

Trembling, he took a bottle of cheap liquor out of a cupboard with a small glass, chipped and sticky, and poured himself a drink. He retched as it went down, his empty stomach protesting, but a second drink, a third, quickly followed, and the resulting haze around his senses helped dull the panic, dull the pain. If he drank enough he might be able to forget for a while, to rest, to sleep without dreams. Dreams of his brother running, screaming, bleeding, dying. Never mind that there had been no screaming, nor bleeding. In his dreams, Ron screamed and bled, and he awoke screaming and sweating and shaking.

A fourth drink, and Percy could feel the tingling warmth spreading through his limbs, making them heavy, while things around him grew blurry despite the fact he had removed his glasses. He had planned it all so carefully, and the man who had recruited him had assured him that he could restore his family’s honor, their status as pureblood, and he would have the sort of power and recognition he had always craved. Lies, so many lies, and once you have hit the bottom of the slippery slope, there is no way back up to the top. Choices made, consequences dealt. He hadn’t slept properly in weeks.

He poured rotgut down his throat until he could not see straight, could not think straight, could not stand straight, and with his remaining balance he tumbled into the bedroom, threw himself amid the rumped, sour smelling sheets. The room was spinning, a black vortex clutching for him, and his last two thoughts before he succumbed to unconsciousness were of the Dark Lord, and of Ron.

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A/N: Wait...stop...ow, that hurts! Seriously, I'll make it better, I promise! I swear!

Seriously, as always, your feedback and comments are always appreciated. Just be gentle, okay? :D

## Chapter 29: Interference

Minerva McGonagall made her way down the basement stairs to the potions lab, contemplating how to approach her prey. She had been quite surprised when Hermione had approached her that morning asking for assistance in learning some incantations in Gaelic, as neither she nor Snape had previously requested help from anyone else in brewing *Hostilis Spiritus*. Even more surprising was the girl's appearance – slightly disheveled, eyes red-rimmed and underlined with blue-black, puffy flesh. This was a stark contrast to her recent demeanor; worried and solemn sometimes, yes, but also excited and animated, her enjoyment in working on this project, working with Snape, quite evident. McGonagall had been keeping an eye on Hermione since she had observed the young woman's obvious despair at Snape's condition when the Dark Mark had been excised, and she was certain her former star pupil was harboring some feelings for the brooding, enigmatic man. A quiet word with Dumbledore led her to believe that the feelings may be reciprocated. Initially rather disturbed, she had since shrugged off her concerns; Hermione was, after all, an adult, and an exceptionally bright individual, while Snape, whatever her opinions may have been about his overall personality, was a brave, brilliant, and ultimately honorable man. Besides, she had seen plenty of dream relationships flounder, and unlikely ones flourish, in her day, and she was enough of a romantic to be predisposed to allow such matters to take whatever course nature dictated.

Of course, in her humble opinion, sometimes nature needed a hand, particularly when one of the individuals involved was Severus Snape.

Her general suspicions about the cause of Hermione's state of mind were confirmed as she descended the stairs. Snape had been seated at his desk, back to the stairwell, and he was still in the motion of turning in his seat, turning toward the sound of her footfalls, as he entered her line of sight, his face suffused with such a raw, open expression that she was stunned a little. He, too, looked as if he had spent a sleepless night, his cheeks pinched, a dark crust of stubble darkening his chin. If she didn't know any better, she would have sworn that the expression he wore was a combination of desperation and hope, and she could only watch as he realized she was not the person he was hoping to see, the light draining out of his face, and then he managed to rearrange his severe features into something resembling his normally closed, impassive mien. Only it was too late; she knew what she had seen, strongly suspect what it meant, and was determined to intrude for his own good.

"Is there something I can do for you, Headmistress?" he asked abruptly, voice clipped and a little strained. He had turned back toward the desk, and his quill commenced flying across the parchment with rapid, furious strokes.

"Minerva, please. What did you do to Hermione?" she said, her own voice brisk, determined, as she moved to sit on a stool near the man work table, close enough to speak with him quietly, far enough away not to invade his personal space. She heard the fragile shaft of the quill snap as he clutched it tightly between his fingers, and with a muffled explicative he turned to face her, expression tight, eyes wary.

"I have done nothing to Miss Granger," he replied shortly. "Now, if you will excuse me..."

"Oh, I don't believe that for a second. Or is that the issue?" she mused. She thought she saw a muscle near his eye twitch, but he maintained his poise.

"Unfortunately, Minerva, I have a great deal of work to do, and regrettably do not have the time to engage in what would undoubtedly be stimulating repartee. If you have something of relevance to say, I suggest you do so. Otherwise, I would like to be alone."

Her eyes narrowed, examining him more closely. He looked rumpled, yes, discouraged, and the skin around his eyes and mouth was tight, the glimmer in his eyes subdued. He looked defeated.

"She has been with me all day, learning the spells for the potion," McGonagall said kindly. "She told me nothing, but it is clear she is distressed about something, and I think that something is you."

She saw something bleak and shadowed move in the obsidian depths of his eyes, but his face remained immobile, frozen. "She came to you for assistance," he repeated softly. It was not a question, and he felt something cold and heavy settle in the pit of his stomach. Hermione was avoiding him, and though he had surmised as much when she failed to appear in the potions lab that morning, the truth of it still rose over his head, icy, rank water, and he felt it closing above him, drowning him, obscuring the light.

He was in turmoil, so much so that he was aware of the cracks in his outward façade, knew his former colleague had seen something of his emotional state on his face, and he could not find it in himself to care. Since he had left Hermione's room, left her lying half-naked, beautiful and wounded, he could not get her out of his mind, the feel of her off his skin, the taste of her out of his mouth, and his thoughts were an absolute mess of contradictions. Leaving the room had not quenched the fire; on the contrary, it seemed as if the flames licked hotter and brighter with each passing moment, the memory of her seared into his flesh, and his id raged at being denied; it wanted nothing more than to turn back the clock and drive him to finish the deed, to bury himself in her warm, willing body. It colored everything, this *desire* that was a life force unto itself, and he struggled to think rationally, to feel rationally, despite its influence.

Gods above and below, why, why had he left? Like a sullen, pouting child his libido threw tantrums as he tried to reassure himself he had done the right thing, the only thing he could do and still be able to look at himself in the morning. Innocence personified she was, and the sudden proof of that was a blow he had not expected, a sucker punch that left him breathless and staggering. He had known she was innocent in the relative sense; that is, less sullied than he himself, but not truly innocent, pure and untouched. That sudden revelation had sent ripples of strange, piercing emotion ripping through him, guilt and shame and a clawing, abject terror that seized his heart, propelled his limbs into motion even while his mind both cheered and resisted.

And he did not really understand why.

Oh, he was well aware of his own perception of himself as a generally unsavory individual, bitter and permanently warped by his actions and his choices, by his association with the Dark Arts and the years of subterfuge he had hoped would be his redemption. With his rebirth to the Light he had found himself more reluctant than he may have been in the past to lash out, to drag others down to his level, to use them and break them and thereby expose them to the hard truth that life was not all fairness and success and happy endings. It had brought him a twisted satisfaction to shatter dreams and ruin hopes, before, even the small dreams and hopes of childhood, the crestfallen faces and tears of his many victims a pale shadow of what he had suffered. He no longer knew how much of that had been his own frustration and how much had been the influence of the Mark, and it no longer really mattered. Because he was not that person anymore, and the thought of allowing his own darkness to stain someone he thought of as wholly pure was foreign

now, distasteful.

And yet he *was* that person; as loathsome as he had been, he did not know how else to be, and he missed who he was because he no longer recognized who he was supposed to be. It was all a muddled mess in his head, his very self-concept eroded, fluid, slipping through his grasp as soon as he managed to get a hold of it, and into this storm Hermione was tossed. Hermione, whom he now considered untouchable, too pure to be sullied by the likes of him, and yet he did not know if he could be near her, work with her, and maintain his sanity. Hermione, who had trusted him and believed in him when no one else would, whose desire to save her friend had yielded his salvation, too. Hermione, hot and soft beneath him, breathy little noises escaping her throat, she wanted him as he wanted her but the very thought chilled him even as it made his blood sing, made him feel dirty and lecherous and *evil*, and he was not evil anymore, he would not be, could not be...

"What can I do, Severus?" McGonagall asked kindly, unable to completely recognize the flickers of feeling that skirted across his face but recognizing his vulnerable state nonetheless. This man was such a mystery, and even more so now. Before, she could rely on a snide retort or sarcastic barb to deflect her if she was getting too close to his tender spots, but those skills were absent now, and she did not want to poke somewhere vital, did not want to be the cause of more pain, more distress.

His eyes held something sad and bleak, black and tumbling like clouds before a downpour. "There is nothing to be done, Minerva. I have made...the best choice."

McGonagall sighed through tightly pursed lips. "I take it Hermione does not agree. I can only imagine how that conversation played out."

He frowned at her. "To what conversation are you referring?"

"I understand you have no desire for others to speculate about your private life, Severus, but it has been obvious that there is, or was, some...something between yourself and Hermione. You intimated you made a choice, and given her demeanor today, I assumed that you informed her of your decision, and it was not to her liking."

He supposed he should not have been surprised by the accuracy of her deductions. Her words, however, stirred an alarm inside his chest. "I did not...tell her. There was no discussion."

McGonagall's eyebrow rose sharply. "You mean you have not had a conversation with her about this... whatever it is?"

The alarm was rising, a loud, clanging torrent in his ears. "I believe my actions communicated my intent with sufficient clarity," he lied, well aware that his actions had been wildly contradictory. One minute he was pressing her to lie beneath him, his hands roaming the soft planes of her body, and the next...

"Severus Snape!" she exclaimed sharply, and the guilt only multiplied. Damn her, and damn him for his weakness! Where was his razor-sharp tongue, his ability to push others away with just the right word, words that cut and protected?

He must have flinched or otherwise made his discomfort unknown, for she softened her tone. "She is

distraught, Severus. I have never seen her this way, even when her friends abandoned her during their third year, or last year when Ron was acting the fool. Whatever happened, it has undermined her self-confidence, and she is miserable. Maybe if you explain your...decision..."

A soft, strangled sound escaped before he could contain it, and he quickly coughed to cover it up, a slight flush tinting his sallow cheeks. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Minerva."

McGonagall's face hardened, and she was suddenly every bit the stern, intimidating woman who had no trouble keeping a passel of mischievous students in line. "It may not be what you wish, but I believe it is necessary, especially if you plan to continue working with her to defeat You-Know-Who. Slytherins pride themselves on their cunning and ability to turn situations to their advantage, I believe. I suggest you find a way to make this situation work for you very soon." And with that she stood and left, the heels of her boots making distinct clicking noises on the wooden stairs, and the creak and snick of the door told him he was alone. Again alone, with only his thoughts and his feelings and his confusion.

And now this directive, that he talk to her, explain himself to her, and he could not even explain it to himself. He pressed shaky palms to his face, the heels digging into the soft, yielding flesh around his eyes, and he tried to think, without much success, around the shame and the confusion and the flame.

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Hermione continued to stare at the text, her brain bleary with fatigue, but the horrible embarrassment and humiliation were there, waiting for her on the fringes of her consciousness, waiting to swallow her alive, and so she read the lines of translation over and over, whispering them aloud. Even to her own ears she sounded weary, sad, but if she stopped and rested there would be no rest, only her tortured thoughts chasing around and around, like a dragon chasing its tail, and the overwhelming mortification would thunder over her, leave her bloody and trampled in its remorseless, churning wake. Better to stave off the inevitable. She had vague, desperate hopes that if she worked herself into utter exhaustion she might be able to collapse without thinking, without feeling.

"I don't think you will learn anything additional tonight, Miss Granger." She startled slightly, her thoughts having begun to drift yet again, and she was back on the bed, his hands invoking sensations she had never imagined possible, and then his eyes as he looked down on her with horror...

Dumbledore gestured to the chair near his portrait, his face soft but serious, and she moved to it with a heavy sigh, her eyes gritty with fatigue and tears. Flashes of memory throughout the day had provoked constant surges of emotion, kept things raw, on the surface, and she could only fight so long. It was coming for her, stalking her, and she was too tired to run for much longer. Maybe talking with Dumbledore would keep it at bay for a little while longer.

"Can you tell me what happened?" the old wizard queried.

"What makes you think something has happened?" she responded tonelessly, a token resistance.

"I may be dead, Miss Granger, but I do still possess some of my faculties. You are distressed about something, and my rather formidable powers of deduction have led me to hazard what I believe to be a

reasonable guess as to the cause of that distress.”

She was too tired to spar with him, even verbally, and the darkness of her thoughts was creeping, looming, waiting. “I’m sure you’re right, sir,” she admitted wearily, scrubbing at gritty eyes with her hands. “I’m not really up for chatting about it, though.”

His head tilted to the side a bit as he looked at her, trying to think of the best way to encourage her without prying. “I warned you, if you recall, that it would not be easy to be involved with him.”

She nodded, Dumbledore’s words coming back to her with ease. *He is not an easy man to know, and it will take great perseverance on your part if you wish to have any part in his life, even that of a friend.* It felt like a lifetime ago, and she recalled waking Snape to give him the potion that would heal him, his confusing words, the way he clutched her hand tightly and asked her not to go. She never had figured out if he had really been aware of her. Little matter now – his flight the night before suggested he would not request her presence again anytime soon.

“My child, I only want to help,” Dumbledore offered, watching the open shift of hurt and loss and confusion across her face.

Her expression was crumpling, the waves of emotion she had held back all day pounding at the walls of her self-control, walls now cracked and trembling. “There’s nothing you can do. I messed everything up…” And then the dam broke and the flood waters crashed down upon her, and she hid her face, ashamed of her tears, ashamed of her feelings, ashamed of herself.

He waited while she cried, speaking only those soft, soothing, nonsensical words and phrases that seem to flow so naturally when we try to comfort another soul in pain. He could not hold her physically, so he tried to buoy her with his words, his presence, as much as possible. He knew his limitations, though; he was, after all, only a painting, a watery reflection of his former self, so he waited patiently while the surge broke and receded, her choking sobs giving way to quiet, embarrassed sniffles.

“Without knowing the specifics, I think I can still assure you that you did not mess everything up, Miss Granger. It is rare that a situation is so hopeless it cannot be salvaged, and I find it difficult to believe you could have damaged your relationship with Severus beyond repair so quickly,” he reassured her. “He is a difficult man to read, and misunderstandings are bound to occur.”

Her head acknowledged the truth of his words, but her heart was too sore to believe them. “I don’t think I misinterpreted his interest, sir. He isn’t. Interested,” she explained, the color in her face from her earlier outburst hiding a renewed blush of shame.

Dumbledore could not help but chuckle a little. “My dear, I think I can safely reassure you that no matter what he has said or done, he does indeed harbor some affection for you.”

She shook her head blindly, remembering the look in his eyes as he practically leapt away from her, throwing on his clothing in a near panic. As if contact with her was repugnant, disgusting. “No, I repulse him,” she mumbled brokenly, and her eyes were burning again.

“Listen to me,” Dumbledore said sharply, and when she turned blurred sight to his picture she saw his



face was sterner now, commanding. "There are always other interpretations of events. You cannot know what he was thinking or feeling at a particular moment unless you talk to him, and even then I doubt you would get a straight answer. He is a very conflicted man, my dear, and now more so than ever. I would not presume to tell you what to do in this instance, but I believe you can forge something with him if you do not give up at the first sign of adversity, and he very much needs someone who does not give up on him."

His words meant nothing to her now, could not penetrate the thick shroud of hurt, and she found herself resenting his presumption. Should she prostrate herself to him, throw herself at a man who was clearly uninterested? She could not bear to do it, could not bear the certain rejection and the compounding of her humiliation. She could not hand him her fragile feelings to trample again with such cruelty, and to even think of it was lunacy. Burn me once, shame on you. Burn me twice...

But then his actions had not been cruel or vicious, really; she had seen no malice in his eyes, had not been able to even decipher the expression she had seen there. Was there some other explanation, logical or illogical, as to why he had fled her touch, run from her at such an intimate moment, another explanation that did not involve his revulsion at the idea of her virginity, an explanation where she was not to blame? An alternate reason escaped her frantic thoughts, the blame again and again settling on her inexperienced and clearly unwanted shoulders, but a tiny seed of hope flourished still. Badly crushed under the heel of his actions, it found some sustenance in Dumbledore's words, enough to keep it alive and struggling still in the dark recesses of her mind.

"I'll think about it, sir. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll try to find something to eat." She practically ran from the room, headed for the kitchen, her mind still a hopeless jumble of images and shame, and tried to plan her next move.

How was she to face him now, knowing his true opinion of her, and be able to function well enough to complete the potion? Just the thought of seeing him again twisted her stomach in knots, and not the pleasant fluttering ones that had attacked every time she saw him these past few weeks. These were sick and cold, heavy and nauseating, and she shivered slightly at the thought of his eyes, dark and cold, sizing her up. He was once again the hard, sneering Potions Master, and she the child, measured and found wanting. But there was still work to do, and for the Order and for Harry and for the war she had to figure out a way to do it, to be in his presence, to work with him without quailing, to do what needed to be done.

Perhaps talking to him would not be amiss. Surely he wanted to finish their work and be freed of the necessity of seeing her as badly as she did, and if she could make him see the logic of sticking to the task at hand, no baiting or scolding, maybe she could hold it together for long enough to cross the finish line, claim the prize, provide Harry with the power he needed to defeat Voldemort, the power the Dark Lord knew not.

Or maybe she would just determine, once and for all, if it was, in fact, possible to die of embarrassment.

She mulled it over and over, her pudding barely touched and her tea long cold, trying to see a way through the mess her life had become, trying not to succumb to the horror and the shame.

