

Descending into Obscurity

by sbrande

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Winner of Action & Adventure Order of Merlin, Third Class in the Owl Awards 2009.

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Present Day

Chapter 1 of 25

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Graphic torture, rape and possibly some other warnings as we go along. I will let you know before each chapter as we take this journey together. You have been warned, so PLEASE heed the forewarning and read only if you are not squeamish. Constructive criticism only: flammers will be burnt at the stake.

Remus Lupin stood immobile in the foyer of Malfoy Manor, his eyes held wide, looking around in wonder at the splendour of the grand entrance hall.

The familiar voice of Severus Snape shook him from his internal musing. "Come, now," Snape beckoned, his voice dripping with derision as it echoed throughout the vestibule.

Remus tore his gaze from the staircase, tapestries and artwork that adorned the hallway. His eyes snapped quickly toward the direction of the voice, just in time to see Snape's figure disappearing into a hidden area roughly fifty metres ahead.

Legs complying quicker than his brain, he jogged to catch up to the dark figure, his wand extended in front of him.

Snape made a rigid left-hand turn, and instead of heading for the door at the far end of the room, he stopped suddenly, eyes to the wall in front of him. Remus found that he was forced to halt abruptly to keep from running into the other wizard.

Snape lifted both hands up and placed them onto the slabs of stone before him. He whispered an incantation, the words producing an opening in the barrier. A narrow staircase appeared before them, leading down into what Remus assumed were the dungeons.

The wizard, his hair as dark as the atmosphere, his skin, even more hopelessly pale against the black backdrop, turned slowly and glared at his counterpart.

"Lupin, I daresay even Lucius had enough intelligence to rid this infernal manor of Dark objects. Corpses should not be an issue." Though his voice was as ominous and foreboding as ever, the man's eyes betrayed his unease.

Remus merely nodded his head in agreement, knowing it was in his best interest not to provoke a wizard like Severus Snape.

Snape descended the moist stone steps first, wand held at the ready as if he expected the previous manor's owner to be laying in wait, ready to ambush him at the bottom of the staircase.

Remus shivered as he hesitantly followed Snape's rapidly disappearing form.

As if of their own accord, the wall sconces abruptly flared to life, eliciting an uncomfortable brightness, as the men made their descent down the narrow stairway. The corridor was constricting, demanding that they continue in single file.

Remus turned to his left and saw row upon row of cell doors. He involuntarily shuddered once more as he thought of all the atrocities this place had seen.

Quickly pulling himself together, he followed the straight backed wizard into the first cell.

"What are you doing?" Severus snapped, turning around to face the aged werewolf. This brought Snape's face into direct alignment with the latter's wand, which was held up mere inches away from his face.

"I, I—" Remus stuttered as he backed away from Snape's outstretched arm.

"I suggest that you start searching the other cells. I don't need you to hold my hand *Lupin*," Severus snarled at him, his lip curling in an all-too-familiar fashion.

"Of course," Remus replied, bowing his head and making a swift departure from the chamber.

He thought it best to start at the opposing end to the Potions master, and so he quickly made his way to the last cell in the row.

He paused and lifted his head, sniffing the air around the door as though gauging it for human occupancy. It was hard for the werewolf to determine if there was anyone within the chamber as the dust, dirt and mould of the dungeons were playing havoc with his most profound of senses. He felt a tingle of magic emitting from the door and quickly took a step closer to it.

"Severus," he called out, his voice echoing in the eerie corridor.

"What do you want, Lupin?" Severus asked, frowning, as he marched over to stand by Remus. He folded his arms across his chest, a scowl etched on his face.

"This door has been warded," Remus replied, ignoring his partner's tone.

"How astounding. What, precisely, would you have me do about it?" Snape asked, his tone bordering on uninterested.

Rolling his eyes, Remus turned his wand and his attention back to the door. Brow furrowed in concentration, he spoke the incantation aloud, while moving his wand in a sweeping arc. "*Alohomora*." Nothing happened. Undeterred by his initial failure, he tried again, not wanting to dip into the Darker spells in his arsenal unless it became absolutely necessary. "*Ianuam resera*." Still nothing.

Severus sighed at his counterpart's failure. "Move out of the way, *wolf*," he ordered. "It is obviously a warding spell of the highest level of the Dark Arts. Although you may have been the Defence against the Dark Arts professor years ago, I think that this might even exceed *your* knowledge, *impressive* as *some* may consider it to be." Severus shouldered the wizard out of the way and stood before the door.

If the werewolf hadn't known the Potions master since boyhood, he would have been insulted by the man's actions. As it was, having worked closely with him in the Order and at the final downfall of the Dark Lord, he took it all in stride. Remus merely moved a little further away.

Snape raised his wand, his features a reflection of his complete concentration.

"*Obscurus me amplectens, resera ianuam, permittito eam excurrere*," Severus incanted authoritatively.

He felt a strange tingling sensation on his left forearm, where the Dark Mark was located, and exhaled sharply when the door clinked open and swung inward. The smell from inside of the cavity hit him like a putrid draught. It was rank, and all he could do to save face was to hold his left arm over his nose and mouth, all thoughts of the hideous branding on his forearm vanishing in the aftermath of the foul stench that was invading his nostrils.

It took his eyes about thirty seconds to adjust to the darkened room, and in the time Severus stood in the doorway, Remus had pushed his way past him with his wand still drawn.

Remus, used to a nocturnal habitat, scanned the room for any movement. He had smelt worse, so the unpleasant odour hadn't bothered him. It was the undercurrent of something else that alerted his senses—something human.

His large eyes surveyed the cell before him—a stack of straw lay solitary in the far right corner, obviously used as a bed for the pitiful creature that had been kept in here. Next to that was an aged wooden table which held a single plate and glass. Continuing on, he swept his eyes over the other side of the room, taking in a pallet in the left-hand corner. There was no mattress on the frame, just a couple of steel spring coils sticking up from the base, it looked as though they had seen better days.

Severus' eyes were drawn to a hole in the floor directly across from where he had been standing in the open doorway. His nostrils flared in disgust as he realised that the hole was indeed a makeshift bathroom and the culprit of the smell.

"*Scourify*," Snape choked out. Gingerly lowering his arm from its position across his face, relieved that he could once again breathe without the thought of losing what little lunch he had eaten.

Looking around the small, dark cell, he became aware of two sconces attached to the far wall. Raising his wand, he muttered "*Lumos*," and the room was brought into focus with a faint, shadowy light.

Remus was standing a metre away from bed, where he had detected the hint of human scent. Looking down through the broken coils of the cot, he thought he perceived movement in the corner, underneath the bedding. In the light provided via the sconces, it appeared to be a bunch of dirty rags. Taking a tentative step forward, he saw a human leg sticking out from beneath the soiled garments.

Crouching down on all fours, he made his way over to the bed. Sheathing his wand beneath his robes, he looked over his shoulder at Snape and gave him a nod. Severus understood and held out his arm, pointing his wand tip at the mass of filthy material.

"It's okay," Remus said, turning his attention back to the task at hand and inching his hand closer and closer to the pathetic soul that was lying in the corner. "We are here to help you. You can come out now." Remus' hand got near enough to touch the garments when a growl from below caused him to retract his hand as if scorched.

The growling continued as Remus crouched, his amber eyes reflecting his shock.

"I said we are here to help," Remus repeated, his voice wavering.

Suddenly, the thing shot from under the bed with such force that it knocked the surprised werewolf onto his back. It was clawing and biting at him as he made to push it off his body, which proved to be not so difficult a task, considering that it was rather lightweight.

Severus cleared his throat, his wand still trained on the deplorable creature in front of him, as Remus scurried backwards using his arms and legs as leverage.

The creature looked up at the Potions master, its eyes narrowed with loathing and hatred. A split second later he saw its eyes change to that of great shame as it quickly made its way over to Severus' feet, keeping its head bowed low.

Severus jumped at the action, taking a diminutive step backwards, but then stilled when he saw the creature stop in front of his boot clad feet, its head touching the floor. Filthy hands were splayed out in front of it, bent at the elbows, palms down. Its legs were tucked beneath its grimy, scantily-clothed body. A metal collar adorned its neck, and its body, hair and what little clothing it was wearing, appeared utterly repulsive.

Severus schooled his features into a look of indifference, though his mind was racing as he took in the sight of the utterly repugnant creature in front of him.

'Forgive me, Master, but I did not see you there.'

Severus took a couple of hesitant steps backwards as he heard the feminine tone enter his mind. His pretence fell, his face registering his astonishment at hearing the voice in his head.

Before he had time to formulate a response, she spoke within the confines of his mind once more. *'I await your command, for I am yours to do with as you see fit.'*

Still she lay splayed there, on the brutal hard stone floor, the perfect picture of submissiveness.

ianuam resera—Unlock the door

Obscurus me amplectens, resera ianuam, permittito eam excurrere—Darkness surrounding me, open the door, let it swing free.

Thanking AmyLouise, who fixed up my Latin :)

Thanks go out to bewarethesmirk and acciobook7 for their wonderful beta'ing job.

Let me know what you think. Sonia :)

The Past

Chapter 2 of 25

Take a walk in the past, as we see how Hermione came to be in the dungeons of the Malfoy Manor.

One year, seven months and twenty three days previously...

Lucius Malfoy's left forearm throbbed. He was being summoned.

With a steady hand, he deftly undid the buttons on his cuff sleeve to expose his forearm. A fleeting look at his Dark Mark told him all he needed to know. This was no ordinary summons; it was a request for his presence, and his presence alone, as the Mark on his skin, now a brilliant shade of blood red, clearly construed.

He quickly searched his memory for anything that he could have done to infuriate his master in the past week. His mind drew a blank, and he hurried to redo his shirt sleeve and Apparate.

Immediately upon arrival he dropped to his knees, his head bowed low, where he remained until the Dark Lord summoned him forward. A ruffle of fabric was all the blonde-haired Slytherin could hear, and he instantly approached the apex of the room. Head still hunched low in a show of respect, he dared not raise his eyes to meet those of his Dark master. The only furniture in the room was a colossal throne that sat solitary in the rear, causing it to stand out against its bare surroundings.

When Lucius was close enough to kiss the hem of Lord Voldemort's robes, he did so immediately on bent knees and swiftly crawled backwards to the centre of the long room, his eyes glued to the floor. His joints began to ache from the constant pressure of the cobblestone floor digging roughly into his kneecaps.

Lucius knew better than to initiate communication without provocation, and therefore he waited for his master to speak to him first.

"Lucius," the serpent-like man hissed.

Lucius dared not move a muscle, his back trembling slightly with the effort of staying in a deferential position. He knew that his Lord was testing him, and he redoubled his efforts.

After what seemed like an eternity, the pale wizard, more creature than man, finally spoke. "You may rise."

"Thank you, my most generous Lord," Lucius responded, rising to stand on unsteady legs.

"You may be wondering why I brought you here today," Voldemort began. "I have a very important assignment for you." Lord Voldemort was uncharacteristically beaming as he clasped his hands together and rose in one fluid motion from his makeshift throne. "I don't have to tell you how important it is that you succeed in this task." He paused, shooting an ominous glare in Lucius' direction.

Lucius promptly countered, puffing his chest out proudly, "No, my Lord."

"Good." The Dark Lord then commenced pacing, his feet gliding over the stones silently.

"Then I also will not have to tell you that this undertaking is a top priority and, by extension, clandestine." Voldemort abruptly stopped pacing and whirled around in front of Lucius, his glowing crimson eyes never leaving his servant's face.

Lucius, who was used to the intimidation shown by the Dark Lord, did not flinch, and a few heartbeats later Voldemort smiled widely.

Lucius nodded his head once to show that he understood.

"I wish for you to capture the Mudblood, Hermione Granger, Potter's best friend. And I want you to break her," he said with a glint of lunacy in his slitted eyes. He turned away from Lucius, moving smoothly away from him before continuing. "I want her beside me when I confront Harry Potter. I think this will shatter what little resolve the brat has left. It shall give me the upper hand."

"Marvellous plan as always, my Lord," Lucius spoke, realising a fraction of a second too late the implications of speaking out of turn.

Voldemort spun around with lightning reflexes and raised his wand menacingly. *'Crucio.'*

Lucius dropped to the floor, his cane flying from his hands and clattering to the stone floor of the fortress. He curled into a protective ball as the Curse wracked through his body, setting his nerve endings on fire. He moaned out loud as he felt his whole body would give way and surrender to the insanity that his mind was teetering upon.

Voldemort held the Curse in place for a full twenty seconds before releasing it.

"You will never speak out of turn, Lucius," the Dark wizard hissed, his red eyes narrowed, promising danger and further punishment. He raised an elegant hand and ran it over his naked scalp.

Lucius, who was still curled up in a ball on the floor, his body jerking roughly in the aftermath of the Curse and panting heavily, missed the gesture entirely.

Voldemort turned away from the crippled man on the floor in front of him and continued as though he had not just used one of the Unforgivables as a means of correction. "I don't want her to expire in your keep, Lucius. Break her, and send her to me when the time is right."

A smirk twisted his thin lips, accentuating his reptilian face. "The Mudblood *will* be mine."

Hermione Granger was lying in bed. Having been gone for almost seven full years, she didn't believe she could call her childhood room *home* any longer. She was only here briefly for the Easter break, and although there were only a few months before her N.E.W.T exams, she was relishing the warmth and comfort afforded to her in her single bed. She sighed as she performed a full-body stretch, not wanting to get up, but figuring both of her parents would be in the kitchen by this time of morning. She reluctantly made her way out of her room, groaning heavily.

Stifling a yawn with her hand as it threatened to break past her lips, she greeted both her parents with *good morning* nod.

Doctor Dean Granger was sitting at the counter with his morning cup of coffee and a plate of bacon, eggs and toast lying in front of him. He cradled the morning paper as he looked up at his daughter.

"Morning, Muffin," he said, smiling brightly. "How's my girl this morning?"

Hermione shot him a look that clearly spoke of her disapproval at being called *a'girl*. She walked around the counter and gave her mum a kiss on the cheek.

"You will always be my little girl," he continued, beaming at her.

Hermione rolled her eyes before giving him a kiss on the forehead and taking out the stool next to her father, perching herself gingerly upon it.

"Anything interesting in there?" she asked, motioning towards the paper.

"Just the usual drivel," her father responded, his eyes never leaving the page.

Doctor Margaret Granger left the stove and brought Hermione a plate of eggs, bacon and toast.

"Thanks, Mum."

"That's quite all right, dear," Margaret replied. "What do you want to drink?"

"I think I'll just have a glass of orange juice, please."

Walking over to the fridge, she removed the orange juice and a clean glass from the cupboard and proceeded to pour her daughter a glass.

"Thanks," Hermione said absently, as she took the glass and set it carefully next to her plate. She picked up her fork and knife and began placing her eggs on top of her toast.

The family completed their respective meals in silence, each one enjoying the peace of the morning. When Hermione finished, she stood up and made her way over to the sink to clean her dishes.

Hermione looked over to her parents. "I thought I would go for a walk to the park this morning... maybe take a book with me. It's such a lovely day outside, and I know I'm more than ready for my exams." Her gaze darted between her parents, a hopeful sparkle alighting her eyes.

She knew of her parents' determination when it came to being the best, and, of course, that extended to her, as well. She supposed she could not really fault them, but she was so sick of all the talks about 'nothing in life coming for free,' and, 'an hour studying is an hour well spent.' She just wished, for once, to be a normal teenager with friends.

Her mother's expression softened for a moment, her smile altering slightly before it quickly made its re-emergence.

"It's just as well that your father and I have to go by the practise today to check up on a few things," Margaret replied. "I will leave you some money on the counter and perhaps you can go to Tim's for lunch."

"Thanks, Mum, that will be nice," Hermione said, drying her hands on the dish towel, her back to her parents. She couldn't help the huge grin that appeared on her face.

She quickly made her excuses and retreated to the bathroom to prepare for her day. After showering, brushing her teeth and attempting to tame her hair, she hurried off to her bedroom to get dressed.

Flopping down on the bed, still wrapped up in her towel, she contemplated what she was going to do today...her one day off from her revision.

Fifteen minutes later saw Hermione dressed and walking down the stairs. The bounce of innocence was in her step as she made her way into the kitchen. It was truly a stunning day outside, and she didn't want to waste another second indoors.

She grabbed a random novel off the bookcase, along with the money her mother had left her, and made her way into London.

Hermione had had a glorious time, a day to herself, spent without worry...a carefree day. She made her way through the park with her book in hand, softly humming to herself. The park was relatively empty as she made her way over to her favourite spot under a giant oak tree, its branches swinging gently in the steady breeze.

Smiling, she sat down at the base of its mammoth trunk and opened her book. The time passed quickly as she devoured the story page by page, and before she knew it, she could hardly make out the words before her in the dimming light. Looking up, Hermione saw that the sun was setting swiftly and got to her feet, brushing off her jeans.

Hermione walked through the park, her book held tightly in one hand. She had a distinct feeling that someone was following her, though she couldn't for the life of her imagine who it could be.

Her grip constricted on the book in her hand when she heard the distinct sound of a footstep behind her. She paused and spun on her heel, nearly losing her balance. Righting herself, she scanned the darkening park. Unable to notice anything out of the ordinary, except for her racing heartbeat and the heat of her blood rushing to her ears, Hermione turned back and quickened her pace.

The park's lamp posts flickered to life, startling her as their eerie glow cast shadows across the pathway.

Hermione felt her heart race, picking up speed as she began to jog toward the street ahead of her. In the surrounding darkness, her hypersensitive ears picked up the resonance of a twig snapping in two.

Her footsteps faltered as she swung around to face the sound, eyes narrowed to slits, desperately trying to pick up on any movement in the shadows to her right. Her heart was thumping in her chest and her breath was coming in shallow gasps as she reached for her wand. She endeavoured to suck in as much oxygen as her lungs would accept before announcing herself to her follower.

"Hello?" she called out breathlessly as she gripped her wand in one hand, the book swinging limply in the other. Silence followed her unanswered call and she felt both irrational and stupid.

Shaking her head, she turned back towards the park's edge, berating herself for behaving in such a foolish manner as she replaced her wand into the side pocket of her jeans.

'*Where is everyone?*' she thought nervously, as she walked briskly towards the lawn's boundaries.

She was almost to the street when she saw a bright light in her peripheral vision. Her mind had just enough time to comprehend that she had been hit by a spell before she collapsed to the ground allowing the blessed darkness to claim her.

Some time later, Hermione slowly awoke to a pounding headache. She grudgingly drew a breath into her mouth, bringing with it the tang of mould and stale air. Opening her eyes, she blinked as she tried to focus on something, anything, in the area around her.

'*Gods above, I've gone blind.*' Her mind was in a state of panic as she struggled to sit up.

Every muscle in her body screamed out its objection to this simple movement, so she lay back on the hard mattress, a groan escaping her lips as the springs squeaked in protest. She drew a shaky hand up to her head.

She felt a large lump on the back of her head and winced as her fingers explored it, feeling for broken skin. Satisfied when she found none, she ran her fingers gently through her tangled hair in an attempt to relax and work out her location.

She felt the first sign of a shiver as her teeth began to chatter. She glanced down at her body, realising that she was still clothed in the jeans and jumper she had hastily thrown on only that morning. The temperature in this place, wherever she was, was as frigid as an icebox.

Hermione's hand scrambled first to her pocket, looking for her wand...it wasn't there. She began blindly searching for something to cover herself, but to no avail. The only items she encountered were the frame of the small pallet that she lay upon and the emptiness of the air around it. Terror quickly rising within her, she forced herself to think rationally, regardless of the fact that her mind was screeching at her to *stand up and do something* as the adrenaline pumped through her body.

Hermione's rational thought process took over, and she lay back down on the rigid mattress. Turning to one side, she curled up into the foetal position, knees tucked up into her chest and hands shoved into her armpits. Her muscles continued to object to any and all movement. Her only response was to tell them to *shut up and get warm*.

Her mind reeled with the implications of where she might be as she tried to remember what had happened before she had allowed the darkness to take her. She distinctly recalled being in the park and starting her brief walk home when the sun was setting, and then... Hermione screwed up her face and tried to concentrate on the vague memories. All efforts proved futile as her head started to pound anew, and, nauseated, she tried her best to relax.

'*Merlin's beard!*'

She abruptly shot up into a seated position, ignoring the pounding in her head. In her self imposed pity she had forgotten about her parents.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she muttered quietly to herself, her mind creating grim scenario after grim scenario. As the images grew in their levels of unpleasantness, she sighed out loud and laid her head in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. The quick motion made her feel like her brain was going to explode.

Laying back down and curling up into as small a ball as possible, her mind whirled faster and faster, even as her sobs lessened.

Her guess as to where she was and how she got there was as good as anyone else's.

She must have drifted off to sleep, for in the next moment, she was startled into consciousness by the slamming of wood on stone and a bright light that was being shoved roughly under her nose.

Hermione twisted away from the wand light, her mind struggling to come to terms with where she was located. That was when she heard the unmistakable voice of one Lucius Malfoy, and she froze in alarm.

"So nice of you to join me, *Mudblood*," he spat, as he removed the wand from under her nose and flicked it gracefully at the sconces that adorned the wall. A wane light illuminated the room, painting dancing shadows on the walls with a light breeze that did not belong there.

"Luckily for you, little *Mudblood*, I am feeling particularly charitable today." He paused and studied her shaking form, his eyes raking slowly over her body in a gesture that made Hermione want to heave as she gathered her courage and shot him a warning glare.

"Welcome to my home," he continued, as he gestured around the cell with widely-stretched arms. "This isn't, by far, the greatest room that my residence has to offer,

however, it is all you will see of the Manor for as long as you remain here." He sneered at her as she slowly turned her head toward him, glaring.

Revulsion must have been apparent on her face, for he quickly grabbed her hair in one balled up fist as his wand came to rest at her throat.

"I will break you, Mudblood, have no qualms about it." Lucius paused as a smirk lifted up the corners of his mouth. "However, because of my *generous* nature," his face twisted in a hideous grin, "I have decided to break you in leisurely. *Get my money's worth* or so the old saying goes." Lucius' eyes glinted in the light, giving Hermione the distinct impression that she hadn't truly known evil until this very moment. He bent his head down low, his lips coming to rest beside her ear. She shivered.

"It is only by the grace of the Dark Lord that you are still alive," he whispered.

She could feel his scorching breath on her neck as his tongue slithered out of his mouth, the tip of it meeting the delicate skin of her inner ear. He let it linger for a moment, then licked at her skin more forcefully.

She could smell alcohol on his breath...he was so close to her that she imagined she could hear his heartbeat... or was that hers? She wasn't sure anymore. Time seemed to stand still in that moment.

"The Dark Lord has plans for you," he continued, his breathe hot on her ear. "But that doesn't mean I can't make you beg for death. Though it may not come from my hand, it *will* come eventually."

He took a step back from her, dropping his wand to his side as he pushed her away from him, into the wall that the pallet was propped up against. She turned around slowly to face him. A smirk was playing at the corners of his lips, and her hand itched to reach up and slap it from his face. Unfortunately, once again, her body would not comply with the wishes of her mind. She wondered if he had cast some spell on her whilst she was asleep. Before she could think more on the matter, his voice cut through her musings.

"Don't even think of harming yourself. These rooms have anti-suicide wards on them. So if you were thinking of taking your own life, think again.

"The only pain you will feel is the pain I wish to bestow upon you," he explained, his eyes fixed firmly on hers.

Hermione's courage faltered and she looked down to the floor.

Lucius chuckled at this. "Now, that is not very Gryffindor of you, is it?"

Lucius let his head fall back as he laughed. Composing himself, his eyes narrowed and Hermione felt hypnotised under his icy gaze as he took a step towards her.

"You think I give a fuck about what you know?" Lucius sneered. All too quickly, he was in her own personal space as he fisted Hermione's hair tightly once more, she whimpered at the abuse. He pulled her close to him, murmuring into her ear.

"You are nothing to me or the Dark Lord. You are lower than a house elf. You have become a tool in winning this war, one that shall see the downfall of Potter, Dumbledore and his beloved *Order*."

Lucius bit down hard on her ear, drawing blood. She gave a startled cry as he pushed her roughly to the floor, holding onto her ear. He spat on her before turning briskly and exiting the dungeon room, extinguishing the sconces before slamming the cell door shut.

Hermione crawled back up onto the bunk, still clutching her bleeding ear, and let the tears fall freely from her eyes *Harry and Ron will come and save me*, she told herself, as she rocked back and forth on the small, inflexible mattress.

Thanking my betas, acciobook7 and bewarethesmirk

Alarm Bells

Chapter 3 of 25

Back at Hogwarts, Ron and Harry worry over Hermione's disappearance whilst Dumbledore sends Severus and Minerva to investigate.

Harry and Ron sat at the Gryffindor table, scanning the Great Hall.

"Where could she be, mate?" Ron asked as his eyes inspected the Hall for Hermione. Both their plates of food lay forgotten before them.

"I don't know," Harry replied, mimicking Ron in his search for their other best friend.

"Well, I think we should tell McGonagall," Ron said, turning to face Harry. "She wasn't on the train either. I didn't think much about it at the time, I thought she was doing her Head Girl duties or something." His blue eyes pierced Harry's green ones, and Harry could tell that Ron was a mere second away from panicking.

Laying a calming hand on Ron's arm, Harry pushed his glasses up with the other. "If she doesn't show up by the time the plates clear, then we'll tell somebody. She could be helping with the other students for all we know," Harry said with a false calmness.

He still remembered, quite vividly, the vision he had suffered three nights ago: Voldemort was extremely pleased about something. He had checked the *Daily Prophet* religiously for a couple of days following the episode, but when he saw nothing outside of the ordinary he had dismissed the feelings of dread as mere paranoia.

"What's up with you two?" Ginny asked, looking at each of the uneaten plates of food that were sitting before both boys. "You haven't even touched your food," she continued, wrinkling up her nose at them.

"Worried about Hermione," Harry said, craning his neck to look once more at the doors of the Great Hall.

"Oh," Ginny replied, and she too looked around, trying to make out Hermione's small frame among the huddled masses. "Well, I'm sure she's around somewhere; you know how she is. Probably just up in the library."

Ginny's tone was anything but reassuring, and it made the knot that was forming in Harry's stomach twist and clench rather painfully.

"Yeah, I guess," Ron said sullenly as he picked up his fork and stabbed one of his baked potatoes a little too harshly, causing it to bounce off of his plate and onto the floor. Ron frowned deeply at what remained of his dinner and threw down his fork, which landed with a loud *clang*. The students closest to him looked up at Ron's outburst.

"Did anyone see her on the train?" Harry asked. His eyebrows rose over searching eyes, scanning the faces of the immediate group of friends that were settled around him.

There was a collective shake of heads and murmured answers in the negative. Harry's brow furrowed and a look of determination crossed his face as he stood up suddenly, causing a litany of gasps to emit from around the table.

Stepping over the bench seat, he made his way to the Head Table. The general chatter died down and every student in the Hall watched as he made his way to the dais where the teachers were enjoying the welcoming feast and talking quietly amongst themselves.

Ron was up in a matter of seconds, mirroring Harry's movements toward the front of the vestibule, finally coming to stand beside his friend.

Dumbledore looked up from his plate, his half moon spectacles perched low upon his nose as he peered over them at Harry and Ron. Professor Snape sneered at them both from his spot to the left of the Headmaster.

Ron shot a nervous glance over at Snape, but as the Headmaster cleared his throat, he diverted his attention back to the aged wizard.

"What can I do for you two?" he asked kindly.

Ron noticed he had some gravy in his beard but made no mention of it as his hand came up unconsciously to his own chin.

"Hermione wasn't on the train," Harry blurted out.

Albus' eyebrows rose slightly and Harry hurried to continue.

"And now she's not here, and I thought you might know where she is. I mean, her being Head Girl and all," he stuttered a little, trying to control the bubble of anger that was slowly rising in his chest. Why were they all just sitting there calmly as if nothing were amiss?

Suddenly, he felt a searing pain in his forehead. The heat was coming from his scar, and he raised his hand as if to ward off the inevitable pain that threatened to consume him. His face screwed up in agony and his knees began to buckle.

The Headmaster, along with Professors McGonagall and Snape, were on their feet at the first signs of Harry's torment.

Snape, his reflexes lightning quick, was at Harry's side in a flash, gripping the boy's arm just above the elbow.

Feeling Snape's bruising grip, Harry took a deep breath and struggled to control the pain issuing from his head.

"You right there, mate?" Ron whispered to Harry, giving Snape a reproachful look.

A sneer was planted firmly on the Potions master's face, though Ron could have sworn he saw a glimpse of concern in the man's dark eyes. Snape had whisked Harry away in the blink of an eye, leaving a speechless Ron behind with nothing but his thoughts.

Ron ran to catch up with Harry and the dour professor, who was dragging him along as if he were a puppy that wouldn't walk on its lead. The three of them made a rather dramatic exit from the Great Hall, every head in the room turning to follow the path of the unlikely trio.

The Headmaster raised his fork to his goblet and tapped it lightly on the side, producing a dingy sound that echoed off the empty walls of the massive Hall. He cleared his throat rather forcefully, summoning every pair of eyes in the room to his own.

"May I have your attention, please," he called as the doors to the Great Hall closed with a bang, marking the exit of his Potions master and the two young wizards. "Once you have all finished your meals, I would like to ask the prefects and Head Boy to direct you straight to your dormitories."

There was a collective groan, after which whispers ran rampant and speculations high. Dumbledore raised both his hands and the Hall fell silent once more.

"I have important business to attend to. However," he paused as his eyes swept the students' faces, "I trust you to do the right thing and not to dally. House points will be taken for any students found wandering the corridors tonight. Now enjoy the rest of your meal." He clapped his hands together and made his way out the staff entranceway, closely followed by Minerva.

Severus, Harry and Ron were already waiting for the Headmaster when he entered his office. The eldest and most ill-tempered of the three was pacing in front of the desk whilst Ron threw concerned looks at the other occupants of the room. Harry contented himself to sit with his head cradled in his hands.

Snape stopped in his tracks upon seeing the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress. He reclined against the desk, arms folded across his chest.

"What is the meaning of your display at dinner, Mr Potter?" McGonagall asked, marching up to Harry with her lips pressed into a thin line. She looked ready to deduct points from her own House.

Harry looked up from his hands, pure anguish set in his features as tears began to roll down his face.

"Voldemort has Hermione," Harry said in a shaking voice.

Snape hissed and straightened at the mention of the Dark Lord's name. McGonagall gasped, Ron winced and Dumbledore simply stood there, his face betraying nothing.

"How do you know?" Dumbledore asked in a kind but firm tone.

"I had a vision three nights ago," Harry started, ignoring Snape's sudden movement; he barrelled on, lest he lose his nerve. "And just now, in the Great Hall, Voldemort's," Harry paused at Snape's irritated hiss, "well, he's rather happy. No, that's not the right word..." Harry sighed and rubbed a hand over his weary face. "He was ecstatic...really, really pleased about something...and I can't help but think it involves Hermione. Sir, I think, no I know, he has her." He looked up into the blue eyes of his mentor, expecting the Headmaster to contradict him, but what he saw made him blanch.

The aged wizard looked just that...old. Harry stared into his eyes, willing him to speak.

The seconds ticked away into minutes. No one wanted to break the stillness that was encompassing the room. Finally, Ron found his voice, coming back to the conversation after having been shocked into silence at Harry's proclamation.

"We've got to go find her," he said, tugging on Harry's arm.

"You will do no such thing." Snape whirled around to face Ron. In a few graceful steps he was standing over him, his demeanour daring the boy to challenge his authority.

Ron's mouth opened and closed several times, finally snapping shut with an audible *click*.

"Right now, I think that it would be best if you two hurry along to your rooms," the Headmaster said in a weary voice, breaking Harry from his self-imposed trance. "I will find out what I can. However, in the mean time, I wish for you both to speak of this to no one, is that understood?" he decreed rather than questioned, his face turning to each of the young men standing before him. His eyes, Harry noticed, held no twinkle...his gaze was unyielding.

Harry nodded, though a look of unreserved ferocity crossed his features, eventually fading into one of acquiescence.

Ron jiggled his head up and down with his mouth agape, a vacant look on his face.

"Good." Albus' whole demeanour changed and the twinkle resurfaced in his eyes as he quickly shoed the boys from his office. When the door clicked shut he turned to face his Deputy and Potions master, an air of resolve and worry marring his features.

"I was afraid something like this would happen." He made his way behind his desk and took a seat.

"Severus, Minerva," he said as they both came to stand before his desk. Both the remaining professors were silent, biding their time until the Headmaster spoke again...they both knew there would be more to discuss. They were not disappointed.

The whirling metal contraptions that adorned Dumbledore's office made a ruckus and Snape glared at one particular device until it stopped. Turning his attention back to the Headmaster, patiently awaited his orders.

"I want you both to go to the Grangers' place of residency tonight." He held up a gnarled hand to forestall any questions. "Find out what has happened to Miss Granger. And Severus," he said, his eyes falling on the dark-robed wizard before him, "use Legilimency if necessary." The Headmaster finished by giving Snape a pointed look.

Snape jerked his head once in acknowledgement before sweeping out of the room.

Minerva gave the Headmaster a piercing look that clearly bespoke of her disapproval of his methods, but silently followed Snape out of the room.

Albus placed his spectacles on the desk and lay his head upon his old, weathered hands...much as he'd seen Harry doing this very evening. He felt as though this war would never end, and he was not as youthful as he had once been. War was for the young, not an old, tired wizard like himself.

A sound, not unlike popcorn heating in a microwave, echoed around the dimly lit suburban street. Two people, dressed in what appeared to be Halloween costumes, materialized out of nowhere, appearing in the shadows so as to avoid the revealing glow of the overhanging street lights.

A dog barking in the distance, along with the chirping of crickets and the wind rustling through the trees, were the only other sounds discernable on the otherwise quiet street.

Snape's eyes narrowed, his cloak fanning out around him as he surveyed the area. His wand was clutched firmly in his hand, hidden by the sleeve of his bulky robes. Minerva stood stock still, waiting for her surly companion to give the all-clear. A slight flick of his wrist signalled her forward, and she preceded him to the front porch of the Grangers' house.

Walking stiffly to the door, Minerva knocked once and waited patiently for the Muggle couple to answer. They heard footsteps approaching the entrance and a light went on inside without warning, blinding both wizards momentarily. A man in his early fifties answered the door, his features strikingly similar to Miss Granger's.

"Mr Granger." Minerva stepped forward and extended her arm. She had met the man before, but he made no move to her take her proffered hand. Lips pressed into a firm line, she retracted the dismissed limb and placed it by her side. Her face betrayed nothing of her rising panic.

"Are you here for the cat?" he asked, eyeing them both with a look of scepticism. Mr Granger looked from Minerva to Severus, the latter of whom was standing behind her in the shadows, and took in the pair's bizarre attire.

"Back from a fancy dress party, I see." He sized the two of them up with a critical eye. McGonagall and Snape remained silent, leaving Mr Granger's question hanging in the air.

"Margaret!" he called out, eyes steadfast and unblinking on the two visitors. "Bring the cat here...I believe its owners are here to claim it."

Minerva's expression changed from blank to dumbfounded when Mr Granger called out to his wife. He hadn't recognized her, and she searched for some possible explanation for his strange behaviour.

There was a shuffling sound in the hallway, and Margaret Granger appeared next to her husband. She carried in her arms a huge orange ball of fluff that Minerva immediately recognised as Hermione Granger's familiar.

"There you are," Minerva called out to the half-Kneazle, as the cat leapt into the air, landing in the witch's outstretched arms. The cat purred loudly, rubbing its flat face into the crook of her neck.

"Oh, I am so pleased that you came to get him," Margaret said, her eyes lighting up. "I don't know how he found his way into the house, but he wouldn't eat, no matter what we gave him! Then he just wouldn't leave... I'd just about given up hope that anyone would come to claim him."

Snape surveyed the scene unfolding before him with all the emotional detachment he could muster. Something wasn't right. He could feel the essence of Dark magic surrounding the Grangers' household. When Mr Granger looked him in the eye, he delved into his mind.

After a brief foray into the man's thoughts, he ended the connection and placed a firm hand on Minerva's arm.

"Thank you for your time and for returning our cat to us," he said hurriedly, his mind whirling. He wasted no time dwelling on what he had just seen inside the Muggle man's head...there would be time to process that information later. "Come," he stated, turning to Minerva, "we really must be going." Bowing, he grasped Minerva's arm just above her elbow, and they made a hasty retreat.

Thanking my beta, acciobook7.

Review and let me know what you think.

Innocence Lost

Chapter 4 of 25

Lucius begins Hermione's lessons.

WARNING: Graphic rape in the following chapter. This story will begin to get Darker, so there is no point in skipping this chapter and reading the next one.