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"Rise, my servant," Voldemort commanded, the sibilant S's in his speech making the words sound hissing, snakelike. Shaking, Percy stood, a handful of other Death Eaters lounging about the room with casual indifference, watching, condemning. Not a full meeting, this, no robes and masks, and he could feel their cold disdain, see their contempt in glittering, malicious eyes, in mock, twisted smiles. He felt clammy, filthy, inside and out, stale sweat clinging to his body, fear and despair clinging to his soul.

"What news, my spy?" his master asked, and he trembled to the soles of his boots, knowing his answer would displease.

"Nothing new, my Lord. There are whispers of a plan, Snape and McGonagall and Harry are involved, but no one seems to know..." And then the invasion, his mind cleaved open and laid bare, the Dark Lord searching, searching, and finding nothing to his satisfaction.

"*Crucio*," Voldemort thundered, venting his frustration on the weak, quaking man before him, driving him to his knees with the pain, his hoarse shouts like music, a symphony of agony. If this spy could not provide useful information, he could at least provide some minimal entertainment.

"I am most displeased. You have not even attempted to question Potter, and yet you stand before me claiming to be my loyal servant, to do your duty to me?" Another flick of his wand and Percy was retching and thrashing, a prone dance of pain.

"My Lord," he gasped desperately when the curse was lifted. "My duties at the Ministry..."

"Are insignificant compared to the task I have given you. I have others to bring me news from London. You will discover what they have planned, or suffer the consequences." And again the Cruciatus Curse, again and again until his throat was on fire from the screaming, every muscle in his body contracted in protest. When it was finally over he tried to stand, his arms and legs beyond his complete control, and settled for kneeling on the cold, stone floor, gasping and filled with dread.

"Do not fail me again." Voldemort watched impassively as the man quaked and sniveled, his weak voice flinging assurances that he would do better. Without emotion, the dark wizard contemplated if the time had come to dispose of the pitiful creature. With a single word the others would set on him like a pack of animals, he knew, and while their frequent skirmishes slaked some thirsts, it had been some time since his more feral followers had been given the opportunity to really play with a victim. And in some ways Weasley was the perfect victim, robust enough to withstand a decent amount of torture, pathetic enough to pose no danger. His fear, his weakness, was palpable, an astringent odor that tickled the noses of the predators he walked among, whetting their appetites for violence. His usefulness as a spy would come to an end very soon, that much was clear, and then the only service he would have left to perform would be to die in as entertaining a manner as his followers could devise.

But not yet. He *needed* to know what the Order was planning, needed to have the information so that he could not only defeat them once and for all, but also humiliate and break them, demonstrate to the wizarding world that he was their one true Lord, and they must submit. Perhaps he did not need this in the strictest sense; tactically he had every confidence in his ability to kill the Potter brat once he deigned to show himself. He would execute the boy in front of the fools who had dared to support him against their rightful master, but for his satisfaction he craved their abject misery and defeat, as well. To have another spy in their midst betray them, a spy from a family that had embraced Potter as their own, would be very

satisfactory indeed. So he decided to bide his time for a while longer, send his spy out once again, and continue to plan for the final battle.

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A/N: My apologies for the delay - I had a midterm and a paper due last week, and I also had this chapter rejected by the admins, which is a first. While I always proof read my chapters, I don't have a beta, so it's rare that I don't have a few corrections to make, but I've never had a chapter rejected before, even ones with more errors. I'm puzzled by what this might mean. Anyway, I hope you enjoy, and I promise our favorite pair will actually talk to each other next chapter. :)

## Chapter 30: Angst

Her heart was hammering in her chest, dread an icy syrup in her veins, as she stood in the hallway of the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, sweaty palm on the cool metal of a doorknob, fighting hard not to turn tail and run. Another twenty-four hours had passed, a night filled with little sleep and thoughts that would not cease, a day filled with McGonagall and rote memorization, only the sheer force of her determination keeping her mind on the task at hand. Fortunately she had an ear for languages, and had therefore been able to learn the relatively short incantations rather quickly. She would continue to practice, of course, but she felt confident that she could do her part in making the potion.

Unfortunately (or so she thought), doing her part in making the potion for Harry would necessitate once again becoming involved with one Severus Snape, and it was for that reason that she haunted the hallway, at war with herself. Only by keeping thoughts of Harry in the forefront of her mind was she able to find the courage to turn the knob and descend into the dimly lit lab, throat arid with trepidation, her brain alternating with words of encouragement and hisses of doom.

Unlike her preparation for the Forbidden Forest, for which she had invested a great deal of time forming her speech for the unicorns, she had been unable this time to rehearse her lines, imagine different responses to his theoretical words. Just the thought of this confrontation turned her mind shy, unwilling to peek at the possibilities, and she found that trying to force the issue made her tremble so forcefully McGonagall thought her physically ill. So she would have to fly blind, a different sort of fear for her to add to the growing pile, and she felt exposed, almost naked in a way she had never experienced before, the ever-prepared bookworm recoiling from the horror that was a test of the unknown. A fleeting wonder passed through her chattering thoughts – was this how the boys felt during exams, starkly afraid of the questions, afraid of the panic of a blank mind, afraid of the failure?

Anxiety made her try to hide the sounds of her feet, her breath a solid mass of air held tightly, but she knew it was futile before she had descended far enough for Snape to come into view, knew he would be able to hear her, have the time to compose his face into that mask that was somehow both indifferent and contemptuous, and she cringed already at the thought. What would she see if she could somehow float down there, invisible and silent?

It is as much a debate in the magical world as in the Muggle, the nature of reality, of perception, of truth. Expecting to see him sneering and cold, could she not help but interpret his expression that way? Would a more neutral party have been able to see the relief in his shadowed eyes, the longing in his tightly drawn mouth? His control was a fragile, crystal thing, and he greatly feared the hammering fists of her words, her expressions, the resulting shattering of his shields, the unfettering of his restraint. He would not listen to the howling of his body and his mind as he stood to watch her walk down those final few stairs, watch her come to an abrupt halt just in front of them, not daring, it seemed, to come any further. He wondered if she could sense the danger in him, the burning desire. Her face was a contrast of misery and defiance, and he felt a flash of admiration for her (that she was here despite her obvious discomfort) followed by a sort of sullen, desperate resentment (that she had not come sooner, or perhaps that she had come at all). The first emotion did not soften the harsh lines of his face; the later drew his features harder, tighter, and she saw this, and believed her worst fears confirmed.

“I’ve been working on the incantations,” she muttered abruptly, the short silence an eternity of molten trepidation she needed to cool.

“So Minerva told me,” he replied shortly, his tone openly hostile, irrational jealousy a dark splinter in his mind.

“We should do a couple of dry runs before we attempt to brew it for real,” she managed around the thick lump in her throat, and her hands were clenched tightly into fists, lest their shaking betray her to the enemy.

“I do not require the advice of a *child* on how to brew a potion,” he sneered, flinching inwardly as she did so openly. Only years of practice allowed him to sound so condescending, so cold, when he felt anything but.

“I wasn’t...can’t you...I can’t do this,” she stuttered, the horrible humiliation swamping her again, and her traitorous mind flashed her the memory of him over her, his hands on her breasts, his mouth hot on her neck, and the shame flamed through her without mercy.

“Cannot do what, Miss Granger?” His own heart stuttered and tripped forward, an awkward, thumping beat in his ears. Minerva was right, she sounded horrible, despondent and defeated. The first blow to his feeble façade, and his viscera twisted with the thought that he was the cause of her misery.

“I can’t work with you if...if we can’t...at least pretend to be civil,” she whispered, courage failing, his ire assured by her audacity, and she could not look at his glowering face, could not bear the sight of him when her mind insisted on remembering other expressions, other feelings.

“I am always...civil,” he grouched, even while the sting of truth hit home. “You should endeavor to grow a thicker skin if you find the most innocent of words offensive.”

She felt the flames of shame and humiliation lick her face, and a glance at his expression told her he was hard and unfeeling still. Anger bubbled in her chest, thick and fast, and words she would never have imagined uttering spilled out of her mouth, fatigue and indignation and embarrassment loosening her tongue.

“You...how dare you? I am *not* a child, and you have no right to treat me like...like...” Like what? An unwanted suitor? An inexperienced, silly little girl? Gods, the degradation, the shame! How could she have misread things so badly, have been so foolish?

And here was the opening he wanted and didn’t want, the opportunity to offer her some form of an explanation, to try to make her see reason, to earn her understanding, her forgiveness. Minerva’s admonishments rang in his ears, and guilt ate at him like a cancer, that he had left her as he had, that he was so weak, so conflicted, so very unworthy. He had no frame of reference for this type of discussion, and panic and uncertainty drove him toward callous, familiar ground.

“It was not my intention to treat you as anything other than a...colleague. My previous actions were a mistake. I can assure you, I will take no such liberties in the future,” he assured her, his voice sharp and professional, her own chagrin and despair and rage ratcheting up another notch. She felt like she was snapping, breaking, and she barely recognized the person screaming inside her head, the person whose anguish burst free of the shackles binding it.

“Why? I don’t understand! We were...and then you...am I that disgusting, that repulsive? You can’t even look me in the eye, now, but before...the way you touched me...” And to her horror the emotions flooded her eyes, too demanding to contain, and she felt the hot tears spill down her cheeks. The final touch to her total and abject disgrace, crying in front of this cruel man, and she clenched her eyes closed tightly to stem the tide, her vision swimming in crimson and onyx.

Snape considered himself something of an expert in being able to withstand any onslaught, his years as a member of the Dark Lord’s inner circle having given him ample opportunity to witness atrocities that could drive a lesser man to insanity, or the grave, his own experiences as a victim of torture and punishment such that he believed himself impervious to attack. And this was perhaps true, or as true of him as any man alive, when the attack was physical, when the entities to be borne were pain and suffering and the more traditional horrors of war.

He was, however, less experienced than most in dealing with the emotions of loss and guilt, of pain that arose from wounds of the heart rather than the body. He had barricaded that part of himself behind walls he dreamed impenetrable, after his awkward, humiliating childhood, sealed off any part of him that could feel such things, and as such he had lost much of his ability to recognize it in another, to empathize with their perception of events, to see with their eyes. Difficult to fathom and yet nonetheless true; he had not considered her interpretation of his actions until her words assailed him, and a new layer of guilt blanketed his mind, his soul, and the weight was smothering. This was his only rationalization, later, for how his defenses buckled with such ease under the barrage of her tears, her psychic hurt, and the knowledge that he was the unwitting culprit, the man who wielded the offending wand, tore through him like the sharpest blade, exposed his bare and bleeding conscious.

Lust was the furthest thing from his mind as he reached for her hands with his own. Startled by the contact, her eyes flew open, and she gasped softly at the naked contortion of his features. No longer a mask of indifference or aloofness, his face; it was instead suffused with a misery as conflicted as her own, and some small, bitter part of her sang with elation, rejoiced that he was not immune to suffering, that she had hurt him, somehow, as he had hurt her.

“Miss...Hermione, none of the blame for what transpired lies at your feet. I did not leave as I did because you repulsed me. I left because...I cannot take your innocence. I am not...appropriate for such a task. You deserve better than my touch, and I will not impose myself on you any further.”

Whatever she had been expecting, this certainly was not it, and her mind spluttered futilely. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she managed, wrenching her hands from his grasp. Of all the inane, ridiculous, *foolish* rationales, she could think of none worse.

“I am speaking the truth. Fortunately, I was able to regain control of myself before I fully took advantage of you. I can only request that you...forgive my earlier actions and accept my word that such a thing will never happen again,” he said earnestly, forcing himself to ask forgiveness, forcing his hands to remain still rather than reach for her again. His own lack of insight disgusted him; he could have spared her much suffering had he explained himself earlier, had he stopped wallowing in his own confusion long enough to think of how it must have seemed to her, his sudden flight right after the intimacy of his touch. He felt wooden, inept, and her understanding could be his only salvation.

“I want it to happen again, you idiot!” she shrieked, a tiny part of her cringing at the shrill quality in her voice, the nerve that she would speak so to her former Potions professor. “You left right after you found out that I’m a-a virgin, so what was I supposed to think? If you were okay with being with me before you found out, why would that change your mind? It makes no sense!”

His own temper flared at her stinging words, and that he had no answer. She was right, it made no sense, but part of him had frozen, terrified, and he did not know why! If he could not explain it to himself, how could he hope to give her a satisfactory answer? Indignation mixed with the shame, laced his voice with some steel. “Whether or not you understand my decision does not alter my thinking on the matter. We will simply have to find a way to work together with a minimal amount of discomfort. I have expressed my regret that you were hurt, and I do not wish to discuss the topic further,” he lied. A rather large portion of his brain (and other parts of his anatomy) were cheering her on, daring to hope that she would fight him, change his mind. He nearly growled with frustration; difficult enough to fight her, but to also have to battle himself? Why, why?

“Well, you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t particularly give a damn what you want right now,” she snarled. “Do you have any idea what you did to me, leaving like that? If you were okay with being with me before you discovered...that, what changed? Why does my lack of experience repulse you?”

“Neither you nor your innocence repulse me. But I could not...” His mouth opened, closed, opened again, but he could not find the words. There were no words, no reason, no explanation. His mind was in full rebellion, different voices all shouting contradictory advice, and he did not know what he should do, or wanted to do, or would do. He knew only that he had not considered her feelings fully and was now confronted with the reality of her hurt and her anger. A lingering part of him that still longed for the comfort of the familiar Professor Snape persona wanted to lash out, drive her away, far away, and for good.

And yet he could not.

“You could not...what?” she prompted, exasperated by his sudden lapse into ineloquence, insides squirming at the unfamiliar expressions that struggled to emerge from behind the crumbled mask he wore.

His eyes glittered like glass, and she inhaled sharply at the intensity there, the conflict. “You deserve... more. Better. I am not a man worthy of such a gift, Miss Granger, and I thought it best to stop before I no longer had the ability to do so.”

Hermione stared at him, the unexpected tenor of their conversation enough of a surprise that her response emerged without censorship, pure and unvarnished. “I think you’re worthy,” she said softly, some of the resentment seeping away at the sight of his soft underbelly. “I mean, I know you’ve done some things you regret, but it was for a good cause, and I think the sacrifices you’ve made far outweigh any pain you may have inflicted...”

“You know NOTHING of what I’ve done!” he spat out. “Do you believe me to be some sort of hero, a dark, misunderstood creature who needs only to be understood, to be accepted, before my innate goodness will be revealed? You are deluding yourself. I tortured and killed innocents at the will of the Dark Lord, did nothing to prevent the slaughter of countless more, and there was a time I enjoyed it, reveled in it, laughed while the bodies of our victims lay cooling on the ground.” As the words emerged so did the

memories; he could almost feel the warm slick of blood on his hands, feel the thrill of his own power, and it sickened him. It was a short period of his life, when the violence of war and the proof of his own abilities allowed him bathe in the suffering of others, to ignore the anguished cries from within, and he carried the stain of it with him still, a mark deeper and more permanent than any brand on his arm, his soul soiled and tarnished. He had never forgiven himself for that time in his life, and never believed that his actions since had wiped his karmic slate clean.

“You also helped save countless victims, you probably saved us all when you had the courage to turn from V-Voldemort...”

“None of that matters,” he said harshly, though the harshness was directed at himself. Words he had heard before, from Dumbledore mostly, and never before could he recall wanting so badly to believe them. “Some things cannot be erased, no matter the penitence after. Some evils cannot be undone. You think you know my character based on the things you’ve seen, but you do not. You cannot. You have not seen the real...the real me.”

It was difficult for her to fathom, the depth of his self-loathing. Brought up in a home full of love and acceptance, she was able to weather the storms of self-doubt that came with being less than popular, with being teased for her academic prowess, with being ignored or overlooked when all she wanted was to be acknowledged as attractive, as feminine. He had no such background to warm him, his past instead a barren stretch of waste as far back as he could recall. As a result of his desolate past, something bubbled beneath the surface of his life, his thoughts, an idea that oozed into his consciousness every so often, though it mostly worked insidiously behind the scenes. It was an idea planted when he was very small, watered by the cruelty of parents and peers alike, and it had produced fruit long before his final descent. It was, perhaps, on some fundamental level, the very reason he had been swayed by the promise of power, the lure of vengeance.

Snape believed that he was, in his very core, an irredeemably evil man.

It must be so; only a bad child would be punished with such a family, with such hardship. Only the wicked would succumb to the temptation the Dark Lord dangled, ripe and easy, for the picking. Only the damned would take pleasure in the misery of others, even after his defection from the ranks of the Death Eaters, that small, twisted pleasure he felt when the happy were grieved, when the high were brought low. His contrition and remorse for his deeds meant nothing, because deep down he did not believe it to be genuine, only the pious face he wore to delude the naïve. He felt the darkness inside, roiling and purely impure, and knew there was a fundamental flaw in him, some defect that made him so, and such a defect could never be cured.

It was this belief, though he could not articulate it in its entirety, that led to his actions when confronted with the proof of her chastity. The fact that an irredeemably evil man would not feel guilt or fear with the archaic notion of stealing that innocence did not enter into his reasoning. Ultimately, he did not believe himself worthy of anything of value. And she was valuable to him, especially as she was, clean and relatively untouched by horror and pain and the dirt of the world.

She could sense only the surface of the dark pool of his psyche, but even that small glimpse stirred her sympathy. Instinctively she squelched it, knowing he would not appreciate the sentiment, would not understand that the feeling was for what he had suffered, not for who he was, and he was not a man who



seemed likely to willingly receive the pity of another. But the tenderness was tempered by indignation, the implicit judgment that he did not trust her judgment, trust her sincerity. Trust her.