You have been informed, so please take note. No flamers, as they will be burnt at the stake. I already have the pile of wood and lighter fluid at the stand by.

Hermione was awoken by a blinding light, the intensity of it stinging her eyes through their heavily-fastened lids. She experienced only a few seconds of peace before she remembered where she was and why she was there. Raising a flat hand to her forehead, she attempted to shield her eyes from the dazzling luminosity overpowering her senses. Through her hazy vision, she was able to make out the figure of her captor. As his form came into focus, she found herself wondering vaguely how someone so angelic looking to the outside world could be, in reality, a demon hidden in corporeal form. She trembled as she sat up fully, wrapping her arms around her legs in a shielding manner.

She noticed an unfamiliar addition to the room a conjured chair that he had placed in the corner at the foot of the bed. His cane was standing next to it, the metal serpent's head leaning lightly against the wall. His outer robe was folded neatly on the seat.

Hesitantly, she looked up at him, her mind a sea of murkiness in the aftermath of her slumber, and she froze.

Lucius was calmly, *oh-so-slowly*, undressing himself. His eyes were glued to hers as his fingers went about their business. His muted stare mocked her, his silence sending an eerie shiver through her body. She wished he would say something, *anything*, but his lips remained sealed, his fingers continuing on their dilatory path. She wanted more than anything to will this nightmare away, and she was startled when he finally spoke out to her.

"It is time to begin your lessons," he stated casually.

His voice was dispassionate, as if he were commenting on the weather, but she wasn't focused on his tone as much as his actions.

"My son tells me that you are an avid pupil, so this should be pretty straightforward, even for a novice such as yourself." His fingers travelled downward to yet another set of buttons as he spoke.

Her eyes widened, her mind just now wrapping around the concept of what he was insinuating, and she scrambled to tuck herself closer into the wall, wishing she were invisible.

Lucius chuckled lightly. "You didn't think I was keeping you here for your good looks," he sneered, as he folded his vest in half, placing it on the chair and moving his fingers to the white shirt that he wore underneath it. Once finished with the shirt, he bent down to untie his boots.

Hermione's eyes travelled to the cane in the corner. Knowing it to contain his wand, she sucked in a lungful of air and prepared to leap from the cot, the wooden instrument her only calculable chance at salvation. Flinging herself with an almighty shriek, she dove for her captor's head, making a desperate grab for the hidden wand.

Lucius' eyes snapped up at the wild scream, widening in surprise as he was pounced upon by the desperate hellcat. She made a clumsy swipe for his cane, but he easily knocked it from her hands, sending it flying across the room. Stumbling, he lost his footing, and the blond should be: blond Death Eater was knocked bluntly onto his back. She was on top of him then, kicking, spitting, clawing and biting at whatever parts of him she could reach. He would have been amused at her spunk if a particularly vicious scratch down his torso hadn't shaken him from his momentary musing.

"Enough!" he bellowed, and quick as a snake striking, he clamped both of her small, flaying wrists in one large, more capable hand. His grip was vice-like, the constraint causing her to struggle even more desperately than before.

He pushed himself off the cold dungeon floor and lifted her with ease. She was still struggling against him, desperately trying to wrench herself out of his air-tight grasp. His strength, however, was unyielding, and he constricted her wrists roughly. The breaking sound of her own grinding bones reached her ears, spurring her to thrash about further. She kicked him viciously, trying to cause injury to his shins with her unprotected feet.

Summoning his wand from across the room, he raised it toward her chest. *Stupefy*," he said in a booming voice. Hermione barely glimpsed the fiery red light before it came into contact with her body. She fell backwards lifelessly.

Lucius' grip was still tight on her wrists, and he pulled her roughly towards him, jarring the broken carpal bones and causing her to slump against him.

"Stupid cunt of a child," he snarled as he pushed her roughly back onto the side of the small cot. Her limbs were pointed in every direction, but it was obvious that he could not care less for her comforts.

After smoothing his tousled hair, he ran his left hand down to the deep gouges on his chest where she had marked him. Lifting his fingers up to his line of vision, he stared at the blood-covered digits, frowning at the fact that a lowly Mudblood had been capable of such an assault upon his person. The pale wizard growled low in his throat. Not only had the harpy attacked him, but she had also drawn blood.

His eyes narrowed in her direction and his blood began to boil to an explosive peak. He desired nothing more at that moment than to tear her limb from limb, but he knew his limitations. His Lord would be more than infuriated with him, and his own subsequent death would not be a pleasant one. Instead, he decided that he would break her the old-fashioned way make her pay for drawing his precious pure blood.

Yes, he thought viciously, she would fracture like one of Narcissa's expensive glass figurines. By the time he was through, he would have her begging for death; a death that would, unfortunately, not be given by his own hand. *No matter*. She was not even worthy enough to lick the underside of his boots.

He returned to his former task of removing his footwear, afterwards casting a Warming charm on his body. It would not do for him to be cold, he realised, and he consequently left his trousers in place. Pointing his wand at her once more, he bit out a harsh, "*Enervate*," and watched snidely as she came back to herself.

Her eyes grew large as she took in his half-clothed state, the bleeding nail marks on his torso jumping out at her against the pale, white flesh. A quick look at his face

proved that he was indeed still livid over her actions, and she fled once more to the far side of the bed, vainly attempting to climb the stonewall in a fit of insanity.

Her wrists ached, but with the adrenaline pumping through her body she hardly noticed the pain.

He reached out, quick as lightning, and pulled her right foot out from underneath her, dragging her along the cot by her ankle. She was pleading with him now, mumbling words that fell on deaf ears as he flipped her onto her back.

"No, no, no," she babbled, mostly to herself, as she attempted to kick out with her left leg. He caught that one too, now holding both of her thin limbs tightly.

Hermione attempted to hold on to the thin mattress with her arms, but her broken wrists seemed to have a different idea. She howled out in pain, momentarily losing her grip on the tight-knit material.

"You will pay for these," he said in a cold voice as he glanced down at his marked chest. He threw his wand to the floor in the centre of the room, where it glided as though it were a sentient being, into the cane that housed it regularly. The connected pair then flew to the corner of the room next to the chair, landing gracefully mere paces from the wall. Lucius now had use of both his hands, and he ripped her cotton underwear from her body in one swift movement.

"Now, I'm not going to lie to you, *Mudblood*," he spat, pulling her closer to his half-naked body, his breathing shallow from exertion. Her eyes were drawn up to his in one horror-struck instant, the glint emitting from them causing her to shiver involuntarily. "This will hurt," he said with devilish smile, "a lot."

She froze, unable to look away from the madness that lay behind his gaze. His eyes were glazed over with lust and anger a heady combination and she felt her body still in terror. Unable to control her limbs, she whimpered from deep within her throat, and she felt her body go limp.

"That's right," Lucius chuckled, "there is no use resisting. You will take your retribution like the polluted creature that you are."

At his mocking words, she found an inner strength of which she had been previously unaware. She sat up to her full-seated height and slapped him hard across the face. Unfortunately, she immediately regretted the action, as she felt her wrist snap back with an intense vibration, pain shooting like lightning up her arm. She screamed aloud at the self-inflicted assault on her senses.

"Little bitch," he swore, staring daggers at the young woman lying in agony before him. He undid his trousers and pushed them down his body in a smooth, fluid motion.

He wore no underwear, and the planned deletion to his clothing was not lost on her as she stared at his rigid member, a look of absolute horror on her face. Her brain screamed for her to move, but her body simply would not comply. It was as though he had cast another *Stupefy* on her when she was not looking.

Smirking at the terrorist-like effect he was having on his captive, he took advantage of her moment of compliance and pushed her coldly up the cot. He straddled her rigid body and placed a knee on either side of her waist. Leaning over her, he took her broken, rapidly swelling wrists in either hand and shoved them roughly above her head.

A whispered word and her wrists were bound by an unseen tether to the metal frame, his hands once again free to peruse her body. Thighs resting heavily on her hips, he reached down and rubbed her breasts brutally, the action so rough it was painful. She wailed loudly as the tremor vibrated through her body, trying desperately to dislodge his gravid frame with the use of her hips and legs. Her efforts were wasted he was simply too heavy for her.

He expressed his amusement by applying more pressure to her breasts, kneading them as though he were preparing the dough for a pizza. She cried out in protest of his forceful behaviour, panicking as she felt herself start to hyperventilate.

Removing his claws from her reddened bosom, he moved to the end of the cot and parted her thighs with his hands. She struggled valiantly against him, but his responding pressure on her legs and abdomen restricted her movement.

She watched in horrified curiosity as he inserted his index finger into his mouth, sucking it lightly before pulling it back out, at which point it made *popping* sound as it left his lips. He smiled at her as he took his now wet finger and moved it to the crevice between her thighs. She shut her eyes tightly as he shoved the coated digit into her dry and unprepared opening, squeezing her lids together with all her might, tears now streaming steadily down her face. When he spoke next, she reluctantly reopened them to face her abuser.

"My, my, what do we have here?" he said teasingly. His finger coming to an abrupt halt as it met her hymen. "It seems that Potter's little Mudblood Slut is indeed a virgin." He clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

Hermione hastily twisted her head and slammed her eyes shut once more. An anticipatory shame flooded her body, and she felt her face grow hot.

"Tut, tut," he said, pulling his finger away from her pink centre and grabbing hold of her cheeks. He turned her head so that her nose was inches from his own, squeezing her cheeks lightly. When she refused to look at him, he tightened his grip, and she was forced to open her eyes to his leer.

"Better," he said with a self-satisfying smirk. She was enraged and terrified simultaneously, wanting nothing more than to wipe that sick smirk off his face. Unable to perform said action in her current predicament, she chose instead to stare at him menacingly, pure loathing evident in her eyes and face.

He chuckled to himself. "And here I thought you would be simple to break, but it seems that I have underestimated you, *Mudblood*. All the more fun for me."

He moved so quickly that she had no opportunity to take advantage of his displacement. In an instant, his legs were melded together between hers, and his palms were braced heavily on her thighs as if he were trying to perform a push-up.

She had scarcely a second to register the feel of his fleshy head against her nether lips before a rapid movement on his part changed her world forever.

He braced his knees against the mattress and pushed himself forward roughly, sheathing himself within her in one swift movement. Her lids flung open at the feeling, and she gave a glass-shattering scream.

"Ah, sweet music to my ears," he said as he began to move heedlessly inside of her. "You're a little dry, but no matter. I'm sure you'll be slick enough once you begin to bleed."

She searched the room for an escape, her eyes landing on his Dark Mark. Each time he pulled back to prepare for a new propulsion, the tattoo would come into her vision; then it was veiled from her sight once more as he pushed forward into her. The skull and serpent became a point of reference for her, its appearance signalling the inevitable thrust about to come her way.

He continued to drive into her, every grind against her cervix sending a shock of pain to her centre. She could feel him inside of her, tearing her apart from within. Her inner walls were constricted snugly around him, and no matter how hard she tried to relax, she was simply too tight, too unprepared to accommodate his girth.

The blood from her freshly pierced hymen was sliding down the crevice of her arse, the brunt of which was creating an awful sucking sound each time he entered and exited her opening.

His ball sac was slapping repeatedly against her soiled flesh, dispersing tiny sprinkles of scarlet fluid along both of their exposed bodies.

By this point in time, Hermione had drifted into a state of incoherence. Her voice had long since given out screaming was no longer an option. In a gesture of defeat, she stopped fighting him. She lay there, limply, utterly detached, not even waiting for the nightmare to end. She simply did not care any more. Hermione had given up.

"All the fight's out of you now?" he grunted, his movements unflinching. "How very disappointing," he drawled as he continued to pump in and out of her. "I do so very much

like it when you struggle." He exhaled roughly. "Puts a little more fun into it, if you know what I mean."

She tuned him out as best she could, his words sounding like little more than distant echoes in her mind. She had gone into a trance no present, no future there was just *nothing*.

"Yes, so very dull," he said, his breathing turning ragged. "Not surprising, really. Mudbloods usually *are* such simple creatures."

Her only response to him was the occasional involuntary shiver of her body against his, perforated thusly by the goose bumps that appeared on her flesh in the coolness of the surrounding dungeon cell.

Eventually, her mental and physical exhaustion grew to be too much for her. She allowed her mind to pass into the realm of peaceful darkness, a brief and heavenly respite from her now pitiful and painful existence.

She awoke in solitude, thankfully, and no longer restricted by the charm that had held her hands in place. She didn't move, however, choosing instead to lay stock-still, wallowing in the bane of her own existence.

Every inch of her body ached with an intensity that she found it difficult to breathe. She feared the pain that even the slightest of movements would bring. Maybe if she lay unmoving, if she let her mind go blank, she would be able to forget the fact that her innocence had just been brutally ripped away from her.

She slowly slid one of her hands down her aching body, a single digit reaching carefully between her legs. The moment her finger touched bare skin she pulled it back quickly, pain rippling through her from below. The combined body fluids from the uninvited coupling had dried to form a crust around her opening, pulling the sensitive skin taut around it. The bruises lining her thighs and genitals caused by his hard, uncompromising thrusts merely added to the agony. She reached her hand tentatively back down between her legs, disregarding the renewed pain it brought her. She found it a just sacrifice for the comfort she was able to obtain by wedging a hand protectively between her thighs. When the throbbing had somewhat subsided, she rolled onto her side and wept.

She wished she could take it all back make it go away. She felt immoral, tainted and unclean. Each attempt to block the memories from her mind only brought them back ten-fold, and she found herself at the edge of emotional insanity.

She threw an arm over her face, scrubbing viciously at the unwanted tears that had begun to flow freely down her cheeks. If Harry and Ron did not come for her soon, she feared she might shatter into a thousand little pieces so small, so unrecognisable, that no one would ever be able to pick up the pieces of her shattered remains and put them back together again.

Thanking my beta acciobook7.

My lack of reviews has left me a little apprehensive. As this is only my second piece of writing, and my first dark-fic, please review and let me know your thoughts on how I am doing thus far. All reviews are appreciated.

Turning Away

Chapter 5 of 25

What went on at the Granger's house?

Attempted suicide in the following chapter.

Professors Snape and McGonagall arrived back at the winged boars that marked the entranceway to Hogwarts. The illumination cast by the crescent moon that hung overhead, as well as the thousands of infinitesimal stars that littered the night sky, allowed them adequate vision without the use of their wands.

As the ex-Death Eater strode through the gates, he was held back by a hand being planted firmly on his arm. Turning around abruptly, he scowled in annoyance and looked into the face of an equally infuriated Minerva McGonagall.

"What was the meaning of dragging me away before I could question them? I..." Minerva started. Her livid face told Severus that she was mere seconds away from losing her illustrious temper.

"Not here," he hissed out, cutting her off abruptly. "Not where anyone can hear you," he whispered as he motioned around with his free arm to show her that they were not on Hogwarts grounds yet and that this was a conversation better suited for the Headmaster's office.

Minerva's face went blank before she nodded her head in understanding and swept past the dark-haired wizard. Crookshanks shifted in her arms as she passed through the gateway, giving a yowl and jumping from his captor's hands. The Deputy Headmistress watched curiously as the furry beast made a bee-line for the castle.

Minerva's stride didn't alter when she dropped the half Kneazle, and the anger in her form told Severus he had better steer clear of her. Unfortunately, he had no other option but to follow the simmering witch. Shaking his head in defeat, he briskly followed the Head of Gryffindor up the steps to the large oak doors that stood open wide, as if expecting them.

They reached the Headmaster's office to find that the stone gargoyles had also moved aside in preparation for their arrival. The seasoned pair made their way up the spiral staircase to the open door at its peak, Minerva in the lead. As soon as she stepped over the threshold, she spun around impatiently to face her colleague.

"Explain," she said, her tone brusque, permitting no room for argument.

Severus was still standing there, mouth open, when he heard the familiar sound of the Headmaster's aged voice speaking from behind his desk.

"Oh, do let the boy come in, Minerva, my dear," he spoke light-heartedly, but stopped when she whirled around and fixed him with a glare that could solidify frost.

"Albus, don't you *my dear* me," she said sharply in her brisk Scottish brogue. She was rounding on the older wizard, who stood up, his palms flat on the desk, an eyebrow

raised in amusement.

Severus took this opportunity to slip into the room and stand by the empty fireplace. He let out a sigh of relief that the mother hen's focus was no longer on him.

"I believe they were Obliviated," Severus said adamantly. Two heads turned abruptly to face the fireplace, giving him their utmost attention. "At least, Mr Granger was, and I presume his wife, as well. He had no recollection of ever having had a daughter, and the only reason for that, I fear, is that Potter was indeed correct in assuming that Miss Granger is now in the clutches of the Dark Lord," he finished, trying to keep his voice as impartial as possible. Inconveniently, it wavered slightly on its conclusion as he ran a trembling hand through his oily locks.

Minerva gave a gasp, and all the anger she had felt previously left her as she melted into the plush chair before the Headmaster's desk.

"What shall we do, Albus?" she asked, her own voice unsteady as she cradled her head in her hands.

"We will do what we must," the elderly wizard replied cryptically.

"And what is that supposed to mean, Albus?" Minerva shot back at him. Her hands fell to her sides, and her head shot up to look at the elderly wizard, his appearance hardly intimidating, what with his bright purple robes and pointed hat.

"Minerva," the old wizard sighed as he took his seat across the desk from her, his hands steepled in front of him as he took another hefty breath, but battling on regardless.

Severus knew he would not like what the Headmaster was about to say to them, but he straightened himself up to his full height, even as Minerva sat forward in her seat, her hands resting on her knees.

"I know of your fondness for the girl," Dumbledore commented, and Minerva made an inarticulate noise. Ignoring her, he continued on. "And regardless of that fact, we have to look at the greater picture. Harry needs me, all of us, in fact, as I fear the time for battle approaches. He cannot afford to be sidetracked from his ultimate purpose. Besides, if Severus has heard nothing, I believe she may already be dead."

Severus was appalled at Albus' dismissal of Miss Granger's importance in light of the Potters' brat's mission. Did he truly not know the significance of her level-headedness? She was, after all, the brain of the trio. Without her the other two fools would fall apart. It would be like leading lambs to the slaughter, and he would have no part in this hair-brained scheme.

"But Albus, surely you cannot brush aside the fact that the Grangers were Obliviated, not killed, and therefore there has to be more to this than you say." Minerva's voice was entirely too soft, and there was no heart behind her statement. Severus wondered if she even believed her own words.

Severus could not believe his ears. Miss Granger's own Head of House was dismissing her entirely as well. Oh, she put on a good show to those that didn't know her. However, he knew she had given up all hope as well, simply by the very way she had spoken the last part of her speech.

Had the world gone totally mad? When did their entire survival depend on one reckless child? Severus was dumbfounded, but hid his expression well...apparently he was not privy to the inner workings of the Headmaster's mind. Not to the extent that Minerva was, at any rate.

"I agree, my dear, but we have to focus on the destruction of Tom Riddle. Harry must be prepared to face Tom, and the time is close at hand, I fear."

Minerva's lips thinned into a tiny, ashen line, and whilst Severus knew she was not at all pleased with the Headmaster's decision, he also recognised that she would stand by him, as she always had.

"And the girl?" Severus sniped. "You propose we do nothing for her?"

Dumbledore regarded the Potions Master over his half-moon spectacles, his head held low. "My boy," the elder man answered, his tone regretful, "there are always casualties where war is involved. Those who pass while fighting for what is right die the most noble death that any of us could hope for."

"You can not be certain that she is in fact dead," Severus countered.

"And it is possible that we shall, unfortunately, never know what has truly happened to Miss Granger. However, if Harry were to be convinced of her passing, and at the hands of Voldemort..."

"You wish us to lie to the boy?" Minerva cut in, and Dumbledore forestalled her with a gentle wave of his hand. He turned back to Snape, his eyes no longer twinkling.

"We must do what is best for the greater good, Severus. If Miss Granger's life..."

"You have never been there!" Severus roared, leaping forward and slamming his hands down on the Headmaster's desk. His eyes were level with the older wizard's, and he lowered his voice to a more serious tone.

"You have never had to watch as he defiled and tortured innocents. He does not do these things for pleasure or personal gain...he does them simply because it is in his nature to do so. There is no *good* and *evil* as far as the Dark Lord is concerned. There is only *power* and *weakness*. If she is alive and in his custody, she is suffering a fate worse than death." Severus took in an unsteady breath.

Dumbledore contemplated the younger man for several moments before responding to him. "We cannot place a higher value on one life than on the lives of so many others, Severus. You have made that mistake before."

Severus sneered, ripping his hands off the desk and turning to McGonagall. The aged witch hung her head warily, unable to bring herself to look into the younger wizard's indistinguishable gaze.

"He's right, Severus. If we could be sure that she is alive ..." The older woman trailed off, sighing. "But we can't, and we have to use every advantage we have to help Harry defeat You-Know-Who."

"I shall make an announcement tomorrow morning at breakfast," Albus added reluctantly. "Tell Mistery Potter and Weasley to go to bed, Minerva, and we shall talk tomorrow. However, for now, I think we are all tired. And as classes start again tomorrow, I believe we need all the respite we can get."

Dumbledore's flippant words echoed hollowly within the confines of Severus' mind. It didn't take a Seer to know when he was being dismissed. He bowed his head slightly to both Albus and Minerva and quickly fled to the sanctuary of his dungeons.

Once inside he poured himself a tumbler of Firewhisky from the sideboard in his sitting rooms, quickly downing its contents. Slamming the glass down hard on cabinet's top, a sudden anger seemed to rise up from within him. He was so tired of this preposterous war and was sorely tempted to run off this night and never return. He knew as soon as this thought entered his mind he could not...would not...do such a thing. The Dark Lord would easily hunt him down as he had Karkaroff and would be sure to see to his instantaneous torture and demise.

It was all such a waste, he thought, as he began the monotonous pacing that usually calmed him. Not that he held any partiality for the Granger girl, but she was bright enough, he supposed, and had even curbed that incessant hand waving of hers as of late. She worked diligently in his classroom, and her Head Girl duties were performed meticulously and without a fuss. She was always respectful towards him, even managing to keep Potter and Weasley in check...for the most part, at least.

He supposed there was nothing to be done for the girl now as the Headmaster had made it painfully clear that there would be no rescue mission mounted to save her. Even

if she were still alive, he wouldn't know where to begin his search.

All he knew for certain was that the war had just stepped up a notch and that he would receive no sleep on this night. He lay awake for hours, thinking about the decision he and his colleagues had come to and the subject of what may be happening to the girl if she was in fact alive. He shuddered unwillingly. *Gods, please let her be dead*, he thought.

Hermione groggily opened her eyes to the pitch-black ambience to which she had become accustomed. She had to rely only on her secondary senses...touch, smell, and sound...but not taste, as she had yet to take in any nourishment. Her lips were chapped and cracked, and her throat felt parched and hurt tremendously when she swallowed.

A small bubble of laughter threatened to make its way up and out of her throat however; she curbed it by biting on her tongue brusquely as she shook her head. She would not lose whatever sanity she had left now and succumb to the hysteria that was terrifyingly close at hand.

Before she could reflect on her impending psychosis more closely, she sat up and felt a rather pressing urgency for relief. Her bladder was full, and she knew that she could not just knock on the cell door and ask if she could use the bathroom. She sensed, rather than saw, the stirring of magic and a faint glow that appeared to her left. Closing her eyes for a brief second, the light invading her vision rather viciously, she reopened them and peered at the spot where the light had come from. Groaning, she saw that the familiar hole had appeared where previously there had been a solid stone floor.

How did this prison know that she needed to pee? she shook her head. It was a wizard's home after all.

She wrinkled her nose in disgust, however the pressing matter of her bladder told her that she had two options, either use the modified bathroom or her bed was going to be drenched and reek even worse than it did at present.

Unfurling herself, she gave great care not to jar her broken wrists, which were still throbbing from their previous assault. Her entire body stiffened as she stood on shaky legs from the small cot, and with some urgency, she made her way over to the hole, she hunched unsteadily over it and relieved herself.

In her dazed state of mind, it took her a brief moment to reacquaint herself with her surroundings. She sniffed at the air whilst still in the squatted position, catching a strange and unfamiliar odour. Her cell smelled of food...or at least something that vaguely resembled it. Her stomach ached and growled in protest.

Standing up straight, she felt the sticky and tepid after effects of her urine trickling down her legs. She paid it no mind as she watched in half amazement as the hole closed in on itself, once more becoming solid stone and the light dissipated leaving her once more in total darkness.

Moving at a snail's pace, she made her way across the room gradually, eventually knocking her hips against the table's rough, wooden surface. She winced at the contact, the overpowering aroma of the food taking precedence over the aches and pains of her body, and she moved her trembling hands little by little over the surface of the table.

Feeling a bowl, which was warm to the touch, she scrambled around for a moment to find the accompanying spoon. There was none. Her stomach rumbled in protest yet again, and she took a moment to consider the last time she had eaten. It was quite possible that she had not consumed anything of substance in two or three days. She winced as her stomach turned over once more, the sepulchral vibrations becoming almost painful.

Kneeling cautiously before the table, she shuffled the bowl closer to the edge of the table until it was resting precariously over the brim. Bringing her lips to the rim of the bowl, she tipped the wooden container forward, using her forearm and being oh-so-careful not to spill the contents of the basin. Darting out her tongue to taste the provisions, she was surprised to find that the dish contained warm broth. She gulped it down greedily, not caring if it would make her sick, and she finished the bowl in no time, licking at the remains like a scavenger creature would pick at the bones of a carcass.

Letting the bowl drop to the floor with an almighty clang, she felt once more around the tabletop, her fingers bumping into a glass. She forced the resulting pain down to a place deep within her, using her teeth to pick up the glass and place it closer to the edge of the table. She cast aside all her twinging muscles, along with the dull, hammering pain that her wrists now emitted.

Bringing her lips to the rim of the glass, she used her forearm for leverage while she tilted her head backwards and took a hearty swig of the liquid. The water was cool and welcome on her lips and tongue, and the feeling as it coated her parched throat could only be described as something akin to blissful relief. She drank hastily from the container, stopping only when she felt her stomach give a sudden, painful lurch. A stabbing pain shot through her insides, and she dropped to her hands on the unyielding dungeon floor. She gave out a piercing scream as her wrists made contact with the floor, dropping onto her shoulder and rolling onto her side. The glass toppled to the ground and shattered on the harsh stone somewhere near her head as she retched, churning out the entire contents of her stomach. She remained thusly for several minutes, crying out between her laboured breathing as she tried to control the rising pain flaring up throughout her entire body.

She pulled her knees into her chest ignoring the pain in her wrists, until she lay in the foetal position. Nearly passing out from the pain as she cradled her arms to her chest. She took in large gulps of air, her face screwed up in a perfect picture of agony.

The sickly scent of her own vomit was in the air surrounding her. It was in her hair, mouth and trickling down her chin. She swiped at her face angrily, no longer caring about the pain that was her very existence.

*Perhaps I can end this now and save myself the pain of another night's torture...*She allowed the idea to fester in her mind as her hands reached out subconsciously for the broken bits of glass.

Her fingers wrapping around one of the larger bits of the shattered tumbler, she stood on quivering legs and made her way over to the cot at a hurried pace. She failed to cry out when her shins met the metal frame, instead quickly sitting down, her prize clutched in her tiny, battered hand. She scooted her way to the head of the bed, crouching against the corner in the darkness, her head abutting the cold, stone wall.

She turned the bit of glass over in her palms, feeling its rough edges against her soft skin as she pictured the end of her short life in the depths of her mind. She pressed the shard against her left wrist, her fingers felt suddenly slippery and wet, and she realised she was shaking.

You can do this, she told herself resolutely.

Bracing herself for the impending pain, she slashed at the soft skin in one, vicious stroke.

Something was wrong...she felt nothing.

Repeatedly she brought the makeshift weapon down upon her wrist, tears pouring down her face as a stiff ball formed in her throat. She was not even able to kill herself correctly. Why would Harry and Ron want to save someone that couldn't even do *that* right?

She flung the piece of glass across the cell, disgusted with herself. She deserved the pain her body was going through, and...God help her...she even welcomed it. To feel anything at all was a grateful distraction in this world that had gone mad.

She curled her arms around her knees and rocked back and forth, back and forth. The silent tears forming clean tracks upon her filthy cheeks were the only sign of her internal turmoil.

The air surrounding the Gryffindor table was thick with tension the following morning. Harry ran a hand through his ruffled hair as he sat next to Ron in the Great Hall. He kept shooting glances at the Headmaster, waiting for some kind of acknowledgement from the wizard, but it never came.

Professor McGonagall had looked in on both boys last night, telling them that the Headmaster wished to speak to them after breakfast and sending them up to their dormitory to sleep without further explanation.

Both boys hadn't slept a wink. They had just lain in their respective beds, lost in their own thoughts.

Ron was staring at his breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon and toast as if it held the answer to Hermione's sudden disappearance, and Harry felt, not for the first time, that Ron was taking Hermione's vanishing personally.

"You 'right there, mate?" Harry asked as he placed his hand in a comforting gesture on his best friend's shoulder.

Ron jumped visibly at Harry's touch, and he quickly withdrew his hand. It flopped down uselessly to his side.

"Sorry about that," Ron dejectedly replied, "just thinking about, well, you know," he said as his miserable looking eyes met Harry's bespeckled face.

In that instant, it was as if a light had gone on inside of Harry's head, and he now knew why Ron was taking this so very hard. Ron loved Hermione, more than a friend, and it was written all over his face.

"Yeah, me too," Harry whispered as his eyes fell once more to the tabletop and his uneaten breakfast. His stomach grumbled in protest, but he paid it no mind as he continued to stare at the full plate, not really seeing it.

Harry glanced back to the Head table and saw that Professor Dumbledore was smiling at something Professor McGonagall was saying, and he scowled. Ron, noticing this, turned his head to look at what Harry was frowning at, and what he saw made his blood boil. He clenched both his fists by his side as his face went beet red. He looked for the entire world as though he was only five seconds away from blowing his top, and if it weren't for Neville's intervention, he might have marched up there to demand some answers.

"Hey guys, what's up?" Neville asked as he took the empty seat next to Ron, placing some eggs and toast on his awaiting plate.

Looking up when he got no response, he turned his head slowly to meet Harry's solemn face.

"What's up with him?" he asked Harry, who was sitting on the other side of Ron. Harry wasn't paying Neville any mind; instead he was staring up at the Head Table.

Neville spun around on the bench and gazed intently up at the Professors, searching for the sight at which the two boys were so adamantly gaping at. He saw nothing out of the ordinary and turned around once more.

"Does this have anything to do with Hermione?" he asked quietly, and two sets of eyes came to rest on his face. Neville raised his brow as if urging them on.

"We've got a meeting with the Headmaster after breakfast," Harry mumbled, suddenly embarrassed that he was staring openly at the Head Table.

The exchange was brought to an abrupt halt as silence fell on the Great Hall. The Headmaster scraped his chair back noisily and stood. Every head in the room swivelled around to face that of the Professor's.

"You are probably all wondering what has happened to our Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger, as she was neither here last night at our welcome back feast, nor is she here now." Dumbledore paused as if building the anticipation for his next words. "I received a letter by owl post late last night explaining her situation to me and expressing her dismay at not being able to return to Hogwarts at this time."

An outraged murmur broke out at the Gryffindor table, and the Headmaster held up both his hands as if to quell the protests.

"Her Aunt is gravely ill, and she has taken it upon herself to act as a nursemaid. Miss Granger did not specify the length of time that this convalescence will cause her to be detained, but she did express her sorrow and disappointment at not being able to finish her seventh and final year." His face fell then, and Harry had to speculate as to his genuineness. The old man was convincing, at any rate.

"So in saying that, I have the pleasure of choosing a new Head Girl. Susan Bones, would you please make your way to the dais to accept your new status as Head Girl for the remainder of the year?" A smile crossed the Headmaster's face, and Harry had to bite back the rising anger that was threatening to encompass not only himself, but also the rest of the Gryffindor table.

A loud cheer rang out from the Hufflepuffs as Susan stood up and made her way down to the front of the hall.

Professor Dumbledore walked down the two stairs to the side of the raised platform and met Miss Bones in the middle. Pinning on her badge, he whispered a few words of encouragement to Susan, who smiled up at the elderly wizard in acceptance.

Susan walked back to her place at the table, back straight, head held high. Her eyes were gleaming with pride as she was congratulated along the way in the form of handshakes and back pats.

Harry watched the exchange with narrowed eyes. It sounded a little too convenient for Hermione's aunt to be suddenly ill. Perhaps that wasn't the full story, and he'd make sure to get all the facts from the old wizard once securely ensconced inside his office.

As Dumbledore took his seat once more, his gaze fell upon the Gryffindor table and ultimately on Harry. Harry interpreted the stony glance he was given to mean there was more the old wizard wanted to declare, just not in the hall where anyone could overhear.

By now you should know the drill. Constructive criticism is always welcome, and if you have nothing more to say than, 'great job,' it will be more than appreciated.

Thanking my betas acciobook7 and deathofme, you ladies rock my world.

Deceptions

What awaits Hermione in her prison cell? What will the Headmaster tell both Harry and Ron about Hermione's disappearance?

WARNING: Graphic torture lies ahead. You have been warned.

She heard the faintest of whisperings in her ear, a stray curl of hair brushing against the side of her face, tickling. The whisperings, along with her hair, was irritating, and she swatted at them in her half state of awareness. Immediately she regretted the decision, as she was jarred awake by an intense pain shooting through her entire body and ending in the tips of her fingers. Even her hair hurt.

Letting out a strangled cry, she sat bolt upright, embracing her ruined wrists and squeezing both legs tightly together. Breathing heavily, she concentrated on counting backwards from one hundred as the pain slowly, though moderately, eased and she unclenched her thighs gradually.

She was cold...so very cold...and her body shivered, commanding itself to get warm. She huddled in upon herself, squeezing into the tiniest of balls, although her body protested quite vigorously. She ignored it.

She tried to picture the warm fireplace in the Gryffindor common room and slowly sank into that part of her psyche that still held her most vivid of imaginings. She let herself relax into the comfortable lounge that adorned the room and felt the hearth's warmth flicker upon her skin.

She sighed, contented in the fact that no matter what that fiend could do to her, he could...under no circumstances...take away her imagination.

She must have drifted back to sleep, for within the next seconds she was startled awake by the echoing of footsteps approaching the door. Heart hammering in her chest, breathing laboured, she scrambled to sit up on the pitiful cot. She was shaking like a leaf, and although she would have liked to have thought it was from the cold, her mind told her it was for another reason...that of the man coming for her.

The wooden cell door burst open, banging against the wall, and the image of her nightmare came into view as he flicked his wand to the sconces on the wall, bringing his fiendish features into light.

There, held on his face, was the look of disgust that she so vividly remembered from the previous occasion he had been within her prison. Hermione held in a lungful of air and briefly wondered if she would pass out from the lack of oxygen before he reached her.

Lucius held his wand in his right hand. The now hollow, round black cane that usually housed his wand and added to his aristocratic image was swinging freely in his left hand. Pointing his wand at the Mudblood, he cast a quick cleansing charm and mended her broken wrists; he would not have her screaming out in pain before he had even begun with her lessons today. He left the ache that he knew she would be feeling between her legs alone; it wouldn't do to seem too caring of the wench's needs.

Hermione took in a large breath as she felt the pain in her wrists disappear. Rubbing at them, she noticed with astonishment that the swelling that had marred them formerly had vanished before her eyes. She blinked twice, not quite understanding what it was that he expected of her.

Lucius flung the bottom of his cane in the direction of the wooden door in which he had just entered. With a clunk it bounced off the stones of the floor to land neatly in the corner. Still he held his wand pointed directly at her...it never wavered from her person.

"Hello, Mudblood." He drawled in an almost conversational tone. "I trust you slept well." When she did not respond, only maintaining eye contact with the corner of the room where he had thrown the base of his wand, he released a frustrated grunt, but continued nonetheless.

"Yes, I believe you did. Good, good." He started to edge closer to her, his wand arm still raised. Hermione's eyes snapped to his face, "because you will need all of your strength for today."

He swung his arm in a graceful arc towards the centre of the room, his eyes never leaving her face. Her head snapped to watch what he was doing, and she was startled to see that chains appeared to be growing out of the ceiling, slithering down, link by link, taking on a life of their own.

She watched on in bewilderment as the chains grew longer. They looked like writhing snakes ready to attack their prey, attack her. Finally, the intricate links stopped, and at each end there appeared a shackle. Her eyes widened as she was struck with the thought of being tied helplessly to such a contraption.

Coldness settled into her very being, into her bones and her muscles, and she felt wilted with the implications of what would ensue. She didn't even have the ability to shiver as she stared, unblinking, at the chains.