"You're right," she said slowly, carefully, watching for signs that her words were being heard. "I don't know everything about you, or your past. I don't know all of the things you've done and experienced, or why you made the choices you made. But I don't think you see everything, either, sir. You let your past color everything good you've done since, as if none of your deeds except the bad ones have meaning. I think they all have meaning. Maybe taking the wrong path for a while was necessary to make you strong enough to do what needed to be done later. I don't know, I just know....I'm drawn to you. And I think I am capable of choosing who is...worthy to be my first."

He heard her, as much as he was able. The words, the sincerity penetrated his awareness, once again astounding him with her trust and her youth. He had shared with her a small portion of the doubt and darkness within, and she had not flinched, had not rejected. He still believed the full truth would cause her to run screaming. Her belief that he had some worth did not penetrate the cold black stone at his core.

But it did warm him, and shame him yet again, that he had left her as he had, hurt her, caused her to doubt herself. And the fact that she was talking to him now, her voice soft and vulnerable, stirred the parts of himself he kept trying to repress, the parts that berated him for his idiocy, that wanted nothing more than to push aside all his trepidation and fear and take her...

"I respect that our opinion on this matter differs. It is fruitless to wish things were different, but I do," he acknowledged, as astonished as she by the admission. "If you were different, or I were, and were we not at war..."

"What does the war have to do with us?" she interjected.

"Such conflict touches every aspect of our lives. It highlights the very humanity it seeks to destroy. It is therefore not at all unusual for people to have their experiences seem amplified, their feelings amplified, knowing they could lose everything in a flash of light, and it drives them to do things they might not otherwise do..."

"You think this is some sort of-of checklist, things to do before I die?" she spluttered.

"No, I do not. But nor do I think you fully grasp the ramifications, emotional and personal, of such a decision, especially a decision made with threat and danger looming."

In truth, neither did he, and it was those ramifications that both intrigued and constrained him, much like his opinion of his own worth shamed him. He had not been so strongly drawn to another since his other life, before he succumbed to the temptation of the Dark Arts, and it exhilarated and terrified him. What if he could throw away the guilt that shackled him, allow himself to feel something good, something powerful, and with another, this young woman? Could he bear to open himself up to such an experience, and the unknown consequences? Could he deal with the aftermath, opening his closed existence to something more?

And could he then bear the fallout when the inevitable occurred, and they were torn apart by his ineptitude or his death?

For Snape did not expect to survive the final confrontation, and some part of him thought it better to die in the misery that had become almost a comfort rather than risk the greater despair that comes of happiness tasted, then lost. The very notion thrilled as much as it distressed, to touch a small piece of a life he had long ago given up all hope of having, to hold someone he *cared* for, to touch and be touched. Would he rest easier carrying the memory of such an event to his final doom, or would it make the inevitable sacrifice that much harder to endure?

And what of her? Could he be with her knowing he would all too soon abandon her to face the biting reality of a world scarred by battle and decay? For she would survive, he thought with fevered desperation, she must. Their world would need goodness and light, after. And life was her reward as surely as death was his final penance.

None of this was fully formed in the whirling maelstrom of his mind; he had only reacted in the moment of blinding clarity he had experienced as he touched her, reacted to the emotions that overwhelmed. And they all seemed to swarm again as she stood there in front of him, expression somehow both stricken and understanding, eyes filled with something soft and sad that only set the knife's keen edge even deeper inside his mind, inside his heart.

"Perhaps you're right," Hermione replied, and it was only as she spoke he realized they had been standing, silent in the thick, heavy space between them, for the space of a dozen breaths. "Perhaps I don't fully grasp everything about you, or myself, or this thing between us. But I was at least prepared to set aside the fear and uncertainty. I still am. I hope...you will, too."

Of course, her fears were different than his. She was afraid of the battle ahead, afraid for herself and Harry and the rest of the people she cared about, afraid of the future. And she was afraid, too, of the sheer magnitude of taking another step in her life, the mysterious shift from adolescence to adulthood that the physical act of intercourse seemed to symbolize, especially at a time when there was no solid ground beneath her feet, beneath her world. Never before had this event, *sex*, seemed so enormous, so nerve wracking, because never before had it been something more than a distant, yearning someday. Now that it loomed, or it had, she discovered that for all her nervousness and self-doubt in the moment, the desire and the hope were greater than the uncertainty and trepidation.

But there was an underlying optimism in her outlook long since missing from Snape's. The fear did not consume her, shade everything bleak and grey, and so she saw more an opportunity missed than a disaster averted. So she spoke boldly, shaking inside at this brave stranger that dared utter such words, a more vocal chorus cheering her on, cheering him on, cheering them on. She put it out there, that she was still willing, and she blushed deeply and lowered her eyes.

He remained at a loss for the right words; having felt woefully out of his depth since the conversation began, he now found himself tongue tied and tired, the toll of thinking and feeling somehow more wearing than physical exertion. Slowly the emotion bled out, left him feeling despondent, adrift. The internal conflict was essentially unresolved, and the future was bleak, so bleak. He wanted and could not allow himself to have. He yearned and must go unfulfilled. Death crept ever closer, and he had reason now more than ever before to experience both relief and dread.

"I am afraid I must decline, Miss Granger," he said softly, formally. "But...thank you."

She looked up and smiled, small and sad, shook her head, though in defiance or something other he could not tell, and their eyes locked and held. A fresh burst of fear swept through him, that this was somehow the end, no more second chances, and in that moment he could not endure the thought of being alone, the short expanse of days before him fallow without her company, her presence. Weak, so weak, but there was no longer room for self castigation, only the creeping dark of his short, barren life stretched out before him, and the desire that it not be so. He wanted, he needed, and her voice seemed to float still in the air, a promise, a dare, and there was something surging from deep inside, the conception of a new type of courage. Things deemed impractical, impossible, need not be so, he had only to reach out, to touch, to take, to feel...

The spell was shattered by the muffled slam of a door from the floor above, the heavy, rapid footfalls of someone running. Another moment and the door to the basement crashed open, the wood slamming against the wall with a bang, and then the squeak and thud of trainers on the wooden steps. Within moments Harry popped into view, face red, brow furrowed, his glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose as he jumped the last few steps to the bottom. Hermione and Snape self-consciously stepped back from each other; throughout their discussion they had moved toward each other without thought or plan, and the sudden appearance of another made them very aware of just how close they had been, close enough to whisper, close enough to touch. Harry stared at them, an odd expression clouding his face momentarily, before he gestured wildly up the stairs, panting slightly.

“You’d better come upstairs,” he announced, his voice grim. “It’s Percy.”

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Okay, I had a seriously difficult time with this chapter. This is the closest I've felt to frustration with any portion of this story. I wrote and rewrote certain passages multiple times, and I'm still not sure if it really works. So you be the judge...

## Chapter 31: Percy

With a gasp and a shuddering twitch, Percy Weasley regained consciousness. It spoke volumes of the depths into which his life had plummeted that waking in such a fashion did not surprise him in the least. What did surprise him was that his head was not a pulsing mass of aggravated nerves; a quick internal inventory revealed that not only was he not suffering from a hangover, but the large muscles of his arms and legs were only slightly stiff and sore. He knew that had he been subjected to the Cruciatus before blacking out, he would have awoken cramped and aching. He opened bleary eyes, unable to focus properly without his glasses, and tried to roll over, to push himself upright.

It was then he realized that he was restrained, seated on a couch, bound firmly but not cruelly hand and foot. This, too, was different, and he squinted up into the foggy air, found shapes that resembled people, two or three at least, and the choking miasma of terror crashed over him, a sharp cry escaping his throat before he could contain it.

“He needs his glasses,” said one of the people-shaped blobs, a figure in something other than a wizard’s ubiquitous black robes, a trunk of blue and green supporting the pale balloon of a head, a head with a dark mass at the peak. And that voice, he knew that voice...

Another riot of color off to his right approached, and he felt the cold metal of the spectacle frames touch his cheek before the arms were hooked around the backs of his ears, the small windows of glass that bent and refracted the light positioned in front of his eyes, bringing his world into sharp relief.

His automatic fear when he had found himself restrained was that the Dark Lord had finally lost patience with him, ordered him executed, and that the figures looming overhead were his fellow Death Eaters come to do the deed. Had he been thinking more clearly he would have realized that the relative absence of pain in his body, the restrictive but not biting ligatures that circled his limbs, and the return of his glasses were all excellent indicators that his slaving, sadistic brethren were not involved in his current situation. But he was not thinking clearly, and was therefore startled when the amorphous shapes before him coalesced into the bodies of Harry, Hermione, McGonagall, and Snape.

The recent past began to emerge from the fragmented pictures in his mind. Pacing his tiny, grimy hovel, swallowing a glass or two of liquid courage before setting out for the house on Bitterwing Way, almost splinching himself when he Apparated to the outskirts of the city; the raucous cacophony of his heartbeat, a driving thrum that seemed to drown out everything else as he approached Harry, trying to strike up a casual conversation, desperate to draw out information that would please the Dark Lord; that lurching, horrifying moment when he saw the disgust that twisted the younger man’s mobile features, and realized that he had failed, he was discovered, and he could almost feel the curses as they ripped through his body, the hoarse cackle of laughter of the others as he screamed and bled and died. Panic had gripped him then, and his memories were a jumble – shouts and a flurry of limbs and his world engulfed in red light.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Weasley?” McGonagall asked sharply, her disappointment and anger at the young man evident but contained. After all, she had known other students who had made tragic mistakes. His betrayal was a shock, but not the personal upheaval it was to Harry and Hermione.

Percy coughed slightly, his voice holding the thick edge of unconsciousness still. “I’ve been better,” he said cautiously, struggling instinctively against the ropes that held him. “What happened, why I am tied

up?" he asked, his voice slightly whiny, a touch hysterical. The wild thought occurred to him that they might yet not know, not for sure, and they had always been trusting fools, except Snape, and who would believe him over a Weasley, the noble and bereaved family that had always been loyal to the cause?

"You may dispense with the façade, Mr. Weasley. We are all well aware of your recent defection to the Dark Lord," Snape responded coolly, his eyes hooded, face unreadable.

Percy laughed, a forced, shrill sound, and the look of terror on his face was undeniable. "I don't know what you're talking about," he began, his mind struggling as fiercely as his restrained extremities. His eyes flicked downward, expecting to see the Mark on his left forearm hidden by his robes, expecting to have that last thin veil of secrecy left to him, and his struggles came to an abrupt halt when he instead saw the offending sleeve pushed up to the elbow, the cloth snagged in the magical ropes that bound him, and the scorching black of the Mark seemed to mock him from his own pale flesh, the eyeless sockets of the skull an empty void to match his empty soul.

He sagged back against the couch, his head falling back, eyes pinched closed, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. His death sentence, discovery, and he felt a strange calm descend on him, allowing him a reprieve from the smothering fear that had been his constant companion since he fully understood the gravity of his decision.

"How did you find out?" he asked numbly, lifting his head upright, taking in the closed expression on Snape's face, the various mixtures of anger and hurt and dismay on the others.

"It was I who discovered your secret," Snape replied, he too watching, analyzing. "The Dark Lord summoned you during the Order meeting when I reemerged, did he not? I am all too familiar with that sudden burst of pain, though I concealed my reactions with far greater ease."

"So what now? Are the Aurors on their way? Or did you plan to deal with me yourself? I'd almost rather that," he said quietly, his voice oddly intense, almost pleading. "It would be decent of you."

"We are not going to kill you, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall admonished, her own sense of horror rising as she listened to the lost, defeated man who had once been one of her own, a son of Gryffindor, Prefect and Head Boy. "How could you think such a thing?"

He shrugged, or at least tried to, his arms held snugly against his torso by the enchanted ropes. "If you don't, they will. There are operatives everywhere, as I'm sure you are aware. Too easy to kidnap me from the Aurors, or Azkaban now that the Dementors are gone. He'd want to be sure I didn't betray him before he disposed of me."

Harry was almost vibrating with emotion, and tears had already begun to track down Hermione's cheeks as he spoke. Familiar and yet a complete stranger, this man who slumped before them, his longish red hair, almost the exact same shade as Ron's, plastered with sweat and grime to his pale, gaunt face. Blue eyes that had once shone with intelligence, pierced rule-breakers with fastidious righteousness, were now dull, watery and red-rimmed. His thin lips were cracked, his skin yellowish and splotchy. He looked nothing and yet exactly like the boy they had seen over summer vacations at the Burrow, swaggering about the common room drawing attention to the badge pinned to his robes, whooping with almost obscene pride when he accomplished anything of note. That they had known him, spent time with him, laughed with

him and his family, made his defection so much harder to understand, so much harder to fathom. Harry in particular felt like a cauldron about to boil over, and his nails left deep marks in his palms as he clenched his hands into fists, over and over.

"Why?" Harry exploded suddenly, unable to wait any longer. "How could you do this to us, to Ron? Were you there when he died, when your father died? Did you kill them? Did you kill Ron?" He was shouting now, his face crimson in his rage and grief, and he could see Ron's face, surprised and empty, as he fell against Harry at the gates of Hogwarts, body still warm, spirit already departed.

"No!" Percy yelled back, the veneer of calm dissipating, and he also trembled with the force of his emotions. Ron, his brother, Ron, and in his dreams he screamed and bled and died. "No, it wasn't me, it was a mistake. No one was supposed to get hurt that night, we were just supposed to capture you, or maybe take one of them hostage, but not kill you, or him!"

"How can we believe you, how can I believe you?" Harry snarled, conscious of Hermione's hands on his arm but past caring. "What about your father? And then you dared to show up at the funeral...that's how they knew! Hermione was hurt, she could have died!" He was leaning forward now, the muscles in his arms flexing, itching to strike. No punishment would ever be enough, there was no revenge for the death of his best friend, but he wanted to smash Percy's face in, feel the snap of bone and the gush of blood. Blood on his hands, but it would be worth it, and he hated the anguish and anger playing over Percy's haunted features, hated that he, too, had grieved. It was his fault, all his fault, and he had no right!

"You don't understand! I did what I had to do, to save them, to save my family!"

"Save them!" Hermione shrieked, her voice a shaky warble. "They're dead, Percy, Arthur and Ron, dead, and they might be alive today if you hadn't betrayed us..."

"I had to!" he howled, and the sheer volume of his voice cut over the others, a roaring din that filled the room. "You don't know, I had no choice! And you...you dare to criticize me, blame me, for Ron! This is all your fault!"

He was staring at Harry with undisguised hatred, the force of his shouts twisting him about, the magical bonds glowing slightly but holding, biting angry red lines into his flesh. He suddenly collapsed back against the couch, his face a bitter mix of anguish and venom, and the fire in his eyes could have burned.

"It's your fault, Harry Potter, yours. None of this would have happened if it weren't for you."

Harry's pain was a physical thing, his breath a harsh explosion punched from his lungs. Wrong, such accusations from a traitor, and yet the words struck a chord within, affirmed the blame he had always shouldered. It seemed indisputable truth that Ron would still be alive if not for him; friendship a blessing for him, the awkward, orphaned Muggle-born, a curse for those who dared befriend the boy with the scar, the reluctant celebrity, the child stalked by dark wizards and death. If Ron hadn't met him on the train platform, hadn't befriended him, hadn't insisted on allying himself with the Boy-Who-Lived, putting himself in harm's way, would he still be with them today? Death courted and mocked him, stole away those close to him, Sirius and Dumbledore and Hagrid and Ron, and his guilt was a living beast in his chest, feeding off the blood on his hands.

But the rage was there, too, and his brain roared even as his heart lurched. “I didn’t sell us out, tell the Death Eaters where we were going to be. That was you, Percy, all you. You killed him, and your Dad, too, even if you didn’t cast Avada.” He lashed out with his tongue instead of his fists, and was rewarded when the blows struck home.

Percy’s eyes glittered behind the glasses, and his voice was thicker. “I know,” he croaked, voice barely above a whisper. “But I didn’t have a choice. I swear to you, I didn’t have a choice.”

“There are always choices,” Snape said evenly, tamping down on the surge of disgust he felt for the young man’s weakness, his cowardice. A voice seemed to echo in his mind, reminding him of his duty. *Choose wisely...*

Something dark flickered across Percy’s face, and his expression as he stared at Snape was an almost comical mix of menace and hope. “And I chose to save my family and myself.”

“What happened, Mr. Weasley? When did you decide upon this course of action?” McGonagall’s query quieted the others, and they watched their prisoner intently. It was beyond their ken, Percy-the-traitor, and they all wanted to understand, though for different reasons.

“After Dumbledore was killed,” Percy answered quietly. “It didn’t seem like there was much hope, after that. The Dark Lord was going to prevail, everyone knew it. It was just a matter of time.”

“How could you think that?” Hermione blurted, outraged. “The Order is still fighting, and we still have Harry. The prophesy...”

“Harry,” Percy snarled bitterly, again staring at the younger man with pure malice. “As long as Harry Fucking Potter lives, no worries, right? How ‘bout it then, Harry? When are you going to kill the Dark Lord and save us all? I’m sure Ron would have appreciated this war being over a few months ago, eh?”

It was not until Harry felt the aching bite of another’s fingers burrowing into the meat of his shoulder that he realized he had lurched forward, blind in his fury, and that it was now Snape who held him fast. “Control yourself, Potter,” he commanded, and Harry felt his cheeks flush.

“I understand you’re worried about the war, Percy, we all are, but what did Harry ever do to you? It’s not his fault V-Voldemort marked him, or that the prophesy says he has to fight.”

But Percy was beyond hearing reasoned arguments or rationales. Now, now he could stop pretending, and the resentment that had built for years was alive and triumphant, and the pained, outraged look on Harry’s face was only fuel for the fire. “My parents believed in you, too, just like Dumbledore. From that first day on the platform for the school train. We were all fools, but I saw. When you stole Ron from me, took my place, I knew. I tried to talk to Mum and Dad, tell them you weren’t the hero Dumbledore said, but they wouldn’t listen. My own parents, and they believed you over me. They loved you over me.” And the hatred was colored now with anguish and jealousy, the shocked faces of his audience just another rejection in a life that seemed replete with high expectations and sour defeat.

Harry Potter. Percy, too, had at first been wildly enthusiastic about The Boy Who Lived, that they shared the same house, that he was friends with his youngest brother, Ron. He had bragged about it, even, to

anyone who would listen, and had certainly mentioned it when he began working at the Ministry after his graduation. Even then, though, there was a pang when he thought of the bond they shared, Harry and Ron, when he saw how his mother doted over the skinny, dark-haired boy. They never looked at him with such fondness, such admiration.

It was only as the friendship between Harry and Ron deepened that he realized, too late, what he had lost. Ron was *his* no more. Six brothers, three pairs, and it was only natural that Bill and Charlie would hang out together, being the two oldest, and of course Fred and George were inseparable, the bond they shared as twins not allowing the true inclusion of a third. Percy was alone between the older boys who had no time for him and the younger ones who needed no one but each other. But then Ron had been born, and Percy finally had his match. He had always thought of himself as Ron's protector, his surrogate father. That they were not an optimal fit personality wise ate at him, a little; he was all too aware that he was the dark sheep of the family, anxious and studious, caring little for sports or jokes, and too eager to find his place by matching and exceeding his older brothers in intelligence, in social standing, in power. He had hoped that as Ron got older they would become more like the brothers in his imagination – Ron coming to him for advice, listening to his words of wisdom, following in his footsteps.

Too late he realized that this would never be, that he had been replaced in his brother's world by an outsider, a usurper, and the bonds were already too entrenched to easily break. His importance to the Crouch and the Minister were completely overshadowed by Harry's role as one of the school champions. His initial burst of pleasure when he heard of their rift had been replaced by mounting resentment as they made up, and when Ron became the person for whom Harry must search in the second challenge, Percy was nearly sick with the disappointment and loss. Ron was his brother, his, but now every conversation seemed to center on Harry, Harry, Harry.

And then, after the Triwizard Tournament, the ridiculous stories Harry had told, and Dumbledore and his parents and Ron believed him, without question. Never mind that the Minister assured them all that it was nonsense, the fevered rantings of a traumatized child, the misguided loyalty of the once brilliant but now suspect Dumbledore. They would not listen, his family, and they openly ridiculed his loyalty to the Minister, turning him away. Never mind that it had been he who had moved out, who never spoke to his father at work, or responded to his mother's owls. They listened to him, Harry, over their own flesh and blood, their own son, and the indignity was too much to bear.

Then the final shame, that they had been right all along, and he the fool. They had extended no olive branch, had not requested his help in the fight once the truth had been revealed to the whole world. Instead he was left to toil in obscurity, the gofer for the Ministry elite, the Weasley name still a burden after years of his father's eccentricities, his own missteps in his associations with Crouch and Fudge the final, devastating blow to his promising career. Drudgery and routine were all he had to look forward to now, and the pitying glances of his coworkers, the whispers when they thought he was out of earshot.

When Dumbledore fell, he heard whispers of another sort, the reign of the Dark Lord imminent, and with startling speed he found himself the attention of a new group of people. Saccharine words laced with poison, they assured him of a position in the new order that was to come, the salvation of his family if he would provide information to help speed the success of the new regime. Small steps were all that was required, at first, the name of other sympathetic Ministry members, general knowledge about the Order. And then in a rush of promises and a desperate desire for glory he was kneeling before the Dark Lord, his head reeling with the rebirth of his dreams, to make a name for himself, to be revered, to be respected, to



be loved.

He knew he was lost, and the hopelessness of his life was a shroud he had worn since his brother's death. The Dark Lord may yet prevail but he would have no place in the new order, the creeping paranoia of the lurking predators he walked among too real to ignore. He saw the hunger in their faces, and in their eyes a reflection of his own blood splattered on the ground. Just another failure in a string of broken ambitions, and in his mind it all led back to Harry.

His words cut Harry like the sharpest blade, so deeply he was conscious of only a fraction of the pain. "You were all he ever talked about, you know. His best friend. And my mom, she used to say all the time how she loved you like her own son, that she considered you one of her own. If my family hadn't met you on the platform that day, Dad and Ron might still be alive today. It was you who brought this death and pain into our lives, and they loved you for it. Me, they treated like an enemy, and all I ever tried to do was help them. I tried to steer the twins and Ron and Ginny right, I tried to help Dad's reputation, our family name, at work. But none of it mattered, because of you."

It was Snape who responded then, his voice cold and clear. "Mr. Potter is no more responsible for your choices than the Minister of Magic, and to suggest otherwise illustrates your cowardice and immaturity. You had options, Mr. Weasley, and you chose to follow the Dark Lord. You must decide, and decide quickly, if you want that choice to rule the remainder of your pitiful life."

The sight of the younger man sickened and angered him, stirred uncomfortable memories and unpleasant emotions. He remember the irate twist of Dumbledore's mouth as he begged for a second chance while laying the blame for his mistakes at the feet of anyone other than himself; the Marauders, Malfoy, his barren, joyless upbringing. It was a long time before he was able to fully comprehend the difference between influence and force – he had been influenced by these things, true, and many others, but he had gone to the Dark Lord of his own free will, carrying a heart full of malice and dreams of vengeance. He remembered Dumbledore's admonishments, the renewed bloom of the childhood trees of guilt and blame, as he took responsibility for his choices, and the consequences thereof.

Now here was another who had gone down that same dark path, though for different reasons. Another who had pledged fealty to the Dark Lord, fallen prey to the lure of power and the assuagement of envy. Of course, Percy had not come to the Order to request a second chance as Snape had, so long ago; he was discovered and captured, and Snape was filled with disdain, his stomach an acidic pit of disgust. Had others looked at him the same way when he turned his back on the darkness all those years ago? He knew they had, and some did still, and a sudden flush of empathy did nothing to brighten his mood.

"It's not like I can turn back now," Percy choked out, the Mark on his arm leering at him, taunting him. "You don't understand, no one betrays him and lives..." He flushed, blood flooding his face as he glanced at the stern, imposing wizard looming over him. "I mean..."

"I know exactly what you mean, Mr. Weasley, and I can assure you that I do understand." All too well he understood, the power the Dark Lord held over his followers, the skeins of pain and temptation he wound so skillfully, ensnaring them in fear and devotion. Oh, the struggle to think clearly with the whisper of ecstasy and death all around, the knowledge that pleasing him meant power and reward, and that failure to please meant agony beyond description. Avoidance of punishment has always been a tool of teachers and tyrants, and its effectiveness, particularly on the weak, cannot be denied. And Snape feared that Weasley

was too weak to push past that curtain of fear.

"Then you know to betray him is a death sentence. You are the only one to last this long, and if anyone were to find you, if he were to get his hands on you..."

"Yes, I have no illusions as to how pleasant a reunion with my former colleagues would be."

Percy swallowed hard, eyes glassy, voice high and thin. "I couldn't...I can't do what you did. I'm not strong enough, not talented enough. He would have me killed in a heartbeat."

There was a beat of silence, sharp and pounding. "As you pointed out only a minute ago, Mr. Weasley, it is likely he will have you killed in any event. Unless the Dark Lord himself is defeated, and soon, your life is forfeit, and not at our hands."

The weight of it settled on him, Death a lurking monster breathing down his neck, and he slumped even further into the cushions of the couch, shoulders beginning to shake, tears streaking down his pallid face. "I know," he gasped through wrenching sobs. "This was my last chance. I only wanted to save them..."

"No." Snape's voice was softer now, almost gentle. "No more pretense, or shifting of blame. Your motives were neither heroic nor pure. And it does not matter, not anymore. You made a choice. Now you will have to make another one."

Percy sniffled, looked up, his face marred by self-pity and resentment, his eyes watery and dull behind his glasses. "What do you mean?" he asked cautiously.

"We have a plan to defeat the Dark Lord. Your assistance would make the plan much more likely to succeed. You agree to help us, or we will contact the Aurors. You will stand trial as a Death Eater, if you survive that long, and if you are fortunate your master will simply forget you, and your compatriots will abandon you, and you will have years in prison to contemplate your past and your choices, constantly wondering if your enemies are behind you, waiting for a flash of green in the dark. If you help us, and we win, you have my word that we will speak for you in the aftermath."

The young man blanched, a ghastly look on sallow, blemished skin. "What would I have to do?" he murmured angrily, his throat drying now with crawling fear.

"Nagini must be dispatched. I have a poison which will do the trick. You could ensure that she comes into contact with it."

Another beat of silence, and then the bound man began to laugh, a sickly, barking cough edged with hysteria. "A snake? You want me to kill a snake?"

Harry bristled at the outburst, his arms crossed over his chest, brow furrowed with contempt. "You think this is funny? We're offering you a chance to redeem your worthless hide, and you think this is funny?"

The redhead's eyes were wide now, wild and haunted, tears still squeezing out of the corners. "It'll never work. Never."

Snape's tone was cooler, sharper, and Percy flinched as he spoke. "As you know nothing of our strategy, I fail to understand why you would dismiss it out of hand. It is your only chance of regaining something of your former life, though...it will never be as it was. You will be despised and rejected for your choices, both to join the Dark Lord and to desert him." No one knew the sort of life these choices engendered better than Snape, the solitude born of society's rebuke, the hard, prickling stares and hissing words. There were times when he wondered if it would not have been better to simply allow the darkness to consume his soul, and suffer the consequences. He wondered if the crying man in front of him had the fortitude to withstand the years ahead.

"You don't understand. I can't be in his presence for more than a minute or two without him invading my mind. He would see my defection in an instant, I can't keep him out. I don't know how."

"Yes, we are aware of your lack of training in the mental disciplines." It was by far the greatest weakness in their plan, the chance that if Percy encountered Voldemort before he could plant the poison, he would be discovered immediately. And if he were discovered...

"It's a death sentence," Percy whispered. Already in his mind's eye he could see it, feel it, the piercing thrust of his master's thoughts into his own, the roar of rage as he saw the betrayal, and the pain, the pain that must then commence, pain and pain and pain until there was finally nothing left of him, nothing human, nothing but a screaming ball of torment. He was afraid, so afraid of such a shameful, humiliating death. It was a fear Voldemort cultivated well amongst his followers, and fear was his primary tool for keeping them in line.

"Perhaps," Snape answered neutrally. "But then, you are under a sentence of death anyway, are you not?"

It was sharp slap of a truth; Hermione felt her temper begin to flare as she listened, and swallowed it down with difficulty. This was the hardest part for her, the knowledge that they might have a hand in his torture and death by giving him this option, and that he was very likely to be another casualty no matter what his decision. Was it a kindness or a work of manipulation to offer him a chance at redemption, knowing that chance carried with it so high a price? How many times had she groused with Harry about Dumbledore's schemes, mentally castigated the old wizard for the callous way he maneuvered and used, friends and foes alike? Like pieces on a chessboard, and certain players must always be sacrificed for the sake of the greater triumph. She understood it in her head, but her heart was a traitorous, pulsing mass in her chest.

Snape waited for the unpleasant reality to wash over the boy, externally composed, internally seething. He remembered this, too, what it felt like to be trapped, desperate and drowning, and the only lifeline was barely a lifeline at all. Better to serve the more benevolent master, true, but that did not diminish the cost, the years of harsh loneliness with naught but the poison of his past for company. He had never wanted to be the master, benevolent or otherwise, of anyone but himself. It was a different type of sacrifice he was making, now, to wear the mantle Dumbledore had left, to wield the power to redeem and enslave in one fell swoop. With his Slytherin cunning, it was a skill he had to admit came readily, but doing so was not pleasant, or comfortable, his younger self a shocked and betrayed voice inside his head.

It seemed like a very long time they all waited, each with gloomy thoughts and conflicted emotions. Finally, Percy seemed to settle himself in his bindings, and he looked at them each in turn, terror and resignation shining from his eyes. Like the atmosphere before a storm, it seemed the air darkened and

sparked with tension, the tremulous reality that something of importance was about to happen, was happening. Another choice made, another path chosen, and another betrayer chose, however reluctantly, to seek the Light.

“What do you need me to do?”

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The next few days flew by. Percy’s role as a double agent was hidden from the Order at large; secrets were in high demand these days, and the already daunting risk would have multiplied considerably with each person who knew, with each opportunity for the Death Eaters or other minions of the enemy to catch wind of the plot. Instead, the Order as a whole was alerted as quietly as possible to be at the ready, and to be prepared to respond for battle a moment’s notice.

As Snape had suspected (and Percy confirmed), Voldemort’s habits regarding his pet and soul receptacle had not changed substantially. Why should they, when he had no reason to suspect anyone fathomed the importance of the reptile, and who would risk his wrath by doing something so foolish as to meddle with the one creature to which the evil man showed some glimmer of affection? It was Nagini’s habit to hunt the grounds of whatever fortress her master inhabited at night for food (human victims being an inconsistent supply of sustenance at best), and like all animals she had her preferred route of entrance and egress, an easy enough place to lay a trap. The poison Snape possessed was highly potent, odorless (even to the enhanced senses of an animal), and absorbed through the most minimal of contact. She would simply die, their hope being that Voldemort would not even be aware of her demise before he responded to their lure to meet Harry.

It was in this aspect of the plan the greatest danger lay for Percy, and neither he nor the rest of those who knew the specifics of the strategy had any misconceptions about the odds he would escape unscathed. They had allowed to leak (through Shackbolt, who was well aware of Voldemort’s spies in the Ministry, and he staged a conversation with Tonks so that the proper people would overhear) their plans for a very secret, very important Order meeting. They were banking on Voldemort not recalling his spy before then; Snape in particular thought it likely his former master would have more patience if he knew an opportunity for information was forthcoming, nor would he expect Percy to appear until after the meeting concluded. In the early morning hours after the “meeting”, Percy would Apparate to the dark wizard’s lair, plant the poison, then appear before Voldemort with the news that Harry would be at Hogwarts very soon.

Percy’s survival hinged on a crucial factor, one they would not be able to predict – Voldemort’s initial reaction to the intelligence about Harry. Snape spent as much time as possible with the young man, schooling him on how best to present the information, and what to do if Voldemort immediately began to probe his mind for more detail.

“You must focus on the memory of your conversation with Harry. Try to think of nothing but that memory, and your excitement at finally having something useful to present to your master.” At Snape’s insistence, they had already staged a conversation between Harry and Percy wherein the former revealed his intent to sneak back to Hogwarts after “the meeting” to retrieve something from the school, something from Dumbledore’s office he thought could help. To say it was a tense affair would be an understatement, and it took a scolding from McGonagall to force them both to act their parts with any sort of conviction.

"I'm trying," Percy panted slightly, pushing his glasses back up his nose and rubbing his aching temples. Snape stood, holding his wand, resisting the urge to do likewise; prolonged Legilimency was taxing.

"You have shown some minimal improvement, but the more clearly you focus on memories that do not incriminate you, the longer it will take him to see anything else." It was the best he could do, in so short a time. Rather than trying to teach Percy how to block those thoughts and images he did not want Voldemort to see, Snape was teaching him to focus on things that would not result in his immediate torture and death. Percy would be carrying a Portkey, one that he could activate to escape, but given the importance of killing Nagini and delivering the message about Harry, the spell was on a timer – the object would whisk him away two minutes after it was triggered. An imperfect plan, to be sure, but the best they could devise with the countdown looming. Percy would be expected to deliver another report soon, so they had announced the false "meeting" for two nights hence, the trap to be sprung in the early morning following.

"He knows, he always knows when someone is concealing something. It's like he can sense their fear, or smell it," Percy whimpered, trying and failing to conceal the surge of terror as he imagined yet again his role, his discovery, his demise.

"Then it is a good thing that you have been afraid in his presence since the beginning, so that there will be no change in your demeanor for him to sense," Snape responded tartly, watching without pity or pleasure as the other man flushed to the roots of his ridiculously red hair. "Again."

When he was not trying to drum a thin veneer of a chance at life into Percy's head, Snape was in the potions lab with Hermione. The immediacy of their task provided them both with a surprising but welcome reprieve from the emotional uncertainty of their relationship, and they found that working together was not so different, or difficult, after all. A couple of hasty dry runs had revealed that Hermione had indeed learned the Gaelic incantations well enough to recite them perfectly, though not with the sort of automatic fluidity she would have preferred. It was rather terrifying for her to have to really *think* while reciting; it had been her habit for years now to study to the point where the information she wanted was retrieved as a reflex, fluidly and (to the untrained observer) effortlessly. But, again, there was not enough time for her to reach her preferred level of comfort with the material, and once he was satisfied they would be able to complete the brew, preparations were finalized and they began.

It was the type of potion that required constant care, a finicky concoction that needed stirring and heat adjustments with annoying frequency. So that Snape could work with Percy, Hermione tended to much of the mundane, and by the time it was ready for the final stage, they were both tired and cranky and anxious.

But their working relationship prevailed despite the hardships. Hermione watched with awe and a little fear as Snape handled the container that held the twitching, obsidian, oily mass that was the remnants of his Mark. Like sentient ooze, it seemed to tremble and thrash as it neared the cauldron, clinging to the sides. As Hermione recited the required spells, her voice slow and sure, confidence rising with each correct syllable, Snape Vanished the container at the perfect moment, and the writhing bit of Voldemort's power splashed down into the potion. The surface rippled, a bubble rising and bursting, before the liquid took on its final, reddish brown appearance.