Snapping out of her morbid fascination with the chains, she crossed her arms over her chest glaring at the madman before her defiantly.

The blond-haired wizard chuckled briefly to himself, and Hermione's eyes narrowed and she lifted her chin ever so slightly. The gleam in his eye was as frightening as the grin he held on his face; after all, he did enjoy it when his captives provided a challenge.

"I see that the Mudblood slut knows what is to come." Lucius laughed quietly once more as he leant forward and snatched at one of her newly healed wrists, pulling her up to her feet.

She cried out then, struggling against her gaoler's stronger grip, but she knew that it was a fruitless attempt; she was effectively imprisoned after all, as she had no place to go. Moreover, even if she could get out of this contemptible cell, where would she run to? She had no idea as to the layout of the mansion or how many traps were set up to detain her if she did indeed manage to break free.

Lucius gripped the Mudblood's wrists in one hand and pulled her flush to his own body. Her legs would not support her, and she shook uncontrollably as he pulled her towards him. He whirled her around, her wrists still caught in the hand that was not holding his wand, her back up against his chest.

Her hands were pinned against her body, and he stroked her bare sex with the back of the hand that held them there. She tried to kick him away, struggling against him. She stomped down on him with all her might, but her bare feet were no match for his booted ones, and he paid her no mind.

Lucius stopped inching towards the chains and pointed his wand to the direction of the back wall. Hermione froze, all at once fascinated to see the stone wall recede, much like the bricks that separated the Leaky Cauldron from Diagon Alley, and a large room appearing behind the stones.

Sconces flared to life in the room, and Hermione went stiff and froze at the sight before her. The room held every imaginable and unimaginable torture device known to man, and her struggles renewed as her eyes fell upon a rather excruciating looking set of knives glittering in the light on the adjacent wall. A gasp flew from her lips.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" The impossibly strong wizard holding her breathed as he once again stroked her mound with his hand. "And they shall make you sing *Mudblood*, and such a glorious sound it will be," he finished as his grip on her tightened still further.

The fear inside her mounted as she stared at the knives shimmering on the wall. The panic was so great that she thought at any moment she might pass out with the mounting anxiety.

The rigidity in her fled as she sagged against her captor, and he snorted behind her. "That's right, slave. There is no use in fighting against the inevitable."

He turned her around in his arms then, and placed both of her wrists into the awaiting metal shackles that extended from the ceiling.

Hermione was complacent, knowing what her fate held for her. *At least he can't take it too far*, she thought numbly to herself. *He said he couldn't kill me. No, that honour lies with Voldemort.* She laughed bitterly inside her own mind. *Some Gryffindor I turned out to be*

The metal bit into her newly healed wrists as he secured her into their jaws. The chains magically shortened until she was hanging from the ceiling like a rag doll, her toes barely touching the floor. Her wrists ached in protest as though they were remembering their previous inflamed and broken state. She could not imagine that this position would be comfortable for long.

She turned her head slightly to the right to see Malfoy laying his wand on the thin mattress of the bed. He then took off his outer robes, rolling up his shirtsleeves. She saw the Dark Mark, mocking her, seeming to smile out at her in anticipation.

Hermione closed her eyes and prayed to Merlin...or anyone that would listen...that she would get out of this situation, but it seemed that the deities were not listening today. Perhaps she was too far down in the bowels of hell for them to hear her pleas.

Opening her eyes when she heard a rustling behind her, she tried to turn her head to catch a glimpse at what was to come. It was no good; she couldn't get her head around far enough to make out what he was doing. In some respects, she believed that it was better that way.

A crack...of what she assumed was a whip...made her jump seconds later, bringing her back to her own living hell. She knew that he was obviously delaying, trying to scare her with his diversionary tactics. Well, *damn it*, it worked. A trickle of something warm ran down her inner thighs.

To her horror, she realised a second later that she had wet herself. The drip, drip of her urine was hitting the floor, forming a puddle beneath her toes. The stones were wet and slimy as she lost her footing and scrambled to try and stand up straight once more. Her wrists jarred as the metal of the crude handcuffs cut into the fleshy part of her hands, and she cried out.

"What, so eager to start?" his mocking voice called out from the hidden room. "Oh, very well, then," he maintained, his voice impressing that *he* was imposing upon him, asking him for a favour that he really didn't want to acquiesce to.

She finally found her toe-hold again as he entered the room. The sickening smell of ammonia was in the air, and her inner thighs and calves were sticky from her own bodily fluids.

He placed some items next to his robes and wand on the cot and made his way over to her. He carried with him a razor-sharp, jagged, silver knife that he wielded with the precarious look of a man who knew his way around blades. Either that or he was really that good at extracting every last piece of information out of a human being before their ultimate death.

However, he wanted no such information from her...he had said so himself. So why was he doing this? Was it from some sick and perverted sense of superiority? Did he honestly believe himself, a pureblood, to be better than she? Did he not know that she bled the same colour red as he?

She was shaken from her musing by his cold voice once more invading her ears.

"My, my, my, and what do we have here?" he drawled out. "You couldn't even wait for me, could you? You had to go and make a mess of yourself." He sighed, even as a flick of his wrist cleaned up the clammy mess between her legs and dried up the floor.

"Better." It was not a question to her, more a comment he made to himself out loud.

Her cheeks blossomed red as her shame heightened. It felt as though there was a weight on her chest, constricting her breathing even though she was upright.

Lucius lifted the blade up in front of his face. As he mumbled a phrase that Hermione's ears couldn't make out, she watched in horror as the tip of the knife glowed red and then turned to white. Her eyes widened and she shook her head faintly from side to side. Surely he wasn't going to touch her with that?

Lucius took a step forward, switching the blade from hand to hand as if the handle was scorching his delicate skin.

"Where to begin," he murmured to himself. His eyes lit from within at the sight of Hermione's perfect, unblemished skin...a canvas, just begging for him to make that first splash of colour upon it.

Upon closer inspection, he detected a thin white scar running down the left hand side of her body. Standing closer to her, even as she tried to back away, he bent over to examine it. The imperfection ran under her left breast and down past her ribcage to end abruptly at her hipbone. It was hardly anything that one would notice if they did not know what to look for, and he was surprised that he had not detected it during her previous ministrations.

Straightening back up, he chuckled in silent appreciation for Dolohov's handiwork at the Department of Mysteries almost two years previously.

She'd thought that after his previous assault on her body that she would be prepared for whatever he was to do now. She had never been more wrong in her life.

As he pressed the glowing, white-hot edge of the knife in between her breasts, her body's natural reaction was to flinch away from the perceived threat, and she did just that. However, the metal chains that cut into her wrists gave her no room to move as she was left to dangle there, at his mercy. She wailed out in agony as he made his way down to the soft part of her abdomen.

Lucius' eyes were gleaming with sadistic pleasure as he made the thin white lines appear in calculated positions on her body. The smell of burning flesh invaded his nostrils, heightening his frenzied attack. He no longer heard her pleas and sobs as he shut out all outside stimuli. The only sound that invaded his ears was that of his own blood rushing through his veins like a continuous tidal wave.

Stepping back to admire his work and ending the spell on the knife, he took in the glorious sight before him. The path that his knife had taken had started to blister, leaving ugly, red oozing lines in their wake. The Mudblood was hanging limply from her chains, obviously having passed out from the assault on her body. If she couldn't even stand that, then they were in for a long night indeed...with plenty of *Enervates*.

Walking the short distance to the cot, he picked up his wand whilst laying down the knife with such care and tenderness that Hermione would have laughed had she been awake to witness it.

Picking up a vial that he had previously deposited on the cot, he walked back over to his slave. Her head was lolling from side to side as though she were at half consciousness, her hair obscuring her features.

As he uncorked the vial, he took particular care to not spill a drop on his precious pureblood hands. Raising it up, he brought it first to the Mudblood's shoulder, tipping up the vial and allowing two drops to fall on her already tarnished skin. The reaction was immediate, as her skin started to bubble and smoke. The acid eating away at her shoulder at an alarming rate as Lucius watched on, a look of pure fascination holding him immobile as he observed in eagerness.

She let out a muffled yell as she came back to herself. Her hair flying wildly about her face, she swung her head from side to side desperately. The tear tracks and snot that she was unable to wipe away clung to her face. Turning her head to see what was going on, her eyes landed on her smouldering shoulder. She tried desperately to move away from her attacker, but it was no use; the chains only gave her a little leeway.

She watched as he brought the object in his hand up to her other shoulder and she kicked out, almost instinctively, knocking the vial from his grasp. It went flying across the room and smashed on the stone floor. The sizzling, smoking fumes erupted in mere seconds, as two sets of eyes followed the vial's progress.

"*Evanesco*," Lucius snarled, pointing his wand at the now useless mess on the floor. Hermione cringed as he whirled around to face her, his countenance and posture expressing his fury as he advanced toward her.

Reaching her, he stuck the wand tip into the pressure point on her neck as he yanked her head back brutally by the roots of her hair.

"That was a mistake," he said dangerously, his lips curled up in an ugly look of hatred. "You shall pay for your error with your own flesh, Mudblood whore."

He was breathing heavily, right next to her left eye that was held wide in terror. She knew in that moment he had lost what little control he usually held onto so tightly. She had somehow managed to unravel it, like a loose thread that begged to be pulled at. She had finally managed to shake his tenacity, and now that she had...she feverishly wished to take it back.

Abruptly, he pushed her head forward, letting go of his hold on her as he stepped away. She could still hear his shallow breathing, her heart pounding in her chest. Her whole body ached; there was not one place on her entire form that did not scream out, from her calves...which were begging her to relax...to her shoulder, from which the scent of her own burning flesh still reached her nostrils. It sickened her as she gagged, bile making its way to her throat, the sour, acidic taste wanting to make her spit it out; however, she swallowed reflexively. Her torso throbbed, and she felt the beads of sweat trickling down her forehead and into her already stinging eyes.

She shook her head, trying to remove some of the sweat from her brow. It was futile, she realised, as more drops appeared to take their place. The demon was taking his time, probably trying to decide on the best course of action, or weapon, at his disposal.

Without warning, he was standing behind her once more, though he had made no noise. She could feel the heat radiating from his body, the little hairs on her arms and legs standing to attention as goosebumps welled up on her flesh. She tensed herself, although her muscles howled out in objection, for the next form of anguish that his devious mind was certainly formulating.

Lucius saw her stiffen but was too incensed to care as he took a step backwards, away from her body, and angled himself just right. He brought the whip back and let it fly through the air with all of his might. She lurched forward as it struck, the blunt material peeling back the delicate skin on her back, as one would an orange. The crimson blood welled to the surface and she screamed out in anguish; however, he did not relent, bringing the whip across her back twenty...no, thirty...times until it was unrecognisable, her blood dripping all over the floor and coating him.

Her back was a criss-cross of jagged openings, each one oozing blood in thin rivers as she hung limply from the chains, clearly passed out from his dealings. He took another step back, breathing deeply.

What have I done? Lucius' fevered mind caught up with his actions.

He froze and looked down at the hand that held the cat-o-nine. It was covered in blood. Mudblood. His gaze fell to his usually pristine white shirt. It too showed flecks of blood spattering, going down as far as the tips of his boots. He realised, as the whip dropped to the floor from his suddenly uncooperative hand, that the defectively bred witch had shattered his usual unruffled façade, causing him to lash out at her in the only way he saw fit...through his own unique sense of brutal punishment.

He strode quickly over to the bed, breathing in through his nose and letting it gush out of his mouth. He had to gain back his customary unflappable control. Picking up his wand, he made his way around to her back. Forehead creased in concentration, he made quick work closing up her back. Fortunately, he was a master of the healing charm as one did not keep their toys alive without mastering the tools of the trade, so to speak. Banishing the chains, he caught her before she fell to the ground, picking her up in his arms and carrying her over to the cot. Sweeping everything off it with one arm as he balanced her in the other, he laid her down and checked for a pulse. It was there, thankfully, though it was barely a faint presence.

He had forgotten how fragile the human body was at these beginning stages. He would have to build up her immunity to the torture a little bit at a time. He decided then and there on a more psychological approach, as opposed to the physical.

He thanked Merlin for minuscule favours, as he did not want to be the one to have to explain why the Mudblood had perished under his tender care. He laughed aloud then, as some of the adrenaline left his body, and his heart rate slowed down. He shook a little under the implications of what a message such as that would bring...most certainly his death, and not the swift and painless death by *Avada*, either.

He was meant to break her...nothing more. What was it about this simple, stupid Mudblood chit that had him all wound up? Was it the fact that she had outdone his own son at Hogwarts? *A dispensable Mudblood was better than his own flesh and blood* The thought sickened him as he turned her over, exposing the blistering redness and ugly scarring that his favoured knife had left. A quick flick of his wand fixed up that problem until they were just thin red marks defacing her upper body.

Next was her shoulder, which he saw still contained the gaping wound that his acid mixture had left. There was, however, no blood escaping the opening. He waved his wand once more, causing the wound to knit itself together. Satisfied that all of her apparent grievances were treated, he ran a diagnostic spell that incorporated her entire body.

Lucius was pleased by the light colours of the spell; the only discomforting tones were those between her legs and in her abdomen. He knew that the dark shades hovering above her stomach were not due to an unwanted half-breed child, as he had regrettably gone sterile for his years as a Death Eater and the hazards that came with the station of being his Lord's right hand man. No, it indicated quite clearly, her near starvation. *That would not do*. He made a mental note to let the house-elf responsible for her know to give her at least two decent meals per day...not enough to get her strength back, but an adequate amount for her to survive on.

Casting a warming spell upon her, he levitated the objects of torment back into the hidden room, making sure to seal the door once everything was in place. Swiping a blood stained hand through his normally spotless hair, he breathed in deeply. He would have to be more subtle in his approach to the Mudblood, lest anything should happen to her.

Moving his eyes around the dingy cell, and contented that everything was in its place, he picked up his robes and cane casing from the corner. Waving the wand through the air, he placed some enchantments on the cell. With one last surreptitious look around, he exited. He would take a long hot shower first and then send a house-elf down with some blood-replenishing potion. After that was taken care of, he would head to his library for a drink of something incredibly strong.

Harry and Ron sat in identical plush chairs before the Headmaster's bulky desk. They both knew there was more to the story than the aged wizard was letting on...they just hoped that he wouldn't be as obscure as he had been at breakfast.

The white-haired Headmaster took in a deep breath. He knew that this was going to be hard on both Harry and Ronald, but hopefully they would come away from this meeting with a renewed sense of purpose. One, he could only hope, that would be in the best interest of defeating Tom Riddle once and for all.

As he looked into the two young men's faces, he saw worry etched in each and every line. Harry's leg was bouncing up and down in a show of unfocused energy, its master eager to hear what the Professor had to say. Ronald was gnawing fervently on the thumbnail of his right hand.

Albus cleared his throat...an unconscious habit...his lined face taking on a look of sympathy as he began.

"Miss Hermione Granger was taken by Death Eaters some time last week..."

There was an outraged cry from Ron as he stood up and almost fell over in the process. Harry just sat unnaturally still in disbelief, his mouth open and his eyes as wide as dinner plates.

The Headmaster held up both hands in an effort to quell the wizards' barrage of questions before continuing onwards in his unpleasant task.

"And I have reason to believe that she will not be coming back." He finished as tactfully as possible, given the circumstances.

"What do you mean 'she's not coming back'?"

Ron hesitated, his face suddenly pale, his freckles standing out in stark contrast, as his brain struggled to catch up with his mouth. He staggered backward and sat heavily on the chair beneath him.

"We have to find her."

It was Harry that spoke this time, quietly, a fierce determination in his emerald green eyes.

"We mustn't, my boy."

Dumbledore realised a moment too late that he had chosen the wrong words.

Harry stood then and crossed the office with a determined air about him. His shoulders were straight, his head held high.

"Then I shall just proceed without you," he said as he reached for the doorknob.

Albus stood and slammed his hands on the polished desk before him, scattering papers in his wake. "Miss Granger is already dead!"

Harry froze on the spot, his hand still around the doorknob. Dumbledore's eyes remained fixed on the back of the young wizard's unruly head, even as a horrified sob broke free from the inhabitant of the chair opposite his desk.

"As much as it pains me to tell you this, Harry," he said in a much softer, sadder voice, "I have confirmation of Miss Granger's death from a highly reliable source."

The young, would-be saviour turned around to face the old wizard as though he were in a trance. Every muscle in his body clenched and unclenched as he tried to maintain his closely guarded temper.

"Then they are wrong," he murmured stubbornly, almost as if he didn't quite believe his own words. Turning around once more, he left the office, shutting the door soundly behind him.

Albus sank into his chair, his face cradled in his hands. He did not expect either child to take the news calmly, but such disbelief was disconcerting, to say the least. Remembering Mr Weasley, he looked up to see that the boy had fainted dead away. With a sigh, he pushed his weary body up and away from the desk. He may as well wake the boy and send him after his friend, for Harry Potter would need every ally available to him if they had any wish of coming out of this war victorious.

Please don't become one of those unidentified individuals that just read and don't review as your opinion could amend the outcome of this story. So in short, review and I will take whatever you have to say seriously. And of course, I will love you forever.

Thanking my betas, deathofme and AmyLouise

Manipulations

Chapter 7 of 25

How far will Headmaster Dumbledore go to win the war?

Albus Dumbledore observed Ronald Weasley closely as he staggered, feet on autopilot, making his way back to the Gryffindor common room.

Albus had debated with himself on whether what he was about to do was completely necessary. He felt a stir of misgiving rise from within his very core, but he pushed it aside and continued with his mantra. *For the Wizarding World.*

As they both paused outside the portrait of the Fat Lady, the Headmaster stared deeply into Mr Weasley's blue eyes and paused for a millisecond, feeling a stab of penitence; however, he focused on what he must do.

A silent "Legilimens" later, he entered the schoolboy's mind. Memories of Miss Granger were already filling the boy's head, making what he was about to do all the more straightforward. He wordlessly added extra images to the boy's genuine reflections - one of himself gazing into the Pensieve and swiftly following that with a quick glimpse of the deceased body of the former Head Girl. As he presented these sequences of his deception into the mind of the unknowing Mr Weasley, he uttered a silent secrecy charm, the *Rem Celare*, which would prevent the boy from speaking about the demise of Hermione Granger to anyone who was not similarly bound, or within the presence of those who were not to know. He would become tongue-tied, unable to mutter even her name.

As he felt the boy before him relax ever so slightly, Albus withdrew from his mind to gaze at the youngest of the Weasley males. A look of deep comprehension passed for a flickering moment across Ronald's face, and he nodded his head briefly, overwhelmed, and attempted to hold himself upright.

Placing an old and weary hand on the boy's shoulder, Albus steadied him as he turned him around to face the portrait of the Fat Lady, who was looking on at the strange display before her. There was a gleam in her eyes as if she were bursting to spread her newfound gossip around the castle as soon as both wizards had disappeared. Albus gave her a knowing glance that spoke volumes, and she went red in the face as she immediately dropped her gaze to the corner of her portrait. Ronald mumbled the password in a daze as he crawled into the hole, not once looking back; he therefore missed the dark frown that marred the headmaster's face.

Albus sighed. He truly despised doing this to the young man, but he could see no other way around it. Harry and Ronald both had to believe that Miss Granger had paid the ultimate price in the war against Voldemort so they wouldn't be tempted to rush off like would-be heroes to save her. Instead they would stay focused on the tasks that still lay ahead of them. It pained him to have to jettison Miss Granger, or any of his students if he were truly honest with himself, but he hoped that the noticeable loss of his friend would make Harry more determined than ever to give this war all his undivided attention. He made a mental note to speak to Harry alone, later that night.

Walking as quickly as his weary old legs would carry him, he made his way from the tower, down the endless staircases, and back to his office. Mentally, he added that which he had done to Mr Weasley to the long line of regrets he had in his life; however, it was as inescapable as his growing years.

Ron entered the Gryffindor common room feeling utterly sick to his stomach. Hermione was dead. Harry was falling apart. He too, felt as though he were moving underwater, but he went through the motions nonetheless, as he knew that Harry would need him to be the strong one.

He saw Harry sitting on the window seat, staring out at the grounds of Hogwarts. The other Gryffindor students were in their first lessons of the day and he would not be disturbed from what he had to do now.

Taking a deep breath in, he walked unhurriedly over to the seat where Harry sat and laid a shaky hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Right there, mate?" Ron asked, his voice holding none of its usual spark.

Harry jumped, obviously startled by Ron's touch, as he whirled around to face him.

"Get away from me!" he all but growled out, his face scrunched up, a look of fury etched there.

Ron recoiled. Never had he seen Harry look so enraged, not even after Sirius' death when he was constantly yelling at everyone within range.

"Just wondering if you were all right?" Ron asked in barely a whisper.

"Oh, everything is just peachy," Harry said as he raised himself up from the seat, clenching his fists into a ball. "Haven't you heard yet? Everyone that I allow to get too close to me winds up dead. First my parents, then Sirius, now Hermione. You'd better watch out or you'll be next!"

"Come off it, Harry, listen to yourself for just a moment, and you'll realise how mental you sound."

Glaring at Ron, Harry slowly shook his head.

Pulling himself up to his considerable height, fearing he might detonate like one of Fred and George's fireworks, Ron stated with all the resolve he could muster. "Do you honestly think you can push me away like this? Hermione was more than a friend to me, Harry, you know that and now she's gone. I don't know how I'm going to get on without her, but don't you dare try to tell me that I'll be more at risk by your side where I belong. I'm involved in this war too, even before I was a thought in my parents' minds or do you forget that Mum and Dad were part of the original Order?"

Harry blinked. He opened his mouth, the perfect retort poised on his lips, but no words materialised. He thought hard, snapping his mouth closed as a frown etched across his forehead. When had Ron grown up? He looked down at his own hands, as though they might give him the answers he sought.

"Were you even listening to what Dumbledore said?" Ron asked, barrelling on as though he were building up momentum with each new question he asked. Harry's head snapped back up to face Ron as his hands fell to his side. "Hermione is dead!" he half choked out as the implication of speaking these words out loud brought the truth home to him and he slowly started to sway on his feet. "Dead," he whispered more to himself as his eyes glazed over and he stumbled backwards.

His mind travelled back to what he had just witnessed in the headmaster's Pensieve. Hermione's broken and battered body, her hair a tangled mess with blood and dirt over her face, her clothing lying in tatters and her eyes, those brilliant, shining eyes, now open and staring lifelessly back at him. Dead. Lost forever. He wanted to retch then, had wanted to reach out and touch her, if only to prove to himself that she was truly beyond his help.

Ron's eyes suddenly flashed back to Harry's face, and Harry was reminded of the first time he had met him on the Hogwarts Express, a scrawny little eleven-year-old with a smudge on his face. Tears welled up in his eyes as he remembered those carefree days, the days before he really knew how truly evil Voldemort was.

"I don't know what I'd do if I lost you too, Harry," Ron stated in an almost inaudible whisper as he leaned heavily against the settee that he had stumbled into moments before.

How the hell had it come to this? Harry thought ruefully. First his godfather, now his best friend. Gone. Forever. Never to return. He would never see either of them again. Harry wanted to pinch himself to make sure that he wasn't dreaming. How did this happen? More importantly, how had he *let* this happen? How many more of them would die before this war was over? Would it ever truly be over?

Wasn't it only two weeks ago that Hermione was nagging him to do all of his set assignments whilst at the Burrow with Ron? He had waved her off in typical fashion and told her to lighten up. Oh, how he wished he had hugged her more fiercely now, told her he loved her, listened to her more, asked her to come with them to the Burrow, though he knew she desperately wanted to see her parents. He had taken her for granted for too long. He had thought she would always be there by his side, fighting right next to him when the time came to face Voldemort. But that wasn't to be. Would never be.

The many 'what ifs' circled around his head. What if he had never befriended Ron and Hermione in the first place? What if he'd listened to the Sorting Hat instead of arguing and been Sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor? What if they had never gone to the Ministry at the end of fifth year? What if Sirius was still alive? And Hermione?

These thoughts, and many others, raced around his head all day long. What Ron had said was true. However, he couldn't help but think about running away and leaving the wizarding world behind. Going to a different country where no one had even heard the name Voldemort spoken and where there wasn't constant fear for his life.

But no, he couldn't do it. He couldn't just ignore the destiny that was his, one way or another, and leave his friends to pick up the pieces. He wouldn't, couldn't do it to all the self-sacrificing Order members. What would become of them? Would they be hunted down and killed one by one because he was too much of a coward to face his own destiny?

Harry had been despondent all day. Going through the motions and appearing to work; but Ron knew him better than that. Harry had not truly been there since he had heard the news of Hermione's death. He would be lying to himself if he said that his own behaviour had been normal, but he figured that someone had to keep Harry together. As he was the only other student who knew what had happened to Hermione, he was in the best position to keep a watchful eye on his friend.

Ron had to do something, anything, to rouse Harry from his worsening depression. As he looked over to his dark-haired friend, he said the first thing that came to mind.

"Do you think he had anything to do with it?" Ron whispered to Harry while seated at the Gryffindor table. Neither of them was particularly hungry, so instead they picked at their food, pushing it around their dinner plates.

Ron was about to repeat the question as Harry's silence stretched out, making Ron feel uncomfortable. He had wanted to shake Harry out of his self-imposed silence.

"Who?" Harry finally asked.

"The Greasy Git and his pet, Ferret Boy," Ron proclaimed.

"Don't call him that," Harry mumbled as he looked once more to his plate.

"What?" the redhead asked, "Ferret Boy?" he sounded truly puzzled at Harry's words; hadn't they always called Malfoy that since their fourth year?

"No," Harry said sighing quietly, "I don't mean him, I mean Professor Snape." He mumbled the name of his hated Potions professor.

"But why? We've always called him that."

"She never did," Harry said in a low voice, turning away from Ron as he felt his eyes starting to fill. He blinked rapidly and swiped at his eyes under his glasses hastily. He was sick of tearing up at the slightest thought of Hermione. She was dead, and crying would accomplish nothing, it could not, and most definitely would not, bring her back.

Ron shook his head at his best mate's behaviour. It was true that Hermione never showed anything but respect to all of her teachers, even the Greasy Git, but that was just it. Hadn't they always hated the man who made their life a living hell? He had belittled their efforts at every turn, raising his Slytherins up onto a pedestal, whilst penalising the rest of the houses, especially Gryffindor.

"I guess," Ron answered as he grabbed a bread roll and started to pick at it, pulling at the harder outer crust and tearing it into tiny pieces. He was so deep in thought that he didn't even notice his sister sit down on the other side of the table.

"Aren't you going to eat that?" Ginny asked as she swung into the seat across from Harry.

Ron jumped in his seat and both he and Harry looked up at her question.

She frowned at Ron, who immediately dropped the roll onto his plate. Then her expression softened when she looked at Harry, whose eyes were red rimmed.

"What's the matter, Harry?" Concern shadowed her voice, all previous thoughts flying from her head.

"Nothing," he mumbled back to her as he hung his head once more and pretended to eat his meal.

Ginny sighed. "Well, if you're not going to tell me, then at least do me the courtesy of not ignoring me, Harry." She looked over to her brother, who just shrugged his shoulders and picked up the bread roll from his plate. He began picking at it once more, letting the crumbs fall onto the plate and the surrounding table.

Ginny made an inarticulate noise in the back of her throat and concentrated on serving herself some dinner.

Hermione was dreaming, tossing and turning on her bed. Trembling with the glacial temperature, she opened her eyes and was stunned that she could actually make out the tiny cell. She saw her breath coming out in little puffs of smoke. Rubbing her hands over her body for warmth, she stood up to look around. She was in a stone cell and there was no window, no escape, except for the wooden door that stood out against the stones that made up her prison.

She knew it was her obligation as a prisoner to try to escape. Knowing that her captor probably had his own means of spying on her, she made a tactical approach towards the door, slyly trying to feel for any uneven stones along the way that may be a means of opening it. Of course there was nothing; this door was spelled shut, well and truly and without her wand to help unravel the charms, she knew she would have no hope against them.

Breathing out a sigh, she walked back to her tiny cot. Sitting down, she closed her eyes for a second, taking in a deep calming breath. Opening her eyes again, she was startled to see Lucius Malfoys face hovering above her. That hauntingly beautiful face of his was snarling in disgust.

Petrified, she tried to turn away but saw there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and so she instead looked at the man standing before her. Eyes held wide, not daring not to breathe, lest she make too much noise, she continued to stare at him as though mesmerised by his icy glare.

He walked further into her cell. Hermione was stunned to see her two best friends, Harry and Ron, strolling in behind him. She attempted to open her mouth, but no sound emerged as she looked on in panic.

Looking down at herself, she realised she was naked and hastily tried to cover herself up with her hands. She peered up at them, a blush burning on her face and making its way down her body.

Harry's face wore a look of revulsion, making his soft features twist into an ugly snarl. He turned around so he didn't have to look at her any longer. Stung by Harry's reaction, Hermione quickly turned her eyes to Ron to see the identical look on his face.

"She's nothing but a Mudblood whore, Harry," Ron said, his voice filled with loathing. "You were right, Lucius," he stated, turning towards the blonde who nodded his head in understanding.

With that, Ron turned his body away from her and grasped Harry's arm as they walked slowly from her dungeon prison.

"Wait," she shrieked and attempted to push past the blonde wizard in her haste to stop both Harry and Ron.

Like a snake striking, Lucius grabbed her face and dragged her by the arm to the centre of the room. She struggled against his brutal grip, but his grasp did not falter as thick chains wound themselves around and around her body, cutting off her ability to suck oxygen into her lungs or cry out. Tighter and tighter they kept on winding around her until she thought that they would crush her to death.

Waking with a scream on her lips, a shrill noise invading her ears and a dim light pervading her eyes, she sat up quickly. Her breath coming out in short pants, her heart felt as though it would explode from her chest. Slowly, she covered her ears with her still shaking hands, and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. It did no good; the reverberation was so piercing it defeated her feeble attempts to shut it out.

She was not sure whether she was shaking from the after-effects of the dream or if it was from the coldness that encompassed the room and reached into the recesses of her soul.

Get a grip, Granger! she scolded herself, but the vivid dream that had just shaken her was not so easily forgotten. Harry and Ron had been there, in this very cell, and they had turned away from her and had let her captor do what he would to her.

It was just a dream, she chastised herself. A vivid dream, but a dream nonetheless.

She shook her head and pushed her feet to the floor.

She could make out that the table across from the cot she was currently occupying was laden with an arrangement of food and drink, and she blinked several times, rubbing at her eyes until they had adjusted to the unusual brightness. Although it was dim, she was not used to seeing light emitting from the sconces unless he was coming for her.

That sudden thought caused her to look around wildly. Hands still pressed over her ears, she took in the emptiness surrounding her. Stomach grumbling in protest, she hastily glanced once more to the table.

It had to be some sort of trick, her mind supplied as she guardedly got up off the hard cot. She hastily remembered her previous dealing with her lunatic captor and she gazed scrupulously at her shoulder and torso. The only indication of her so-called lessons that she could see were the thin white lines that ran down her mid-section. The place where he had placed the acid had a large vicious-looking red mark, but as she ran her hand over the spot, she felt no raised skin. Her back was next, as she reached around with both hands to feel the raised skin that was all but healed and caused her no discomfort. Astonished that the blonde demon had mended her body so completely, she stood suddenly and twirled around.

The racket was still deafening, but in her exhilaration she tuned it out. Over the past few days she had been to hell and back, and just a glimpse at heaven was a

welcoming experience for her.

She paused in her contented thoughts, coming down from her adrenaline rush and walked slowly over to the table, her eyes darting around, half-expecting the company of her captor at any moment. The smell of food, of something substantial, was too much for her and she quickly snatched a pastry off the table. Shoving it all into her mouth, she barely chewed it before swallowing it down. Coughing racked her body as she keeled over. She dry-heaved before grabbing at the juice and downed that too in record time.

Reaching out a shaking hand, she placed the glass back onto the table.

Eat slowly, chew everything, she admonished herself as she reached once more for a piece of fruit. It tasted bitter to her mouth, but she sucked at the sliced orange greedily as the juices flowed down her chin.

Unexpectedly, the piercing noise halted as the sconces slowly flickered and went out. She was left there, sitting on the floor in total darkness, her breathing uneven and an unpleasant ringing in her ears.

A sense of foreboding settled deep within Hermione as the remnant of the orange she had been eating suddenly fell from her slackening hands. She felt wilted, used up. She knew she could not continue like this – Gryffindor or not, she just wanted this nightmare to end, though she was not naive enough to think that Harry and Ron would suddenly burst through the door and save her. That thought had long since fled her mind, as the days turned into weeks without sight of another soul except for her deeply disturbed subjugator.

Her heart sank as she sat there staring into the abyss of darkness. How had her life suddenly come to this? Surely it was all a bad dream and she would wake up any moment from this nightmare, safe and sound in her bed.

She gave a great, despairing sigh that echoed off the stone walls surrounding her. The desolate sound reinforced the full horror of her situation – she would remain here until such time as Voldemort decided that she was of no further use alive. There was no one to save her, and nothing she could do to change her situation.

A/N: Thank you to all of my wonderful and thought provoking reviewers.

Rem Celare To keep the thing secret.

To my betas, AmyLouise and deathofme, thank you so very much for finding my mistakes, making my writing flow better, and the Latin translation. You both rock my world.

Smoke and Mirrors

Chapter 8 of 25

Severus meets with the Dark Lord. Harry gets his memory modified.

Classes the following day were an abomination for Severus. He found his mind wandering to Miss Granger at the most inopportune times, and he had to use all of his iron will to block out these intrusions.

Of course, it wasn't helping that The-Brat-Who-Lived was sulking around the castle, sending glares that clearly showed what he thought of the Potions master.

Death Eater, the fierceness in his green eyes clearly spoke, *it is you and your scum associates that took her away.* Severus didn't need Legilimency to interpret those heated glares, as he had been on the receiving end of hundreds of them throughout the course of his life. Nevertheless, he caught himself scowling more often than usual as the day progressed and taking house points by the bucket load. Especially from Gryffindor.

Therefore, when his left forearm burnt late in the evening, it came almost as a relief, even though it might mean his own torture and subsequent death at the hands of his Dark Master. He gathered up his cloak and mask and made his quick exit from the castle and its grounds.

Severus swiftly Apparated to the Dark Lord's bastion and hurriedly made his way inside. When he reached the entrance that led to the main throne room, he paused for a millisecond before pushing upon the weighty door, crossing the threshold into the snake's pit.

Head bowed, he scrupulously eyed his surroundings, taking note of the other Death Eaters who were already present. He made his way up to the hefty throne where the dark shadow of his Master sat surveying his most loyal followers.

Severus knelt before the Dark Lord, his head bent; he concentrated solely on maintaining his Occlumency shields.

"You may rise, Severus." The cold hiss sent shivers down his spine, making the fine hairs at the base of his scalp stand on end.

He suppressed the need to shiver as he rose, standing before the serpent-like man and peering directly into his red eyes. Severus knew that the madman standing before him would search his mind, if for no other reason than to let him feel his power. Feeling the telltale signs of Legilimency at work, he poured all of his strength into not letting his walls disintegrate.

He allowed a series of inconsequential pictures – unruly pupils, colleagues, even a glimpse of a surly Potter – float to the foreground of his mind. Satisfied that there was nothing of importance, Voldemort withdrew.

"What news of Hogwarts?" Voldemort's voice caressed his ears almost like a whisper, but much more sinister.

Severus felt that explaining what the Dark Lord had just witnessed within the confines of his mind to be redundant, but he ploughed on nonetheless.

"It seems that our Head Girl, and one of Potter's close friends, has disappeared completely," Severus answered whilst straightening up and smoothing out his Death Eater robes as he ascended. "It has been weeks since she was last seen. Her whereabouts is a complete mystery and is causing great concern at the school."

"And what do you know of this?" Voldemort asked, narrowing his cold red eyes shrewdly and peering into the black eyes of his servant.

"Nothing, my Lord; I was wondering whether perhaps you could shed some light on the situation?"

Voldemort had his wand out before Severus could even blink, pointing it at his heart.

"I trust, Severus, that you do not have the temerity to question me?" he hissed, his eyes narrowing further until they were barely visible beneath his serpentine eyelids.

"No, my Lord, I was simply curious," Severus back-pedalled swiftly, letting his posture droop; it was never wise to show anything but fear in the face of the lunatic.

"It is not your position to be curious, you are required to follow my orders, nothing more," Voldemort hissed, before abruptly changing the subject. "Tell me, how is the Potter boy faring?"

"Not well, my Lord. He has become moody and withdrawn, pushing away all those who want to help him." Severus had noted the quick change of topic and filed it away in his mind to replay when he was safely within his rooms in the dungeons.