"That's it, then," Hermione said, pushing damp wisps of hair back off her forehead. No matter how hard she tried, she never could keep it back off her face entirely, and the steam and heat from the cauldron

turned her normally unkempt locks into a frizzy mess. Fortunately she had learned to deal with the distraction long ago, and never gave in to the temptation to fix it in the middle of a potion.

"Indeed," Snape responded, quietly gathering the utensils and beakers they had used, the gentle clinking of glass following him as he took the materials to a side table to be cleaned.

"Is it right, do you think?" Due to the unique nature of the potion, the fact that it required a part of the enemy against whom it was meant to be used, the end color and consistency varied accordingly. Hermione found it unsettling that she could not look at a description in a book to reassure her that everything had gone perfectly.

"I believe so, but of course we cannot be certain until the Dark Lord attacks Harry." A small part of him rather relished the idea, but it was a part that was beginning to hold less and less sway over his thoughts and actions, so no note of his dark humor crept into his voice.

It was the middle of the afternoon. That evening was the night of the supposed meeting -the next morning would be, if all went according to plan, the final battle between the Order and Voldemort. Neither of them had mentioned it; they had not talked much at all, beyond what was necessary to work together, and while it was nowhere near as tense as he would have feared, he also found he missed the sound of her voice, her insightful questions. His resolve to maintain his distance was far from firm, and the hours they had spent together had kept his emotions at a simmer.

Over and over he heard her words, that she was drawn to him, found him worthy, wanted him still. They seemed to crash violently with his own self-image, the resulting din resulting in a headache, but also in slow, insidious roots of doubt. Again and again he weighed and judged, debated and argued, and still there was no concrete truth, no epiphany. He still believed he was not worthy of her affection, her touch, and that association with him would only bring her pain.

And he still wanted her, burned for her, yearned for her and all she represented in ways that harkened back to his own youth, and dreams abandoned.

He could not bring himself to believe her assessment of him; his own self-image was too entrenched, tied to years of deeds and thoughts and opinions, and even without the bitter dregs of the Mark's influence dragging him down, turning his ideas and feelings acidic, there was no quick cure. He was dark, and unfriendly, and unwanted by society at large. That she saw some worth in him made him question her more than it provided him a new lens through which to view himself.

There was one thing that kept pushing to the front of his mind, something that both inflamed and soothed him, something that kept butting against the cracked surface of his control. Her words, that she saw his worth, that he should not judge himself solely on the basis of the blackness within. It was not that he believed them, but upon reflection he did believe that she believed him.

It was enough to unsettle him, thrill him, arouse him, and terrify him.

Was it enough, that she saw something good in him, even if he could not see it himself? Enough to put aside fear and uncertainty? Enough to experience some goodness before his likely demise?

Her voice dragged him back from his mental wandering; just as well, really, as hours of similar thoughts had left him with no conclusion. "I think I'm going to get cleaned up and get a bit of sleep," she said, not looking directly at him, suddenly shy now that they were alone without the press of work to keep them occupied.

"Yes," he said, the word large and clumsy in his mouth, and her chagrined smile reassured him. Of what, he could not say, and he could only watch as she ascended the stairs, his brain unable to form more words.

He finished cleaning, conjuring a damp cloth so he could scrub down the primary work table, hot water and soap still the best way to ensure no ingredients remained trapped in the grain of the wood. As he worked he allowed his mind to wander yet again, weighing options, trying to convince himself he had made the right choice, the honorable choice. He tried to believe it, and then he would see her face, crestfallen and confused, and he could taste her, feel her, and his the cracks in his resolve widened further still. When he had finished he, too, went to shower and rest, trying to force his mind on the battle ahead, trying not to hear the ticking of the clock in his mind, reminding him that any chance he had with Hermione was slipping, slipping away. If he wanted her, he had to choose, and soon.

Her voice echoed again, but from a dream. *Choose wisely...*

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A/N: I understand that this might not be the most popular choice on how to deal with Percy, but ultimately I think he is a sympathetic character. Maybe I relate to him on some level; maybe I'm just feeling guilty about how I've abused the Weasleys in this story; or maybe I just find this a convenient foil to allow Snape to come full circle.

We're coming down the home stretch now. There are at MOST three chapters and an epilouge remaining, and the next chapter is already in progress. While I'm writing at a pretty good clip these days, feedback always keeps the motivation high... :)

## Chapter 32: Cry Havoc

Hermione stood in her darkened bedroom, the light from a solitary candle flickering softly, casting wide swaths of shadow on the floors, the wall. It was nearing midnight, a few hours left now until battle, and there was nothing to do now but wait, and worry, and wonder what the next day might hold. A jagged crack of lightening split the night, illuminated her face briefly as she pressed against the cold panes of glass at the window, and soon after came the deafening crash of thunder. The frigid wind tore at the house, the chill seeping through the cracks in the molding around the windows, and she shivered but did not move, entranced by the violence of the storm.

She had slept only fitfully, waking after a few scant hours of deep, drug-like sleep, awakening suddenly and disoriented, afraid that it was all over, she had been left behind, and everyone she knew was dead. Unable to sleep again after that, she had instead joined Harry downstairs for a late dinner, both of them picking at their food while other Order members came and went, many staying, none of them talking much. Time seemed fractured and unwieldy, some moments agonizingly slow, others flying by too soon. Full darkness settled over the house, and as the minutes ticked by the night seeped into their bones, their minds, and they waited together quietly for the zero hour.

Hermione could not bear it, the blaring silence, and she slipped back to her room to stew in her anxiety alone. She watched as the bolts of fire rent the darkness, silently counting the seconds until the thunder pealed, mentally calculating the distance of the impending storm. It was almost upon them, now, and she shivered again.

The noise from outside had obscured the knock at the door; it was the sudden fall of lamplight from the hallway that alerted her to the presence of another. She could hear neither breath nor footfalls over the mournful wail of the weather, and she did not turn to see who the visitor was. She knew. Somehow, she had known that they would speak again before this night ended, before the ache of waiting bled into the chaos of battle. What she did not know was what he would say, and so she stood by the window, eyes still turned to the shifting, howling darkness, and waited.

Snape closed the door behind him quietly, and again the room was engulfed in guttering shadow. He watched the steady rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed, gathering the resolve to speak. He had tried to rest, to prepare, after they had completed the potion, eating before she had risen, attempting to banish her and his warring self from his thoughts. To no avail, though, and now he was here with her, feeling calmer and yet agitated by her presence, and in that instant he knew what he had come to say, and to do.

“You should get some rest,” he began, and her eyes slipped closed as another arc of electricity ignited the air. She had never noticed, in his classes, how soothing his voice could be when he wasn’t barking or berating, the low timbre enough to lull her senses, or awaken them.

“I don’t think anyone will be able to sleep tonight. If...if I am to die tomorrow, I’d rather spend this last night awake and aware.”

“You should not think like that. Pessimistic thoughts have a way of translating into reality.” He was well aware of the irony of him lecturing her on the subject, and her soft laughter did not bother him.



“It’s what you think, isn’t it? That you won’t live past the battle?” She turned her head to look at him, her own face hidden in the shadows, and he wished he could see her more clearly, divine her thoughts. She sounded sad, a little, and wistful, but also calm and strong. She was prepared for him, for anything, as much as possible.

“Yes,” he answered simply. No hiding, no deception this night, and he walked closer to her, close enough to feel the draft of winter air from the window.

“Is that what you want?” she asked gently, she, too, wishing for more light, more sight, more of him.

He smiled a little, though she could not see it in the dim illumination from the candle. “It is something I have come to accept. I never expected to live this long.”

“But is it what you want?” she challenged, and she heard him take a long, deep breath over the muted scream of the wind.

“For a long time, I did not seek death, but I would not have fought it, either, should it have come. It is only recently that I have been able to envision something...better than the peace of the grave.” When she did not respond, he sighed a little. “No, M-Hermione, I do not want to die. But I am prepared to.”

She was silent a moment longer, then she too sighed, turned back to the window. “I’m not,” she said quietly. “Prepared, I mean. There’s so much I haven’t done, haven’t seen, haven’t experienced...” The storm shrieked again, and now the heavy blat of fat rain as it rapped against the window, against the roof. She wondered if it would still be raining when they left, when they fought Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

Slowly, hesitantly, he reached for her, his hand soothing up her arm, across her shoulder. Her back was to him, her other shoulder braced against the wall, and he felt her shiver under his touch. She felt cool under his palm, the cloth of the thin shirt she wore not enough to keep her warm this close to the glass, and he touched the skin of her neck, reveling in the softness.

“Did you mean what you said?” he asked hoarsely, inching closer, letting the heat of his body envelope her.

“Yes,” she answered automatically, not knowing what specifically he was referring to, but knowing the answer all the same. She had meant every word she said to him the last time they spoke.

“Hermione,” he breathed, and turned her gently to face him. Lightning crashed, and in the harsh blue-white light it threw through the window he saw her, saw the unguarded eyes, her lower lip trapped between her teeth. If there were to be no more tomorrows for him, could he at least take something soft and gentle with him to comfort the lonely ache within? He had panicked in the face of that thought before; now it drove him forward, past the remnants of guilt and doubt.

It was not gone, the blackness inside. But it seemed like, for the first time in a long time, he was able to find a different type of courage - he was able to turn away from the well-worn path of his life, his self-image, and reach for something different, something larger, something more.

"I can guarantee nothing beyond tonight. Even in the unlikely event of my survival...I am not a nice man,

Hermione. I am not...enough, right now, to be there for another person in that way."

"I'm not asking for anything more. I would hope that you would remain open to future possibilities, but I'm not naive enough to think that you, this, us, is a forever kind of thing. But I am...drawn to you. I care about you, more than even I myself realized. And I would be lying if I said that I don't hope we both survive, sir..."

"Please, no titles or formalities. Call me Severus."

"Severus," she said shyly. Even in her mind she had a difficult time thinking of him, of any professor, in such familiar terms. Still, under the circumstances, it did seem silly to think of him as a professor. His hand lingered still on the flesh at the juncture of her neck and shoulder, and the heat of his touch raised gooseflesh, accelerated her breathing.

"Are you sure this is what you want, Hermione?" Another bright slash of lightening, and she could make out his expression now, the dilated pupils, the touch of uncertainty around his mouth. His voice was low, intimate, gravel wrapped in silk, and it felt like a shard of ice slid down her spine.

Oh, it was, it was, but the words stuck in her throat, the shuddering rumble of thunder stealing her voice. He waited, waited, and just a beat before his world crumbled to dust at his feet she looked directly into his eyes, her rising blush hidden by the night, and nodded, her own shaking hand rising and resting lightly against the lean strength of his chest. Against her palm she felt his breath catch and hold, exhale in a loud, jerky sigh, and then his mouth was on hers, and she stopped thinking, stopped doubting, and let go.

Again that sweet shock, her lips soft and hot and hesitant under his, and there was no stopping this time, no turning back. His hand slid to the nape of her neck, anchoring her mouth to his own, while he brandished his wand with the other, a quick flick conjuring several softly glowing balls of light. The visibility in the room increased considerably; he wanted to see, to experience, to remember this night. If it was to be his last, he did not want it to be like so many others, shrouded in darkness, hidden from the light. Another slash of his wrist, aimed at his own body, and he removed any chance that he would impregnate her; he doubted she was on the Juice (the slang term adolescents used for the Contraception Potion), and he also doubted she pined for children, especially his, at this early stage in her life.

When they broke from their kiss they were both breathing heavily, the sound of their exhalations mixing with the sound of the wind and the rain. Trying to hide the slight tremble in his hands, he pressed his lips to her forehead, sliding his hands down her arms to clasp hers. Watching her closely for any signs of hesitation, of second thoughts, he led her over to the bed.

It was like a dream, she thought, like something out of the hazy, fevered visions that inflamed her in the night. Her hesitancy was insignificant in the heat of his mouth, the hard weight of him as he pressed her into the nest of sheets and blankets that lay tangled on her bed. His touch was soft but firm as his hands skimmed under her top, the fabric bunching and exposing the flesh of her belly while his large, calloused palms cupped the aching weight of her breasts. She gasped into his mouth, the sure touch of his fingers tightening the textured skin at the peak, and the electric fury of the storm outside mirrored the jolt of excitement that ran through her, deep and powerful and new.

His mouth now trailed down her neck, teeth and tongue and lips finding a tender spot near her ear, under

her jaw, down the slope of skin that tasted like salt and heat. She twitched beneath him as he sucked lightly at her pulse point, her surprised moan a breathy counterpoint to his own hammering heartbeat, and he laved the sensitive flesh, nipping as she subtly arched against him, branding her with his mouth. He paused to admire the faint red mark against her pale skin, filled with a primal satisfaction, that he could bring her pleasure, that she enjoyed his touch.

He knelt up over her, eyes never leaving hers. With a few rapid movements he shed his robes and footwear, leaving him in nothing but his pants. His deft fingers made quick work of her Muggle top, too, and he watched his own long hands gliding over her soft curves, watched her breathing hitch as his thumbs began to circle her nipples.

“You must promise to tell me if I do something you do not like,” he whispered, almost hypnotized by the relative darkness of his hands as they smoothed against her fair flesh. He lay down on his side next to her, propped up on one elbow, dark eyes holding hers until she nodded shakily. He smiled at her, small but with a hint of mirth, and lowered his lips to her breast.

She jerked against him again, trying to bite back the little sounds that seemed to escape without her permission, too loud to her ears even against the backdrop of thunder and wind and rain. Gods, she had heard and read that this felt good, but giggled stories and perfunctory words could not adequately describe the experience, the tug and pulse of his mouth as he drew taut nipples inside, the heat of his bare flesh pressed to hers as he leaned over her. Her breasts felt too large, too full with sensation, and she was aware of a growing, aching burn low in her abdomen, the restless, uncertain motion of her hips testimony to her growing arousal.

Her sudden squeak when he trapped one nipple between his teeth caused him to raise his head. “Too much?”

“No,” she gasped, blood rushing to her face. Was she supposed to make noise, or would that distract him? She would worry her lower lip bloody if she had to hold it all in.

“Tell me what you want, Hermione,” he murmured darkly, his mouth hovering over her wet flesh, black eyes flashing with intensity. Erotic, it was, to look down her own body and see his pale face so close to her own bare flesh, the dark hair spilling across her stomach as he tilted his head, and speech was a skill that felt thick and unwieldy in her head.

“I...please...”

“Tell me,” he said again, the warmth of his breath skating across the moist skin, and she shivered under him.

“I want...more,” she groaned, embarrassed, desperately hoping he would not demand she be more specific. His short laugh was muffled as he took pity on her, his mouth resuming its exploration of her silken flesh. Heady, the knowledge that he had reduced her to monosyllabic responses, her restrained moans a powerful aphrodisiac, and the twisting movements of her pelvis invited him to explore further. Had she been this hot, this soft under his fingertips before? His nimble fingers slid into the humid confines of her flannel sleep trousers, squeezed the firm muscles of her buttocks, threaded through the damp hair above her sex. So much and yet not enough, and he lifted himself long enough to ease the material down

her legs, looking up the length of body to once again meet her hooded eyes, silently asking permission, silently receiving.

He lapped at the salt of her belly while his fingertips traversed newly bared territory, mapped swollen folds and circled engorged peaks. Her cries were fiercer now, less restrained, and the sharp, rich scent of her filled his nostrils as he shifted lower still, his hands smoothing over the jut of her hipbones and the sleek contours of her thighs, and he covered her with his mouth.

Her protest died in her throat, half-formed and incoherent. Again, the guilty tittering of teenaged girls fell short, far short, and the fleeting chagrin she felt that someone was ‘down there’ was quickly drowned in the clenching, blinding pleasure. Sight and sound were dim, insignificant, and the whole of her reality was centered in the cresting, aching throb between her legs, the intricate, intimate press of lips and tongue. Her own shy caresses paled in comparison, and it was building, building, her hips trying to rise off the bed against the weight of his body, blindly seeking the edge of the cliff.

Good, so good, her responses to his ministrations, the taste of her, salt and earth and tang. He had always enjoyed this, coaxing and stimulating, forcing his often less than enthusiastic partners to dance to his tune. What was once about power, another weapon to wield, was now something else entirely, and it was so much better this way, so much better when she was willing and wanting and her moans were shocked and raw and real. He could feel her legs trembling beneath his hands, sense the thread pulled tight, ready to snap. He glanced up the soft, beautiful length of her, reveled in her head thrown back, her chest heaving and mouth gasping, and began laving the erect bundle of nerves at the apex of her sex in earnest.

The directness, the intensity, was more than she could contain. She was broken, shattered, the white roar of her orgasm deafening and blinding and all-consuming. This was what they gossiped about, and she was unprepared for the encompassing ecstasy, the abandonment of reason or restraint. She bucked against him, riding the wave, and as she reformed on the bed she was conscious of the quivering in her muscles, the pound of blood in her ears, the heat in her face, and the still pulsing spasm deep inside.

And something else inside her, too; his fingers now, teasing, exploring, cautiously testing the tight, slick channel of her sex. Any doubts that lingered were now dissolved in the blaring desire that taunted him, urged him to act, to rush, to take. Part of his anatomy was literally twitching with the compulsion to test the warm, wet depths of her, and he forced himself to continue his slow, gentle pace.

“You didn’t have to,” he heard her say shyly, and he turned his gaze from the task at hand to her open, slightly dazed expression.

“I wanted to,” he said simply.

“I thought guys only did that if they...well, if they wanted the girl to...”

“I would disregard the rumors you may have heard from your friends about what men like and dislike. Each one is different, and some enjoy pleasing a woman in that way without expecting anything in return.” He was not surprised by her confusion; he heard enough of the adolescent prattling of his students to wonder how witches and wizards ever managed to propagate, so astoundingly backwards were their assumptions.

“So you don’t want me to...you know...” She was blushing furiously, and not at all immune to the notion that her embarrassment and her stammering were rather silly, under the circumstances. She had wanted this, imagined it, agreed to it, had she not? But silly or not she still felt nervous and unsure, eager to please him and yet uncertain she knew how to do so.

She heard the rustle of cloth as he moved, then the warmth of his body as he slipped up the bed to rest beside her. With another rush of fire to her face she realized that he had removed his pants, that he was now as naked as she, and though she tried to keep her eyes glued to his face, they were drawn down, down the length of him, down the wiry strength of his shoulders and chest, down the thin trail of black hair across the pale flesh of his belly, down...

He took her hand with his own, guided her to grasp his erection. Timidly she wrapped her fingers around him, slowly began to move her hand up and down the shaft, marveling at the contrast in textures, softness and steel. His shuddering indrawn breath spurred her on, and her movements grew bolder, her fingers exploring the smooth bulbous head, creeping lower to explore the loose, hairy flesh of his scrotum.

He had forgotten how much different, better, it was, the touch and slide of a hand other than his own, her small, warm palm creating delicious shivers through his body. For a moment he felt young again, experiencing that first exhilaration of tentative exploration. And while the brush of her hand was quickly gaining more confidence, more fluidity, she was still halting enough that he was able to maintain his control. For that he was grateful; years of nothing but his own company left him hypersensitive to another's caress, and he was loathe to have this end too soon.

"Is this right?" she asked a little anxiously, her thumb circling the velvety crown, oddly fascinated by the tiny drop of fluid seeping from the tip.

He nodded, a small smile quirking the corners of his mouth. "Yes," he rasped as her fingers found a particularly sensitive spot.

"Do you want me to...use my mouth?" she managed, the redness burning all the way to the tips of her ears.

His fingers lifted gently at her chin, drawing her eyes upward to meet his own, dark and stormy, emotions crashing like a storm in the night. "I do not want you to do anything you are not comfortable with doing, Hermione. I want you to remember this night with no regrets."

She nodded, mouth dry, gaze drawn back to his erect organ, her fingers stroking up and down the tender, twitching flesh. She wanted to and was afraid to all at the same time, afraid of doing something wrong, afraid of appearing more awkward and naive than she already felt. But Gods, the pleasure he had given her, and she wanted to give to him in equal parts. As she vacillated, his hands reached out to her again, trailing over her neck and arms, her breasts and belly and hips, and her train of thought derailed when his fingers again slid between her legs, delved inside still slick flesh, filling her and moving in a way she found strange and daunting and thrilling all at the same time.

Trembling, she leaned into him, hands still exploring the length of his swollen flesh, her mouth searching and finding his. She tried to convey with her lips and tongue what she could not say with her words, tried to tell him that she was uncertain still, innocent still, and needed him to take the lead. She started slightly when she realized the faintly musky taste of his mouth was her, the remnants of her pleasure, and she

moaned against him.

"Tell me what you want, Hermione," he muttered, hoarse and low, as they broke apart. He knew what he wanted, what his body wanted, but he was trying not to impose on her, trying not to frighten her. "Tell me you have not changed your mind."

She looked at him, amazed. The thought had not crossed her mind, truly, but the fact that he was offering touched her. Again she thought of things she had heard, horror tales of blue balls and labels of being a tease, and she realized that everything she had heard from schoolmates was horribly skewed. Either that, or she had certainly made the correct choice in avoiding said schoolmates for sexual encounters.

She shook her head, and his mouth was against hers again, harder, more demanding kisses, and she squeezed his erection convulsively, repeated the action when he growled against her neck. She was conscious now of the fine tremor of his muscles as bore her down to lay flat on the bed, the slightly sweaty skin of his back as he settled above her, the intimate shock of his naked flesh on hers. He rested in the cradle of her pelvis, kissing her, hands skimming her sides and flanks, and she could feel him, a hard, nudging presence, against her inner thigh.

His mouth slowed on hers, his kiss now soft and reverent, and he pulled back to look at her. However short his remaining time might be, he was grateful for a memory like this, a mental picture of something other than ugliness and doubt. Beautiful she was, to him, her hair a dark, wild mane against the pillow, cheeks pink, mouth parted and full. And those eyes, wide and soft, that stared back at him, seemed to reach into some part of him long imprisoned, a shaft of sunlight in a place long kept dreary and desolate.

"You are sure?" he inquired one final time, his voice deep and strained, his erection throbbing against the outer lips of her sex.

"Yes," she said, reaching up one hand to trace the tendons in his neck, the slope of his shoulder, the flat male nipple that lay almost hidden in a nest of coarse black hair. "Will...will it hurt?"

"I will be as gentle as possible, but there may be some pain, yes. It should not last long. You need only tell me to stop and I will."

She nodded again, and he kissed her gently, moving one of his hands between them. Now she could feel the tip, poised at her entrance, and the incredible sudden sense of fullness, of stretching, sensations just this side of pain. She gasped as he inched further and further inside, a faintly burning ache, and then opened her eyes to find him staring down at her, his face a contortion of pleasure and restraint, his eyes wide and unguarded.

Gods, she was so *tight*, and he could feel the little spasms as her body sought to accommodate him. He stopped when he encountered resistance, waited until she got used to the feel of this much, his control clenched tightly. He dreaded hurting her, and yet his body was urging him forward, forward...

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and with a sharp thrust of his hips he pushed past the membrane, sheathing himself fully inside her body.

Although she was prepared for it mentally, she still shrieked at the intrusion, the fiery, tearing pain. He

had felt large inside her before, but now, as she clamped down on her lower lip to bite back the cries, she had the ridiculous thought that he had decided to insert something else, instead. Gryffindor's Sword, perhaps. While she had no past experience with which to judge, she had decided he was average in size, neither too large nor too small, but the pain was shrieking that he was huge, an invader to be expelled, and she tried to force herself to relax.

He stilled inside her, his breath a shuddering explosion, the feel of her twitching around him almost overriding higher brain function. How long since he had felt this, the clenching sheath of a warm, willing woman? He knew he would not last particularly long, and allowed himself a moment's regret. Still, perhaps it would be easier for her if this first time with a man was not a marathon session; she would surely be sore enough later without him hammering away for hours.

Soon he felt her relax somewhat, the muscles of her legs, which were crooked about his hips, releasing their death grip. Experimentally, he withdrew a bit, eased forward again, establishing a slow, shallow motion that he hoped would not cause her further distress.

"Okay?" he rasped, watching her carefully, waiting to see if those tight lines appeared again around her eyes and mouth.

"I think so," she responded, the sharpness of the pain having subsided. It was, for lack of a better word, a very different experience, the feel of something sliding between her legs, something moving deep inside. As the pain lessened, she became aware the sensation was indeed pleasant, a distant, growing pressure inside her core. He paused suddenly, withdrew further, thrust a little deeper and harder, and she gasped at the feeling.

"Yes," she muttered before he could ask, the wave of sensation peaking, receding. A hint of pain yet, deep, but it was no longer a concern.

He took her permission and surged forward, deeper and faster still, his own impending release approaching with the speed of the Hogwarts Express. Too long, too long since he had felt anything this good, and now she was arching up against him, hesitant, jerky motions that inflamed him further. She couldn't catch the rhythm, and he moaned against her shoulder, one hand reaching down to cup her hip, press her hard against him, still her asynchronous movements so that he could drive into her, the hot, claspings depths of her body, and he was close, so close...

With a final, shuddering groan his orgasm overtook him, and with one last thrust he buried himself deep, his whole body rigid with pleasure, and he spilled inside her, body and soul. His vision swam with the force of it, and he felt her hands clutching at his back, his sides. As the bliss dissolved into lassitude, he spared the energy to wish he could have done more, been better, brought her to the brink with him. He was aware of the unlikelihood, given her inexperience and his relative lack of stamina this night, and he sighed deeply and he rested flush against her.

She tightened her arms around him, embracing him as she felt his full weight pressing into her. Her sense of uncertainty was returning; what should she say now, or do? What did he expect from her, or want? Was he disappointed in her performance - had she done it right at all?

She felt him tense just before he eased from her, the wet slip of his softening organ from her body an odd

sensation, and she felt her sex convulse a little, almost as if seeking to be full again. He moved off to the side a little, shifting his weight so that she no longer supported the bulk of it, and she felt alone suddenly. She wanted reassurance badly, and did not know how to ask for it. Would he think her silly or immature if she voiced some of her thoughts?

"What are you thinking?" he asked softly, hiding a smirk at her obvious surprise. He had been her teacher for years, after all, and well knew what she looked like when she was burning to ask something, when her mind was whirring with questions.

"I...was I okay? I didn't do much, really..."

He rolled onto his side, lifted his hand to stroke her cheek, tucking a hank of unruly hair behind her ear. It did no good, the curl immediately flopping forward again. "You did quite well," he said seriously, watching some of the unease seep from her eyes. Quite well indeed, for while he had experienced his share of sexual encounters where carnality and ecstasy abounded, there was something deeply satisfying about this time with her, her trust in him, her responsive innocence.

"What happens now?" she whispered, her own hand reaching up to trace his face, the prickle of his evening stubble harsh against her palm, the thick, lank hair that framed his features tickling the back of her hand.

"Whatever you wish," he replied honestly, a frisson of fear tweaking his mind. Did she want him to leave, now that it was over? He wondered why the thought bothered him; did he want to spend all his remaining hours with her? Would such intimacy only make it that much harder to face the coming battle, and his likely demise?

She blushed as he looked at her, his expression more relaxed than she could ever remember seeing. Odd, to feel so reticent after what they had just done. Or perhaps not so odd, when she thought about what she knew and believed about the man who lay next to her. For all the relative softness he had allowed her to see, he could still be a very sarcastic man, his tongue an instrument of pain as well as pleasure, and should she feel the caustic sting of a well-placed barb now, the rejection would be total.

So her heart was in her throat, her eyes downcast, as she voiced her desire. "Will you...will you hold me for a while?"

He swallowed down a suspicious burn in his own throat, emotions momentarily threatening to overwhelm him, and drew her into his arms. She murmured softly as she settled against him, entwining her soft limbs with his own, her breath a warm, reassuring presence against his chest. Her hair tickled his chin and nose as her head tucked against his neck, and he breathed deeply of the scent of her, soap and shampoo, sweat and sex. He felt something swelling inside his chest, something he could not allow to escape, not now, but as he held her, he allowed the warmth of it to spread through his body. As her breathing evened out, her body relaxing further into the quiescence of sleep, he watched the flickering light of the storm outside, listened to the thunder as it crashed in the distance, and allowed his thoughts to flow.

As difficult as his life had been, he did not often indulge in remembrance, in melancholy. But it seemed as if something deep in his core had been damaged, broken, and memories welled up. His childhood, bleak and loveless as it had been, had contained some goodness. His mother had tried to provide him with some



warmth, some affection, something to counteract the violent moods of her husband. Though he was the Muggle, it was she who had introduced their son to books, magical and Muggle alike, her own love of learning and literature something she fostered in her dark, brooding offspring.

At night, sometimes, when her husband was too drunk to care, she would read to him. There was a poem she liked to read from time to time, a poem that had haunted and confused him as a boy. He had wondered, once he was older and had a better understanding of what it meant, if she was preparing him for her death, or for the misery of life. He wondered why she would try to teach him something like that so young.

Now, as he held Hermione he found that the words of that poem emerging from his memory, his mother's deep but gentle voice an echo in his mind, he pondered again its meaning:

*Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

*Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

*Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*And you, my father, there on that sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Severus Snape was not a poetic man, a romantic man. His life was a long, bare road of sacrifice and subterfuge, few respites of friends or confidants, of light or joy. He knew, had known since his descent into the Dark, that he was not destined to live long, or well. He had accepted that he would die, and die bloody and alone, long ago. He did not rail against the injustice of it, did not rage against his fate. Death did not seem to him to be something to dread, and though he did not yearn for it, nor did he cringe from the thought.

Now, though, it seemed as if he understood a little better what it must be like to have something worth holding onto. If his life was filled with tenderness, would he beg and plead for more? More time, please, to spend with others, to enjoy life. If he had something to enjoy...

He held her closer, an uncomfortable sensation still churning, and thought about the dangers that lay before him, before them. And perhaps for the first time, he allowed himself to hope, really hope, that he would survive the day, and that his light would not die.

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A/N: I, of course, did not write the poem cited herein. It was written by Dylan Thomas, and has always been a favorite of mine.

This type of writing (the lemony type) is not really my forte. While I enjoy some of the randier stories on here, I wanted this story to be something everyone could relate to and find believable. Whether or not I've succeeded, I leave to you, the reader. Be gentle... :)

## Chapter 33: And Let Slip the Dogs of War

It had ceased to rain in the land from which Voldemort's castle rose, a hulking, glowering old battlement that loomed over the land. It was a foreboding shadow to the creatures that lived nearby, and this evening the storm clouds conspired to completely blot out the moon, leaving the night black as pitch. If a stranger were to venture closely enough, he might be able to make out the faint hint of light through a window, the wild dance of a candle's flame on cold stone walls, but strangers were uncommon, the countryside a dour, forbidding place where travelers rarely ventured. The wind whistled mournfully through the long, untended grass around the grounds, loud enough to hide the short, sharp crack of Apparation from anyone who cared to listen.

Percy stood stock still at the edge of the grounds, the closest he could get to the rear of the castle with the Anti-Apparation wards in place, the hood of his black cloak pulled up over his head. He strained to hear through the rustle of the foliage, the high-pitched whine of the wind as it whipped through the trees, and the loud rush of blood in his ears. A minute or two passed, and though his fear did not subside one iota, it did seem, at least, that he had managed to arrive on the outskirts of the stronghold undetected.

He did not dare risk igniting his wand for light, relying solely on the faint glow from the massive fortress beyond. He crept closer, each shriek of the wind startling him anew, until he breached the general wards surrounding the encampment. No turning back now; whoever was assigned guard duty that night would check on the intrusion, and soon, and Percy broke into a sprint, clambering up the wet, grassy slope, his shoes and robes soon soaked through to the knee, leaving him shivering and cold.

There, along one corner of the rear wall, was a hole in the thick grey stone, the buttery gleam of a distant light source splashing the rough edges of rock. It was here Nagini usually entered and exited the castle, her thick body squeezing through, her scales a dry rasp on the granite floor, a whispering rustle in the grass beyond. Fumbling with numb, stiff fingers, Percy reaching into the pocket of his outer robes, withdrawing the smooth glass vial of poison Snape had provided for him. He had thumbed the cork from the opening and was just about to pour the fluid onto the gap in the stones when a noise, faint and ominous, froze his hand and his heart.

There, again, a distinct swish of grass made by conscious movement, and not by the random, blustery wind. His wand shook as he stabbed it blindly forward into the night, the darkness thicker now that his eyes had adjusted to the feeble illumination from the castle, and he waited for a flash of red (or worse) to come streaking through the air. Part of him was screaming to run, run away, run from the Dark Lord and the Order and the war and everything else. But he also knew that if he started running now, he would never be able to stop. That isn't what prevented his feet from carrying him away, though; in truth, he was entirely too scared to move, and so he listened and waited and choked on his terror and the loud thud-thud-thud of his heart.

The noise was closer now, too close, almost upon him, and still no magic sparked his way. He saw no one and nothing; it was rather a testament to the singular focus of his task and his fear that he did not think to look down until he felt something heavy slither across his foot, a sense of pressure more than actual sensation. With a small cry, he scuttled in reverse, his back smacking hard against the wall of the castle, and watched as Nagini paused, flat black eyes reflecting the pale light, lending an aura of conscious menace to her expressionless expression, and her thin, forked tongue tasted the air about his legs, flickering around him.

It was one of those moments that seemed to stretch on indefinitely; still too afraid to move, he stared at her, his brain reeling at the opportunity presented. Right here in front of him, success assured, if he could only think fast enough, move fast enough – and then the moment shattered, and she started to move again, winding her way toward the gap in the wall, her head already disappearing inside. It felt like he was in slow motion, his hand shaking so badly he almost dropped the slick glass vial, but he was bending, tilting, pouring, watching the flow of green-black liquid glisten through the air, splash on the scaly green flesh just before the body began to narrow again, begin to flow in rivulets down the serpent's sides. It never made it to the floor, though, the poison absorbing quickly, and then her tail slithered through the gap, and she was gone.

"Who's there?" A raspy, male voice floated to him through the dark, and Percy bolted up straight, wand again poking at the air.

"I-It's me," he stammered, dropping the empty container to the ground, pushing the hood of his robe back to reveal his face. "I thought I h-heard something..."

"*Lumos*," came the voice again, and Percy saw a wand flare to life about 50 feet away, the tip illuminating two figures as they strode toward him. The elder Crabbe and Goyle squinted at the shadow against the wall, made out a pale face, a shock of red hair.

"Oy, it's only Weasley," Crabbe snickered, while Goyle lost his footing on the wet grass and fell to one knee, cursing. "What's the idea, sneakin' around out here? He's been waiting on you, you know," he sneered, watching the taller young man blanch and tremor a little. Stupid little blood traitor, the Weasley brat, and Crabbe would be more than happy to see to his demise when their master so ordered.

"I told you, I thought I heard something," Percy retorted, a little of his fright giving way to irritation. He knew what these ignorant brutes thought of him, but their lack of intelligence made him feel marginally safer. Another Death Eater would have stunned first and asked questions later, but these two would do nothing more than mock and jeer, their own place in the Dark Lord's hierarchy not high enough, nor their own intellect developed enough, for them to take some sort of action on their own.

"Too scared to go in again without news, I wager," Goyle muttered thickly as he struggled to his feet. "Skulking around out here won't do you no good, boy."

"I have news," Percy said hotly, shifting his feet subtly, feeling the resistance then crush of the glass under his heel. Over the sound of the wind and their voices, the tiny noise did not carry.