"Good, good." Voldemort could not conceal his evident glee as he stood, laying his wand by his side and walking past the man who was standing a metre from his throne.

Severus turned, his eyes never leaving the figure of the Dark Lord as he glided away. He knew he had come close to being cursed with the *Cruciatius*, and his heart still hammered loudly in his chest. Being cursed came with his role as a double agent, but each time it took just a little more out of him, just a little longer to recover.

Voldemort stopped, his head cocked to one side as though he were contemplating something.

"I have every confidence in you, Severus – no doubt you still have the ability to make the Potter boy's life as difficult as possible?"

The question was more of an order, thrown at Severus as Voldemort turned to face the dark-haired wizard.

"Yes, my Lord. Though I must be careful, now more than ever. With the old fool thwarting my every effort, I cannot seem to be too harsh on the ill-bred boy," Severus returned, a sneer making its way to his face.

"Try harder Severus, I wish the boy to be completely vulnerable by the time he is standing before me."

"Yes, my Lord," Severus repeated.

With a wave of the long spider-like digits, Severus knew he was dismissed. Not wanting to linger for longer than necessary in case Voldemort changed his mind and decided to curse him, he left as quickly and inconspicuously as possible.

When Severus made it past the anti-Apparation wards, he lifted his wand and thought of Hogwarts.

Albus was seated behind his desk as Harry paced before him, muttering to himself as the elderly wizard watched him move back and forth. Fawkes let out an ear-piercing cry from his stand, which caused Harry to come to a standstill and look up at the phoenix. As both wizard and magical bird eyed each other, neither of them blinking, Albus watched on for a few minutes in fascination. Each was attempting to impel his will on the other, and under any other circumstances he would have laughed out loud at the fierce looks on both of their faces. As it was, he could not afford such a delay and cleared his throat.

Harry turned his attention now to the headmaster and scowled. Albus knew the young man was angry, but he did not want a repeat performance of Harry's fifth year, so he motioned for him to take a seat.

Harry crossed his arms angrily across his chest; there was a magical hum radiating from his body as he stiffly took the proffered chair and continued to glare at the headmaster.

Albus cleared his throat once more; although his face gave nothing away, he was dreading what he was about to do to the boy.

"Harry," Albus started in the fatherly tone he reserved only for a special few, Harry being one of them, "I want to extend my humble apologies for my outburst earlier this morning. I did not intend you to find out that way, and for that, I hold nothing but deep regret." He looked straight at Harry then and saw him relax a little.

"These are dangerous times; Miss Granger knew the risk, and that is why I tried to persuade her not to go to her parents' house, but she was adamant. In the end my hands were tied and with no other reason to hold her here, I had to let her go." Albus wore a distressed look on his face.

Very convincing, Harry thought even as he opened his mouth to retort.

"Then why didn't you place an Order member to watch over her?" He found himself standing and shouting at the old man who looked, if it were possible, even more frail and tired than Harry had ever remembered seeing him.

"Why didn't you protect her? You, Albus Dumbledore, defender of the weak, seer of all. Why didn't you save her?" Harry felt deflated as he let the tears flow freely down his face. "Why didn't you stop her from going to her parents', make her see the dangers that were out there? She was one of my best friends; you could have told her she was in danger, convinced her to see reason."

"And don't you think I tried?" Albus replied wearily.

"I don't know what I believe any longer," Harry responded dejectedly. He sighed loudly as he pushed up his glasses as if they, and not his tears, were the cause of his blurred vision.

Fawkes trilled loudly, and both heads snapped up and over to the perch. The large phoenix stretched its magnificent wings and took off out of the castle through an enchanted window that appeared in the side of the castle wall.

Both wizards watched as Fawkes flew towards the Forbidden Forest, and Albus knew he would be receiving another visitor before this night was out.

Standing up, he brought the attention back to himself, and Harry's head whipped around, focusing on the headmaster.

As Harry stared into the headmaster's eyes, he got the distinct feeling that Hermione was truly dead, but that wasn't right, was it? And he clung stubbornly to this belief with all his might.

Albus endeavoured to break through Harry's thoughts; he wasn't as open-minded as Ronald Weasley, and he had some difficulties planting the false memories, as well as activating the *Rem Celare* in his mind. Harry fought him every step of the way, but in the end he simply was no match for the older, more practised wizard.

Seconds later, Harry woke up on the floor, a concerned-looking Professor Dumbledore hovering over him. As he tried to stand, the old wizard held him down with one hand pressed firmly to his shoulder.

"Are you all right, Harry?" he asked. Harry tried to nod his head, but even that slight movement made everything feel fuzzy and out of focus.

"I believe you should go to the hospital wing just to make sure," the professor said as he helped Harry to stand. He walked him slowly over to the armchair and sat him

down. Walking to the fireplace, he threw in a handful of Floo powder from the mantel. "Poppy," he called out, and the matron's head appeared in the fireplace.

"Yes, Headmaster," she promptly replied, her head appearing in the green flames looking faintly frazzled.

"Mr Potter has had a brief fainting spell, and I want him in your care tonight," he stated, looking sternly at the mediwitch.

She nodded her assent as she stepped through the flames and walked up to the chair that was currently occupied by Harry.

Placing a firm hand under his armpit, she raised him into the standing position.

"Come along, Mr Potter," she said in her no-nonsense voice, "a little bit of respite is all that you need."

She quickly ushered him into the green flames and to the hospital wing, but before she did so she gave Albus a frown that clearly stated that she would speak to him later.

Albus took his seat behind his desk once more and waited for his next visitor. He was weary and greatly wished for the warmth of his bed. At that moment, Fawkes flew back in through the enchanted window and landed on his desk. A vibrant screech announced the return of his Potions master onto the school grounds.

"Thank you, Fawkes," the wizard said, reaching out his hand to stroke the phoenix's head. "Thank you."

Severus Snape anxiously ascended the spiral staircase, not willing to wait for it to rise, and he raced up the revolving stairs to the headmaster's office. He barged through the door, neither knocking nor waiting for a response. He knew the headmaster would already know of his impending arrival. He barrelled onwards to stand before the large desk that took up the majority of the room.

Albus looked up to find his dishevelled Potions master and spy standing before his desk.

"Anything to report, Severus?" he asked, steepling his hands in front of himself with his elbows resting upon the desk.

"The Dark Lord knows nothing about Miss Granger's disappearance," Severus replied, willing his breath back to normal as he gasped for air.

Dumbledore just raised an eyebrow as though waiting for the younger man to finish.

"Damn it all to hell, Albus," Severus roared, "why are you just sitting there acting as though everything is well? You and I both know that Potter will not succeed without Miss Granger at his side, and you will lose what little hold you have over the boy." He sneered as he took in the headmaster's calm composure.

"It has all been taken care of," Albus replied in a nonchalant tone.

Narrowing his eyes at the old man seated before him, Severus took in a deep breath, forcing his voice to remain steady.

"And what exactly does that mean?" he asked, his voice teetering on the brink of exploding.

"It means what it sounds like. I have spoken to both Mister Potter and Mister Weasley, and it is settled. They shall not be running off to perform any heroics, as they have accepted Miss Granger's fate."

"What have you done?" Severus asked, his voice barely above a whisper, as though he were almost afraid of the answer.

"What needed to be done: nothing more, nothing less, my boy," Albus replied, still in that all-too-calm voice that grated on Severus's nerves.

"But, Albus, if she was not taken on the Dark Lord's orders, then I fear that she has fallen into the hands of one of my brethren and even now could be going through what I would not wish on my worst enemy," Severus said, appealing to the headmaster's conscience.

One of his students, a child that he had sworn to protect, was out there, more than likely being raped and tortured, whilst they were here discussing her abduction as if she were inconsequential.

"My hands are tied," Albus said as he held up both of his arms in the air. "What did Tom want to see you for tonight?" he asked, changing the subject.

"He wanted me to give him my reassurances that I would continue to alienate the boy and make it most difficult for him to fight when the time comes," he replied, his voice a mere croak in his throat as he eyed the old man still seated calmly behind his desk.

"And what was your response?" Dumbledore asked, giving Severus the impression that he was looking down on him when it was he, Severus, who had the height advantage.

"I told him precisely what he wanted to hear. That I would indeed continue to isolate Potter," Severus continued, rubbing his temple with his right hand. He could feel a nasty headache approaching, and all he wanted was to go down to the dungeons and take a potion and, perhaps, a shower.

"Was that all?" Albus enquired, raising his bushy eyebrows until they nearly ascended into his hairline.

"Of course," Severus snapped back at him, "do you honestly think I would hide anything from you?"

"No, Severus, I don't," Albus retorted, a slight smile hovering over his lips.

Severus scoffed at this and abruptly turned his back to the headmaster.

"If that is all, I wish to get changed." Severus sulked, his back still firmly to the headmaster.

Albus took in his attire – the midnight-black of his Death Eater robes – before adding with a sigh, "That will be all for tonight, Severus."

No sooner were the words out of Albus's lips, than Severus fled his office, black robes flying behind him, and descended hastily into his dungeon home.

Sitting at breakfast the next morning, Ron held his head in his hands. He had had the most dreadful past twenty-four hours of his short life. Harry had not come back to the Gryffindor common room last night, and after a quick detour to Professor McGonagall's office, he had learnt that Harry was in the hospital wing, nothing serious, he was just being kept for observation and would be down for breakfast the next morning.

Ron had contemplated sneaking out under Harry's Invisibility Cloak to see him; his hand was poised over the lock of Harry's trunk, but out of nowhere a feeling of dread came over him, and instead he went straight to bed, pulling the curtains around his four-poster forcefully and curling up under the covers.

He had brought all of Harry's books down for him and had them sitting on the seat next to him in anticipation of Harry's arrival. As though Ron had magically summoned Harry, the doors to the Great Hall opened and in he walked.

Harry's head was hung low as he shuffled his feet. Clearing his books from the seat next to Ron, he sat down and positioned the books on the floor behind him. A mumbled

'hello' later, Harry started heaping his plate full of scrambled eggs.

Ron turned around in his seat to look at his friend. He looked tired and his brows were pushed together as if he were deep in thought.

"Everything all right there, mate?" Ron whispered, eyeing Harry.

Harry was saved from answering that 'no, nothing would ever be the same again' when the Great Hall erupted into a flurry as the morning post owls arrived. A large barn owl swooped down, dropping a letter into the middle of his scrambled eggs.

He sat there as if frozen; the serving-spoon fell from his grasp as he stared at the all-too-familiar neat script on the front of the envelope. Ron gaped at the letter. It seemed as though he too had recognised the penmanship of Hermione.

How could he not recognise Hermione's handwriting? Harry thought bitterly to himself as his hand automatically took up the letter from his breakfast.

With shaking hands, he tore at the envelope and reached inside for its contents, his eyes quickly scanning it for a hint that his best friend was still alive and well.

But how can that be so? He had seen with his own eyes last night, before he passed out, the broken remains of her body from within the headmaster's Pensieve.

His stomach did a somersault as he continued to scan the letter. Finishing it, he let it fall to the table and Ron quickly snatched it up with greedy fingers, reading it with lightning speed.

Harry suddenly wasn't hungry any longer, and his stomach was doing flips as he took in large breaths behind his hand. He looked up towards the Head Table, his hand still covering his mouth as though it too was frozen in its place.

Ron's mouth was open as he stared at Harry, a look of disbelief crossing his face. Harry was still looking towards the Head Table, his eyes narrowed. He frowned as he saw the headmaster gazing at him. Quickly, he turned his attention back to the tabletop, dropping his hands into his lap.

Harry had become aware of the fact that Ginny was sitting next to Neville, a few seats across from him. She was ignoring him, but every so often her eyes would flick over to his direction, and when he did catch her eye she would deliberately turn her focus back to Neville, placing a hand on his arm.

Harry snorted at this and picked up the glass of pumpkin juice in front of him to disguise the noise. His attention had been diverted for a minute, but then his thoughts returned to the troubling letter that he had just received. The contents were not disturbing, quite the contrary, as it had stated that she was in good health, but that her Aunt was still ill and it would be some time before she could join Harry and Ron once more. If he hadn't seen the headmaster's Pensieve last night, he was sure that he would have just skimmed the letter and continued with his meal.

But he knew otherwise. It had to be a clever forgery, but by whom? Why keep up the pretence of the story that Professor Dumbledore had led them all to believe was the truth? Harry had a feeling that there was more than one Death Eater amongst the students; perhaps one of them had told Voldemort about the headmaster's speech, and Voldemort was now mocking Harry? But to what end? Something didn't quite add up, and he tried his hardest to think, squeezing his eyes closed with all of his might, but his mind only came up blank.

Opening his eyes, he looked over to Ron. The letter was screwed up in his right fist. His face was a mixture of emotions as he grasped harder still on the parchment in his hand.

Taking another drink from the glass, he turned as if to speak to Ron, but his eyes were subtly scanning the Head Table. The headmaster was talking to Professor McGonagall whilst the other teachers were either too busy in their own conversations, or eating. Scanning the line of professors, his gaze came to rest on the Potions master who at that precise second was looking right at him. Instead of his usual scowl or glare, the surly professor looked apprehensive. Harry was taken aback, but before he could properly take it in, Snape's face changed in an instant to a blank expression and he dropped his eyes to study his plate.

Since when does Professor Snape back down from a challenge? Harry mused as he once again faced his cold breakfast, placing his glass beside his plate and picking up his fork. He'd never heard of the student who could outstare the Potions master, and it was always Harry who broke eye contact first in any confrontation with the Professor.

Harry had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that there was something else going on, but for the life of him he couldn't think what it was.

A/N: Thank you to all of my wonderful and thought provoking reviewers. If you feel so inclined, I would love to hear your thoughts on my story so far.

To my wonderful betas, AmyLouise and deathofme, thank you so very much for finding my mistakes, making my writing flow better, and the Latin translation. You both mean the world to me.

Insanity

Chapter 9 of 25

The Order meets. Harry Potter grows up whilst Hermione slips further into insanity.

The Order were crammed into the smallish kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Most were seated at the table, but Severus Snape had taken his customary spot tucked away in the shadows of a corner where he could observe the mish-mash of people who had gathered to fight for the Greater Good. His stomach was tied in knots, and he felt the telltale signs of a headache blossoming behind his eyes. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he knew that this would be a difficult meeting and had beseeched Albus to excuse him from attending, on the basis that he had potions that needed his immediate attention. The headmaster, however, had simply told him to place a stasis charm over them and gave Severus a look that stated clearly that the discussion was closed.

Cursing Albus Dumbledore's name silently for the fiftieth time that night, he waited for him to open the blasted meeting so he could return all the more swiftly to his dungeons at Hogwarts.

As if on cue, Dumbledore stood and held up his aged hands. The room's occupants settled at once, and they all turned their attention to the elderly wizard at the head of the table.

"Friends," Albus opened with, and Severus made a noise in the back of his throat as he watched from the depths of his darkened corner. Most of the wizards and witches in this room were just as likely to spit on him as they were to throw the first hex, and he didn't kid himself that any of these people would call him "friend": acquaintances maybe, but even that was stretching the truth as far as it would extend.

Severus was pulled back from his thoughts as the headmaster continued.

"I come to you today to discuss a matter of grave importance," he spoke, eyeing each of the Order members around the long table.

"It has only recently come to my attention that our Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger, went missing some time during the Easter break." There was a gasp around the table, and Molly Weasley, the matriarch of the Weasley family, covered her mouth with both of her hands. All heads turned towards her, and Severus noticed how her eyes were brimming, threatening to spill the tears that were gathering in her reddened eyes.

Arthur Weasley placed an arm on her back, rubbing small soothing circles on it as he turned his lips towards her ear and whispered something that was meant for his wife only. Molly visibly pulled herself together and straightened, slowly nodding her head at whatever it was that Arthur had said.

Albus cleared his throat, and all eyes turned from Molly and her husband towards the head of the Order again.

"Minerva and Severus, upon my request, went out the very night I heard the news, to investigate the Grangers' residence. Unfortunately, Mr and Mrs Granger failed to recognise Minerva; obviously they had both been Obliviated, as they had previously met her prior to Miss Granger's entry into Hogwarts. It is with a heavy heart that I must admit that I do not know what has befallen Miss Granger.

"While every effort will be made to find out just what did happen to Miss Granger after the attack on her parents' house, it is vital that Mr Potter should focus all his attention on preparing himself for his final meeting with Tom Riddle. We don't know when that may be, so he must not be allowed to tear off trying to find Miss Granger to rescue her, an action which would almost certainly result in failure and, very probably, in his capture by Death Eaters."

Here Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment before allowing his gaze to sweep around the table, resting for a second on each of the Order members. He allowed a look of contrition to pass over his face as he paused briefly, first on Arthur and then on Molly Weasley.

"I have therefore, with the greatest reluctance, given Mr Potter and Mr Ronald Weasley cause to believe that Miss Granger has, indeed... perished at the hands of Death Eaters. When Severus gives his report, he will go into further details. That is all."

"But, Albus " Molly spoke before the headmaster could take his seat.

"Yes, Molly?" Albus replied. He was not looking forward to this particular interrogation and had hoped to palm off the Order's fears on to Severus.

"You said that you have given Harry and my Ronald cause to believe that Hermione is..." she paused here as more fat tears rolled down her cheeks. Arthur patted her on the back, feeding her his strength. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief that her husband had laid in her hands, gathered her resolve and continued, "that Hermione is dead." Albus nodded his head once, dreading where this conversation was heading.

"Knowing my son, and Harry too, I find it very hard to accept that they would have just taken you at your word; no offence." She paused again, and Albus nodded his head, indicating that he would not be offended if she were to speak her mind. Molly continued, looking a little abashed at the whole situation. "What I mean to say is, the three of them have been so close since they entered Hogwarts."

Various Order members nodded their heads. It seemed as though Molly had voiced what was on everyone's mind. Now that it was out in the open, they all looked expectantly at Albus.

Severus, who sat still in the darkened corner, mentally scoffed at this. He knew that no one had liked Miss Granger upon her arrival at the school, and they had become friends only because she had lied to save the boys during the troll incident in their first year. That the boys had achieved anything at all was due almost entirely to Miss Granger's brains. He sat up straighter as the Headmaster started to explain.

"It was impossible to eliminate all traces of doubt from their minds, and I therefore felt it necessary to invoke the *Rem Celare*." Albus held up both his hands as the kitchen exploded with angry voices. Order members were shouting at Albus as well as arguing with each other.

"Let the headmaster explain," Remus yelled, standing up and slamming both of his palms down on the table.

Everyone fell quiet at Remus's explosion; it was so atypical for him to speak at the Order meetings, unless directly questioned. He was more of a listener than an active participant.

"Thank you, Remus," Albus said, nodding his head at Remus, who then took his seat near the end of the table.

"As I was saying, I found it necessary to invoke the *Rem Celare*. It is not something that I am proud of, but I found it necessary in order to keep Mr Potter and Mr Weasley from running off secretly in search of Miss Granger without assistance from the Order. Mr Potter is not equipped to carry out such a task, and if he were to be captured or killed, not only would our cause be damaged, but I believe it would most probably put an end to the world as we know it."

There was mumbled acceptance at this as Dumbledore wearily sat down again and looked upon the faces of the Order members. Most of those who knew Hermione personally in one way or another had a look of deep sorrow etched upon their faces.

"Now I do believe Severus is ready to give his report. Severus, please." Dumbledore motioned to the darkened corner where the Potions master sat.

Severus sneered at the Head of the Order. It was just like the wizard to pass off the unpleasantness of the whole affair to his lackey: a man for whom none of them felt any sympathy, a man who was barely tolerated by them, and even then only because of the headmaster's trust in him.

He slowly rose from the shadows, wrapping his cloak around him as though to shield himself from the poisoned glares of the Order members. In truth, Lupin, and Molly and Arthur Weasley had looks of expectation on their faces, but it was equally true that most of the Order were staring at him as if they believed he had personally whisked Miss Granger away in the night for the express purpose of having his evil way with her.

He scoffed inwardly at the thought, even as he primed himself to reveal nothing on his face.

"I was summoned to meet with the Dark Lord yesterday evening," he began, then paused as Moody whispered something behind his hand. Severus scowled at the Auror, and Molly gave Mad-Eye one of the notorious glares that could make every one of her children, even the twins, squirm. Moody held both of his hands up, flicking his eyes back to the Potions master.

"I enlightened him to the fact that our Head Girl had failed to return from the Easter holidays and endeavoured to learn whether he was familiar with this fact," Severus continued. "He was not. So if the Dark Lord knows nothing of this development, I therefore must conclude that one of the Dark Lord's followers has taken Miss Granger from her home and Obliviated her parents. To what end, I am not certain; and as the Death Eaters are very tight-lipped at present, I must play this game with some sense of caution. I shall of course continue to enquire, but I shall have to be very delicate in my approach."

Severus, having given his report, was taking his seat when Moody spoke.

"Not so fast, Snape, I have a couple of questions for you myself," he growled out in his rough voice, standing up as if to bridge the distance between them.

Giving a sigh, Severus moved forward reluctantly from the shadows, his sanctuary, into the dimly lit space before his chair.

"Very well," Severus answered with a sneer and signalled for the old Auror to continue.

Moody cleared his throat before he begun his interrogation as he thought of it. "What exactly did you ask his *Majesty*?" He spat the final word as though he were mocking Severus, which indeed he was.

"One does not merely presume to question him and live to tell the tale," Severus replied, his eyes narrowing. "As I said before, I simply made him aware of the current situation, of which he knew absolutely nothing, and left it at that."

"What, are you afraid that he would *Crucio* you if you asked the scum if they knew about this?" Moody mocked, barking out a harsh laugh.

"That is exactly what I am implying," Severus replied in a tight voice, his temper rising as the headache he had previously managed to subdue made its presence felt with renewed force once more.

Severus's wand arm itched to hex the man so badly that he would have to be hospitalised in St Mungo's for a month.

"Coward," Mad-Eye whispered as he took his seat.

Severus's wand was in his hand before Moody was able to reclaim his chair, and he strode over to the ex-Auror within the blink of an eye.

"What did you call me?" Severus asked in a low and menacing voice, his wand a mere inch from Moody's throat.

Disbelief was predominant on the faces of the Order as they froze in shock at how quickly the important subject of Miss Granger's disappearance had turned into a duelling match between the two wizards. No one so much as breathed as they waited for Moody to respond.

"Coward," Moody growled out, straightening himself as he swiftly took a step back and drew his own wand, his chair clattering to the ground and breaking the spell that held the others immobile.

Moody held his own wand in his hand, pointed directly at the Death Eater as both men faced each other breathing deeply.

"Gentlemen," Albus commanded, his voice cutting through the silence like a knife, "that is quite enough."

Neither of the two wizards appeared likely to be the first to back down as they continued to stare at each other, neither blinking.

"I said, that is enough." Albus's voice reverberated around the room this time, and Severus lowered his wand grudgingly, never taking his eyes off Moody, who gave him a smug grin.

"Alastor, the same goes for you," Albus said in a much more controlled voice.

"But of course, Albus," Moody replied, dropping his wand to his side.

"Severus, you may take your seat," Albus said, looking at the man in question.

Severus bowed his head towards the headmaster before leaning forward until his nose almost touched that of the gnarled wizard's half nose before him. Moody's eyes widened, and his smug smile quickly vanished as Severus lowered his voice to a deadly whisper, targeted so that the old Auror alone could hear.

"If I ever hear you brand me that name again, I shall hunt you down and kill you myself, but nobody but you and I will know that it was anything other than a most unfortunate accident." That said, Severus turned around and made his way back to his seat in the shadows.

Moody's smug smile vanished as he heard Snape's threat. Although he could take care of himself, he held no misconceptions about Snape's volatile temper. Moody knew he was quite capable of carrying out his threat.

The rest of the meeting was strained as the Order devoted the remaining time to trying to devise a way of learning the whereabouts of Miss Hermione Granger.

It had been a month since that fateful night when Harry's world had come crashing down around him. He couldn't sleep tonight not that his sleep had been peaceful these last four weeks anyway but tonight thoughts of Hermione's broken body, eyes staring up at him blankly, kept invading his mind every time he closed his eyes.

He turned over, roughly pulling his sheets with him, and sighed. There was no possible way he was going to get any rest tonight. His school work was suffering, but he didn't care, not when everyone he had ever loved was dropping like flies around him and it was all his fault.

He heard light snores coming from the others in his dorm room and threw his pillow over his head to try to drown out the noise. It was then that he heard Hermione's voice pleading with him, asking him why he had abandoned her to her fate. He shivered and, sitting up in bed quickly, he threw the pillow to the floor and then kicked off his sheets. He could no longer lie there pretending he had any chance of sleeping.

He reached over to his bedside table and grabbed his glasses. Placing them roughly on his face, he moved silently to his trunk at the foot of the bed. Opening it, he searched around for his Invisibility Cloak. Finding it stuffed under some books, he straightened up, closed the trunk and threw the cloak over his body.

He moved with soft footfalls out of the portrait hole and headed downstairs. The castle was eerily quiet this night, and he passed no one, not even a ghost, as he made his descent into the belly of the castle. It seemed that he was standing before the door to the room where his Potions class was held in the blink of an eye. He noticed that there was light shining underneath the door and steeled his nerves for the confrontation that was surely to come.

Harry raised a slightly shaking hand to the heavy wooden door and knocked firmly, his hand falling to his side as he waited. He was about to raise his fist and knock once more, when the door was yanked open, and on the other side stood his scowling Potions master.

Severus scanned the corridors, his eyes narrowing as his head went to and fro. Not seeing anyone, a look of fury formed on his features. He was about to slam his door shut once more, when a hand shot out and grabbed his arm. Severus was momentarily in shock as his brain urged him to grab for his wand.

"Excuse me, Sir," the unmistakable voice of the bane of his existence pleaded, "may I please come in and have a word with you?"

Severus emphatically did *not* want to talk to the irksome child, and was about to send him on his way with a week's worth of detention and the Gryffindor hourglass a little less full of its rubies, but something in the boy's voice made Severus pause. He inclined his head and stood aside to let him enter.

Taking off the Invisibility Cloak, Harry stepped over the threshold into the Potions classroom. As Severus closed the door quietly, he whirled around and took in the boy standing before him. He was dressed in a pair of boxer shorts and a Muggle t-shirt two sizes too big for him. Never before had Severus seen the boy look so distressed; his eyes were wide behind his glasses, imploring Severus to listen to what he had to say. The tongue-lashing that he had prepared died on his lips.

Sighing, he made his way over to his desk and took up his customary chair, sweeping the essays he had been marking to one side and motioning for the boy to take the seat on the other side of the large desk.

Harry walked slowly, shuffling his bare feet as he went. Severus noticed how he gripped the cloak in his hands as though it had the power to ground him to the tangible world.

Harry's mind was in overdrive. He had so much to say to the man before him, and he half wished that he would explode with his usual sharp-tongued sarcasm just so Harry could have the pleasure of pinning his friend's death on the ex-Death Eater.

But Harry had done a lot of thinking in the last fortnight and had come to the conclusion that he had been unfair to the Potions master. Certainly, Snape had appeared to hate him from the moment he had entered Hogwarts, and Harry didn't understand why, but he had returned that hatred in full measure and had allowed that hate to blind him to what, he now believed, was the truth.

While the other Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and even Hagrid had treated him as a child, and kept vital knowledge away from him, only Professor Snape had expected him to behave like an adult. Yes, his lessons had been harsh, but he had forced him to think and to observe, and above all not to put his trust blindly in anyone. Unlike Dumbledore, who, like a puppet-master, expected Harry to carry out tasks with complete trust and without question, Snape *wanted* Harry to ask questions, *wanted* him to think for himself. And Harry had fought him all the way, instead of seeing that he was being prepared for battle; to play his part in a war that was inevitable, a war that he and he alone could end.

It was all crystal clear to him now, it was as though a light had been switched on in his mind, and it shone so brightly that Harry had to wonder why the hell he had never seen it before.

This man before him had protected him from Quirrell in his first year; from Remus in werewolf form in his third; and in his fourth year had taken the huge risk of showing Fudge his burning Dark Mark in a futile attempt to warn the Minister of the danger facing them all. He repeatedly went to Voldemort's side whenever he was Summoned to obtain information that would assist the Order, although the slightest suspicion on Voldemort's part that Snape might be a spy would result in his torture and death. He thought back to the countless times the dark-haired wizard had had the opportunity to snatch him from Hogwarts and take him to Voldemort, but it had never happened, and he wanted to slap himself for being so blind to the facts.

No wonder Snape was so often infuriated with Harry. He was trying to keep him safe, all the while treading a fine line with his Slytherins. The parents of many of them were Death Eaters and would eagerly report any small sign of favouritism towards the Dark Lord's nemesis, and Harry had, however unwittingly, made sure that tales of his defiance of the Potions master went back to Voldemort. For one brief moment, Harry allowed himself to feel deep regret for all the many times he had caused pain and difficulties for the solitary man before him.

He shook his head, a glance of repentance crossing his features as he took his seat across from the man whom, he had decided only moments ago, he could trust above all others. If Harry had his facts right, and everything pointed to the actuality that he did, then reality as he had known it had been turned on its head. Despite the Dark Mark on his left forearm, proclaiming his allegiance to his Dark Lord, the man seated before him was unquestionably not on the side of Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters, but on the side of Harry and his friends.

Harry took his seat and looked up at the inscrutable man. This was a man that they had all despised for the last six and a half years; and yet now he felt certain that Snape wouldn't lie to him. He had never before minced his words, and Harry knew instinctively that he would not do so now.

Severus waited patiently for the boy to speak. He seemed to be fighting an inner battle with himself between coming out and saying what he really wanted to say and walking away. Finally, Harry spoke.

"Sir, I was just wondering if it were true? About Hermione?" Harry asked, his voice tight with emotion and his eyes filled with dread at the thought of what his professor would say.

Severus felt the rising anger abate and pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand. He knew the boy was worried over his friend; hell, if he was truly honest, he would admit he too was worried, but that would do nothing for his image as the dreaded Potions master, bat of the dungeons, and all-round evil git, so he kept the thought to himself.

"Yes," was all he whispered, and for a second he didn't know what had come over him. He had never before cared what Potter thought of him, but right now the notion that this boy, this *young man*, he corrected himself, needed the truth about his best friend, and something about his willingness to face the truth made his heart beat a little faster.

He could read the emotions on Potter's face without the aid of Legilimency and knew that he could not go into battle without his help.

Harry nodded his head at that. A look of resolution passed across his face as he sat straighter.

"So, it's up to me to end this war, then?" he asked the Potions professor.

Severus just nodded his head once.

"Sir?" he paused as though it was difficult for him to continue, but after a few seconds of expectant waiting, he did so. "I was wondering something," pausing again, he took a deep breath in and rushed on. "I know that we haven't exactly been friends..." he started as he looked into the dark eyes of the man across the desk.

Severus wanted to snort at this, but held his annotations to himself for now.

"And I know you can't show me any favouritism in class, but I was wondering if we could work together?" Harry's green eyes looked into Severus' black ones imploringly as though his whole world depended on what the dark-haired wizard seated before him would say to the words he had just spoken.

Severus's first reaction was that this had to be some sort of prank, but then looking into the young man's eyes he saw his earnestness, and he was floored by the all-encompassing emotions that crossed Potter's face.

"I don't mean you have to like me," Harry quickly added when the silence became too much, "all I'm asking for is that we can be civilised to one another," Severus raised an eyebrow at that. "I mean in private," Harry hastily added.

Severus inclined his head, once more speechless at the maturity that Potter was showing. "Very well, Potter," he replied, and for once there was no malice behind his words.

"Harry," the young man across from him whispered, and when a look of disbelief crossed Severus's face, he added, "My name, Sir, is Harry."

Severus almost wanted to pinch himself. Was he dreaming? But before he could check, Potter Harry, his mind supplied spoke once more.

"Did she suffer?" he asked, his eyes wide with apprehension. Severus knew that everything hinged on his answer.

"I do not know," he answered truthfully, not quite believing that he was having this conversation with the boy who had been a blight on his life for the last six and a half years.

"I will kill him for this," Harry said, his fists clenched and a new tone in his voice letting Severus know he was deadly serious. Determination and purpose were etched on a suddenly more mature face. It was as though he had grown up years in the four hours since Severus had last seen him sullenly eating in the Great Hall.

Harry's eyes had been opened wide to the true danger out there, and while he knew he was safe at Hogwarts, he couldn't hide within the school forever. Before too long he would have to venture outside the gates that protected the school and kept them all safe, and he would be done for if he was not prepared. Harry may not like it, but he

knew that if the prophecy was correct, then he and Voldemort would have to face each other one last time, and he wanted to be as entirely trained as possible for the confrontation.

Harry would hide no more; he would be ready to stand up and fight. And whether he was victorious, or fell at Voldemort's feet, he would give all that was in him.

"Will you teach me Occlumency?" Harry asked, a new fortitude in his voice as he bowed his head and his words came out in a rush. "It's just that I don't *want* it entering my mind ever again, and I know I betrayed your trust before back in fifth year, but I promise that I am ready to learn it now and will do whatever you tell me. I will do whatever it takes to end this war, for her." His voice faded away at the mention of the female member of the Golden Trio. It was as though Hermione's name was taboo, as if the refusal to utter a name he had used for the last six and a half years, would prove to himself and to everyone else that she was gone forever.

Now it was down to himself and Ron, and although he had not mentioned the fact that he was coming down to the dungeons tonight, he was sure that his best friend would back him on whatever decision he made. After all, they had been through everything else together.

"I will," Severus replied. He didn't feel a great rush of affection for the young wizard, but he felt a respect he could never feel for the Dark Lord. He would prepare him for the forthcoming battle that he knew was as inevitable as the sun rising tomorrow. And the gods give him strength, but he would become a mentor to him, if it meant ending the war and saving countless lives.

He couldn't help an ironic inward smirk at the thought that James Potter would be whirling in his grave at the thought that the hated Severus Snape would become mentor to his son. *Lily's son*, he added to himself as he regarded the green eyes looking directly into his own black ones.

Harry nodded as he stood up, pushing his chair away before tucking it back under the desk. Severus too, stood, feeling awkward and not quite trusting his voice.

They walked slowly and silently to the door as Harry once more covered himself in his Invisibility Cloak. Severus felt as if a huge burden was lifted off his shoulders; however, his mind was awash with all the preparations it would take to change this young man before him into the warrior he would need to become to defeat Voldemort once and for all. Harry Potter, the one who had made his task of double agent that much harder, had grown up and was ready to take on the responsibility that was his, and his alone, of finally ridding the Wizarding and Muggle worlds of the megalomaniac who had caused so much evil and suffering for the past twenty years.

It had taken the apparent death of his friend to make him suddenly mature. It was the hardest of all lessons, and Severus found himself wishing that it didn't have to be this way. But he himself had witnessed more than his share of horrors and knew there was no easy way to acquire the strength that would equip him to face the Dark Lord as an equal. To wish it could be otherwise was a foolish and hopeless exercise

Hermione sits on the small cot in her dungeon prison, rocking back and forth in a calming motion, her hands wrapped tightly around her legs, which are pulled up to her chest. She isn't crying, as it seems all of her tears were spent eons ago. She stares blankly at the wall, rocking back and forth, back and forth.

Each day has become the worst day of her miserable life. Just when she thinks it can't get any worse, Lucius, the Devil Incarnate, as she thinks of him, manages to devise a new form of torture to bestow upon her. Whether it be psychological or physical torture is of little difference, as both are capable of working under her skin like a worm until she screams out in agony.

It generally feels as if the seconds are crawling by until, all too soon, they will stop altogether. She wonders whether she is the only living, breathing person on the entire planet.

Ha. She scoffs at that reflection. Obviously, she's not alone the food keeps on arriving and so does her captor. Tick tock; she can hear the seconds passing by like an internal clock in her brain. Tick tock, tick tock.

She had given in to her subjugator's relentless pursuits, finally acknowledging that there was no way out of this hellhole that was her existence. After the first time, when he had tortured her until she had passed out, he has generally been using a psychological approach. Sometimes he made her violently ill by poisoning her food or her drink. Her stomach cramps up until she throws up her meagre meal. She never knows when the food will be tainted, and after a while she gives up trying to guess, as she has reached such a state of chronic starvation she no longer cares.

He has now added to his inventory a piercing scream that echoes throughout the small chamber in which she is held. It can erupt at any time, and there is no discernable pattern as to when it will begin or end. The high-pitched noise leaves her nerves on edge and her mental state hanging by a thread. There are also the blinding, flashing lights that had been introduced as part of his mental torture; she has learnt to tolerate these, however, as she knows he is too busy to come for her.