"Really? Enough to save you from another round of Cruciatius? Tell us, we could use a good laugh, then," Crabbe jeered, and Goyle laughed appreciatively.

"I report to the Dark Lord alone," Percy responded, gathering as much arrogance as he could muster, and while their cackles burned in his ears they did nothing more as they "escorted" him to the main entrance, mocking him all the way.

As he walked through the dimly lit entrance hall, he glimpsed the main gathering chamber beyond the archway, enough torches lit along the bare grey walls to create an audience of dancing shadows. A decent

sized gathering, he saw, and there, on the raised dais, his lord and master. He hesitated, ignoring the guffaws behind him, and thrust his wandless hand into his pocket, grasped the hidden Portkey. A simple button, easily concealed or explained, and he concentrated hard, his eyes screwed shut, and whispered the spell to activate the device. Too early, perhaps, for what if the Dark Lord did not call on him right away, but he couldn't survive otherwise, the fear already clouding his sight, his brain, and the Dark Lord would see, he would know he would know he would know....

Heart in his mouth, he walked rapidly into the main chamber, the felt the eyes of the other Death Eaters watching, tracking, and his tongue was dry and swollen and his palms were sweaty and shaking, but he stared straight ahead, at the stairs leading up to the Dark Lord's throne, trying to remember what Snape had taught him, focusing on what he wanted to reveal, and not on what he wanted to hide.

Trembling, he walked directly to the base of the steps and knelt, forehead touching the cold, gritty floor. "My Lord, I have news, important news."

Voldemort's red eyes narrowed to mere slits, examining the bent back of his servant, the fine tremor, the cloud of fear that surrounded him. His nostrils flared, suspicious. The weakling was always afraid, but this was different for some reason, and he would know why, and soon.

"Speak, my spy," he hissed, and felt the loose circle of his followers pull in closer, drawn to the kneeling man's terror, like sharks scenting blood in the water.

"My Lord, the boy, Harry. I know where he's going to be, out in the open and unprotected. Very soon, if not right now."

Still the tang of deceit, but not about this, he was certain. "Where?"

Percy was sweating profusely, the upper part of his under-robos sticking to his chest from the perspiration, the lower half of his robes still plastered about his calves from the rain soaked grass. Focus, focus, and he remembered Harry, speaking to him, the sick rage churning in the pit of his belly, and he tried to control the waver in his voice as he spoke.

"He's returning to Hogwarts, my Lord. We spoke, after the meeting, he told me he needed to return there to retrieve something, and that he was going alone as soon as the rest of the Order left or retired for the evening. He could be there even now..."

"What are you hiding?" Voldemort interrupted, the sense of deception thickening, but not about what he spoke, it was something else, something about Harry, and the Order...

"N-nothing, my Lord. He is there, or will be shortly, I swear it," Percy stuttered, trying to hold on to the image of Harry, trying to fill his mind with things he wanted his master to see, but the fear was winning, and scenes of his own impending doom crowded his brain.

"Crabbe. Goyle. Take others and secure the area. I will be along shortly to deal with him myself. I hope I need not remind you that I wish him to be alive, and relatively unharmed," Voldemort commanded, the two hulking men bowing low, motioning to other low level, brutish Death Eaters to join them. No mistakes this time, no relying on his fallible followers, and his reign was close at hand. "And now, my faithful servant,"

he hissed, low and menacing. "What are you hiding?"

Time was moving slowly, too slowly, the Portkey should have activated by now, and the thoughts in his head had nothing to do with Harry telling him about going to Hogwarts. Everything he wanted to hide was bubbling up, his capture by Snape and the others, his acquiescence to their demand for his help, his horror and dismay at the choice he had made to join the Dark Lord, and he couldn't hide it, it was all right there for his master to see if he looked, and he would, oh, he would at any moment now...

And before he could protest again, he felt it, the icy, phantom fingers of the Dark Lord piercing his mind, invading his memories, and he was everywhere, everywhere, rifling through the events of the past few days. He tried, he tried so hard to keep thoughts of Harry and Hogwarts in the front of his brain, tried to summon his very real hatred for the boy as a shield against the assault, but it was no good, no good, and then there was nothing but the shrieking terror as it all spilled through his plaster defenses, and he could feel his master's towering rage even before he withdrew, Voldemort's mind screaming through his own as he ripped himself free. Gasping, he tried to sort through his own reeling thoughts. Had he found it all, seen it all, or just bits and pieces of the whole?

"Traitor!" Voldemort bellowed, and the heads of the other Death Eaters jerked up, sensing the coming pain and torture of another. The evil wizard rose from his chair, descending the stairs so rapidly he seemed to fly, and Percy lay bowed and shaking, so scared he never even dreamed of trying to fight his way out. A blast from a wand and Percy flew across the room, skidding across the floor before his head impacted the wall with a sickening crack, leaving the young man dazed and disoriented while his master stalked forward, his other followers thronging behind.

Voldemort was trying to sort through the images he had seen even as he advanced, seizing on memories of Harry and the Order. The hatred there was real, yes, and there was Snape, trying to instruct the traitor in the mental disciplines, and it was true, Harry was to be at Hogwarts, soon, now, the hour of his triumph at hand. He laughed, high and humorless, and pointed his wand directly at Percy's heaving chest, just over the heart.

"Victory is at hand!" he crowed, even as he kept searching through the things he had seen, searching. There were many other thoughts, formless and chaotic, but in his fury and excitement he decided to push them aside for now. There would be ample time to unravel the whole tapestry of the traitor's duplicity once his victory was complete. "And you, sniveling, faithless coward that you are, will not live to see our triumph. I only regret I do not have the time to punish you properly before you die."

Percy stared up from the ground, hopeless, defenseless, eyes fixed on the tip of the wand, the flat, snakelike face of his master beyond. *'I'm sorry, Ron,'* he thought, his mind blissfully blank now, no emotion other than regret burning in his eyes.

Voldemort sneered, disgusted by the other man's acceptance of death. He would never submit blindly to the void, and he had sold his soul, or at least parts of it, to avoid that fate. Now, though, he would destroy his last remaining enemies and rule the world, his immortality all but assured. Just a few last loose ends to tie up. *"Avada Kedavra."*

Percy was just barely aware of a flash of green blooming from the end of the wand when he felt the tug of the Portkey, the magic tugging just below his navel. A race now, to see which magic would take hold first

- would he escape the curse, or travel back to the Order a corpse?

How often, in casual speech, do people remark that two separate events occurred at the same moment in time? More often than not, the person is simply unable to discern the tiny fractions that mark time's passage, the naked eye unable to detect which thing did, indeed, happen first. It is exceedingly rare for two events, especially two magical events, to take place at the exact same millisecond, rarer still for two spells to collide in space, person, and time.

But that is what happened to Percy Weasley, the Killing Curse reaching his person just as his body was yanked away by the spell of the Portkey. And the magics collided, a blinding explosion without heat or sound, and then he was gone, the spot of the floor where the spy had lain now vacant, and the Dark Lord was left to howl his rage, a sound like the echoes of hell, and gather the rest of his minions to storm the gates of Hogwarts.

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Most of the Order now was waiting at headquarters, a crowd of black cloaks and thick tension. Everyone, anyone who wanted to fight the Dark Lord or defend Hogwarts was there, adults and adolescents, grey heads and pimpled faces, all grim and twitchy. Hermione wondered fleetingly how some of them had discovered to be there, now, to fight, but the twisted, satisfied smiles of the Weasley twins told much of the story. She even thought she saw one of her charmed Galleons being passed on the sly, and the arrival of almost every member of Dumbledore's Army made something solid and large stick in her throat. She wanted to do something, say something, to make them leave, especially the younger ones, but say what? Did not they, too, have the right to stand up for what they believed, the right to protect themselves and their families and their friends against the threat of the Dark?

She found herself looking for him again, Snape, the shifting, mulling throng of bodies in the rooms, in the halls, making movement difficult. There, standing in a corner near the front door, McGonagall saying something into his ear, his face stoic and grave. Even as the threat loomed, she felt something inside her relax a little as she allowed herself the luxury of watching him, allowed herself to remember touches and feelings. With a sigh, she shoved such thoughts from her head, trying to focus, hexes and spells flying through her mind.

"Knut for your thoughts," said Harry as he sidled up next to her, his face already pale and tight.

She looked around at the anxious, determined faces, friends and strangers alike. So many good people, but would it be enough? "They aren't worth that much right now," she muttered, wishing it was all over, wishing it would never happen. Anything but this waiting, and wondering.

"I'm worried, too," he replied simply, and she leaned into him, refusing to think of what her life would be like if he, too, fell. Like Ron.

"It's going to be horrible," she whispered. Not the battle, though of course there was horror there, too. She wondered what frightened her more, the thought of fighting and bleeding and dying, or her vivid imaginings of the aftermath, of bodies and funerals and loss. She wanted to live, wanted them all to live, but was it worse to be one of the mourned, or the mourner?

“Yeah.” He didn’t know what else to say. Was this it, the moment everyone discovered what a fraud he was, a failure? The boy who would save the world, but no one had ever asked the boy, and he was afraid, so afraid. Suicide, to face the most powerful Dark wizard that ever lived, and yet even if he had a choice, he didn’t. His parents, Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Arthur, Ron...the list of the dead stretched across the gathering, demanding justice, demanding peace. And he was just Harry Potter, the only person to ever survive the Killing Curse, the boy who had faced the Dark Lord three times and lived to tell the tale, the man who knew his fate was bound to another, and neither could live while the other survived. Funny, that – they had both managed to be alive for a couple of years now. He felt a bubble of wild laughter rise and die before it ever made it out of his mouth, and he put his arm around Hermione, held her close, like a lifeline to sanity.

Snape also found his eyes wandering the crowd, seemingly at random, but they settled most frequently on the bushy head of Hermione Granger. She was with Potter now, the pair of them drawing comfort and solace before the coming fight, and he did not begrudge her that. It was not something he could offer freely, and he would not deny her something so simple with the events that loomed. Still, he felt a frisson of something bitter at the sight, irrational though he knew it to be.

He was about to look away, not wishing to be caught staring at the girl, when her eyes met his. Electric, her gaze, and he could not let her go, could not break the connection. What had she done to him, this young woman who had slipped inside his defenses, given him the first hint of hope he had ever felt in his adult life? Best not to think of her, feel her, allow her to distract him from what needed to be done. He could not allow an uncertain future, however tempting, to stay his hand in war. He could feel Death, just another presence in the room, and he was prepared to make whatever sacrifice was necessary. He had to be. Look away, look away from her small, sad smile, those large, bright eyes...

Like the ringing of a giant bell, noise clattered through the house; Percy had activated the Portkey, the plan set in motion, and the ensuing silence was absolute. Each man and woman, young and old, grasped their wands, listened to the pounding of their hearts. Time, now, no turning back, time to face the darkness, time to fight the good fight, to thwart the impending evil or die trying. And some undoubtedly would.

Snape allowed himself one last look at her, pale and trembling, standing next to Potter. No more words now, the zero hour at hand, and he walked to the door, opened it to the cold, inky night. “It’s time. To Hogwarts,” he stated confidently before, with one last glance at Hermione, he stepped outside, into the uncertain future, and Apparated.

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Humanity has a certain fascination with wars, with battles, and the wizarding community was no exception. Stories and legends were filled with heroes and villains, with great deeds and great sacrifices, dates and feats learned by schoolchildren in the mind-numbing tedium of the classroom, far removed from the realities of the events described, sanitized and scrubbed clean. A defense mechanism, perhaps, that allows a society as a whole, and individuals in particular, to rise up when needs be, to defend and protect without adding to the burden of fear and death and horror.

Hermione’s father was a history buff, fascinated in particular by the Muggle World Wars. She had seen



countless documentaries and fictionalizations about soldiers and sailors, enemies and treachery. She knew it wasn't truly real, that it was only a fraction of the whole, that death did not always come in a flash of artillery and an artful trickle of blood. But she was still unprepared for the sheer atrocity of it, the smells and the sights and the sounds. They would haunt her ever after - the bright, rancid spill of viscera as Colin Creevy was hit with the Entrail-Expelling Curse; the screams that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere as she ran and ran, lungs burning, dodging and twisting; the smell of burning flesh and hair; the strobe-like flashes of colored light that crisscrossed the grounds, reds and blues and yellows and greens, a beautiful tapestry of destruction and chaos that rendered the darkness of night almost as bright as day.

It had all gone according to plan, Voldemort and his followers caught completely off guard by the whole of the Order lying in wait when they arrived at Hogwarts to capture Harry, their advance party having been easily subdued. McGonagall's ability to erect a powerful barrier around the castle and grounds just after their arrival hindered their ability to flee, and the Dark Lord seethed and raged and threw himself and his minions into the fray, activating the Mark to summon all of his servants to his side. Badly outnumbered at the start, the Death Eaters eventually breached the barrier and flooded to their master's side, their willingness to kill and maim a benefit against an army comprised of many youth who, too often, hesitated in the face of pure violence.

There was no thought of flight now for either side, the battle pitched, the only way out victory or defeat. Hermione tried to stay with Harry, desperate to be by his side when he confronted Voldemort, but the fury of the fight made that impossible, their ranks broken into smaller clusters of confrontation, the Dark Lord determined to crush the fools who dared defy before dealing the final blow, the death of their boy champion.

Voldemort stormed through the battlefield, wielding his wand at will, watching without compassion, without mercy, as ally and enemy alike fell to the ground, wet with rain and blood. The silver masks of his followers were beginning to dwindle in number, and his wand flew ever faster, spitting agony and death. He could sense the pendulum swinging, the strength of his subordinates flagging and waning, and he kept scanning the field of black cloaks and faces contorted with concentration and pain, looking, looking...

And there, through the ever churning mass of bodies and magic he saw him, the boy, and the traitor, too, by his side. Both were tall and lean and full of cold fury, their wands never ceasing as they stood their ground. Voldemort did not know, in that moment, which he hated worse, which he wanted dead more, and nothing could deter him as he swept to stand before them.

"Harry Potter!" His voice rang out high and clear through the shrieking cacophony of war, and both Harry and Snape's heads turned toward the sound. A burst of energy and the Dark Lord had pushed other fighters from their vicinity, leaving the three of them oddly alone in the midst of the fighting, a quiet looking cocoon of serenity amidst the shouts and flashes and bodies.

"Take a look around you, Potter! Do you see your comrades fallen, your friends dying? It is time for this to come to an end, to unite the wizarding world under one rule. My rule. It is time to finish the task I started 16 years ago."

Voldemort's face darkened suddenly, and with a fierce slashing movement he sent Snape flying through the air, slamming hard to earth yards away, face a mask of mud and blood. "And you, my *loyal* spy. When I rule, you will be the first of the vermin to squeal for mercy. I will break you before you die."

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry shouted, hoping to catch Voldemort off guard, but the self-styled lord merely laughed, thin and mirthless, the spell deflected effortlessly.

"Eager to start, then, Harry? You will not escape our duel so easily this time, I promise you that. I have a new wand, now, and there will be no shadows of the past to help you. Shall we begin, then? Are you prepared to die?"

"Are you?" Harry challenged, hoping he sounded braver than he felt, hoping the evil wizard could not see his uncertainty and his fear. Holding his own against a Death Eater was all well and good, but this was Voldemort, one of the worst Dark wizards in history, and he knew that he had only survived their past encounters by luck and little else. Yes, he had taken the elixir Snape had concocted as soon as he knew Voldemort was there, shuddering as the dark, rancid liquid clogged his throat, but if it didn't work...

Voldemort raised his wand, held it vertically in front of his face, and without conscious thought Harry mimicked him, standing up straighter, preparing to duel. Their wands cut through air on a downward arc before rising to point straight at the other. Harry's vision swam with the sight of him, white, flat features and red eyes and snake-slit nostrils. It seemed inconceivable to him that this man had ever been human, had ever been anything other than a monster, and the unreality and reality of his life, their intertwined fates, came crashing down, settled over him with an eerie calm and cold sweat. *'For neither can live while the other survives...'*

And then the duel was underway, and Harry could do nothing but twist and surge, flinging off curses and hexes as fast as he could while trying to avoid the barrages of light and flame that singed the sky. Fast, he was too fast, and Harry could avoid and scuttle and leap only so many times before something went awry. And then it did, his foot landing awkwardly in a dip in the ground, his ankle wrenching one way while his body went another, and he felt something pop as the leg buckled beneath him, sent him tumbling awkwardly to the ground. He rolled over, ignoring the pain, mind screaming for him to get up get up get up but it was too late – Voldemort was lurking over him, wand extended, and there was no escape this time.

Like the barrel of a Muggle firearm, the tip of Voldemort's wand seemed to swell and loom over Harry as he looked up from his back, panting and terrified, and the Dark Lord cackled in triumph. "Did you really think you could defeat me, Harry Potter? All these years, you have only delayed the inevitable, and at what cost? There is no one here to save you this time, boy, no mother and father to make that sacrifice. Your time has ended, and mine is just beginning."

Red eyes glinted malevolently in the spell-streaked night, and Harry felt his heart stutter. "Goodbye, Harry Potter," the Dark Lord hissed. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Just like his so many of his dreams, he could hear screaming (his mother?), his vision a field of green light, and he waited and waited and waited with his heart hammering so fast he felt his chest might explode, and then it occurred to him that if he could feel his heart through the green light then his heart was still beating and if his heart was still beating then he must be alive, alive again despite the Killing Curse, and he was staring at Voldemort, at the snake-like features that flitted from exaltation to shock to rage to something that looked like fear...