She thinks that he is something of a genius in his sadism when the stone floor beneath her feet turns from freezing cold to boiling hot in a moment. As she sits on her cot, cradling her burnt feet, she has to give him credit for truly knowing how to break a captive. But she won't give in; even though she outwardly appears to have done so, she knows inside that she will *never, ever*, give up

But she wonders whether it would really matter if she did? If she gives in to her keeper, would he treat her better? She highly doubts that and laughs within the confines of her mind at her own stupidity. Perhaps she is going mental, as Ron has so often said. Loopier than Luna Lovegood.

As he had promised, she is not able to harm herself. Her hair never becomes tangled, and she never smells unclean, although her living conditions are anything but sanitary. She is never sick; well, no colds or flu at least, not even a sniffle. It was as though she is living in an alternate universe, but this particular microcosm is one of constant torment and agony. It is her life, but she can't even put an end to it if she wants to.

And so, she goes through the motions of eating and sleeping whenever she can. But it is only a semblance of reality, for she does not truly reside within her outward form. She is safely locked away within the confines of her mind, never truly present in her physical body; therefore, no one can harm her.

Oh, but he tries. He tries to break her with his mind games and petty torture and the pursuit of her body, and she thinks she would have snapped like a twig ages ago, if it had not been for her mental strength and her vivid imagination.

Her parents are dead. At least, that is what the madman has told her. They had been murdered by his own hand, and he comes into her small prison to gloat about it on a regular basis. She had thrown up the first time she had heard him speak of it in vivid detail, and she can only assume that he had spoken the truth. Hermione believes he is capable of the most abominable falsehoods simply to fuck with her mind, but she deems he is not lying about this. Her captor rarely jests about homicide unless it is in his mirth after a slaughtering or a particularly fine spot of Muggle hunting.

She is not privy to any information relating to their *'cause'*, as the demon refers to it. If he ever lets slip any information, she is usually too deep within the confines of her mind to hear much of what he is saying. And just who would she tell anyway? The rats that share her cell with her? Perhaps one of them could get a message through to Harry and Ron?

She ponders this thought and laughs out loud at its absurdity. Perhaps he has indeed robbed her of the one thing that made her Hermione Granger her intellectual competence.

If she were ever to escape this place which she is almost positive she would not she would have the blond-haired demon tortured and killed with excruciating slowness. Perhaps she would do it herself. The concept that she could be capable of something so cruel and unfeeling scares her a bit, but how could anyone retain moral compunction after an experience such as this one? She has begun to entertain fantasies of burning him alive in his precious mansion and then dancing upon the ashes.

She stops her rocking and turns her head to the side with extraordinary slowness. Closing her eyes, she luxuriates in the exquisite vision of his agonised screams as he pleads for mercy while he slowly becomes one of the many tortured souls in his own house of horrors.

A smile flitters across her face, and she is able to make out his tormented shrieks as she watches from outside Malfoy Mansion, watches and waits.

She used to hold out hope for rescue, but left that little fantasy behind with her virginity and subsequent torture. She supposes somewhere within herself she still believes in the prospect of a better world, one where she would be surrounded by people who are able to distinguish between right and wrong, love and lust, good and evil. Why she continues to clutch at such delusions is simply beyond her. These wizards known as Death Eaters are certainly not capable of such humanity. Anything human that may have lived inside them at some point in their wretched lives has long since rotted away. What lives in their souls if they do indeed still possess them is black and cold, something more akin to a demon than an embodiment of human nature.

She has come to believe that Harry and Ron were never particularly fond of her anyway and were only using her because they required her intelligence. She twists her head to the side slowly, letting that thought fester within her mind.

Yes, she thinks to herself, they would most certainly be having more fun without her to impede them with her constant nagging for them both to study.

If they hadn't come by now, then they weren't going to come at all. She was sure she wasn't missed, and they had probably been glad to be rid of her.

Yes, she thinks bitterly, who would miss a know-it-all when all is said and done? *No one*, was the answer her mind supplied.

And so she sits there in the dank dungeon cell, staring out into the abyss as the seconds of her wretched life tick by, and she resumes her steady rocking back and forth, back and forth.

A/N: Thank you to each and everyone who has taken the time to read this and leave a review. You guys rock my world. All I ask is that if you read it, you leave a review. I'm not asking for much, really.

To my wonderful betas, AmyLouise and deathofme, thank you so very much for sticking with me. Love you, girls!

Moon Dog

Chapter 10 of 25

Lucius gets creative. Hermione gets a present from the Dark Lord.

Chapter 10: Moon Dog

This chapter is dedicated to my beta and good friend, deathofme. She challenged me to incorporate this subject matter into my story, which I have done, but it has a purpose and is not just thrown in there for her perverse pleasure.

WARNING: The following chapter contains bestiality. It is not just in my story for the shock value and is an essential part of Hermione's account, and I believe a turning point in the story.

Lucius strode down to the dungeons. Behind him a cumbersome chain floated in the air. He had a surprise for the Mudblood, one he would enjoy immensely. His heavy boots echoed upon the stone floor as he made his descent. His prick stood at half-mast; it, too, was eager for the show.

He had sent Narcissa and Draco shopping this morning, allowing him ample time to take amusement with his slave. She had become willing in his sexual exploits of her body and no longer cried out when he carved into her skin with the precision of a surgeon. Nevertheless, her eyes still held defiance, and that was what he was hoping to rip from her with this next form of degradation.

He had taken her in every way imaginable, and she had become quite compliant to his every whim, willing to defile herself for whatever his devious mind could come up with. However, when he was done with her he would look into her eyes and see a spark barely recognisable unless one knew what to look for. It was this flicker of rebellion that he had to be rid of before he took her to his Master.

He had come up with the usual forms of mental torture for her in her first month of captivity. Placing tasteless poison into her food, or sometimes her drink. He would intersperse one with the other at intervals so she never knew which of her meals would be contaminated.

He knew how to break a prisoner and had seen many of them respond well to the mental breaking down of their defences by flashing lights and loud noises. So he had adopted those into her daily regime when he was too busy to tend to her himself. It appeared to have worked, for when he had entered her cell she had looked around wildly as though she were searching for something, never truly seeing him. Oh, she had put up a good fight that first night, but it seemed that some of her will to resist him had bled away with the blood of her virginity.

He had also developed something that he praised himself for whenever he thought about it. He would make the floor ice cold for a period of time and at other times scorching hot, making it virtually impossible for her to get to the table across her cell for sustenance.

He chuckled in self-appreciation. Yes, he would indeed enjoy the show.

Making it to the last chamber, he barged through the door. The sconces flared to life, illuminating the room in an eerie glow as he stopped just inside the doorway, his wand balanced precariously in one hand. The door slammed shut after Lucius and his guest were within the small prison.

Pointing his wand at a section of stone just to the right of the door, he produced a metal D-ring that hung out of the wall. Stepping fully into the room, he gathered up the heavy chain, securing it to the wall. Turning around, he faced the stubborn Mudblood, who was sitting quite calmly on the edge of the small cot. She was staring at the stone across from her, giving the impression that it was truly more fascinating than anything he might be doing.

"Today we begin the next part of your training." His voice was harsh, but she made no response as he knew she wouldn't. "I see that I have approached this entire procedure incorrectly; therefore, I have enlisted the help of a friend."

She was still staring off into space, absolutely still, giving no indication that she had heard him. He was perturbed, but didn't show it as he continued.

"In saying that, I have acquired this improbable beast on loan for the next few days." The muscles in her jaw moved imperceptibly, showing him that she was listening.

Splendid, he reflected as he continued speaking.

"This, my dim-witted little Mudblood, is a Moon Dog," he said, gesturing to the creature in question. "What, I hear you ask, is a Moon Dog?" Her hand flexed ever so slowly into a fist and if Lucius hadn't been watching her closely he might have missed it entirely. "It is a surprisingly ingenious creation of one of my comrades. The combination of a werewolf and an ordinary dog, hence, Moon Dog."

That got her attention, as he knew it would, and her head snapped over in the blink of an eye, to stare at the beast.

It was ugly, she determined, a huge salivating beast with impossibly long claws and teeth. Its coat was a dirty, shaggy brown and its paws were the size of small dinner plates. Hermione shuddered as she caught the beast's eyes; they were unlike any she had ever seen before. A mixture of colours, reds, browns and blacks, all mixed into one pupil. It must have been under some sort of containment spell, as only its eyes moved within its huge, repulsive head.

"Now I know that I could have come up with a far superior name for this beast." He paused and cocked his head to the side, watching her eye off the monster. "But you know Macnair and his penchant for stating the obvious."

He took a couple of steps towards her, his wand still in hand whilst his other arm reached beneath his robes to produce a tiny vial.

"Come here, slave," he demanded.

Her eyes jerked up from the beast's to his, showing a new form of terror that he had all but forgotten. Lucius almost jumped up and down with glee. She stayed stubbornly where she was.

"I said. Come. Here." He punctuated each word through his tightly clenched jaw, almost stamping his foot like a child denied a lolly.

She pleaded silently with her eyes not to be taken anywhere near the fiend, starting to shake, slowly at first and then more violently as the silence stretched on.

He closed in on her, pulling her up harshly by her arm with the hand that held his wand, almost dislocating her shoulder from its socket. She cried out as he threw her to the floor in front of the gigantic creature.

"This," he began coolly, as though he had not just thrown her onto the hard stone floor, "is the scent of a werewolf in heat." He held up a vial of clear liquid, tinged only slightly with a blood-red colour. "I obtained it from Macnair, who has been shall we say *experimenting* with the beast and his own current detainees." He paused, and as she tore her gaze from the vial and looked up into his eyes, he saw a look of abject horror on her face.

Good, let the Mudblood know who's boss, he thought to himself as he kept up his inscrutable mask.

He took a step towards her. Hermione felt as though she were glued to the spot by some unknown force. She could feel the beast's breath on her face, smell its putrid stench from her position on the ground. Her instinct was screaming at her to move, lash out, do something, but her body would not act in accordance with her wishes and so she remained there, laid out on the floor like some comical rag doll.

He lifted the vial up into the light that was reflecting off the stone walls as though he were studying it, his eyes drinking in its red-tinged hue. Her eyes swivelled back to the vial as she watched his hand swirl the semi-thick liquid as though mesmerised by what it contained. He could see her through the corner of his eye and smirked inwardly. This was definitely going to be thoroughly amusing for him.

Bringing the vial down towards his side, he waved his wand lazily in the air directly in front of her and she gave a startled shriek as she was lifted into the air and then placed down, not too gently, on all fours, her back towards the creature. She tried to struggle, but it was useless, he must have used a sticking charm on her hands and knees. She found that she could only move her head, as the rest of her body was stuck to the stone floor. She started to make mewling sounds, which worked their way from her chest and up and out through her mouth, not recognising them as her own.

Lucius watched as the panic took hold of her. He smiled to himself. This was the strongest reaction he had seen from his slave since the first wonderful couple of days when he had first brought her here. He felt like a god, and on one hand he actually was, a god who had the power to squash her like a bug. He was glorifying in her rising panic, it was heady, and he closed his eyes momentarily and took in a deep breath through his nose, puffing out his chest.

I am a god, he reflected to himself before he slowly opened his eyes and uncorked the vial. It made a 'popping' sound as it came loose and the Mudblood froze.

As he tapped his wand harshly on her head, she felt a sinister magic sweep over her. She was not sure what spell he had used, though she knew it was Dark magic as she felt it course through her body and settle into her bones. She tried to shake it off, but couldn't even do that as the sticking charm was still in place, binding her to the freezing stone beneath her. She felt vulnerable with her arse up in the air, pointed towards the beast.

Shaking her head, she wondered whether he had received new orders to finally do away with her; she thought it quite fitting that he'd use this abomination to do his dirty work.

She felt a trickle, warm, and thick like honey, run down her bum and in-between her crevice. Her mind unexpectedly went blank. All outside stimuli shut off, she could feel nothing, hear nothing, smell nothing, see nothing. There was an empty void where her senses used to reside and she felt hollow, gouged out, numb.

Lucius placed the cork back into the vial as he put it back into his cloak pocket. Satisfied that his Mudblood slave was indeed unsettled by her current predicament, he turned sharply on his heel, facing the untamed beast once more.

Raising his wand at the creature, he unlocked the chain that was fastened around its neck with a flick of his wand. The fetter that was previously holding the creature under an enchantment fell with a loud clack to the floor. He felt her tense up behind him as she snapped out of the self-induced lack of awareness she had been in. He grinned like a madman to himself as he spun around and made his way over to the familiar chair conjured by the right hand side of the door as his chosen prime seating for this exhibition.

The Moon Dog stood still; it had yet to move a muscle as it sniffed at the air, making snuffling noises. Lucius took his seat and watched in apparent glee. This was sure to be a show, one he wouldn't forget for some time. His cock was straining from within his now too-tight pants; however, he ignored it and watched in fascination as the beast caught sight of its prey.

Hermione froze and her heart stopped beating as she felt the beast's breath on her exposed arse, and in the next instant she felt it run its tongue from the top of her vagina all the way up her bum. It inhaled, its tongue twisting inside her hole. The beast sniffed some more, the small current of air on her exposed backside causing goose bumps to appear on her arms and legs. A dribble of the dog's copious saliva dangled down to the floor from her cunt. The fiend was licking her with eagerness now, and she cringed inwardly at the drooling mess it was leaving.

She was brought back to earth by a grunt. Her cheeks flaming crimson from her own mortification, she lifted her head and turned it ever so slowly to the right where she saw her captor leaning forward in his chair, his eyes riveted to whatever was going on behind her, an impression of madness within those pale grey eyes. She quickly squeezed her eyes shut as she hung her head.

The hound was licking and sniffing with fever now, getting more and more worked up as the seconds ticked by.

"No," she whispered, her voice barely recognisable to her own ears, it was so choked with tears that she had to wonder when she had begun to cry. She thought it was impossible to cry anymore, but she dismissed that thought as she shook her head from side to side and attempted to break the spell placed upon her.

"No," she repeated, stronger this time.

It was no use; she felt the dog scramble up to mount her, its awkward body finding its way on top of her, and she felt as if she would surely break in two with the immense weight of the creature. It continued its ascent, digging its claws into her side as it tried to find somewhere to hold on to its mate, finally finding purchase on her hips.

It was pure agony between the combined weight of the beast and its long claws dragging down her side, but it was nothing as it finally found its mark, and its long claws settled at her hips and it started to rut against her with all of its might.

She screamed out, shaking her head from side to side once more, trying to dissuade the dog from taking her. It was no use; she felt the long fangs of the beast sink into her fleshy shoulder, trying to hold her still, although at best she could only move her head.

She felt the dog's penis searching for her opening. Her insides turned to ice and her voice turned hoarse as she screeched out at the unwanted invasion, and she felt herself tear from the large knot at the end of the dog's penis. This was immoral, everything about this situation was wrong.

The Moon Dog released her shoulder as he made one final thrust, binding with her as she felt him swell up inside her. The creature gave out a piercing howl of triumph as it salivated all over her back.

She felt herself go numb, even though her whole body shook as it fought off going into shock. She turned her head, eyes closed, still whimpering, as she looked at the spot where the creature had bitten into her shoulder. It was agony and she thought about the lesson with Professor Snape, in what seemed like a lifetime ago, about werewolves. If so much as one drop of saliva made its way into the blood stream, the person affected would be doomed to becoming a werewolf too.

She had to know, so she opened her eyes to see the damage the beast had done. She gasped in shock, even as she blinked back the tears that were currently streaming down her face and making a pool of clear liquid on the grimy stones in front of her hands. There was nothing there apart from the excruciating pain in her shoulder, neither a scratch nor the gaping wound that she had imagined would be there not ten seconds ago.

She tuned out the pain that was encompassing her body as she quickly turned her head around to look at the demon in the chair to her right, a questioning look in her eyes. He smirked at her as he undid his trousers and pushed them down his legs, slowly exposing his rigid member to the chilly dungeon air.

She quickly turned her head away and looked at the pool of her tears once more. The light from the sconces was flickering off the puddle, and she watched the play of the lights, tuning out all of the pain, hurt and turmoil within her.

She felt, rather than saw, the creature remove its body weight from her, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The dog was far from done, as they were still connected together in the most intimate way.

The beast threw its back leg over her so that they were bum to bum, continuing to pump its seed inside her, its tongue lolling out the side of its mouth and a look of pure bliss on its repugnant features.

Her examination of the pool was broken when she heard grunting to her right; she wanted to ignore it, but in a reflex action, her head snapped up once more to look at her captor.

Lucius was fisting his cock in one hand, his wand beating out a rhythm in his other hand against his thigh. His head was thrown back, eyes closed, as he pumped one last time and gave an almighty shout as his semen sprayed the front of his fine robes. His breathing laboured, he opened his eyes as a devious smirk crossed his face.

Hermione was hypnotised by the smile; it was not as though she had not seen him in the throes of orgasm before; it was the thought that there were men, men like him, out there that got off on the suffering and degradation of others.

Their eyes were locked. Hers were wide with untold horror, and his were calculating, predatory, filled with lust and the thrill of debasing another human being.

The spell that held her eyes captive with his own was broken when the alarms echoed around the small space surrounding them. Hermione was brought back to earth by the pain of the monster still inside her and the marks that he had left on her body, invisible to all except her.

Lucius jumped to his feet, casting a cleansing charm quickly and doing up his trousers efficiently with the other hand. He paced hastily to the door, throwing it open before speaking to her.

"Have fun, Mudblood," he spat out maliciously, not even bothering to face her as he slammed the door shut.

The only sounds were those of his retreating steps, the heavy panting of the creature at her rear, and the small whining noises that escaped her throat.

Lucius stomped his way down to the dungeons the next morning. He knew he was being childish, but he didn't care. It was his mansion, his home, and he thought if he couldn't be self-indulgent in his own residence, where could he be?

He hadn't been able to come back down to the dungeons last night, as Narcissa and Draco had come home early, hence the alarms, and he had to play the doting husband as Narcissa showed off all of her purchases.

He only hoped that the beast hadn't been too rough on the Mudblood, not that the enchantments on her cell would allow this, but still he had a feeling of impending disaster as he pushed aside the cell door.

The first thing he noticed was the fact that the sconces didn't light up, and he pulled his wand from the cane that housed it, dropping the housing clumsily to the ground, and flicked the wand up, murmuring *Lumos*.

He stood, momentarily immobilised, and glanced around in horror. The faint light that his wand gave off wasn't enough to encompass the entire cell, but his heart skipped a beat as he took in the scene before his eyes.

It was as though a whirlwind had been through the cell. The table was smashed, lying in splinters, no longer recognisable. The cot was up-ended, the flimsy mattress was in pieces, and bits of straw were scattered around the floor in every direction. The sconces were no longer attached to the wall and lay at the other end of the room.

Frantic now, he whirled around, searching for any signs of life. His eyes fell on the Moon Dog, its lifeless body lying in the corner of the room. Stepping into the cell, he walked over to the beast and kicked it once with his boot. It made no movement, and he perceived the pool of congealed blood in which it was lying. Sneering, he turned away from the creature and continued his search of the small cell for the Mudblood.

He swung his wand arm around frantically as he approached the cot, which was lying upright, and he saw a small figure huddled in the foetal position between the wall and the cot. Hastily approaching the other side of the room, he reached down to yank the Mudblood up, only to come in contact with a solid force field surrounding her entire body.

The field didn't harm him, although he could not get through it to reach his slave, no matter how hard he forced his hand against it. Bringing up his wand to lie an inch from the sphere, he tapped it once. His wand bounced back at him. Next, he conjured up some floating candles to light the cell as he brought his wand up and flicked it once, enunciating *Finite Incantatem*; nothing happened.

Growling low in his throat, his teeth bared, he ripped the cot from the wall and threw it across the room. Her body, huddled in the corner of the room that had previously been covered up by the frame of the cot, lit up as he levitated the candles to float closer to her. He could see that she was breathing; she seemed to be in some kind of

enchanted sleep, and he got down on his knees, his wand still firmly held in his hand, and looked at her peaceful face.

Spells of any kind were not allowed to work in his personal dungeons, and especially not by the prisoners. He, of course, could perform magic, but had seen to it personally that the Mudblood could not do wandless magic of any kind. Lucius held her wand upstairs encased in the most powerful of Dark magic he knew of. So why was it that she was still able to perform potent enchantments?

Unless, he thought grimly to himself, she had indeed evoked the most ancient of magic charms unconsciously, that of the protection spell. Extraordinary He threw a simple stinging hex at the sphere that was surrounding his slave and quickly jumped to the side to avoid the rebounded hex.

Walking back to the field, he toed it with his foot. It seemed as if nothing could get into the blasted sphere.

Lucius felt his anger reaching boiling point, and he spun on his heel, firing off an *Avada Kedavra* at the Moon Dog. He saw the bolt of green leave his wand and hit its mark. It felt satisfying although he knew that the creature was already dead.

Macnair is going to be pissed, he thought ruefully before turning around again and facing his current quandary.

Hexes, curses, spell after spell: he threw them all at the orb, but nothing seemed to penetrate it. Hair dishevelled, his eyes filled with rage, he sat down on a conjured chair and let his breathing become even as he contemplated his next move.

As he summoned his wand housing and neatly tucked away his wand, a cold chill laced its way down his spine at the thought of what he would have to do next. There was nothing else for it, he would have to go to the Dark Lord and explain what had happened. He shivered as he stood and vanished the chair.

"Elf," Lucius bellowed.

A diminutive popping noise was heard beside him, and he whirled around to face the small creature.

"I want this mess cleaned up," he said to the trembling elf before him. Ears hung low, eyes downcast, it nodded its head in the affirmative. It knew better than to speak to back to its Master.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Lucius was swiftly losing what little patience he had as he lifted his cane and brought it down on the elf's head with a sickening crunch.

The creature fell to its knees from the blow, but did not cry out in pain. Straightening up, it went to work immediately, snapping its fingers, and the Moon Dog disappeared.

Lucius left his dungeons, making his way to the Entrance Hall. He knew the elf would do a first-rate job, but he was dreading going to his Lord with this quandary. He had been placed in charge of the Mudblood, an incredibly significant undertaking for him. No one else was to find out about her, and so far he had thought he was performing an impressive job.

His face like thunder, covering the trepidation he felt inside, he dropped the wards surrounding his home and Disapparated to the Dark Lord's stronghold.

Sitting in his own private study scrutinising books on the Dark Arts, Voldemort knew he would not be disturbed here, not if his servants wished to retain their limbs. His devoted familiar, Nagini, was curled up next to his chair in front of the fire.

It was not quite time for lunch, and the Dark Lord was catching up on his reading. Overthrowing the wizarding government wasn't an easy task, so he preferred to come to his sanctuary for a few hours a day to unwind and scheme.

His reading was cut short as his inner refuge was disturbed, the door opening with a loud squeak and a tousled Lucius Malfoy hurtling into the room. Voldemort took in his most trusted servant's appearance as he threw himself at his feet and quickly kissed the hem of his robes before rising.

"Forgive me, my Lord," Lucius said, his voice coming out much stronger than he felt.

"Whatever it is, Lucius, it had better be good." Not wanting to fritter away any more of his time or tolerance, he whispered threateningly, not even bothering to raise his wand, "*Legilimens*."

Before Lucius could answer, the Dark Lord was in his mind and siphoning through his thoughts with ease, though he was not inconveniencing himself by being gentle.

Lucius staggered as Voldemort abruptly left his mind. He looked back at his Lord's face and saw a hideous twisting of his features.

"You didn't think to place any wards?" Voldemort spoke softly, with deadly precision, though his voice suggested the guarantee of retribution that was yet to be dealt out.

"Yes, my Lord, I did, though it seems as if the Mudblood has overcome them somehow," Lucius responded, precariously. Lucius knew he was condemned to the Cruciatius for his indiscretion.

"I give you this lone task, Lucius, and even with that you fail me."

Voldemort stood effortlessly, what passed for a smile contorting his facial appearance. Lucius took a step back cautiously, fearing that his life was indeed over. Instead, the Dark Lord clapped his hands together once, and the blond-haired wizard watched in astonishment as a metal collar appeared in his open hand.

Handing it to Lucius, who turned it over in his hands with interest, Voldemort hissed with irritation, "Now take me to the Mudblood, Lucius, before you suffer the consequences of making me wait."

Lucius didn't need to be told twice.

Lucius stood in the main foyer of his mansion, collar in hand, with his Lord beside him. He quickly marched to the hidden door that lead down to his personal dungeons.

The eeriness of the situation slowly filled Lucius with dread as he descended the stone steps and the sconces along the narrow corridor flared to life.

Lucius entered the cell first, checking to see that the elf had done his bidding. Everything seemed to be in order, and the cell was back to its original state.

Voldemort's magnificent presence filled the small dungeon cell as Lucius took a step to the right, just over the threshold, towards the Mudblood. His Lord took quick stock of what was the Mudblood's place of residence until his eyes fell on the foul creature huddled in the corner.

Lucius watched as his Lord approached his slave; she was surrounded by a sphere encompassing her entire body. It appeared the elf had taken his words to heart, as it had tried to place the bed back into its original position. It appeared, however, that the creature had been unable to move the Mudblood. He looked in fascination at the sphere that covered her body, now glowing a bright blue colour. He wondered to himself silently what the elf had done to get any kind of reaction out of the orb, as he had tried every spell and still it remained an invisible circumference.

The Mudblood appeared to be in a deep sleep, and Lucius once more cursed himself for not being able to break the enchantment that she had obviously placed upon her

own body.

He shook his head slightly as his Master approached his slave.

"Lucius," the Dark Lord hissed, and he found himself striding up to his Master's side in a few steps.

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius replied.

"The collar." Voldemort held out his hand as Lucius fumbled slightly with the heavy piece of metal in his hands and placed it in his Lord's outstretched hand.

He watched in fascination as his Lord waved his hand over the sleeping Mudblood and the barrier vanished. He looked down to see her shiver faintly as the Dark Lord reached down and picked her up by the throat whilst holding the metal collar in his other hand.

"Mudblood," he murmured as he brought her up to face him, his hand still firmly around her throat.

Hermione's eyes opened from the most wonderful dream to see herself staring into the face of Voldemort. She gave a tiny squeak as she felt his hand squeeze more forcefully around her throat. She couldn't breathe. Her feet were dangling from the floor, and she was barely able to take some of the pressure off her throat by standing on tiptoe.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed to the creature before him. She was going to play a large part in this war whether she wanted to or not. He turned her head to and fro as though assessing a purchase.

Abruptly, he relinquished his hold on her and she dropped to the floor like a sack of flobberworms; she dared not look up into the faces of the madman and her tormentor.

"Rise, Mudblood."

She heard the unmistakable hiss of Voldemort's voice, and she felt her body complying, in spite of her wish to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

She dared not look into his face as she rose, her head still bowed.

Is this the end? she reflected grimly to herself. *Please let it be quick.* And in those few seconds, as she ascended to her feet, she saw her brief life flash before her eyes.

A/N: Sorry for leaving you all on such a cliff hanger, but I thought that at 11 pages it was getting a bit too long. Rest assured though, I am feverishly typing away at the next chapter of this story. Any comments, about this chapter, would be welcomed. Please no flames. Remember, if you can't say anything nice, say nothing at all.

To my wonderful beta's AmyLouise and deathofme, thank you so very much for finding my mistakes and making my writing flow better. Love and hugs to you both. I seriously don't know what I would do without the two of you.

Werewolves

Chapter 11 of 25

Lucius tests Hermione's will, while Remus heads off on Order business.

Lucius awoke on the bitterly frigid, unyielding flagstones in his own dungeons. He thought that rather ironic as he groaned, lifting his head and shaking it to remove some of the lingering fogginess within. His stomach clenched in warning at his vigorous head shaking, and he willed himself to take deep, even breaths as he kept his eyes closed until the queasiness passed.

He had known he would pay for the Mudblood's error, but he had miscalculated just how badly. His anger welled up inside him now, like a finely woven tendril, waiting to snap. He hated to be made to look like a fool in front of his Lord, especially as the stupid Mudblood watched on as he received his reprimand.

Opening his eyes, he took in the scene before him, his vision blurry and every muscle in his body protesting as he made his way into an upright position. Lifting a trembling hand, he Summoned his cane, which was lying a few metres to his left where he had dropped it when his Lord had cast the first of many Cruciatu's Curses.

Pushing himself up on unsteady legs and a body that was currently unwilling to cooperate with his mental desires, he leant heavily on his cane. Looking over towards the cot where he had last seen his slave, he witnessed her staring at him; well, not exactly at him, more like *through* him. The blank look on her face only incensed him further, and the tendril that held his finely wound anger together snapped.

Stumbling over to her, he balled his left hand into a fist and punched the Mudblood with all of his strength right in the mouth.

"Whore," he yelled as she fell sideways off the cot, landing on the stone floor with an almighty thump as his own body convulsed with rage. When she looked up at him, he saw the blood streaming from her open mouth; one of her upper teeth was missing.

Insane gleam in his eye, he separated his wand from the housing and lifted it, with a barely waving arm, towards the back wall and watched the stones dissolve. Feeling his power over his slave infusing his limbs with a newfound strength, he strode over to pick up what looked like a pair of pliers.

Coming back to stand before the Mudblood who had caused him so much agony, he spoke abruptly.

"Stand up, you piece of filth," he spat, and he watched as the magical collar made her comply. Her limbs were unbalanced as she stood up from the floor.

She looked a right mess. Blood was dribbling down her chin at a steady rate and coating the collar and her breasts. One glance at her face told him that she was in immense pain, although she made no sounds to indicate this fact.

He pushed her back onto the cot; she made no effort to thwart him. Growling, he threw his wand onto the floor; it bounced once before seeking out the housing and flying to stand neatly against the wall at the foot of the cot.

Grabbing her cheeks with his left hand, the pliers in his right, he snaked his legs between hers, his right knee pushed up against her sex as his left knee came down on her

abdomen, near her diaphragm.

All the air rushed out of her body, and she was having trouble breathing as she sucked in lungful after lungful of air. His left hand was pushing her cheeks together hard enough for her molars to cut into the insides of her cheeks, but still she made no move to dislodge him or resist his violent handling of her person.

Bringing up the pliers towards her mouth, he clamped down on her remaining front upper tooth and pulled. The sickening yank as it popped out of her mouth was exhilarating and spurred him onwards into a heady frenzy.

He discarded the tooth with a flick, and it clicked onto the stones and bounced off the wall, trailing blood in its wake. He brought the tool back down towards her mouth and again and again he worked at pulling each of her remaining teeth out one by one until the blood was flowing copiously from her mouth, and she was fighting hard not to choke as it flowed down her throat. She made little whimpering noises, and her eyes were filled with tears which flowed down her cheeks, mixing with the blood and mucus from her nose.

He leant back and took in his handiwork. Her chin and breasts were covered completely in blood, and he smeared it all around. Beautiful.

A simple spell, and all of her teeth were replaced. The blood that was covering her face, breasts and the metal collar had vanished.

Her fingernails and toenails were next, and he watched her squirm as he took to them with the meticulousness of a man who had practised this particular form of torture many times before. However, he had to replace them too, lest she bleed out on him. It was extremely satisfying, but it wasn't sufficient to meet his needs.

What is the purpose of having a slave if I can't mark her as my own?

It was true that she would follow his commands now, as the magic within the collar commanded her to do so. He had gleaned that much from his Master before the first curse hit him. She would be compelled to do his bidding and that of the Dark Lord and any of his subordinates, but only those with the Dark Mark would ever have the right to bend Harry Potter's Mudblood friend to obey their orders.

A laugh thundered its way shamelessly up his throat, like a wave crashing against the shore, and he allowed it to hit the stones surrounding him. The rich sound of his maniacal laughter filled the chamber as his magic continued to thrum through him, taking on a life of its own as it danced through his veins and out of his fingertips.

A thought popped into his mind, and he knew what he had to do. Flipping his slave onto her stomach, he Summoned his wand, sending the pliers back to the chamber and closing the bricks, turning the wall back to its previous state. He held her face down on the thin straw-filled mattress with a hand shoved between her shoulder blades.

"Flagrate," he whispered excitedly into the dimly lit chamber and he brought his wand, its tip now glowing red hot, to hover before the small of her back. He felt her tense up underneath his hand as his wand came into contact with her skin, and he wrote his initials, LM, on her back in his precise script.

His pants were too tight, his rigid member straining to get out. Dropping his wand, he undid his trousers in a frenzy and thrust into her dry passage. He plunged into her violently, rubbing his new symbol of ownership sadistically with his stomach. He felt the first tingling of his impending orgasm, and he pulled out of her and fisted his cock until he spurted his semen all over her back. He swiftly Summoned his wand and made a slice to his left palm, watching as the blood dripped onto her back to mingle with his sweat and semen. Closing the wound to his palm, he placed his wand on the mattress beside her and used both hands to smear his semen and blood into the mark.

She whimpered as soon as his hand made contact with her damaged skin; he knew it must be exquisite torture, not being able to fight back, and his magic flared up again. He would not treat the bubbling blisters that were now rising on her back but force her to suffer as he had suffered under the wand of his Lord.

He became aware that the metal collar was glowing a reddish colour. *Fascinating,* his mind supplied in awe as he reached out to touch it, quickly pulling his hand back as he felt a sharp jolt work its way through his fingertips. Apprehensively, he reached over again and pressed his palm to the red-glowing piece of metal.

He felt the surge of magic rolling from the metal into his hands, and he drank it in, feeling his muscles begin to relax and cease their shaking.

Lucius finally let go of the metal collar and stumbled back a few paces, staring at his hands.

What was that? he asked himself as he felt the magic shift around his body before finally settling in the pit of his stomach.

He looked up then and saw that his slave had not moved from her previous position, with her arse still in the air.

"Sit up," he ordered, in a voice filled with power. She complied immediately, turning to face him.

"What did you just do to me?" he asked, his eyes opened wide in awe, before taking a small step towards her.

'I didn't do anything, Master.' He heard the voice enter his mind as though she had spoken it aloud, although her mouth did not move.

Narrowing his eyes, he marched the few paces towards her, and his right hand shot out like a snake striking and squeezed her cheeks together while forcing her eyes to meet his.

"What did you just say?" he asked, this time paying particular attention to her mouth and tongue as she answered him.

'I said that I did nothing, Master,' she repeated, neither her mouth nor her tongue moving. Her unblinking eyes were firmly fixed on his chin.

He pushed her away brutally then, raising up his hand to strike her once more, but his hand stilled mere centimetres before it made impact. Perhaps she was telling the truth and did not know what she had done.

His hand dropped heavily to his side as he stood. He needed a brandy. He would lock himself up in his study, where he wouldn't be bothered, and contemplate just what his Lord had neglected to tell him about the magical properties of the metal collar now adorning the Mudblood neck.

Remus stood surveying the dense forest in the Scottish Highlands. He had been sent there by the headmaster to discover if the werewolves would join the side of light. He knew there were werewolves in this area; he could smell them. It was just two days away from the full moon, and his senses of smell, sight and hearing were greatly enhanced.

Although he was weary and definitely smelt horrendous, he made his way slowly to the north, pausing when he came across a cave that was well hidden in the foliage. Straightening up, he sniffed the air and got a whiff of the pungent smell emitted only by those of his own kind; the ones with his affliction.

Cautiously, he walked on to the cave's mouth, stopping before actually entering and encroaching on the other werewolves' territory.

Sensing he had been heard, he waited in the open, palms held facing the cave, showing these werewolves that he meant them no harm, as he was unarmed.

Slinking out of the cave's mouth came three males in formation. Remus eyed them warily, but he stood stock still, waiting for them to make the first move.

The one in the centre and slightly ahead of the others was clearly the alpha male. He spoke in a harsh voice.

"What do you want?" he growled as he came to a halt mere metres from Remus.

His hair was a shaggy brown, and he looked a little malnourished; his clothes were but torn rags that hung limply from his frame. A quick glance at the other two werewolves showed that they were in even worse condition than the alpha, and Remus cringed inwardly at the sight of the three of them standing tall, but looking for the entire world as though a breeze would knock them all over.

"I have come to offer you my assistance," Remus replied, still not moving a muscle.

The alpha werewolf bit out a harsh laugh, cocking his head slightly to the side as if weighing up the intruder.

"And what could you possibly offer us that we don't already have here?" he replied, making a show with his arms to encompass the entire area surrounding himself. "We have shelter," he said, flicking his head back to the cave's mouth, "all the food we could hope for, and no one bothers us this far north. So again I ask, what could you possibly offer us that we haven't already got?"

"Wolfsbane," came Remus' reply, and the three werewolves' eyes widened. The two behind the alpha took an uncertain half-step backwards.

"And what good would that be to us?" barked the leader once more, eyes narrowing in suspicion. "We actually like the beast that consumes us at every full moon."