"NO!" he roared, and lashed out in a fury of emotion and magic, the energy a blast radius that scorched

the earth and knocked everyone in the vicinity off their feet. All around wizards and witches looked up from the ground, the fighting for a moment forgotten, astounded at the sight. Voldemort, surrounded by a scarlet miasma of power, radiating magic with such intensity it blinded, forcing Death Eater and Order members alike to shrink and cower and shield their eyes, the waves of energy tearing cries from their mouths as it swarmed over them like biting insects, burning, tormenting...

And there in the center of the storm, standing his ground, a look of savage joy on his face, was Harry Potter. The magic did not seem to touch him, and there were shouts of victory from the Order, dismayed disbelief from the Death Eaters. Impossible, that their Lord could be defeated by a mere child, that their faith should be in vain. Elation and despair wove through the crowd as the power receded, Voldemort staring, crazed and defiant, at the Boy Who Continued To Live.

“How?” he screamed, infuriated, as it was Harry now who advanced, limped forward with his wand outstretched, the end close at hand. Voldemort cast about his mind for an answer, a reason, something he could understand and examine and use to his advantage. But there was nothing, nothing that could explain this.

“Snape,” Harry responded quietly, as almost as if summoned the dark haired man stumbled from the throng, blood still seeping from a jagged gash high on his forehead, rivulets of crimson staining his face, impeding his vision. He walked to stand beside Harry, his wand also pointed and unwavering, to face his former master.

“Traitor!” the Dark Lord wailed, and all around the battle was resuming as the Death Eaters started to turn tail and flee. “You will pay, I will see you writhe...”

“I think not,” Snape said hoarsely. “Your army is defeated, your power broken.”

“How?” he asked again, and he sounded almost plaintive, pleading.

“Hostilis Spiritus,” Snape answered plainly, and the Dark Lord’s eyes widened.

“Impossible! The secrets of those rites are lost, and you could not have procured...” But then he realized, and his fury swallowed him whole. Again his power rent the air, focused this time on the traitor, but Harry stepped in front of the onslaught, shielding his former potions professor from the attack.

“You see now, Riddle? You see how your own schemes and inventions proved to be your downfall? You gave your power to me freely, gave it to us all when you burned the Mark into our flesh, and I used what you so graciously provided. I used your own power against you, used it to give Harry a power you never imagined.” Ironic, using the Dark to give power to the Light, but then Snape had always found that magic was tricky that way, the line between good and evil to be a blurry, fractured thing, not the clean barrier so many imagined.

The panic now on Voldemort’s face was unmistakable, and the last of his followers scattered at the sight, Order members fast on their heels. Gone, all gone, and his voice cracked with the strain as he summoned the last shreds of his dignity. “You may have won this battle, but I will be back again, Harry. Did you forget? I am immortal, death has no hold over me.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Harry snarled, his voice so hard, so sure, that for a moment Voldemort imagined that he knew, they knew the secret of the Horcruxes, but surely this could not be so! He would know, he would have felt any interference with them, surely, for they were pieces of himself, his soul. Instinctively, he reached outward with his mind for the connection he felt with Nagini (and wouldn’t the boy be appalled to learn the real truth about his scar?), waited to feel that cool brush of his own essence, but it wasn’t there, the link severed, and his panic now was a living thing that clawed inside his chest and belly and mind. Impossible, how could they know, and he reached out again, this time to sense that part of his spirit that Harry housed, but it, too, was absent, and he sunk to his knees, trembling, afraid as he had never been in his life. Too late, he realized that he had not unearthed the whole truth of the Weasley brat’s treachery, and as soon as he felt the connection with his pet was now a cold, dead thing, the memory surfaced from the flotsam of the blood traitor’s mind, an image of his serpent and a poison.

“Impossible,” he whispered, searching for the others, the locket, the badge, the ring, all gone, the strings cut and leading to nothing but an aching, howling void. Harry and Snape both looked down at him, watching the truth dawn whole and horrifying on the smooth, ivory face. “My Horcruxes. You can’t...”

“We can. We did.”

Harry grimaced as the face of Tom Riddle swam to the surface of the wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort, the serpentine features melting and bulging until he looked almost human, milk-white and haggard, eyes still the color of freshly spilled blood. He almost resembled the man Harry had seen in Dumbledore’s Pensieve, the night he had come to ask about the DADA position, and Harry felt his insides twist with hatred and disgust. Snape remained impassive, his loathing for his former master strong and dark.

“Please,” Riddle implored, all haughtiness and contempt gone from his tone. Never had he felt so weak, so helpless; even as a child he knew he was different, superior, and that he was destined for greatness. All his plans, his schemes, his dreams, were they to end like this, bled dry on the field of the school that had sheltered and educated him, at the hand of two of his greatest foes?

“We cannot risk allowing you to live,” Snape responded. Harry thought maybe he heard regret in the older man’s voice.

“I cannot die. I am not ready. I’m not ready!” Riddle shrieked, and he trembled violently now, begging with his words and his eyes, begging for mercy.

“Few are.”

Without a word Snape and Harry looked at each other, and for the first time they saw each other without the blinders of enmity. Harry looked at the other’s face, coated with sweat and dirt and blood, and the exhaustion around Snape’s mouth, the strange, intense light in his eyes, and wondered what this day, this fight, must have cost. Snape saw Harry as the young man he had become, the ghost of another Potter gone, saw the triumph and the pain, saw the expressive, youthful face as he mentally steeled himself for one last act, one last necessary evil, and he was surprised to find that he would have taken this burden from him, if he could. He fleetingly recalled his own early adulthood, the things he had seen and done, and hoped that Harry would not carry the stain of it as he had.

Hermione finally reached them, having witnessed most of the altercation, if not the specific words and actions from across the grounds, and she shivered as she approached. A terrible picture they made, a triangle of war, their enemy kneeling with his arms thrown out in supplication, his now human face a portrait of suffering and pleading, while Harry and Snape, both tall and imposing, wands steady and aimed, stood a few steps apart. Her heart broke at the sight of them both; she could read the misery and resolve etched plainly on her friend's face, and the sight of so much blood on Snape scared her more than she was willing to admit. She watched silently as the two men nodded and glared down at the man who had once been Tom Riddle, and their voices rose as one over the battlefield, the Boy Who Lived and the Dark Lord's Betrayer united to seal his doom.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Riddle had no time to shriek or wail, the light in his eyes snuffed out before his limp body hit the ground. There were a few hoarse shouts from around the field, though whether they were exclamations of victory or defeat was impossible to guess. In the grey-blue light of the approaching dawn Hermione watched as Harry slumped to the earth, head bowed and shoulders shaking. She moved toward him, tears stinging her own eyes, and before she gave herself over to the comfort and grief of her friend's embrace, she noticed the shocked, empty expression of Severus Snape as he stared at the body of the man he had once called his lord.

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A/N: Percy's fate, the (immediate) future of our duo, and pretty much anything else I can think of will be covered in the next (last) chapter. I hope you've enjoyed the ride as much as I have...

## Chapter 34: Epilogue

Three days. It had been three days since that terrible, wonderful day. The Daily Prophet had taken to calling it “The Battle of Hogwarts”, trumpeting the final fall of Voldemort, and the heroes who had saved the wizarding world, with as much brazen audacity as they had once declared Dumbledore a batty old codger, and Harry a curse-addled liar. Hermione found she could not muster the energy to care that much. Indignation over the unfairness of a news rag seemed insignificant in the face of the new and painful world in which she found herself.

It was all over now, Voldemort well and truly beaten, but the price had been high. It was as she feared, her mind’s eye unable to stop seeing the green grass of Hogwarts littered with the dead and dying. More enemy casualties than friend, true, but again the injustice of life reared its ugly head. The Order had, by and large, fought to incapacitate their foe, trap and bind them – they had not gone out of their way to inflict pain, to torture, to maim. The Death Eaters were not so inclined, and the more grievous injuries seemed to be inflicted on the young Order members, many of whom were still school age or little older, whose inherent goodness and unwillingness to fight dirty became a weapon turned against them, and to cruel ends.

The horror she felt was compounded by guilt, that she had survived, and relatively unscathed. A few scratches and bruises, a nasty burn on one arm, but nothing like what some of the others had suffered, would suffer in still the days and weeks to come. Neville Longbottom had been blinded, possibly permanently, by an Eyeball Enflaming Jinx; Colin Creevy died twitching on the battlefield, his intestines a spill of gore on the ground; Pavarti Patil was disfigured, the burn scars on her face contorting her features into a gruesome caricature of their former beauty, but the damage to her psyche was far worse, her twin now lying cold in the earth, and the Healers were uncertain if her mind would fully recover from the shock of seeing her sister killed before her eyes.

More than just her childhood schoolmates had suffered, of course. Lupin was still touch and go, apparently suffering from multiple hexes. Luna’s father, editor of *The Quibbler*, had been killed. Professor Flitwick was missing, and they were beginning to presume the worst. And then, of course, there was Percy, ministry employee and Death Eater and reluctant spy. His role in the Death Eater attacks and Voldemort’s defeat had come out, after the blood and dust had settled, but debates about his motives and the baying for justice took a back seat to cold reality.

He was being kept sedated, more for the sake of those around him than for his own suffering. What he felt or experienced was difficult to ascertain, even for personnel trained in magical disasters, schooled in the painstaking art of unraveling complex reactions and chain effects. Perhaps it was their somewhat limited experience with Unforgivables; more likely still, the fact that no one (except Harry) had ever survived the Killing Curse made the study of magical malfunctions with it as an ingredient uncharted territory. So the Healers were working with little more than conjunction, theory, and the dogged determination so entrenched in the healing arts – that where there is life, there is hope.

He was alive, Percy, or at least his body had survived the curse the Dark Lord had hurled his way. Whether or not the essence of his personality had lived was another matter. Unsedated, he did nothing while conscious to indicate anything of his mind or soul was still present. He laid in his bed, unmoving, unresponsive, never a twitch or a blink to indicate he was aware of his surroundings. The only thing that gave some indication that he was might be more than a shell of meat and bone was the screaming; every

night, for hours without end, he would scream, an unwavering pitch that broke only with the need to inhale. They did not seem to indicate pain, his screams, nor did they seem to speak to emotional torment. His face would remain blank, his body perfectly still, and he would scream and scream and scream until the morning. It was eerie and unnerving, and the Healers had decided that he needed some semblance of rest, of sleep, even if it was a drugged rest, a charmed sleep.

The list of the dead and the suffering went on and on, and Hermione found it very hard to be around the hurt and grieving, found it difficult to stomach the pats on the back and words of condolence and congratulations. Why them, and not her? And yet she was grateful, so grateful to have survived, to have escaped, and that those most dear to her had done so, too.

Harry hadn't spoken much since the battle, and Hermione was fiercely protective of him, snarling at the gawkers who crowded the lobby of St. Mungo's, deftly turning away the Ministry officials who wanted a word with him, the Boy Who Triumphed. She would have laughed, if there was any humor left in her, at his new title. There was little left in him of the boy she first met at Hogwarts. He was a man, now, and his grief and regret and horror were too raw yet to discuss. She did not push him, taking solace in the fact that he seemed to find comfort in her mere presence as she sat by his bed in the hospital when he was kept for observation (though his fractured ankle was mended with ease, the staff were disquieted by his lack of speech and affect), that he sought her out when she was away from him for too long. Though that was infrequent. There was no where else for her to be, no where to go, nothing to research or plan or do. No one else she was needed or wanted to see right now. Although that was not entirely true. There were others she wanted to be with, but they were gone. Dead. Or just gone.

It had been two days since Snape left.

She knew, somehow, when she saw him that evening, after the battle. They were all still at St. Mungo's, and already the parade of officials and reporters and sensation seekers were arriving, milling, commenting. His expression, closed and stoic as ever, barely fluctuated as he responded to those around him, endured the hooded glances and vague whispers, accepted those who approached to thank or congratulate him with an inscrutable gaze and perfunctory words. She wondered if anyone else could see it burning there, deep inside, the utter confusion and hopelessness. His eyes met hers across the room and she was almost crushed by the weight of it, the yawning chasm she sensed at his core, the tormenting numbness and loss. And in that moment she was afraid, for him, and when she awoke the next morning to rumors of his sudden disappearance, she knew that he was gone, not just for a few hours or days, but for a long time.

Knowing and even understanding (or believing she did, on some level) did not make his flight any less painful, and she welcomed the opportunity to retreat from the questions and the gazes, welcomed Harry's need for her as a shield from the outsiders who did not understand, whom she could not face, not now, not yet. She was too weary even to indulge in self flagellation for her cowardice, should she choose to label it so. Outwardly healthy and quietly proud of herself, of Harry, she was far too bruised inside to play the intelligent, heroic young witch everyone seemed to expect her to be.

They were staying at Headquarters, she and Harry, the still-hidden house a welcome respite from the crowds and the questions and the world. She awoke that third morning after the battle with a gasp, tears streaming down her face, atrocities spinning in her thoughts. She retched but held her gorge, her stomach a mass of knots, the bile bitter in the back of her throat. It was very early yet, the night just losing its hold,

the blackness slowly mutating to that fuzzy wash of grey that leeches color from the world, leaving everything iron and bleak in the cold winter air. Knowing sleep would not come with the nightmare still looming, she rose and threw on a jumper against the chill, left the confines of her room. Maybe a book would help her relax, help her sleep, help her forget, at least for a little while. But forget what?

It was not until she found herself standing at the work table in their makeshift potions lab that she realized her feet had not carried her to the library. Colder in here, the stone basement walls unable to steal much warmth from the fires above, and she shivered in the dim, sharp air. Here, they had worked together, dicing and mashing and stirring, and there, that spot on the floor, where he had held her and dashed water into her eyes to flush out the burning capsicum. And there he had reached out for her, pulled her to him, kissed her. Other memories surfaced, all the little glances and touches that had built up to something more, and now he was gone...

A sudden burst of light from behind startled her, and she whirled to see Harry, face wan and weary in the wand light. He offered her a small smile before flicking his wand upward, igniting a few candle stubs situated about the room, and he sank down on one of the stools, watching his friend.

She seemed lost, walking around the work table aimlessly before sitting at the small desk that had been Snape's, her hands aimlessly tracing the parchment, the subtle nicks and blemishes on the surface. She opened drawers, touching quills, ink wells, sheaves of paper. Then, in the lowest and deepest drawer, under a stack of journals and books, her fingers brushed something her eyes couldn't see, and she felt the tingle of a ward against her hand. She smiled to herself, recognizing the spell he had used (from "breaking" into his quarters at Hogwarts). Effortlessly she recalled the password he had given her to access his secrets before, her heart clenching painfully when it worked again.

Harry watched as she withdrew a few items from the drawer, a worn leather book and a small, ivory box. The look on her face was one he had never seen before, not on her, something simultaneously tender and torn. He wondered how he would have reacted to this before - before the battle, before the death, before his whole life had become something other than that of a school-aged boy wizard.

"Did he tell you before he left?"

She looked up from watching her fingers stroke Snape's things, afraid of what she might see on her friend's face, but there was nothing but concern on his pinched, pale features. She wasn't particularly surprised; she had seen no animosity in him when Snape's name was brought up. He had in fact defended his former professor, more than once, though not with any vigor. He hadn't said anything with much force or conviction since Voldemort's death.

"No," she replied quietly, and the word was like a shard of glass caught in her throat, sharp and cutting. He had not said a thing to her, after the battle. Only his eyes gave her any clue, desperate and pleading, and lost, so lost. He had seemed to fade even as she watched, right before her eyes. She knew she was not to blame, but it was still another blow to absorb, another uppercut to her battered soul.

"Do you love him?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head slowly, though not in response to his query. The leather of Snape's journal was soft under the pads of her fingers, the discoloration on the cover testament to its heavy usage.



"I don't know," she answered softly, idly running her thumb across the binding, ruffling the paper at the edges.

He rose slowly, almost as if he was in pain, and went to stand by her chair, his hand a warm, heavy presence on her shoulder. She looked up into his eyes, those startling bottle green eyes (like his mother's, they said), and saw compassion and understanding and a vein of deep, rich sadness behind the glasses. The tears rose fast and fierce, and she blinked rapidly to keep them at bay. She had not cried, much, since the battle, nor since he left. She wondered why; it hurt, certainly, she felt as if her whole insides were a giant, pulsing bruise. She wondered why the simple touch of Harry's hand and those honest emerald eyes would bring the hurt so much closer to the surface.

"I know there's something between you. I'm not sure I understand it, but I'm here for you," he said warmly. And he was, it somehow did not bother him to think of his best friend and his former enemy romantically involved. It amazed him, now, to think about how much energy he had invested in resentment and hatred for Snape. Such an insignificant thing he had allowed to dominate so much of his time. Hours and days wasted, never to return.

She did not think to question how he knew, an unimportant detail when she was too busy fighting the tide of emotions threatening to break. She wanted to be strong for Harry, still. For herself. It seemed as if she started to cry she would never stop, the grief and the losses would consume her whole.

"Thanks, Harry," she offered, a small, lopsided smile twisting her lips. He nodded, his own grin wry and sad, his eyes full of darkness. Without another word he left her alone in the basement potions lab of the Order of the Phoenix, alone with her thoughts and her memories and her sorrow. And she stayed there for a long while, the grey morning lightening around her, hands ceaselessly caressing Snape's belongings, until she felt ready to face another day.

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A/N: I'm well aware some people will not be particularly satisfied with this ending. It is, however, what I've been planning all along. In the universe in my head, Snape is not yet whole enough to be much good to anyone in a personal relationship. How well I succeeded in making this seem real is for you to decide, but as tempted as I was to write a happy ending, it just didn't seem authentic to me, and this is the result.

Right now, the chances are good I will do a sequel at some point in the future. However, the next project on my plate is a post DH story (HG/SS - beta, anyone?).

I'd like to thank all those who took the time to read and post reviews throughout the course of this story. It really helped keep me motivated, and I hope you have enjoyed.

SGT RJ