"But it would stop you from destroying innocent lives," Remus said, his tone even as his hands dropped to his side, making the two werewolves standing behind the alpha jump slightly in wariness.

"And why, pray tell, would I want that?" the alpha replied. He leant forward as though challenging Remus.

"You can't tell me you actually enjoy hurting innocent people?" Remus raised his eyebrows in a questioning manner as the alpha sneered at him.

"What I enjoy is none of your business; go back to your kind and leave us alone."

With that he turned his back on Remus as he felt no threat coming from him. His two lieutenants stood their ground as though weighing up the options of the Wolfsbane potion. They had heard that the transformation affected them less with the potion. They were both willing to try it but would not stand up to their alpha's wrath.

One of the men broke away at a trot, following the alpha back to the cave's mouth.

"Wait, Angus," he said, laying his hand on the alpha's shoulder.

With lightning quick reflexes, Angus had laid the werewolf on his back, his teeth bared at his throat as he growled out his warning.

"Don't you ever lay a hand on me, Laden," he snarled.

Laden offered up his neck to the alpha, showing him a level of trust that Remus had never seen before as Angus continued to pin him to the ground, teeth bared at his throat.

"Gentlemen." Remus spoke to break the tension. It worked, as Angus looked up at him. "All I ask is for you to hear me out and then decide for yourselves whether or not you want my assistance in procuring the Wolfsbane potion for you."

Remus discerned the fact that he had to tread carefully, as the tension in the air was high, with the impending Full Moon. He knew that he could probably take out Angus and thus become the new alpha, but he wanted to see if he could resolve this peacefully and with little bloodshed. The gods knew he had seen enough bloodshed and devastation in the past to last him several lifetimes.

Angus growled as he rose back to the upright position, with Laden staying put on the ground, his throat still bared and his eyes closed.

Striding over to where Remus was standing his ground, Angus snarled, "Give me one hour; I shall speak to the others within my pack, and then we shall talk, just the two of us," he said, his eyes flicking back to Laden, who was still lying motionless on the ground. Facing Remus once more, he spat, "One hour."

And with that he marched back to the cave's mouth, eyes straight ahead, not even bothering to look at the werewolf that was still on the ground, and disappeared from sight. The other man ambled over to his fallen comrade and bent over to give him his arm, which he willingly took. Not sparing another glance at Remus, they both disappeared into the cave.

Well that went better than expected, thought Remus as he ran a shaking hand through his hair and took a seat on the rocks surrounding the cave, prepared to wait the hour the alpha had stipulated.

Harry was bent down in the dungeon passageway, digging through his bag to find his latest N.E.W.T. level assignment for Potions. It was his very last one too, and he had breathed out a sigh of relief upon finishing it late last night. He was sure Professor Snape would ask for it as soon as they entered the classroom, and heaven help the poor sap who didn't have it ready for collection.

It would be right down the bottom, he thought as he lifted out the contents of his bag and groaned.

Harry was the only one in his year of Gryffindors who was taking N.E.W.T. level Potions and had to be constantly on his guard. He was in the Slytherin's territory, and any number of hexes and curses could come his way, with no one to watch his back. The others, except for Hermione, who was no longer here, had opted not to take the gruelling class.

With N.E.W.T.s being a scant three weeks away, there wasn't even a spare moment for flying. Oh, how Harry wished Hermione was here; she would be the one giving Ron and himself their own personal study schedules and nagging them to study more; she would also be able to look out for him in the snake pit. The Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs didn't want to get involved in petty political struggles between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins, and who could really blame them?

Ginny was a fair substitute, but she didn't compare to Hermione. The common room was mostly dedicated to those wishing to study for their N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s, and even the younger students understood the stress on the fifth- and seventh-years and steered clear of them.

The only time Harry could be himself, or so it seemed to him, was when he was alone with the Potions professor. But that too was study; even more important than the N.E.W.T.s.

But at the moment he had other things on his mind while he rifled through his bag. His previous lesson with Professor Snape was one of the thoughts spinning through his head as a smile played serenely across his features. He brought that memory to the forefront of his mind. He had finally been able to block the dark-haired wizard from his mind, and although he was drained once the lesson ended, he felt a sense of accomplishment.

Harry was so consumed with his own thoughts of the previous night's activities that he didn't notice Draco until it was too late and he was sprawled out face down on the dungeon floor. He felt warmth spreading upon his upper lip and, elevating his head, darted his tongue out automatically. His lip had a copper tang to it, and Harry surmised correctly that it was blood that was streaming from his nose. His glasses were broken and dangling from one ear.

Harry quickly shot up, wiped the dripping blood from his nose onto his sleeve and pushed his glasses back onto his nose as best he could. He looked around wildly for his attacker. That's when he saw him. Malfoy. He was leaning against the wall with a smug look on his face. Harry's hands clenched into fists as his blood boiled.

"What happened, Potter?" Draco asked, the sound of his voice grating on Harry's last nerve. "You trip?" Draco continued, smirking at him.

Harry, reacting automatically, reached for his wand, lifting up his eleven inches of Holly and phoenix feather baton and shouting out the first curse without thought.

"*Furnunculus*," he yelled, his voice echoing in the still dungeon corridors, the spell hitting Draco straight in the face.

Draco let out a girlish shriek as he covered his face with both his hands.

The other students were all staring at Harry as the Potions classroom door banged open and a very irate Professor Snape made his appearance.

"What is happening here?" he ground out through tightly clenched teeth. He took in the position of the Boy Wonder, blood slowly dribbling down his face from his nose, his glasses broken and his wand still pointed at a cowering Draco Malfoy, and he had to hide the smirk that threatened to materialise on his face.

"Answer me now!" he said, his voice booming in the quiet corridor.

Draco looked up then, dropping his hands from his face to show the ugly boils that were still erupting on his once-handsome features.

"He cursed me," Draco said in a whiny voice.

Severus spun to face Harry; internally, he was beaming at the boy, but outwardly, he wore a fierce scowl.

"Is this true, Miss Parkinson?" he asked, choosing the random Slytherin who was closest to Draco. Anyone who had heard that tone of voice from the Potions professor knew that Harry Potter was done for. The students shrank back a little, out of the firing line.

Pansy took a step closer to the tall, imposing wizard. "Yes, Draco and I were just discussing the latest Potions assignment that you had given us, sir, when out of nowhere, Potter " she spat the name as she raised an accusing arm to point at Harry, "raised his wand and cursed poor Draco." She finished with a sob escaping her lips as she covered her mouth with her hand.

And I'm the Minister of Magic, Severus thought to himself.

"Draco," he said, flicking his gaze to rest on the spoilt child, "go to the hospital wing at once and let Madam Pomfrey take a look at you."

"Yes, sir," he replied before picking up his bag and heading off in the direction of the hospital wing.

Severus waited until he was gone before rounding on Harry.

When will he learn to choose his battles? Severus asked himself.

"Potter," he said with as much loathing as he could muster under the circumstances. Harry's head was raised, blood still oozing slowly from his nose, his ruined glasses hanging from his ears. "You will serve detention with me every night for a week, and I think a subtraction of fifty points should discourage this behaviour in the future. I thought you would have grown up by seventeen, but obviously that assumption does not apply to Gryffindors." Severus sneered at Harry as his mouth opened to retort.

Think, boy. Severus pushed the thought into Harry's head, and Harry's eyes widened for a second before he hung his head with a look of quiet resignation.

"Now, into class all of you, before I start deducting points," Severus boomed as everyone hastened into the classroom, leaving Harry alone in the corridor, stuffing his belongings into his bag.

Pansy, passing him, snickered behind her hand.

Harry looked up to see Severus waiting for him. As he got back to his feet and swung his schoolbag up to his shoulder, he felt his glasses rearrange themselves on his face. Reaching up a hand in shock, he felt that his glasses were no longer broken and his nose had stopped bleeding. The professor had a look of agitation on his face as Harry quickly scurried past him and into the classroom, taking his seat to the back of the room.

At least he now had the perfect reason to come down to the dungeons nightly. He'd never been caught, but it was only a matter of time, and now he'd no longer have to use his Invisibility Cloak to reach the dungeons undetected. He didn't consider himself to be any good at the cloak and dagger stuff; perhaps it was because he was a Gryffindor and rushed into battle without thinking about his actions beforehand.

The Professor had given him a perfect alibi as to why he would be in the dungeons at night. He wouldn't have to avoid the Slytherins, as they wouldn't dare taunt him or try to duel him whilst he was on his way to detention with their Head of House.

Thank you, Severus. Thank you. Harry acknowledged the Potions Master wordlessly within his own mind.

To my wonderful beta AmyLouise, thank you so very much for finding my mistakes and making my writing flow better. Love and hugs to you. I seriously don't know what I would do without you.

This chapter is dedicated to my grandmother who sadly passed away earlier this month. She really loved to read, and even read my first story that I wrote. I know she is smiling down on me and helping me with life in general. All I can say is that this has been one rough year so far.

Reviews, as always, are appreciated.

Suspicious Mind

Chapter 12 of 25

Voldemort suspects Severus of double dealing and gives him an impossible task. Albus asks Harry to stay at Hogwarts.

Lord Voldemort was, by nature, a person of suspicion and distrust; he therefore had one mantra locked away in his cold-blooded heart and mind: "keep your friends close and your enemies even closer". Not even his most loyal followers were ever given all the information that was in his head; they were each told only enough to allow them to complete a set task and no more, and only Voldemort himself could put all the pieces of the quite complex puzzle together.

It was hardly surprising, then, that he suspected that Severus Snape, close to the Hogwarts headmaster through his teaching post, could be playing both sides, though he wasn't absolutely confident in making such an assumption. He was unable to see anything in the wizard's mind that could compromise him, but however clever Severus was, he was more so, and he kept him close, playing with him at times as a cat plays with a mouse it plans to devour.

Another reason for keeping Severus close was the reality that his skill at potion making was unequalled by anyone else. He was finicky to a degree; nothing else mattered when Severus was brewing. The whole world could fall apart around his head, but he would be unwavering in his devotion to his current project. Voldemort was particularly fond of that level of commitment in his followers if only he could find more supporters that were as dedicated as Severus. So, while Voldemort occasionally fantasised about getting rid of his personal potions brewer, he knew his value and allowed him to live until such time as he ceased to be of further use to him.

When Fenrir Greyback, that disgusting, mangy werewolf, had come to him whining that one of his packs to the far north had revolted, lured away by Remus Lupin, he knew he had the perfect task to test Severus's loyalties. It would not only appease the unkempt werewolf, but it would put his suspicious mind to rest once and for all. Severus would be given the task of killing the Order's resident werewolf.

There would be no need to present Severus with an option the wizard would know without being told that failure to comply would result in torture and a slow, agonising death. For a wizard like Severus, his own survival would come before all else. Humans were so predictable, after all.

It seemed as though the Potter boy had learnt a thing or two since they had last met. He had obviously gained the knowledge of Occlumency, no doubt from that vexatious headmaster who was hiding behind his school, and Voldemort could no longer enter the boy's head.

No matter, he could find other ways to torment him. He would strike at his friends. He already had the Mudblood, and though sorely tempted to bait Potter with this knowledge, he knew that his plan for the unveiling of the Mudblood when they next met in battle was a sound one.

He could imagine the look on the boy's face when he recognised her. An evil half smile crossed his face as he closed his eyes and drank in the scene pictured within his mind.

Exquisite.

The Potter boy would fail to carry out his allotted task, the opposition would collapse, and he, Lord Voldemort, would be victorious. All would bow down to him, and Mudbloods and blood traitors would be eliminated from the wizarding world.

But first things first, he would have to call Severus and inform him of his plan to destroy the werewolf. The plan was perfect; whether Severus succeeded in carrying out his task or not, the outcome would be the loss of a valuable member of Dumbledore's precious Order.

Bringing his wand to his own left forearm, he concentrated on calling Severus, not too harshly at first, just enough to let him know that he was needed; Severus well knew the punishment that would be dealt out if he didn't answer the call quickly.

Dumbledore sat behind the desk in his office, scratching at his wiry beard with his left hand. So deep in thought was he that when Fawkes let out a high pitched trill, he paid no mind to the phoenix.

The N.E.W.T.s were over, and so was Harry's education at Hogwarts. Albus was mourning this a little, for how could he guide Harry to follow his ways without being a constant figure in the young man's life? There was so much more to teach Harry, and time was quickly running out.

Tom Riddle and his followers, the Death Eaters, were stepping up the war; however, instead of keeping it within the wizarding world, they were going after helpless Muggles. The Muggle authorities called it the work of terrorists, but the Order knew better. Every night there would be a random act of brutality and violence, and by the time Albus had a chance to gather the Order, all that was left of the site was a burning building and hovering over it in the sky would be the Dark Mark.

The headmaster sighed deeply. He knew this had to end and end soon. But Harry wasn't yet proficient enough to face Tom. He had wanted the boy to enjoy as much of his childhood as possible. Although Albus knew they were at war, he did have a conscience and had even, to a certain degree, encouraged some of Harry's recklessness. How was he to learn otherwise? Besides, he had Severus keep an eye on the boy and his friends, so he was never truly in danger.

His mind suddenly turned back to the present as a brief knock on the door heralded the arrival of the subject of his thoughts, and he sat up straighter in his chair.

"Come in, Harry."

A moment later the office door opened and a flushed looking Harry Potter entered the room, his eyes on the headmaster.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" he asked, slightly out of breath.

"Yes, yes, my boy. Oh, do please take a seat. Lemon drop?" Albus asked, holding out the bowl to the young man, a serene smile on his wrinkled face.

"No, thanks, sir," Harry replied, taking his seat.

"Oh, well, your loss then," Albus said, placing the bowl back onto the table.

Steeping his hands together, he looked over his half-moon spectacles into Harry's green eyes. He had grown into a fine, capable young man.

"Let me get straight to the point of this meeting. I was wondering what your plans are, Harry, now that you have completed your education?" Albus asked, showing no sign of the inner turmoil he was feeling.

Harry sat forward in his chair. "I thought perhaps I would join the Aurors if my N.E.W.T. scores are good enough, that is." A frown marred his forehead, and for a split second, Albus didn't need Legilimency to see his wish to be a normal wizard without the constant threat of death and a war that he knew was bound to happen sooner rather than later.

"Ah, a fine plan, Harry, very fine indeed. Have you given any thought to where you would live whilst going through the training?"

"No, sir, I haven't thought that far ahead. As you know, I still have the summer, and Ron and I were talking about perhaps going to the Burrow for that."

"I see," Albus replied, his forehead crinkling into a frown.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Harry asked, genuinely confused.

"Harry, may I be blunt with you?"

"Of course, sir," Harry replied, his green eyes anxiously looked at the aged wizard before him.

"It's just that I don't know how safe you would be at the Burrow, Harry," Albus said, and he let out a little sigh. "As Tom's forces grow daily, I fear that the Order are

stretched rather thin, and I don't believe we could protect you fully."

"What do you suggest then?" Harry asked, ruffling up his hair in an unconscious motion.

"I think you would be best protected here, at Hogwarts."

"But, sir, I am no coward, and if Voldemort wants me, what's to stop him getting to the people I care about or even coming onto Hogwarts grounds?"

"Harry, I'm not saying that you are a coward or that anyone for whom you care will not be hurt; I am merely suggesting that you stay here, inside these wards, where I can protect you fully and train you for the coming confrontation."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut for a moment; he didn't want Voldemort going for the Weasleys or any of his other friends whilst he hid in the school, but he also recognised the sense of the headmaster's words. He was ill-prepared to face Voldemort; Severus had shown him that. The previous times he had faced him, he had survived on sheer luck; he thought that he might not be so fortunate the next time.

Looking up into the headmaster's kind, grandfatherly face, he drew in a deep breath before letting it gush out of his mouth.

"Can you guarantee that you will protect my friends as best you can and that no one else will be taken and tortured in my place?" he asked. His voice sounded weak to his own ears, as he knew he would do what the headmaster asked regardless of the situation.

"Of course I can make no such guarantee, Harry, and I would be foolish to lie to you. This is war, my boy, and people will die, but I am trying to prepare you for something that is a certainty. You will face Voldemort, one way or another, and I am trying to give you the upper hand when the time comes. Now, I cannot force you to stay, Harry, but you should know that it would be foolhardy of you not to take what I am offering you."

Harry sat there and weighed up the headmaster's words while he nervously rubbed at his scar. He wanted this war to be over and the sooner the better, in his opinion. He didn't want to lose more friends and family members, and he considered the Weasleys to be the family he had never had. It was hard enough to lose Hermione, and every time he thought about her, it broke his heart just that little bit more. He was slowly coming to terms with it though, as he knew that no amount of tears or temper tantrums would bring her back. He had to be strong, for Hermione. The only thing he didn't understand was that Voldemort wasn't taunting him with the fact that he had tortured and broken his best friend.

He was so sure that he would have felt something when Hermione had died and had discussed this with Ron, who just shook his head as though revisiting these painful memories was just too much for him. So he had kept it to himself.

Hermione was the closest thing he had had to a sister. He had thought that she had been smart enough to have sent him some sort of message, even if it were in the form of a dream, but he hadn't felt anything, dreamt nothing except for his usual nightmares, and in this one thing he had felt more cheated than he had in the past. He was no longer denying the fact that she was dead, gone, never to return, but without a body to be laid to rest, he thought that he had not had the proper closure.

Perhaps after the war is over, he thought, filing that task away for later.

He allowed his mind to wander over the previous weeks when, in one of his late night detentions with Severus, he had maintained his Occlumency shields long enough to prevent the dark-haired wizard from breaking through into his mind.

He had wanted to yell out in triumph but suddenly felt so emotionally and physically drained that all he could manage was to let out a strangled cry as he cradled his head in his hands and tears ran unchecked down his face.

With Severus's teaching of Occlumency he had not had a vision through his scar for at least a month, and he silently cheered that fact. But what the headmaster was saying was factual he just wasn't ready to battle the world's most powerful Dark wizard and expect to come out victorious.

Looking up into Dumbledore's kind blue eyes, he thought very carefully about what he was about to commit himself to.

"Okay," he half whispered before stating in a much stronger voice, "I'll stay here if you think it will help me defeat Voldemort."

Harry saw the twinkle return to the headmaster's eyes as he smiled gently at Harry before clapping his hands together and declaring, "Marvellous," and he stood up from behind his desk.

Harry stood too; he felt weary, as though he had just run a marathon, and his heart was fluttering around in his chest. Deep down, Harry felt a bit resentful at the headmaster's request, but he knew that Voldemort wouldn't stop until he, Harry, was either dead or had vanquished him and his Death Eaters to the fiery pits of hell.

Harry had grown up in the past few months, and losing Hermione played an enormous part in that. Also his new-found friendship with Severus had helped him deal with the loss of his best friend. It was hard, but Harry was as determined as ever to see it through. Then, once this entire mess was dealt with, perhaps he could lie down and mourn Hermione properly.

Until then, however, he was bound to keep fighting for everyone whose lives had been lost due to Voldemort and the Death Eaters. He was the only one who could stop this madness once and for all.

Severus had been overwhelmed with a strangely heightened feeling of anxiety and a sense of malice since he had awoken that morning. The feeling did not desist throughout the day.

Preparing himself for the Leaving Feast, he was straightening his robes over his body when his left forearm started to throb and tingle.

He was being Summoned, as he had expected, although he had thought it wouldn't be until tomorrow. Severus knew what this particular meeting would entail. Harry Potter was graduating this evening, and no doubt Voldemort would want to know where he would be heading after he left Hogwarts.

Sighing, although there was no one around to hear him, he flung his robes off and reached down to the hidden panel in the bottom of his wardrobe, revealing his Death Eater mask and robes.

Sneering at the hateful reminders of the youthful mistake that had brought him to his present predicament, he hastily donned his robe and mask.

Making his way towards the Forbidden Forest, he sent his Patronus back towards the castle with a message to be delivered to Albus.

When Severus Apparated, he found himself positioned in the middle of a bare marsh. The wind was blowing fiercely, and although the breeze was warm, he still shivered as he stood out in the open, uncovered space with not a tree in sight. It was not a particularly encouraging scene, and he knew he was no longer in Scotland. He had half expected to find himself outside the familiar fortress where Lord Voldemort normally assembled his followers. It was not a good omen that Voldemort had chosen to conduct this meeting elsewhere.

"Severus," the chilling voice of his other Master hit his ears from somewhere behind him, and he immediately whirled around and dropped to the ground, eyes downcast, waiting to see how his Lord would proceed.

"All of my servants were unfaithful to an extent in my absence, but none of them have been dim-witted enough to be insubordinate since my return. Severus, I thought

better of you. You, above all, are my most intelligent disciple. I still remember the day when you first came to me. Yes, you were arrogant even then, but do you remember why you came to me, Severus?" Voldemort paused, not really expecting an answer from the wizard prostrate before him. His eyes narrowed, while his slit-like nostrils flared slightly.

"Well, perhaps I shall refresh your memory a little for you." Voldemort was circling the downed wizard now, like a shark would circle its prey, and Severus felt truly afraid, not for his own life, but for those of the others, the side of Light. What would they do without their spy?

He dared not move a muscle; he knew these petty mind games the Dark Lord liked to play with his followers and had seen the others grovelling to appease their Master. Severus knew the Dark Lord saw these followers as weak-minded fools who had something to hide, and therefore they were punished severely whether they were concealing something or not.

"Tell me, Severus, are you frightened?" The lunatic changed the subject abruptly, his cruel hiss breaking Severus out of his thoughts, and he jumped slightly.

Voldemort's ruthless laugh rang through Severus's entire body, and he inwardly shivered whilst maintaining his Occlumency shields.

"Answer me!" Voldemort demanded as his hushed footsteps came to an abrupt halt in front of the Potions Master.

"No, my Lord, for I have nothing to hide from you," Severus replied, trying to maintain the steady rhythm of even breaths even as he felt water seeping into his clothes from his prolonged exposure to the soggy grounds. He was, to put it mildly, very uncomfortable.

"You may rise, Severus."

Severus got to his feet, straightening up, but he dared not hope for a reprieve. Dared not look into the eyes of the madman standing before him. For that was what Lord Voldemort was: a megalomaniac who was unstable enough to harm those who were trying to assist him in his insane cause.

"Look at me." And Severus looked up into his eyes then, putting everything he had into his Occlumency shields. He was stunned when he did not feel the Dark Lord's presence in his mind. Instead, he just stared at Severus with his red eyes, studying him as though he were an insect, small and insignificant.

"What of the Potter boy?" Voldemort unexpectedly asked, his gaze still penetrating. "Tonight he graduates; where will he go?"

"There has been much speculation, but thus far the headmaster remains close-lipped in regard to Potter," Severus responded, amazed at the Dark wizard's change of discussion.

"It appears that you have not outlived your usefulness yet, Severus." Voldemort spoke in a heated voice, the breeze fluttering his cloak around him as Severus stayed absolutely still, taking great care not to show the relief on his face.

"I have an assignment for you," Voldemort continued, his eyes lighting up with glee, "I want you to eliminate the Order's werewolf. Remus Lupin."

Lord Voldemort stopped in front of Severus as though gauging his reactions to this order. As always, Severus showed no response to his Lord's commands.

"You may leave now, as I find myself growing rather tired of your presence." He turned around and dismissed Severus, using his pale, spidery hand.

"Yes, my Lord," Severus replied as he bowed quickly.

Pulling his wand from the inner pocket of his robes, he was about to Disapparate when his Master spoke once more.

"Don't forget, Severus," he hissed, his voice infused with frozen venom, "I have spies at Hogwarts that even you don't know of. If word gets back to me of your failure in carrying out my orders, I shall be most displeased."

A shiver ran down Severus spine as he tried to regain his composure.

"Of course, my Lord," Severus hastened to answer, startled to hear this. He knew that Voldemort was not bluffing. If one thing was true about the evil bastard, it was that he never jested about such things.

Severus was sitting in his favoured chair in front of the cold, bare fireplace in his dungeon sitting room. It was free of any warmth, just like its owner. He was chilled to the bone, the cold making its way through his veins as he sat in his chair before the fireplace looking but not truly seeing anything.

His Death Eater cloak and mask were thrown into the corner of the room; he had not even bothered to cast a drying charm on his pants.

He hadn't felt it necessary to report back to the headmaster. Besides, what would he tell him? That he was charged with killing the last remaining Marauder? Either that or perish himself? He knew it was a test of his loyalty to the Dark Lord, and he also knew that Albus would seek him out eventually, as the wards of the school had undoubtedly told him of his return.

Speak of the devil, Severus thought resentfully, not even acknowledging the figure that had entered his room.

"Ah, Severus, I see that you have made it back to Hogwarts in one piece again," Albus joked, the slight hint of merriment in his voice doing nothing to dispel Severus's dark mood. Severus did not reply as he continued to stare into the unlit fire.

"You were missed at the Leaving Feast," Dumbledore continued, before he conjured up his own comfortable chair next to the brooding wizard and sat down, waiting for the dark-haired man to speak.

Albus didn't have to wait long, as Severus got to his feet and started pacing back and forth like a big cat in a cage.

"My orders are to execute Lupin," Severus said bluntly, getting straight to the point as he continued to pace.

The headmaster, although taken aback by this news, chose to remain silent, his eyes the only part of him moving as he watched the man before him continue in his relentless pacing. Albus knew he had not finished.

The Potions master stopped in front of the headmaster and glared at him. "Don't you have anything to say, or is it just that you didn't hear me?" Severus spat. Albus knew he was getting irritated now; the Potions professor was so predictable.

"I heard you, Severus, and do please sit down so we can discuss this like two rational adults." Severus continued to glare down his nose at the wizard in front of him before finally flopping back into his chair to stare once more at the fireplace.

Albus looked over at Severus, and an impression of sadness appeared on his face as he continued to gaze at the man who appeared to be made of stone. Severus neither blinked nor appeared to be breathing, and Albus cleared his throat before continuing.

"Why didn't you contact me as soon as you returned to the school?" Albus asked, as a way of getting the younger man to break free of his self imposed melancholy.

Severus closed his eyes briefly, a hand coming up to rub the bridge of his nose. "I knew you would be able to find me if you deemed it necessary. I needed the time to

reflect on the meeting with my *other* Master." Severus was bone weary as he unwillingly countered Albus's question. He spoke the truth, but perhaps it had been because he was too spineless to speak to the headmaster and was trying to put off the inevitable.

He winced faintly at that thought.

Albus made a humming noise in the back of his throat and sat there waiting for Severus to continue. The silence was almost unnerving as both men sat there in the dark, cold dungeon room.

"Needless to say, I cannot go through with it," Severus said while still staring into the cold grate.

"We will work something out," Albus replied, looking at his spy through the corner of his eye.

Severus sighed. It was the sound of a man condemned. He was tired of this infernal war, tired of serving two masters, but above all, he was just tired. He scrubbed at his face with both of his hands before resting them on the arms of his chair.

"Don't fret about it, my dear boy, we will work out something," Albus repeated, placing a hand on the reluctant spy's arm.

Severus grunted in response as both wizards continued to gaze into the unlit grate before them.

This chapter was beta read by the wonderful AmyLouise. Thanks so much babe.

I'd like to know what you, as my reader, would like to see more of. Please let me know in a review.

Lessons Learnt

Chapter 13 of 25

Harry gets his O.W.L. results. Draco has some fun at Hermione's expense.

Harry was bored out of his mind. He'd been told by the headmaster that he wasn't to leave his rooms without the aid of his Invisibility Cloak and only then if he were summoned by a professor, or in an emergency. Having just finished breakfast in his rooms, he was lying on the bed debating with himself what he would do today.

Missing his Gryffindor classmates terribly, longing for any company at all, he got up and paced around his room. He stopped in front of his trunk, his hands itching to open it, grab his cloak and go outside for a walk. It was a truly beautiful day outside and the sun shone brightly through the window above his bed.

Without warning, he heard tapping on the window and jumped. He looked over to the welcome distraction. It was an ordinary looking brown owl that was flapping its wings outside the window. Happy to be distracted from his boredom, he strode to the window, opened it and let the owl in. Harry quickly tore the offered letter from its leg and shooed it off, closing the window.

It was his N.E.W.T. results. He hastily ripped open the envelope with shaky hands, anxiety rising in the pit of his stomach as he quickly scanned the official letter. He couldn't believe his eyes and did a double take.

His feet were faster in responding than his brain as he raced down to the dungeons and burst through the door without knocking.

"I got 'Outstanding' in Potions," he shouted excitedly, waving his transcript in the air in front of him. His breathing was a little laboured with the adrenaline rush, not to mention the fact that he had sprinted the entire way to the dungeons.

Severus looked up from the cauldron he was currently stirring, raising one graceful eyebrow.

"What happened to knocking before you enter, Potter? And where, pray tell, is your Invisibility Cloak? Did the headmaster not explain to you the importance of discretion on your part?" he asked, his hand never wavering from his task.

Harry blushed faintly and ducked his head before continuing. "I thought you would be interested to know, that's all," he answered sheepishly.

"We are at war, in case you had not noticed. If you need to speak with me use the Floo, or did the headmaster neglect to tell you about the pot on the mantle in your rooms?" he questioned, looking back down to the cauldron before taking out the stirring rod and placing it neatly onto the desk.

Harry had the sense to look chastised. "No, sir, the headmaster explained everything. I was just so shocked at the results that I ran down here without thinking. I assure you, it won't happen again." Harry shuffled his feet as he spoke to the ground. He mentally kicked himself for acting so foolishly.

"Do you doubt my ability as a professor, Potter?" Severus sneered before adding, "Were you seen by anyone? Perhaps a ghost?"

"I don't think so," Harry replied, his face lifting to look at the wizard before him, and Severus couldn't help but look into the eyes of the young man the eyes of his one love, Lily, long dead, staring eerily back at him.

Severus let out a huff. "Very good, Potter. And pray tell, what did you attain in Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

"'Outstanding'," Harry replied as he scanned the parchment in his hand.

"I see." The Potions master went over to the sink and washed up the rod as well as his hands, wiping them methodically before turning back to Harry.

"As I have done all I can for the day, let's go and put that 'Outstanding' into practice," Severus huffed, a slight quirk upon his lips, before sweeping over to Harry, his wand extended.

Harry shied away from the wand and almost pulled his own before Severus tapped him once on the head. He felt the telltale signs of a Disillusionment Charm as the effects made its way down his body and he shivered at the frosty feeling caused by the charm.

Almost before Harry could blink, Severus had made his way to the door of his classroom and was gone in a flurry of robes.

Harry stood there dumbfounded for a couple of seconds before he hastily shoved the letter into one of the pockets of his robes. He quickly caught up with Severus, the door to Severus's classroom slamming shut behind him, but he had to jog keep up with the wizard's longer strides.

Severus made several twists and turns, using short cuts that Harry had not known about previously. Before long, Harry was lost and had no idea where they were heading. When Severus came to an abrupt halt, Harry almost ran into him, pulling up quickly to avoid the collision.

Severus started to pace back and forth, and it was then that Harry realised where they were standing. They were in front of the Room of Requirement, and his brow furrowed as he tried to work out why they were here of all places.

The door magically appeared in the wall, and Severus strode over to it in his usual melodramatic way and yanked on the door handle. Harry had enough sense to follow the wizard quickly into the room before the door closed.

Harry gasped in surprise as he took in his surroundings. They were standing by an exact replica of the Hogwarts lake.

Severus paused at the foot of the lake. The light was reflecting off the surface, and the water was calm and peaceful. He turned abruptly to face Harry, lifting his wand and tapping him on the head again. As Harry appeared visible once more, he was staring at Severus, a look of uncertainty on his face.

"I trust you know how to run, Potter?"

A moment's hesitation on the boy's part was all Severus needed for the familiar sneer to appear on his face.

"It is moderately uncomplicated really; as you have demonstrated that you know how to walk, all you do is speed up the process," Severus continued sardonically.

"I know how to run, you g..." Harry mumbled.

"Manners, boy. Now since you say you know what to do, I suggest you start running around the lake, and I will tell you when to stop."

Harry was dumbfounded. How was running even remotely linked with Defence Against the Dark Arts? Any idiot could run.

Severus folded his arms across his chest as he raised his eyebrow once more.

Harry groaned as he took off his outer robe and folded it neatly. He was not even wearing what he would consider running gear, but at least he was wearing his trainers. He took off at a fast-paced jog around the lake, counting each footfall as it came down.

"Stupid running," he voiced, but continued nonetheless around the large lake. He had been quite perplexed when he had seen what the room had provided for them, and he still had no idea what it was all about. All he knew was that his legs were becoming tired and he was beginning to sweat.

Running a hand across his forehead as he reached the starting point once more, he stopped near the dark-haired wizard, trying to make his breath return to normal by taking in lungful after lungful of oxygen.

"Did I tell you to stop?" snapped the professor.

"No, but..."

"Then I suggest you continue."

Harry groaned louder this time as he took off around the lake for the second lap. He was thankful for the fact that he was an athlete, playing Quidditch for Gryffindor, but he knew he used different muscles riding a broom than for running, and his legs felt like dead weights attached to his body.

"One, two, three, four," he counted under his breath.

Out of nowhere, a spell grazed his shoulder, and he was falling to the ground, frantically looking around for the enemy whilst trying to keep his glasses on his face. Another spell; this one was closer, and he scrambled to find some cover in the bushes beside the lake and draw his wand.

"Shit," he swore, trying to will his breathing to slow down so he could pinpoint where the assault was coming from. Suddenly he realised that he had left his wand in his outer robes next to Severus, halfway across the lake.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit," he cursed and began to panic. No doubt that it was Severus who was trying to prove a point by sending the spells his way. He wouldn't really hurt him, would he?

Great, he thought to himself, some hero of the wizarding world I turned out to be. I can't even remember to take my wand with me.

He continued to berate himself until another jet of red light shot over to the right of where he was hiding. Harry was just about to make a run for it when Severus appeared out of nowhere in front of him.

"Really, it looks as if they hand out O's like lollies nowadays," Severus scoffed as he stood there with his wand pointed at Harry, a fleeting grin on his face.

"You berk," Harry shouted, jumping up from where he was crouched beside the bushes and pushing Severus back with both hands.

Severus faulted as he stumbled backwards a couple of paces, not expecting the physical assault.

"Resorting to physical violence, I see," Severus commented as he looked down at the young man who was still gulping for air. "It is the refuge of the intellectually weak."

"You almost gave me a heart attack, Severus," Harry explained, a little calmer now, as he brushed the leaves and twigs off his clothes and hair.

"Well, perhaps next time you will bear in mind that you do have a fully functioning wand. It does not leave your side, no matter what activity you are currently pursuing, is that understood?"

Harry nodded his head solemnly. He hated to look like a fool in front of Severus, but he knew it was a lesson he would not forget in a hurry.

The professor produced Harry's wand from one of his many side pockets and proffered it to the young man. Harry took it eagerly and evaluated the feel of it in his hand, turning it over and over again. It felt right, like an extension of his very being.

"You have learnt a very valuable lesson today, Harry," Severus said sternly. "Your wand is a part of who you are. Use that fact to your advantage."

Severus turned abruptly, having put his point across, and made his way back to the door of the Room of Requirement.

Harry, suitably chastised, gathered his robes and jogged once more to catch up to his mentor, following him out of the room. This had without a doubt been a lesson he would commit to memory.

Draco had taken the Dark Mark the night he had left Hogwarts. He had knelt before the Dark Lord and held out his left forearm, which was bared up to the elbow. The blond-haired wizard had felt an agonising pain shoot straight from the Dark Lord's wand into his forearm and race around his body. He had closed his eyes briefly, trying to deal with the pain, gritting his teeth together to keep himself from crying out. When he had opened them briefly, he had caught sight of his father through the corner of his eye and had seen the pride in his father's eyes; seen the way the elder Malfoy had stood taller, his presence somehow stronger in stature, than Draco had ever seen before. And so he endured this anguish deep within his very core, for the look of pride in his father's usually cold grey eyes.

These thoughts were running through his head as he made his way down the narrow staircase that led to the dungeons. He truly hated it down here as it was damp, and the mould hung in the air with a stench that seeped right into his clothes and wouldn't come out. But still he came. As the wall sconces flared to life, casting an unearthly glow upon the dismal space, he strutted his way along the corridor, inspecting the heavy oak doors that lay to his left.

Draco had left Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry the previous month and having fulfilled all his prior obligations, he was feeling bored and decided to have a little fun with the slaves his father kept down here.

Wrinkling up his nose at the dampness that this place held, he went to the far end of the dungeons and decided to make his way backwards. He would inspect all of the slaves and make his mind up which one would be his conquest for the evening.

Standing before the door at the end, he felt a weird tingling in his very centre. He shook himself and ran his hand through his hair and over his handsome face. Shaking his head at his own foolishness, he opened the heavy wooden door and stepped through.

The blond-haired boy took out his wand as a precaution and lit the sconces on the far wall. That accomplished, he took two more steps into the cell and looked around. His eyes immediately went to the right where he spied an old wooden table with a bowl of broth, an apple and a glass of water.

Pitiful, he thought to himself as he scanned the rest of this small cell.

Suddenly something rushed from under the bed, and Draco, in disbelief, took a couple of steps backwards, wand held out in front of him as he prepared to defend himself. But the attack never came; instead, he saw a woman splay herself at the edge of his feet.

'I await your command, Master.' He heard the words from a strangely familiar female voice enter his head.

Staggering backwards in disbelief, he still held his wand at the figure before him.

"Did you speak to me?" he asked, confusion clouding his voice.

'Yes, Master,' she replied once more in his mind.

Draco took a couple of hesitant steps forward and came to stand before the creature. She was clearly in the position of submission with her hands at her side and her knees tucked up under her body. Her head was touching the cold floor.

"Interesting," Draco said more to himself than to her. "My father is a genius." He smirked, putting his wand away and rubbing his chin with his hand.

Draco could sense her confusion at his spoken words.

"Sit up so I can get a good look at you," he sneered, the shock all but dissipating and a sense of awe taking its place.

She did as she was bade and sat back on her heels, her arms touching the ground at her side. She raised her chin but carefully looked down at the man's boots.

A shocked gasp was the only response she received as she saw the boots take a quick step backwards.

"Granger," Draco whispered, a mix of terror and trepidation in his voice.

She was confused. The blond-haired man that she had previously addressed as 'Master' had called her only 'slave', or sometimes 'Mudblood', but never 'Granger'. She had never heard this particular name used by him before.

"Is that really you?" he asked, taking a slow step forward.

Draco laughed. "Merlin, it is." The laughter rang in his voice. "How the mighty have fallen, hey, Mudblood," he spoke, the air of supremacy quickly seeping into his voice once more.

Now there was a name she recognised, and she straightened her back a little more.

He was now circling her as if she were his prey. She was used to this however, and thought nothing of it.

"I thought you were dead," Draco stated with an air of wonderment, "and to think, my own father had you here all along." He paused before continuing, "He never told me about you. All this time, I thought you were dead."

"Stand up," he jeered, and he watched her get to her feet with her head bowed. He took out his wand once more, tapping it into his open left palm.

"Wait until word of this gets back to Scarface and Weasel," he said, his eyes lighting up and a smirk crossing his face. "That is, once I've had you, of course," Draco's tone turned deadly, and he grabbed her by her hair and shoved her away from him. She fell to the floor but didn't utter a sound.

"Strip," he hissed as he once again pointed his wand at the female before him.

She pushed herself up onto her knees as she began to undo the torn robe that she had worn for as long as she could remember.

It was then that Draco noticed the metal collar that was around her neck and the various marks from the blade, whip and other torture devices adorning her body. His eyes opened wide as her tattered robe dropped to the floor.

'I am yours to command, Master,' she spoke once more inside his head, but her tone was flat, as though it was a practised command instead of something she truly wanted.

He struck swiftly as he came up behind her and put a boot in between her shoulder blades and kicked hard. It sent her sprawling across the room, but she had long ago learnt to mask the sounds of pain and surprise, and not so much as a whimper escaped her lips.

Draco advanced on her; she could hear his boots stomping across the small room, and she wanted to cringe, to roll herself into a tiny ball, but she knew better. And so she stayed where she had fallen, awaiting whatever it was that would be meted out by the man behind her, who loathed her so and was very angry with her.

His boots stopped suddenly, and she heard his ragged breathing, which was coming out in quick pants. Then he spoke aloud once more, and she had to wonder why he was not speaking into her mind like her other Master had.

"He has branded you?" he asked, and she noticed that his voice held a hint of panic. "I suppose you do belong to him," he said, his voice now showing nothing but contempt.

He brought his wand up and traced along the LM that was seared into her lower back. She neither flinched nor tried to move away, as she had learnt to just take whatever her Master handed out; he could always make it ten times worse.

"You disgust me, you know," Draco suddenly spat, removing his wand. He moved briskly in front of her, still breathing harshly.

"Look at me," he whispered, his voice taking on an ugly tone that she had heard too often.

Pushing herself up off the ground, she knelt down before him and raised her head carefully, looking at his boots instead of in his eyes.

"I said, look at me," he growled, but she couldn't bring her head up quickly enough to comply with her master's wishes.

She never even saw it coming; he backhanded her across the face and sent her flying once more across the room. He was upon her in an instant, and he brought his boot down on the side of her face. She saw stars as her jaw exploded, but still no sound came out of her tightly pressed lips.

"*Crucio*," he yelled as he pointed his wand at her. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead as he concentrated all of his hatred towards the woman before him.

She wanted to die. All of the blood running through her veins felt as though it had been replaced with liquid lava, her nerves twisting as her body betrayed her. Her back arched as her eyes rolled back in their sockets. Her mouth opened as though she was about to scream but no sound came out. She tried to crawl away, but every movement caused her more pain, and she finally whimpered in desperation.

Draco ended the curse, panting heavily. He wiped the sweat that was trickling down his forehead on to the sleeve of his robe.

"See, I knew you weren't mute," he laughed.

'Yes, *Master*,' she panted, still in excruciating pain.

He was on her again in a flash and pulled up her arm roughly to make her stand up. The right side of her face was swollen, and her jaw looked as though it was broken. She was shaky on her legs, but he didn't give a fuck.

"You will speak to me when you're spoken to," he spat viciously in her face. She could smell his breath, and he dropped her arm and took a couple of steps away from her before spinning on his heel and facing her once more. His wand was raised and she was screaming inside her head for this nightmare to end.

Her other master was never this cruel. Since she had the collar on, there was no need for that, and she knew how to read her master's mood and play along accordingly. This master, however, was different. She had never laid eyes on him before, but he looked like a younger version of her other master, perhaps his son. But he was unpredictable at best, and she didn't know what to expect.

"Now, Mudblood," he spat out the word as if he were sullyng his mouth with something distasteful, "we are going to play a game," he jeered at her. "This game has consequences, though," he paused before continuing, "so I want you to do exactly as I say, and if you do not comply, or are too slow in carrying out my wishes, you will be punished." He spoke as though he were speaking to a child, enunciating each word carefully.

He was circling her once more, and she tried very hard to listen to the words he was saying, but it was difficult with the blood rushing in her ears and her nerves still twitching painfully.

"Take me into your mouth," he said as he undid his trousers.

She did as he asked, immediately dropping to her knees on the unrelenting stone floor. Gods, her body was in pain, but she wasn't about to disobey a direct order; the collar saw to that.

As she knelt before him, she opened her mouth to receive his slightly soft prick, and it felt like every muscle in her jaw snapped. She couldn't protest even if she wanted to, and he hummed his approval as he slid into her warm, wet mouth.

He hardened rapidly as he started to thrust eagerly inside her mouth.

Her other master, the one she knew well, had taught her to deep throat, if by teaching it was meant that she had no choice but to take it all in or choke. She was nothing if not a quick learner.

Draco closed his eyes and threw his head back. He never thought the Mudblood would feel this good, and his hands came up and wrapped into her hair harshly, pulling himself deeper into her waiting mouth. His movement was getting more and more erratic as he neared his completion.

With one final deep thrust, he came inside her mouth, shooting his warm seed down her throat. He groaned out loud as he came, and when he was done he pushed her away from him and quickly did up his trousers.

She was lying on her side, and she didn't move as she heard him rustling behind her.

"That was acceptable," he sneered as his breathing slowed down to its normal pace once more. "I knew that mouth was good for something besides the answers to every question. I shall be back later for a repeat performance."

And with that, he left her lying there in the flicker of light, bruised and broken. She didn't move from the spot, as she was too afraid of what would happen if he were to return.

Draco made his way up from the dungeons, a huge smirk on his face. He was humming softly to himself.

Who would have thought that Granger could give such good head, he thought as his smirk widened into an unpleasant grin.

He was still wearing the grin when he entered his father's library, to see Lucius himself sitting before the fireplace.

"My, my, but we are pleased with ourselves, aren't we," Lucius mocked as he looked up from the Dark Arts text he was currently perusing.

After months of fruitless searching, he had found this Dark text, which was proving to be quite promising in finding the secret of the hidden power behind the collar now adorning the neck of the Mudblood, currently safely tucked away in his dungeons. It seemed, from his readings so far, that a mixture of blood, an open wound, and bodily secretions opened up a whole new world of possibilities to the captor. He wondered idly if Voldemort knew of the power he could wield with this particular formula. It was feasible that his master had overlooked this possibility, but he wouldn't be willing to bet his life on it.

He thought back to the brand he had given her, no less than his own initials, which lay engraved upon her flesh in the small of her back. He could always change it to an 'LV', though he doubted that his Lord would ever sully his eyes by looking at the Mudblood's naked body. Being more reptilian than human, he wasn't interested in the needs of his body. Lucius thought, not for the first time, that was why his Lord had wizards like himself carry out the sexual torture and rape of prisoners instead of doing it

himself.

He had tried to erase his brand, thinking his Master would be infuriated with him for marking something that was not his own, but no amount of healing spells or Dark Magic put so much as a dent in the scarred flesh. After hours of failed attempts, he had been so frustrated that he took it out on the slave instead.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Draco asked, interrupting Lucius's thoughts.

He looked up at Draco as he went over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a glass of brandy. "Tell you what?" Lucius replied, snapping out of his current musings with a frown spreading across his face.

"About Granger," Draco responded nonchalantly.

His back was towards Lucius, so he didn't have time to defend himself as the older man moved with a speed that Draco had seldom seen. The Dark book was thrown to one side and lay on the floor, its pages bent oddly as Lucius sprinted over to his son.

Lucius pulled the boy's hair back so roughly he almost pulled it out by its roots, and he pushed his cane across Draco's throat. The fangs of the serpent were near enough to strike his perfect white skin, should the young man make a false move. This was as close to a warning as Draco would ever get from the man he called his father.

The younger man was startled, dropping the glass of brandy that he had been lifting up to his lips. The glass bounced once, splashing its contents on the rug under his feet before lying still. Draco knew better than to bring his hands up to defend himself, so he curled his fingers into rigid fists at his side.

"How do you know about her?" Lucius's deadly whisper was a promise of worse to come. His body was pressing up against Draco's, and the cabinet, which was in front of him, was pressing uncomfortably into his hips. Draco knew there was no getting out of this one, so he tried to play up to his father.

"Oh, come on, Father, I was bored and decided to take a little stroll down to the dungeons to relieve some of the stress," Draco replied. His voice was calm, but inside he was scared stiff. He rarely, if ever, saw his father lose control like this and all over a Mudblood; it was absurd.

The cane tightened around Draco's throat, and he struggled to breathe. Lucius's hand pulled tighter still on his son's hair.

"And how did you leave the Dark Lord's pet?" Lucius spoke the words softly into Draco's ear.

Draco immediately stiffened as he tried to push hard against the stronger arms of his father.

"I didn't know," he whined. "I would have never..." The fangs cut into the tender skin on his neck as two drops of blood fell downwards.

Lucius pushed Draco away from him, and he landed haphazardly across the settee.

"That's your problem, isn't it, boy?" he sneered. "You don't think. There are few secrets I hide from you, son, and the Mudblood just happens to be one of them. Now that you know, the Dark Lord will be most displeased with both of us." He turned away and poured himself a brandy from the decanter that his son had left on the sideboard, taking a hearty swig.

"He doesn't have to know," Draco whispered as he scrambled to his feet, panic in his voice.

Lucius laughed. "You think that you can hide that little fact from the world's greatest Legilimens?" Lucius scoffed as he once more pursued Draco, who quickly straightened up and circled around the settee, keeping it between himself and his father.

"Wait," the younger man said, holding up both of his hands, "you can always Obliviate me," he pleaded, his eyes wide with terror at the mere thought of the Dark Lord's wrath.

Lucius stopped in his tracks and weighed up his options. Draco was right; there was no other option but to Obliviate him. He would have to keep a closer eye on his son from now on and place a warding spell on the Mudblood's cell. He could afford no further slip-ups in the Dark Lord's plans, as he wasn't currently a favourite in the Death Eater ranks after his Lord had to come and put the collar on his slave.

He placed his drink down on the sideboard, and pulling his wand out of his cane, he spoke the words that he never thought he would say to his own son.

"*Obliviate.*" He didn't even bother cleaning up the mess that Draco had made, but instead he walked out of the library and down to the dungeons, leaving Draco lying sprawled out on the settee.

Lucius walked briskly down to the dungeons, a murderous look on his face. All this trouble because the boy just had to get his rocks off. He shook his head as he descended the narrow stairway.

Marching up to the last door, he quickly took out his wand and barged through the door, tossing the cane down at the entrance. The sight that met his eyes caused him to cringe inwardly; not for the Mudblood, of course, but for his own hide were the Dark Lord to find out.

She had come a long way from the time he had first received her into this cell. The collar, he knew, played a large part in that, and although he hated to admit it, he had grown quite fond of the Mudblood in a strange, twisted way. Not that he would let his fondness get in the way of what had to be done, but when the Dark Lord had won this war, perhaps he would ask his Lord for the Mudblood as a reward if he were still standing at the end.

She was lying there naked and obviously in pain as he stepped in front of her. She attempted to get into the position of submissiveness that she knew he liked, but her nerves and muscles were not co-operating.

'Forgive me, Master,' she whispered into Lucius' mind.

Lucius released his breath in some surprise at the fact that she was still living. He could see she was in agony when she attempted to move.

'Don't move,' he responded into her mind, his voice kinder than she had anticipated.

He swiftly picked up her still jerking body and waved his wand at the bed. A mattress appeared, and he laid her down on it almost tenderly. He then wiped her hair out of her eyes with one gloved hand. He could see the snot, tear tracks, and bruising on her face.

Lucius clenched his jaw in anger. He would teach the boy to respect his property and that of the Dark Lord. Lifting his wand up to her face, he gently healed the bruising and set to work repairing the broken jaw. He was nothing if not efficient in his healing spells and worked carefully towards his goal.

"Better?" he asked, his voice placid as it caressed her newly healed ears.

'Thank you, Master, you are most generous,' she spoke, even as her body was still reeling in the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse.

He left her side then and went to retrieve her discarded robe. He came back to her and placed it over her.

'Are you cold?' he asked, never uttering a sound.

She had to wonder at this new caring side to her Master. She hesitated for a split second before wearily replying 'A little.'

He conjured up a blanket for her then and placed it almost lovingly around her. She shivered once more, not from the curse this time, but from something else.

"Unfortunately, I can do nothing for the curse that my son has placed on you," he spat as he looked at the far wall. "Sleep is the best cure for that." And stroking her hair once more, he left her side and closed the door behind him.

She had to wonder about this side of her Master's personality. Why hadn't she seen it before? Oh yes, he could be cruel; she had seen that side of him often enough, but affectionate? She would have to keep a close eye on him if she were to work this one out, but for now her eyes were heavy and she closed them, letting sleep take away her pain.

This chapter was beta read by the wonderful AmyLouise. Thanks so much, babe.

Sorry for the delay, but I was in the U.S. at Azkatraz and then in Alabama.

Thanking everyone who has reviewed and stuck with this story. I cannot guarantee regular updates; however, I will not abandon this story. Once again, reviews are very much appreciated.

Best Laid Plans

Chapter 14 of 25

The Order meets to discuss Severus's orders.

The weeks following Harry's final days of school were a whirlwind of Order meetings and plans. The headmaster was patiently waiting for Harry to finish his final year at Hogwarts before he was inducted into the Order, and his training took on a whole new level of intensity. He was sure that hell couldn't even compare to the way he was feeling right now.

During the summer break, the Order had moved their meetings to Hogwarts, due in part to Harry's reluctant agreement to remain inside the confines of the castle walls. Remus had arrived at Hogwarts too and had told Harry that he was there to keep him company, though Harry knew that there was more to the story than even Remus was willing to tell.

His suspicions were confirmed with Severus's own admission of Lord Voldemort's plans for him to eliminate Remus Lupin, information that was shared only between the headmaster, Severus, Remus and Harry. Harry knew that the news would be broken to the most trusted members of the Order at tonight's meeting. He was curious to see how the remaining members would take the information and what plan they would come up with.

Harry was worried too about the Weasleys. Ron, in particular, had not written to him, not that he knew where the headmaster was keeping him. His parents knew, though he doubted they would relay important Order information even to their youngest son, Harry's best friend.

He resolved to ask Professor Dumbledore, next time they spoke, about inducting Ron into the Order. After all, he was involved in this war through his family and friends and was the most loyal friend he had.

Harry willed his abused body to climb up the remaining staircases to the private rooms he had been given on the second floor. He dearly wished, at times such as this, that he had been given rooms closer to the dungeons so as to be nearer to his tormentor. But that wasn't being totally fair to Severus. Harry knew that he was being trained for the forthcoming battle and that the Potions master was only endeavouring to prepare him, though his body saw it as a form of torture.

The dark-haired wizard had started his training on orders from Professor Dumbledore, and Harry thought it was particularly cruel and unusual punishment to make him run flat out around the replica lake in the Room of Requirement until he was heaving for breath and the air itself felt like a foreign object to his lungs.

He was careful to keep his wand on him at all times. Severus's lesson that first morning was a harsh one, but it could have been so much worse had the lesson taken place when confronted by Voldemort.

He had caught the smirk on Severus's face the second morning after his run and was about to explode in his usual temper, but something held him back. Perhaps it was the look in the older wizard's eye, or maybe the raised eyebrow that seemed to be mocking him into quitting. So he just took a deep breath and asked Severus what was next.

Not a day went by when he didn't think about Hermione and her sacrifice. Although it was not her choice to die, and a more gruesome and frightening death he could not imagine, he thought he would not be at the stage he was now without her help. Not for the first time, he thanked the gods that she had come into his life, no matter how briefly. He never voiced his thoughts, as he didn't want to dredge up the memories that were almost too painful to think about, even within the confines of his own mind. So instead, he pushed himself all the harder in training, the vivid memories of what he had seen in the Pensieve running through his head the entire time. No matter how much he had tried to will them away it was no good and in the end, he was determined to try to live with them.

Making it to his rooms, he quickly shut the door behind him before tossing his Invisibility Cloak on the end of the bed and collapsing onto the soft mattress face first. He knew he needed a shower, but now that he was in a horizontal position he couldn't will his body to get up.

And so he lay there, his mind awlwhirl, relaxing his abused body while he could.

With Harry's training stepping up a notch, Severus found himself busier than he was during the rest of the year when all the students were underfoot. With the Dark Lord's threat hanging over his head like a ghastly piece of mistletoe, he was finding himself quicker to demonstrate his ill-temper, with Potter being his central outlet.

He had to give the boy credit, though; he took it like a man and put more effort into whatever spell or training he was performing. Severus was suitably impressed, though he would rather suffer the *Cruciatas* than tell the boy this.

There had been many heated arguments within the headmaster's office, with Severus himself doing more than his fair share of shouting and pacing. He had argued with Albus as to what would transpire between Remus and himself. The headmaster assured him that it would all be taken care of when the time came. Severus had that dreadful sensation in the pit of his stomach that Albus was about to use his questionable morals once again for the side of the Light.

He knew there was a meeting tonight. Albus would tell the inner members of the Order about the orders given to Severus by his other master. He was not looking forward to it and wondered idly if he could feign some illness. Black Crow fever perhaps. No, he couldn't take that road, and he knew that he had to face the Order head on if he were ever to gain their trust and respect.

It was true that he hardly required it. It was only essential that he garner the trust of the Order's head member, Albus Dumbledore, but even he was using some dubious methods in these shaky times. Not that there was anything wrong with that; they were at war, but he couldn't help thinking that he should have handled the case of Miss Granger's disappearance with the decorum it deserved. At least he could have put some actual effort into finding the girl before dismissing all hope.

He knew that the Potter boy's newfound maturity was entirely due to the circumstances surrounding Miss Granger's disappearance and ultimate death. Although Albus himself had performed the *Rem Celare* not only on Potter but the youngest male Weasley spawn to make them believe that Miss Granger had indeed met her end, it still worried him that the old man was playing with the young man's mind, no matter how much he still despised the red-headed one.

He himself believed that there was little hope of finding Miss Granger alive. Too much time had passed. He acknowledged the signs of a highly proficient wizard that had performed the *Obliviate* on Mr and Mrs Granger. It had effectively erased from their minds the memory of their only child and nothing else.

The events pointed to a number of the Dark Lord's followers, but to Severus, it didn't quite add up. Why kidnap Miss Granger and *Obliviate* her parents, but not follow up by torturing and killing her, sending her body back to Potter in order to taunt him?

Still, something was gnawing at his insides, and he couldn't get the damn girl out of his mind. Was it guilt for the way he had treated her in class? No, he treated all of his students the same, except for his Slytherins. He could have marked her assignments a little easier; her work was always excellent, in truth. But the girl had irked him from day one always with that damn arm flailing around in the air, always ready with the right response to any question, straight out of the textbook.

He had called her a know-it-all on numerous occasions. He only now saw how much self-recognition was involved in that epithet. He knew the intense desire to prove oneself as good as those who were pure-blood, but there was a more subtle way to go about it. She never realised how much her showing-off squashed the desire of the other children to learn.

Groaning, he put his face in his hands and scrubbed hard. He had bigger things to worry about than a know-it-all who had by now long left this plane of existence. She was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time, and no amount of revisiting the past would bring her back.

Why couldn't he just let her rest in peace and move on with his life? Or what little fragment of it that was still his own. He knew he would soon be joining her, wherever she may be. Not that he believed in an after-life. No... final oblivion would be welcome after the life he had led thus far.

The key players from within the Order were all seated around the oval table in an unused classroom where their leader held the Order's most private meetings. Albus had another classroom, which was much larger, but this particular room was selected for its location in the dungeons and its cosy size.

Dumbledore knew that the wizards and witches sitting in this room would not speak about what he was about to divulge to them, as he himself had placed charms on the room making it impossible for them to discuss the proceedings with anyone who was not in the room at the time. Any listening devices or spies would hear only a mixture of unintelligible words; therefore, he knew that what was about to be discussed would not leave the room.

He hated having to place the charms, but one could never be too careful where Tom Riddle was concerned. Perhaps he was paranoid, but paranoia had served him well in the last war.

He was torn from his thoughts as Arthur Weasley, who was seated on his left, bent towards the ageing headmaster and said in a low voice, "Any word on Hermione?"

Albus looked over towards Arthur, his face solemn as he shook his head.

"It's just that Molly worries so; you know she considered Hermione part of the family and used to fuss over her as though she were one of our own."

Albus nodded his head. "I know, Arthur, and believe me when I say that I am doing everything in my power to find her, but the war is my first priority, as it should be for all of us. I fear that there are no new leads on Miss Granger's whereabouts. I am truly sorry."

Albus looked into Arthur's cheerless eyes as he conveyed his condolences. He knew that Hermione was most likely dead, but he couldn't bring himself to tell the wizard, who had a heart of gold.

Nymphadora Tonks was seated on Remus's right, whispering in his ear. Remus went bright red for a moment before shaking his head. Tonks giggled girlishly and placed a hand on Remus's thigh under the table. Remus stiffened momentarily, then relaxed.

Severus looked around the table with hooded eyes. He felt too exposed seated around the table. He was used to shadows, the darkness, where he could hide himself away from the world and its accusing eyes. The eyes of the fallen, the eyes of those he had betrayed for the good of all, the green eyes of Lily Potter which he saw every day through her son as Severus trained him to become the next chess piece on Albus Dumbledore's board.

He wondered briefly whether Harry would succeed in the end. Whether he would vanquish the Dark Lord and whether the Wizarding World would hail him as a hero. No matter, for he himself would not live to see the end of that day, whenever it may come.

This brightly lit room was giving him a headache. He knew that they were there to discuss his orders, and he had to will himself to remain seated, not to fidget, and definitely not to pace the length of the small area.

His musings were abruptly halted when Moody limped into the room, his wooden leg beating out a cadence on the stone floor. Everyone seated at the small table turned to look at him, his magical eye swirling around within its socket.

"Bloody stairs," Moody growled out by way of explaining why he was late. He hobbled to his usual seat; the only other vacant seat was that of Mundungus Fletcher, who had already stated that he could not make the meeting. Mundungus was working on a lead that he said would ultimately be of assistance to the Order.

Albus drew his hands together in the fashion of a father welcoming his children back home. He stood, preparing to speak, and all eyes turned to face the powerful wizard.

"As we are all here, then I propose we begin. I have a matter of grave importance to discuss with you all tonight. Our able spy, Severus, has been asked to perform a most unforgivable act in order to show his allegiance to Voldemort."

All eyes turned towards Severus, who glared back at the looks of pity, curiosity and loathing that were cast in his direction. Albus cleared his throat and diverted the attention away from Severus and back to himself.

"As I was saying, Severus has been put in a most awkward position, and he must appear to obey this order to maintain his position as Voldemort's loyal follower. Therefore, I have come up with a plan to ensure that this act will be carried out and make it clear to Voldemort that Severus is once and for all in his camp."

"What are his orders?" Emmeline Vance asked.

"Ah, I was just about to get to that." Albus paused as the majority of the Order held its breath, waiting for the news.

Harry looked around the table at the various members. His heart was beating fast in his chest, and he wondered if he would die from a heart attack before the headmaster let everyone know of Severus's instructions to kill Remus.

"Unfortunately, there is no delicate way around this Severus has been charged with killing Remus."

Initial gasps of disbelief and cries of outrage were heard around the table as all eyes focused on both Severus and Remus.

"As I was saying, Severus has been given the decidedly difficult task of killing Remus," the headmaster continued. "I have come up with a plan to ensure that this takes place."

"But, Albus, you can't be serious!" Hestia Jones spoke up. She looked flustered, as though she were about to faint.

"Of course I am, my dear; when have you ever known me to jest about such things?" Hestia just shook her head as she quivered in her seat. Minerva placed a steadying hand on her shoulder.

"We shall not be sacrificing Remus; he is too valuable to the cause, as are you all. He has made immense progress with the werewolves in the north, and if we were to lose him now, they would slip back into the darkness, something we cannot afford. No, instead we shall be using someone else, someone who has volunteered for the job in a Polyjuiced version of Remus. Someone without whom, I fear, Severus would be unable to complete his task and would no longer be able to return to Voldemort's side, thereby causing us to lose all the valuable information that he risks his life for each time he returns to Voldemort."

"But Polyjuice ceases to work on the dead, Albus," Moody growled out, "any competent potions maker will tell you that."

"Indeed, it does not. Therefore I propose that Severus burns the body before anyone sees it," Albus stated, looking pointedly at Severus, who inclined his head slightly.

Severus had previously discussed with Albus the fact that he was being followed by Death Eaters. Although he never saw them, he knew they were there and also that the Dark Lord had directed them to tail him whenever he was not within the walls of the castle, to make sure that he carried out his plans to the letter.

"I already have someone in mind to take Remus's place." The old wizard paused. "He has already agreed to do all he can and would be grateful for even a short time in a healthy body."

"What's the matter with him and can he be trusted?" Moody asked, his magical eye spinning wildly within its socket. He seemed to be thinking through the plan with his usual mantra of 'constant vigilance' running through his head.

"He prefers to remain anonymous, and I trust him." At Moody's brief nod, Albus continued. "The good medi-witches and wizards at St. Mungo's have done all they can for him." Albus lowered his head in a show of respect for his friend.

"He has lived a full life and feels that dying for our cause would be the best way to end his life on his own terms." Kingsley nodded his head, agreeing with the old wizard that it was indeed a very selfless act.

Albus reseated himself, and after a few brief minutes of silence when everyone in the Order was lost in their own thoughts, Albus stirred in his seat. "Now, if there is anything else anyone would like to discuss, I suggest you do so now, as we are all in for a busy night."

When no one posed any other questions, still too lost in their thoughts, Albus spoke. "I believe, Remus, that you should appoint someone else to converse with the werewolves, as they will still need their monthly Wolfsbane, and you, being dead, will not be able to take it to them." He looked at Tonks, who opened her mouth to speak and then abruptly shut it once more.

"It is settled then. I shall leave that up to you to organise, Remus, though I fear that Voldemort's anger will fall on Severus if he waits much longer to carry out this task. I am afraid, Remus, that once your death has come to pass, you will be under similar conditions as young Harry here. You must not be seen, if Severus is to pull off this ruse."

Remus nodded his head, a steely look of determination crossing his face as he returned Tonks's earlier squeeze under the table.

Draco was confused. A situation he would never freely admit to anyone.

His father, a wizard who always had time for his only son and protégé, was not acting himself lately.

He had seen his mother yesterday for the first time in a week. His father had told him she was feeling ill, and he had thought nothing of it. However, when he had seen her yesterday, he had to hold in a gasp and stop himself from running into her arms and asking her if she was alright. She was limping slightly, and her face had various bruises and cuts that looked as though they were days old, as they were already healing. Why hadn't she used a potion or charm to heal them? One look at his father showed him that he would not allow it, and he turned back to his mother and saw, for the first time in his life, fear in her eyes, and it was directed at her husband.

Something was wrong here. Very, very wrong.

He had heard the spectacular yelling coming from his parents' bedroom more frequently of late, and he was worried about what was going on with his father. When questioned about it, his father had raised his silver cane to his throat, the threat of violence in the air. His father had never laid a hand on Draco before; what had changed?

He had no one to turn to regarding his father's increasingly volatile temperament, and for the first time in his life he felt isolated. His friends, if one could call them that, would never understand the complexities of his problems, and besides, they weren't smart enough to come up with a solution anyway.

No, a Malfoy didn't air his dirty laundry for all to see. A Malfoy stood tall and proud. That was one thing his father had taught him. Right now, Draco wished he was anybody but a Malfoy; and then he would be able to save his mother, a woman he loved more than himself, from the harm caused to her from the man she loved. His father.

Draco didn't know what was happening with his father, but he knew he didn't like it one tiny bit.

Severus was seated behind his desk, going over this week's strategy for the Order. He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a weary hand. He knew he would have to go through with Albus's hair-brained scheme, though he did not like it. There was too much room for error. An unknown wizard, Polyjuiced to look like the werewolf; a thousand things could go wrong.

And then there were the werewolves that Lupin had befriended to the north. What would become of them? Though they were not his concern, he believed they would play a strong part in the coming battle, and he shuddered to think that they may still turn back towards the Dark if Lupin didn't convince them otherwise.

Yes, it was a pain to have to brew so much Wolfsbane each month, but though he complained regularly to the headmaster, he didn't truly mind, not if it meant that his potion could swing the war in their favour.

Hanging his head in his hands, he sighed once more. He knew he was being tracked whenever he was outside the school gates by his fellow Death Eaters. They were waiting for him to slip up; the Dark Lord didn't trust him and with good reason. Therefore, he had to be additionally watchful whenever he left the confines of Hogwarts,

without appearing to be so.

'How has my life come to this?' he thought ruefully.

A quiet knock at his door made his head jerk up. Sitting up straighter and plastering a frown upon his face, he barked, "Enter," at the unwelcome guest.

The door opened to reveal a smiling Remus Lupin.

"Ah, if this is a bad time, Severus, I can come back later," he said, already moving towards the desk and closing the door behind him.

Severus glared at the wizard, his usual look of contempt on his features.

"By all means, Lupin, come in, make yourself at home," he sneered, standing and sweeping his right arm in an arc.

Remus ducked his head shyly, but nevertheless took up the seat across from Severus, folding his legs neatly under the desk. He looked up at the Potions master expectantly.

"I thought," he began when the raven-haired man sat down once more, "that we could discuss the events leading to my demise," he continued with a smile gracing his lips.

Severus nodded his head. He wasn't foolish enough to think the Dark Lord would wait forever and felt a tiny bit of gratitude at Lupin for coming down to his dungeons as quickly as he had. He had thought the werewolf would have wanted his freedom for at least another week, and the fact that he had come to him within three days showed Severus that he not only had the backbone to see it through but also the presence of mind not to allow Severus to be punished for his procrastination.

"I am sorry I was not here sooner, but I had to brief Dora and Kingsley as to what to expect with the werewolves. I'm afraid to say they are not the most trusting of people in the best of circumstances. Although I think they will get on in the end, it will just take time for all to adapt and get used to each other, they are not very trusting of wizards, not that I blame them really, it's just that they haven't had much exposure to wizards and those that have, have very good reason to distrust them, but I think it will work out in the end and..."

"Lupin, will you cease the infernal chatter? I do not want to know about your so called 'friends'. You are giving me a headache." Severus glared angrily at Remus, who at least had the decency to look suitably chastised.

"Sorry, but I do tend to prattle on when I'm nervous." At Severus's angry look, Remus quickly shut his mouth.

"Now," Severus continued when he knew he would not be interrupted again, "I will be needing a small number of your hairs for the Polyjuice Potion."

"Oh, of course." Remus smiled, reaching up and plucking four light brown hairs from his head.

"Is that enough?" he asked, as he held out the four hairs including the roots. Severus pulled out a small pouch from one of the inner pockets of his robe and held it out.

"That should be sufficient." Severus closed the pouch once the hairs were within and placed it back into his pocket.

"As I'm certain that Albus has already spoken to you on this matter, I do not have to reiterate how important it is to the cause that you remain hidden within the castle. It is not only imperative to my role, but to several others, that you remain unseen once my task is carried out." Severus spoke in the way he would when speaking to one of his students. It carried an underlying warning that Lupin held his own security in the palm of his hand.

Remus nodded his head a couple of times, his face reflecting the gravity of the situation. Remus knew that his position was a serious one, though he was inclined to deal with the rising anxiety and pressure through jokes and laughter: his own coping mechanism.

"How are you going to convince *him* that it is me that you have killed if you are going to destroy the evidence, so to speak?" Remus asked, his face openly curious.

Severus looked up at the wizard. Sneering, he replied, "I am sure that Albus has a contingency plan for this unless you want to donate a body part to the cause?"

Remus laughed. Actually laughed at Severus's words. The deep, rich laughter rang in Severus's ears until he wanted to let go and join in. But he dared not. It would do nothing for his image as the surly Potions professor and spy. Instead, he bit his tongue.

"No," Remus countered, wiping the tears of laughter that had formed in his eyes. "I am quite partial to every one of my body parts. Though perhaps I could part with a few more hairs." He looked up at Severus then, a genuine smile lighting up his face.

"These will be sufficient," Severus replied. He was unnerved by the Marauder's easy-going nature. He had never really talked to the werewolf before, and with good reason, but he knew he would be spending more time in his presence during the coming months, as where Potter would go, no doubt the mutt would follow. Thinking on it for a second, he resolved to try to be a little more tolerant when he was in his presence.

He had made amends with Potter, so what was one more? Besides, both would prove useful if he lived through this war.

Remus stood up and cleared his throat. "Well, I'd better be off then," he stated as Severus sat lost in thought.

Remus walked over to the door, opened it and stepped out before pausing and turning his head to look over at Severus, who was still seated at his desk.

"Stay safe, Severus," Remus said, a tinge of sorrow in his voice.

Before Severus could formulate a response, or even look up at the werewolf, he had already slipped out the door, shutting it firmly behind him.

Firstly, I would like to thank my fantastic beta, AmyLouise, without whom you would be reading a story that does not make much sense. Truly, she is a wonderful beta, and I couldn't ask for better. Thanks so very much, babe.

Second, I would also like to thank everyone who is reading and reviewing my story. Kudos to you for sticking with it. Although I cannot guarantee regular updates, I will not abandon this story. Once again, reviews and constructive criticism are very much appreciated.

The Death of a Werewolf

Severus gets deeper into his cover and an interesting twist comes into play.

Severus was waiting in the shadows, leaning against a large pine tree, its branches swaying in the light summer breeze. It was dark, and although his eyes had adjusted to the blackness, he knew Lupin's werewolf night vision would afford him a better view of the landscape and its surrounding areas. Severus hadn't been waiting long before his keen hearing picked up the sounds of someone approaching.

Narrowing his eyes, he turned his head slowly towards the noise and saw the werewolf coming into view. Stepping away from the shadows, he strode straight into the path of the man.

Remus Lupin had just come from seeing the werewolf pack and delivering their latest batch of Wolfsbane Potion. Although the full moon was not for a couple of days yet, he liked to be efficient and saw the pack's trust in him escalate due to this fact.

Walking back towards the clearing in the forest where he liked to Apparate, he saw a dark cloaked form unexpectedly step onto the path he was taking. For a brief moment he thought it was a Death Eater, and he fumbled for his wand until he saw the figure raise its hands in the air and lower its hood.

"Severus," Remus hissed, even as he breathed out a sigh of relief. His sweaty hand tucked the wand back into his pocket, and he held his other hand to his heart. "What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?" he joked, smiling at the dark-haired man standing before him on the path.

Severus sneered back at him, although Remus didn't seem to notice Severus's darkening features.

"What are you doing out here, Severus?" Remus asked again as he raked a hand through his greying hair and slouched a little more.

"I came here to talk to you, actually," Severus replied as his hand inched closer to his wand. The other wizard did not become aware of the rising threat the wizard posed.

"Out here?" Remus asked, turning his head back and forth as though this was some kind of joke. "Come off it, Severus. What could you possibly have to speak to me about that couldn't wait until we were both indoors?" He took a step closer to the wizard whom he considered his friend. Severus, in turn, took a step away from the werewolf. A look of bewilderment crossed Remus's features as he stopped in his tracks.

"Severus, what is this really about?" Remus asked, genuinely perplexed as to why this taciturn man would come all the way out in the middle of the night to seek him out and have a heart to heart in the middle of a dark forest.

"Why?" Severus asked, turning his face to the side, his voice sounding so dejected to Remus that he almost wanted to reach out and reassure the man.

Instead he asked, "Why what, Severus?" Severus was starting to alarm Remus now, and he swallowed past the lump in his throat.

"Why did you just stand by in the background and watch whilst James and Sirius tormented me? Why did you do nothing? You were a prefect." Severus looked over at Remus then, and the werewolf's sharp eyes caused him to shudder at the emotions on the face of the man before him. Emotions he didn't show anyone, ever.

Taken aback by the wizard's surprising show of emotion, Remus decided that if Severus wanted some sort of confession from him, he would give it to him. Remus gulped, his mouth dry, and he decided that when he was back at Hogwarts, giving his report to the headmaster, he would take the proffered liquor this one time.

"I was young, Severus. Hell, we all were. I was a fool to stand by and do nothing. But I guess it was the fact that they accepted me for what I was, what I still am, and to go against them both would leave me with nothing... I was selfish and self-centred. Looking out for myself. I had never belonged to anything before, and what James and Sirius offered me was friendship. For the first time in my life, I had someone to call a friend, and those people considered me a friend too. We all did some pretty dense and dangerous things when we were kids," Remus stated, and this time he really did reach out for Severus.

As Remus laid his hand on Severus's arm, Severus jerked his whole body away from the man's offer of comfort.

"Don't touch me, you filthy mutt," Severus spat with such conviction that Remus cringed away from the man he had thought he was getting to know.

Before Remus could collect himself, Severus had pulled his wand and growled out, *Expelliarmus*," and as his wand hit Severus's outstretched left hand, Remus flew back and hit a large tree, knocking himself out cold.

"Remus, where are you?" Tonks's voice echoed in a harsh whisper around the forest.

Severus's head snapped up at the sound; he knew he had to work quickly now.

"Come on, this isn't funny. It's creepy in here," Tonks said, exasperated, getting closer to Severus and Remus's location.

Pulling himself together, Severus advanced on Remus then, tucking the werewolf's wand away in his outer robes and coming to stand half a metre away from where he had fallen. Looking down on the mutt, who was splayed out beneath the massive tree, he cocked his head to the side, a nasty sneer on his face and spat, "*Avada Kedavra*" with all the hatred he could muster.

Before Severus could blink, before the body had time to transform, Severus's hand was casting a containment field around the body and setting it alight with a flourish of his wand. He watched with a contemptuous sneer on his face as the magical fire consumed the body at a much quicker rate than that of a normal fire, until there was not a trace left. Finally, he cast, "*Finite Incantatem!*" on the containment charm.

Glancing around swiftly as he heard more rustling to his right, he flicked his wand, casting an intricate spell to hide all trace that he had been present in the forest from anyone who would come looking for a hint of magic and Disapparated.

Lord Voldemort sat in an antechamber across from where he held his usual meetings. Only the highest ranking of his servant's were privy to this meticulous, furnished assembly quarter, and as such, it was more extravagant than the generously proportioned space which would be the only room in his mansion that his lower Death Eaters would ever see.

The lavish tastes of the Dark Lord were everywhere within this room, from the intricate wooden panelling that sported the carved snakes that he preferred, to the huge open fireplace that burned brightly whenever he was present.

Nagini was slithering around his chair lazily, clearly having a fondness for the heat that the fire provided, keeping one eye on Wormtail, who huddled in on himself in one of the darkened corners. Voldemort looked down at Nagini, and in a series of hisses, he spoke with her. The giant magical snake cocked its head to one side and then left the room through a small opening to go find herself some dinner.

He looked around, his eyes scanning the room. The fireplace casting a half-light upon his eerie features made him look even more sinister. He was surrounded by his most trustworthy servants. Wormtail, although a snivelling, diminutive man, had proven himself in the past and therefore had earned his right to be regarded as one of Voldemort's more trusted lackeys. No matter how many times he pushed Wormtail's head under water, asking for the impossible, he always bobbed back up to the surface

like a rat, so much like his Animagus, crawling back on all fours for more of the same treatment.

A wide grin passed over Voldemort's inhuman face at this stray thought; he knew it made his underlings think that he was plotting something, and he could read the fear in their faces and minds as they watched him from the corners of their eyes.

All except for Bellatrix. One of his most loyal, if fanatical, servants. She had clearly lost her mind in Azkaban, but she was beyond a doubt more special to him for it. Bella meant beautiful, and to Voldemort she was more than just beautiful; she was magnificent in her sadistic pleasures. Always willing to debase and defile herself at her Lord's whim. How he wished there were more followers like his Bella.

He studied Walden Macnair next. His taste for exotic creatures was what actually drew him to Voldemort's side. Macnair had a genuine knack when it came to magical creatures, and that was one of the reasons Voldemort liked to keep Walden close; his entertainment value was never lacking and was enjoyed by all of his followers.

Voldemort was fascinated at the way the man's thought process worked. He watched as Walden fiddled with his moustache, a nervous habit that he had picked up from somewhere, as he stood talking to Dolohov.

Voldemort's red eyes narrowed as they flickered over to Antonin Dolohov. He was one of the first of his Death Eaters and had proven himself to be quite handy not only with Muggle objects but also with a wand. Voldemort noticed that he never went anywhere without the sharp knife that was tucked away in his belt. When questioned, Antonin said that he liked to see his Muggle victims bleed, see the panic and pain in their eyes as he watched their life slowly fade away.

Leaning against the wall a few paces away from where Macnair and Dolohov were having a conversation was Avery. Although he had failed Voldemort at the Department of Mysteries almost two years ago, not being able to catch the Potter brat and his band of misfits, Avery had given him the information about the prophecy that concerned Voldemort and Potter and had therefore redeemed himself in Voldemort's eyes.

Voldemort closed his eyes as he felt a disturbance in the wards surrounding his impenetrable fortress. Knowing that no one could Apparate in without bearing the Dark Mark, he wasn't alarmed; however, he was quite intrigued by the power play happening in this very room, and if this disciple did not bear something of worth, they would be made an example of.

At that thought the doors opened, and Severus walked in. The man was solemn as usual; he never gave anything away even when he spoke. His face was a mask; clearly he had had more practice than most at hiding his emotions. Or possibly he actually was that severe - unfeeling, heartless and callous.

All conversation stopped as every head whipped around to witness the intrusion.

Bella smiled in obvious glee, thinking that the Potions master was about to be punished for his impertinence.

Severus stopped in front of the Dark Lord and fell to his knees, bowing deeply, his head almost touching the ground.

"I trust that you have brought me good news, Severus?" Voldemort asked. His voice promised retribution if this was not the case.

Daring to look up at the insane dictator before him, Severus tilted his head upwards, still kneeling.

Looking straight into his Master's eyes, he let all his hurt, frustration and anger linger in the forefront of his mind. Not blinking, he felt Voldemort slither his way into his mind like the magical snake he kept as a familiar.

Severus focused on projecting the images of the last thirty minutes and his belief that the werewolf didn't trust him.

Voldemort watched the scene playing out within Severus's mind; however, he did more than that. When he reached the final death blow, Severus felt Voldemort pause on the image of the wizard, twisting it to and fro as though to ascertain its authenticity. Satisfied that it was indeed the werewolf, he moved onwards to watch as Severus burnt the body methodically, leaving no trace of his presence when he heard the voice of another, searching for the werewolf.

It became all too clear to Voldemort that Severus's suspicion was accurate and that he covered his tracks admirably.

He left his mind then, but Severus didn't dare blink as Voldemort held out one long-fingered hand towards him. Severus knew instinctively what the powerful Dark wizard wanted and reached into his breast pocket and presented the werewolf's wand, handle first, to his Dark Master.

Voldemort gripped the wand as he pulled it away from his servant. He looked at it for a moment, then pulling out his own Dark and twisted wand, he cast a levitation charm on it and the wand hovered, mid-air, above Severus's head. Not a sound was heard in the antechamber as Voldemort swished his own wand delicately, pointing it at the werewolf's wand, which started to emit a high squeal, tumbling and turning in the air.

Abruptly, the squealing hum ended, and the wand dropped to the stone floor, the dull sound of wood meeting stone echoing through the silent room. It bounced once, twice and then lay perfectly still.

Severus held his breath as he watched the impressive magical display before him. He had known that Voldemort was paranoid, but this went even beyond what a sane wizard would call being cautious.

All eyes in the room were suddenly focused on the Dark Lord as a frightening grin crossed his face, and he looked down at his spy, still kneeling before him.

"Severus," he said, the smile blossoming into something sinister, "you may rise, my most trusted spy." He gestured to the wizard before him as he rose quickly.

Looking out to his assembled few, he took in the look of bewilderment on most of the faces. Taking his time to seat himself once more on his throne, he made a show of keeping them in the dark as long as possible, as he so liked the taste of expectation.

"My most trustworthy servant," he started, his eyes glancing over each and every one of them, "Severus, my spy at that Muggle-loving school, has delivered to me something very special tonight." Here he paused, letting the expectation grow until the room was almost bursting with anticipation. He liked to cause this jealousy and rivalry amongst his followers, if for nothing else but his own amusement.

"He has delivered the wand and the memory of the final moments of the Order's werewolf." He laid his hand out before himself in a gesture of an offering. The gasps he heard around the room were music to his ears as all eyes flickered from the wand that was lying on the ground to Severus's blank face.

"Severus has tonight destroyed the werewolf that this wand belonged to and covered his tracks most convincingly, even to the Aurors and other Order members. Tonight he has made me most proud." Voldemort beamed, a fear-provoking smile lighting his face.

Severus's face remained stony as his eyes flicked around the room to count the Death Eaters present.

'So this is a meeting of the inner circle only,' he thought, before slowly taking in the looks of envy and resentment on most of the faces.

Voldemort Summoned the werewolf's wand from where it was lying on the floor to his left hand and then turned to face Severus, presenting the wand to him. He inclined his head slightly, and Severus took up the offering held before him.

Taking the wand in both hands, he snapped it in two, the sound of the wood and its magical core snapping rebounding piercingly around the room and off the stone walls.

Voldemort gave a vigorous cackle, and all of the Death Eaters soon joined in with their Master.

Severus presented the two broken halves of the wand back to his Dark Master, who took them from him, smiling, then tucked the broken pieces of the useless wand into the folds of his robe.

Severus shuddered mentally at the image before him, then bowed deeply once more. It was a great honour to break the wand of the wizard that you had defeated in battle, and even though Severus knew that there was no great struggle involved, his Dark Master had bestowed upon him an enormous tribute.

Before he could ask his Lord if he could be dismissed, his mind already coming up with the many reasons why he was needed back at Hogwarts, the sound of the double doors banging open caused most of the inner circle to jump slightly, and all heads whipped around to gauge the second intrusion of the evening.

Lucius strolled into the room, head held high, with a look of arrogance on his face. His wand was pointed over his shoulder as he levitated a body behind him. Lucius stopped once he was in the centre of the room, and with a harsh downward flick of his wand, the body that was floating behind him crashed to the ground. Severus flinched inwardly as he heard a bone or two crack as the body made contact with the stone ground.

"And what have you brought your Lord, Lucius?" the serpent-like creature asked whilst making his way over to the crumpled body.

"My apologies, My Lord, for disturbing you," Lucius replied, bowing his head, "although I had assumed you would like this little token of my gratitude." He looked up then, and Severus caught the malevolent gleam in his eye before he continued. "I caught this piece of filth in Knockturn Alley; he thought that he could shadow me." Lucius let out a little chuckle at this, turning and looking down upon the body with utter contempt.

Severus looked down at the body at Lucius's feet for the first time and saw with mounting horror the profile of Mundungus Fletcher, his mind screamed out to him. Even though he made no movement, he mentally acknowledged the fact that it would only be a matter of minutes before his betrayal was discovered. If he was fortunate, he would be killed outright.

Severus's muscles tensed minutely, his mind racing through all the lies and half-truths he could come up with, each one more outlandish than the next. He was doomed. Why did the two-bit thief have to be captured now?

"*Ennervate*," Voldemort said lazily, although the excitement was not lost on his followers, who, perceiving easy prey, homed in on the weakest one in the room like a pack of hyenas.

"So pleased you could join us," Voldemort hissed, looking down at the wizard. The Death Eaters surrounding the man laughed contemptuously.

Mundungus opened his eyes groggily, and he winced in pain from his broken shoulder. He looked up, and the first thing his blurry vision could focus on was the red eyes of Voldemort staring back at him. He immediately shrank back in fear, cowering on the ground. A boot stopped his retreat, and as he froze he knew at that precise moment that his life was at an end. Looking around in a blind panic, he was hoping to find a familiar face in the crowd, but Severus had hung back from those circling around the fallen wizard, and Mundungus neither saw nor heard him.

Voldemort smiled at the delicious terror that was encompassing the wizard before him, as his focus once more turned towards the Dark wizard, and he stared into his red eyes.

"What say you, my most loyal? Would you like a spot of entertainment this evening?" Voldemort enquired, his voice almost joking in its quality, as though this were a game to be played out: toying with a human life.

The Death Eaters were openly thrilled now, jostling each other for a better position to get the first hex in. Bella laughed feverishly.

"Shall I start?" the red-eyed wizard asked, an almost comical look on his face.

At the murmurs of approval and giddy eagerness running through the room, Voldemort rounded on the wizard, who was cringing on the floor, and pulled his wand out. He never spoke a word, but simply flicked his wand, and the Death Eaters watched as the prisoner convulsed and cried out in agony.

When Voldemort dropped his wand to his side, Severus saw Lucius approach him and whisper in his ear, cupping his hand around his mouth as though he were still a child in school, sharing a secret with his friend. Severus's upper lip curled into a sneer as he strained to hear what Malfoy was up to, but he could not make out a word of what was said.

Voldemort turned to look at Lucius as he took a step back. A grin appeared on his face as the blond-haired wizard raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow at him. Waving his hand at the prisoner, who was thankfully unconscious, he finally spoke. "A very cunning and worthy idea, my servant," Voldemort replied.

Lucius nodded his head once in acquiescence.

Voldemort turned to look at his followers, taking in the gleaming eyes of Bella and the way that Dolohov's hand was poised on the hilt of his knife. Even Wormtail was excited about the way that this evening was progressing so far, though Voldemort knew that he would not have a hand in administering the final blow to the prisoner; he was just too weak-willed when it came to openly hurting the enemy, though he did have his uses.

"It seems that your brother here has plans for this particular prisoner, but never fear, I shall not spoil your fun. Walden, perhaps you can come up with a form of distraction for your brothers and sister?" he asked as he cocked his head to the side.

MacNair's flair for the dramatic caused his eyes to mist over momentarily as a sinister grin broke out across his face. "Of course, My Lord, I would be most honoured to show you a new beast I have been playing with. Perhaps if I could go to the dungeons and procure a few of the prisoners?" Walden asked, the grin never fading from his face.

Voldemort waved one spidery hand at his disciple, and Walden disappeared out of a door behind his Lord's throne with a spring in his step.

Lucius made his apologies to the Dark Lord, truly regretful that he could not be there to witness MacNair's stimulating show, and he brandished his wand and levitated Mundungus's prone body from the floor. Bowing deeply, he walked straight to the door, which opened to allow him to exit, passing through his fellow Death Eaters and not once looking back at them.

Severus released his breath; his heart was racing inside his chest, and he was surprised that the others in the darkened room could not hear it.

The Death Eaters looked over to Voldemort as the doors swung shut. He could taste the suspicion, but also growing excitement in the air. He liked to keep his most loyal followers guessing at his next move. He found that it not only kept them on their toes, but also fearful of him.

Severus made his way over to the Dark Lord, careful to slow his beating heart and will his breathing under control.

Bowing before the wizard, he brought his regrets that he could not be present for his brother's demonstration to the front of his mind. His face was a carefully controlled mask which showed no emotion whatsoever.

"Severus, will you not stay to witness what your brother has to offer?" Voldemort asked. He already knew the answer to his question but felt the need to explain it to his Death Eaters.

"Regretfully not, my Lord," Severus simply stated, "I must be back at the school. Although the new school year has not yet begun, there is plenty to do and classes to prepare for."

"Very well, Severus," Voldemort sighed in mock disappointment, "you may go, but keep your ears open for any sign of Harry Potter. The boy has been most quiet since he graduated, and I think he and that old man may be plotting something."

Severus nodded his head once in acknowledgement of his Master's wishes before making a hasty exit from the room; the thought of how close he had come to his actual death was rather disconcerting.

Severus stumbled up the stairs to the headmaster's office, just catching himself in time before he made a fool of himself by making an awkward entry into the headmaster's office.

His thoughts were whirling around one another like the currents of a strong lake. Yes, he had fooled the Dark Lord into thinking that he had indeed killed the werewolf, but that fool Mundungus had almost blown his cover; would have, he was certain, if he had seen Severus. In fact, Mundungus still could blow his plans and those of the headmaster all to hell, and it was only by the grace of the deities that the Dark Lord had not yet delved into the mind of that no-good thief.

He trudged up the remaining stairs, even though it was a revolving staircase; he had no time to wait for it to reach the top, and he barrelled through the office door without knocking.

Albus glanced up at Severus as he barged through the door. His breathing was laboured, and he wore a pained expression on his face.

"Ah, I see you're back, my boy," Albus said in an almost jovial voice as he peered down his nose and through his glasses at Severus.

The dishevelled wizard before him took two steps into the room before heading straight for the cabinet that held the headmaster's finest liquor. Pouring himself a Firewhisky neat, he downed the contents of the glass in one gulp and slammed it back down before turning towards the headmaster's desk and hissing out his response.

"Yes," he replied and turned to face the elderly wizard, "but imagine my surprise when Lucius brought in Mundungus tonight." He paused at the old man's sharp intake of air and watched as he rose on unsteady legs. Severus held up one hand to forestall any questions that Albus might have and continued, "and imagine, if you will, my disbelief when the Dark Lord did not see fit to question him via Legilimency, instead gifting him to Lucius for his own perverted pleasure," he spat, a frown and sneer battling for dominance on his face.

For once the headmaster was speechless. He opened and closed his mouth a few times as though searching for the words to placate his spy.

"Mundungus was a hair's breadth away from betraying all; I could see it in his eyes, the coward, and it was only the Dark Lord's wand that kept him from betraying all of us. In fact, he still could betray us; Lucius is very gifted when it comes to interrogation," Severus fumed, taking a couple of steps towards the headmaster's desk.

"The Dark Lord has become lax due to his belief in his own supremacy. An extremely costly error indeed. I have never known him to be so careless, and I fear he would have performed Legilimency if not for Lucius's suggestion, though what that proposition was I do not know."

"Severus, my dear boy..."

Severus hissed at the headmaster's referral to him as anybody's "dear", but Albus continued nevertheless, "It is a dangerous game you play. You know as well as I that you can be betrayed at any given moment, which is why I have limited your full disclosure amongst the Order. It is not to downplay your heroics, Severus, but to ensure you are kept safe. If Mundungus were to implicate you as my spy, I'm sure you could come up with a convincing lie, one good enough to satisfy even Tom. We can just be thankful that he was not present during our discussion on Remus's death," Albus concluded, his face a most unsettling shade of white.

"You find the silver lining in everything, don't you, Albus? A wizard's life is in peril, and all you can think of is the bigger picture."

Albus shrugged his shoulders before saying, "He knew the risks before he came into this game, Severus, as we all did. No one's life is more precious than the next, but I do feel that you must be kept safe, for if you were to depart this world, we would lose vital information from the inner circle, information that I fear we cannot do without."

Severus sneered openly at the headmaster, his hands balling into fists at his side.

"I risk my life every time I go back to the madman. It is already forfeit, Albus," Severus spat. "You and I both know that whoever wins this thrice-damned war, whether it be the Light or the Dark, I shall pay for my deceptions." At Albus's look of shock, Severus threw his arms up in the air before slamming them down on the desk.

"If your Order wins, as a Death Eater I shall be a pariah, because of this mark on my left arm. Although it may not be spoken, I am positive that no one outside the Order will see me for what I truly am - your sacrificial lamb and a spy for the Light.

"I will have to leave the only place I have called home for the last twenty-eight years of my miserable life, for the threat to you and this school would be too great. They would be calling out for my blood, and there is only so much you can do, Albus, to protect me." Severus took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

"And do I even need to explain the world as I see it if the Dark Lord is the victor? There will not be a single place on this godforsaken planet where I would find peace, so don't you dare talk to me about sacrifices and protection, for there will be none for me." The fight left Severus then, and he took a few unsteady steps backwards, throwing himself into the chair that faced the headmaster's desk.

Albus rounded the desk, a look of complete and utter hopelessness on his face. He came to stand next to Severus and placed an old, withered hand upon his black-clad shoulder. Looking up at Albus, Severus noticed how close to tears the old man truly was.

"Severus," Albus whispered, almost pleading with the dark-haired man, "I know how hard it is for you, but think of all the good you are doing." Severus scoffed at this, but the headmaster continued as though he had not heard him.

"I too have made many sacrifices for the war, and look at me. I am an old, tired man, but I know that as long as I hold air in my lungs, I shall continue to fight until my dying breath. Wizards like Tom have no place in this world. No wizard, witch, or Muggle should feel threatened, and Tom is doing just that. Can't you see that this is greater than you or I?" Albus pleaded, raising both his eyebrows and peering down at the younger man.

Bravo, Severus thought, you really are a superb actor, Albus, or perhaps you even believe this act of yours. Enough to project it upon others. That's what makes you a formidable leader; your ability to sway the feelings of others to do your bidding.

Severus sighed once and closed his eyes, nodding his head. As he struggled to stand from the chair, Albus's hand still rested lightly on his shoulder.

"Severus, I have to ask if the plan was successful tonight?"

The dark-haired man opened his eyes and looked into the headmaster's eyes. Nodding his head, for he felt he could not speak, he conveyed the message that the deed was done and the Polyjuiced Remus Lupin was indeed dead.

Albus sighed dramatically at that before simply telling his Potions master to go and get some rest and that they would discuss the matter further in the morning.

Severus nodded his head and made his way over to the door. His footsteps were almost mechanical, and he felt so very, very tired and defeated.

As he made his way past the outer door to the headmaster's office, sticking to the shadows along the hallway, he thought back to the conversation he had just had with the headmaster and thought it quite telling that he didn't ask him if he knew where Mundungus was being held, and there was no talk of a rescue. It was as though he already

knew he was a lost cause, or that he simply didn't care.

His mind went back to Hermione Granger then, and he realised this was not the first, and most certainly would not be the last, time that Albus had dismissed a fellow fighter for the Light.

A coiling mass erupted in his stomach at the thought that they were all the powerful wizard's pawns in this war. Disposable, expendable. Albus fucking Dumbledore had made it clear on so many other occasions that this was the case. He was certain now that the great headmaster was little better than the Dark Lord himself. Yes, he could dress it up in pretty lights and parade it around as doing what was good and proper for the greater good, but he would bet his life that even Minerva was not privy to all of the white wizard's plans.

Still, Severus would do what he thought was right, fighting for all of the unnamed witches, wizards and Muggles that were threatened in the name of the Dark Lord. He would see that justice was served and do what he had always done. He would fight for the Light, as that was the right thing to do.

Albus had just confirmed the suspicion in Severus's own mind that he shared relevant information only with the witch or wizard that it pertained to, so that no information could be leaked in the case of the enemy capturing anyone within the Order and none of his grand plans could be ruined. It was a wise move for any political leader in a war, but something about the way the old wizard seemed to care for each Order member when they were all together, but then dismissed Mundungus's life as though he was not worthy of a rescue mission was inexcusable. He had never liked the thief, but he wondered to himself if Albus would do the same to him, should he fail one day to return from the dark Lord's fortress.

Severus paused for a moment in an alcove before the stairs leading down to the dungeons. Hand outstretched, leaning against the wall, he tried to gather his thoughts.

Why was it that the Dark Lord himself feared this old man above all others, even Potter? Perhaps he had just cause. Would the world be truly a better place if the Dark Lord was vanquished and Potter prevailed?

This was the first time he had honestly asked himself that very question, and he shuddered, not caring for the answer that his mind supplied.

Yes, he knew now with absolute certainty that they were all pawns waiting for the headmaster's frail hands to move them around on the chessboard of life. Only Albus Dumbledore knew the full story.

His legs started descending down the staircase. His mind was a million miles away, thinking, plotting, until he reached his quarters and dropped the wards. Severus dived head first onto the bed, not even bothering to undress as the exhaustion from the evening finally took its toll.

A/N: What is Lucius up to? 10 points to Slytherin (because honestly, what other house would you be in if you are reading my story?) for the first one to leave a review with the correct answer.

If you enjoyed it, please be brave and leave a review. To my regular reviewers, I love you guys.

I would also like to pay homage to my fantastic beta, AmyLouise, without whom you would be reading a story that does not make much sense, full of plot holes and the like. Truly, she is a wonderful beta and I couldn't ask for better. She picks up on the most obscure things, and for that I am forever in her debt. Thanks so very much, babe.

Mundungus' Fate

Chapter 16 of 25

Learn about Mundungus' fate as Harry becomes suspicious of someone's motives.

Hermione was seated on the very edge of the small cot, staring directly across at the stone wall. The food, which was sitting below the particular stone she was admiring, held no appeal. She was waiting for something, though what, her mind could not quite grasp.

Her breath came out in slow and steady billowing puffs of white smoke, and she thought she must have been a dragon in a previous life, making such nice white clouds of smoke. She lifted one hand from her lap and placed it in front of her face, cupping it to her mouth as she imagined herself soaring high above the ground, looking down on the earth from a great distance. Her hand dropped to her side, and she closed her eyes as she felt the wind rustling through her hair.

She opened her eyes abruptly, her thoughts about being a dragon quickly forgotten when she became aware of him, her master, as he stood outside the cell door. The sconces on the wall flared to life, temporarily blinding her, and she blinked her eyes a few times to focus them before quickly jumping off the cot and lying prostrate on the floor beside the bed.

"I have brought you a present, Mudblood," Lucius spoke casually as he entered the cell and with a flick of his wand, dumped the body of Mundungus in a heap on the floor. He had wanted to test a theory ever since he had read about it in a Dark text he had pursued when looking for the key to the collar his slave wore around her neck, and this was the first opportunity he had had to do so.

As the stench met her nostrils, she tried not to gag; she did not dare to look up to greet her master, as she had paid once, quite dearly, for that offence. So instead, she lay there on the unpleasantly cold and hard stone floor awaiting his commands.

"Oh, do get up," Lucius mocked in feigned indignation. There was a tinge of excitement lacing his voice, and Hermione shuddered inwardly. She realised that this would be another one of his tests.

Rising, she chanced a look at the gift her master had brought her; it was most certainly the cause of her sinus passages flaring, and there was something wrong with the thing that made her want to growl and snarl. She contained the harsh sound that was bubbling up into her throat and took a deep breath.

"Tsk, not eating again, I see." Lucius's voice broke through her thoughts as he spun around from the table upon which her meagre meal sat, placing his wand into its casing as he looked at her.

"I want you to eat everything that I provide for you," he said.

'Yes, Master,' she replied into his mind as she studied a crack in the stone floor. How could she explain to him that the food made her feel ill?

"Now, is that the way you show your Master your appreciation for the gift he has brought you?" Lucius asked, his voice growing more aggressive as he neared the end of his sentence.

'*Sorry, Master,*' Hermione replied as she quickly scrambled to kneel before him, scraping her already abused knees on the stone floor.

Her small hands reached up to brush his robes out of the way as she made quick work of his belt and trousers. Lucius stopped her with the head of his cane at her throat just as she was about to reach inside, her mouth open to receive him.

"That is not the proper way to treat your guest, slave," he snarled out, and Hermione was once again struggling to do or say the right thing so as not to anger him. He had a nasty temper, as she had learnt, but if she went through the motions and pleased him before he got to that stage, she knew that she would come off relatively unscathed.

Hermione dared not move from where she was kneeling before him; in her fear, she did not shift even a millimetre.

"Tut, tut..." Lucius sounded as though he was bitterly disappointed in her, which made her heart break a little. If only she could come up with the right thing to say or do; but she was no mind reader.

Lucius removed his cane from her throat, and pulling his wand from its casing, he pointed it at the thing that was causing the sickening odour in the room. She had almost forgotten about it, as she was so focused on satisfying the man before her. Anything to please him.

"*Ennervate,*" said Lucius in a half sigh, and she heard a groan from the other side of the room, though she dared not take a second glance over towards it.

Mundungus awoke to a splitting headache. He felt as if he had been run over repeatedly by the Knight Bus. Cradling his head in his hand, he squinted in the light, and his eyes widened as his focus returned.

"So pleased that you could join us," Lucius drawled in a haughty voice.

Mundungus couldn't do anything but stare at the scene before him, his mouth gaping open as he sat glued to the spot. The senior Malfoy was standing not two metres away from him with a woman kneeling at his feet, her hands reaching up towards him, though what she was grasping at he couldn't tell from this angle, as her back was to him. She had not a stitch of clothing on, except for a metal collar adorning her neck, though what it was for, Mundungus couldn't begin to guess. He blinked and shook his head a few times to clear it, but that only made the headache worse, so he stilled his movements.

"Slave, shouldn't you greet your guest?" Lucius spoke, his eyes never leaving those of Mundungus.

'*Yes, Master,*' her mind supplied, although Lucius could feel the tension radiating from her body.

Excellent, he thought to himself as he watched her slowly turn around to face the other wizard in the cell.

She could not help the low growl that came from her throat. Her body was shaking with the pressure of holding herself still, and her mind screamed at her to get the intruder out of her cell.

Lucius almost laughed out loud when he heard the growl coming from the Mudblood.

Oh, this will be fun, he thought as he did up his pants, but still hung onto his wand.

He made his way over to the prisoner, wand held firmly in one hand as he started tapping it into his other hand.

Mundungus sat transfixed as he stared at the naked woman, who was still kneeling. She looked vaguely familiar, and he tried to rack his abused memory for where he had seen her before. Suddenly a gasp left his throat as he recognised her. His stomach plummeted into the floor. This was Harry Potter's friend, Hermione Granger.

"Hermione," he choked out, rubbing his eyes with his one good hand in case it was an illusion conjured by the demon in the cell.

The sound of laughter met his ears, but he couldn't for the life of him tear his eyes from the vision of a naked Miss Granger in front of him.

"I see that you two are already acquainted," Lucius said, the laughter still ringing in his voice. "This will make what happens next all the more delicious."

It was then that Mundungus looked up into the eyes of Lucius Malfoy; he cringed back in fear as he saw the wizard's features take on a look of pure, unadulterated ecstasy.

"Mudblood," he said to the girl as though she were an encumbrance at best, "go greet your guest." Mundungus watched on as he saw her move jerkily towards him. He noticed the hesitation with which she did so.

"Now!" Lucius spoke with the promise of retribution if his orders were not carried out immediately, and Mundungus hastily held up both hands, his throbbing head and shoulder forgotten, as she let out a pure, animalistic cry and lunged towards him.

She was upon him in the blink of an eye, and Mundungus did not have a chance to retaliate. She was biting and scratching him, and he registered that she was quite strong for such a small thing.

He brought his left leg up and kicked out with all of his strength, sending her sprawling across the cell and into the cot against the wall as he stumbled to his feet. His broken shoulder, ribs and head made themselves felt once more as he swayed on the spot, his back leaning heavily on the wall behind him as he waited for her to come at him again.

"Now, is that any way to treat a woman, even if she is Mudblood filth?" Lucius protested, but Mundungus didn't take his eyes off Hermione. He realised, to his horror, that the metal collar must be controlling her and making her lash out at him. They had never been close; he couldn't even remember having talked to her, but he had never seen her raise a hand in violence. In fact, he remembered her as being a polite young lady on the few occasions he had seen her at Grimmauld Place. Surely she must recognise him.

Lucius sighed as he raised his wand and pointed it towards the wizard in the cell. If he wasn't going to play fair then neither would Lucius.

"*Petrificus Totalus,*" Lucius said, and Mundungus felt his body stiffen like a board, and a second later he crashed to the floor. The pain radiating from his shoulder and ribs was too much to bear, and he lost consciousness for a brief moment.

When he awoke, he found himself staring at the ceiling, his wide eyes darting around. He couldn't move as he struggled against the invisible bindings that held him. He thought his heart would come crashing out of his chest, it was beating so fast. It did no good to struggle, for he couldn't break the curse, so instead he strained to hear what was going on in the room.

Now that the waste of breathing space was bound, Lucius walked calmly over towards his slave. No one would hurt her except for him, and he was furious with himself for not binding the man sooner.

He crouched down towards the Mudblood and pushed her wayward hair out of her eyes tenderly.

Hermione groaned; the stench was all-encompassing, and she couldn't breathe. It was in her nose and on her body and hands, and she felt like ripping her skin off to get

rid of it. But then she felt the hand of her master pushing her hair aside, and she leant into it for a brief second, nuzzling it as if she were an animal instead of a human being.

"Can you stand?" Lucius asked, concern infusing the question.

Hermione nodded her head once as she replied, 'Yes, *Master*,' into his mind.

Lucius helped her stand as he sighed with relief. She had a big egg-shaped bump on her head, and there was blood trickling down her forehead from a nasty, ragged gash, probably from her collision with the metal bed frame.

She let out another snarl as her eyes focused beadily on the man now bound in her cell.

"Do hold still," Lucius remarked as he held on to her by the arm, bringing up his wand to close the wound and heal the bump on her head.

"Better?" he asked, and she again answered him with the same words he had heard a thousand times in his mind.

"He is all yours now, Mudblood. He is bound and will do you no harm. Do your worst." And with that, he released her arm and watched her rush over to the prostrate man like a starving buzzard, ready to gorge herself on his flesh.

Lucius watched, his eyes shining with pride, as she ripped into the man, and as the sounds of tearing flesh met his ears, a sadistic grin made its way onto his face as he made his way towards his Mudblood slave and the wizard.

It was times like this he loved being a Malfoy.

Lucius reappeared from behind the hidden stones that held the Mudblood's prison, a look of pure bliss on his face. Who would have thought that it would end so well for him? It was beyond his wildest imagination.

So it was true; she would destroy anyone without the Dark Mark on their forearm.

He smiled to himself as he made his way into his personal study, the wand of the wizard whom he had just had the pleasure of seeing annihilated now taken out of his breast pocket and resting in his hand. He swung his cane around in a circle as he reached the door. Lowering the wards that were in place, he strode purposefully to the fireplace. Tapping the stones above it, he laid the wand into the crevice that appeared. Taking one look at the Mudblood's wand, he thought back to what had just occurred in his slave's cell.

She had ripped into the wizard as though he were an overripe tomato. The blood and flesh oozed from her open mouth, her teeth were bared, and her fingers, hands and breasts were coated in red. One look at his slave, and Lucius was instantly hard. He had taken her right there on the stone floor while the disfigured remains of the wizard were rapidly cooling. She was still hunched over the wizard, breathing heavily, although she knew he was dead. He had forced his hard cock into her from behind, but not before placing a cushioning charm on the floor, as he hung onto her hips in a bruising manner and pulled her roughly towards him, entering her in one cruel stroke. The wizard had looked a fright when his slave had finished with him, and that made their coupling even more frenzied, as the sight of all that blood had made his groin twist in anticipation. He never took his eyes off the glazed, blank eyes of the dead wizard, now wide open and staring. His body was twisted and mangled to a point of almost non-recognition, and Lucius had fucked the Mudblood harder because of it. Her small body was covered with the drying blood of the man she had just killed. It was magnificent.

After he had finished, shouting out his completion, he had called a house-elf to dispose of the body and clean up the mess. He then cast an air-purifying charm around the room. After all, he was responsible for the Mudblood's safety and sanity.

He came back to himself as he heard a disturbance at the door and whirled around quickly, dropping the wand that was in his hand and not bothering to close up the hole.

Narcissa stood just over the threshold of the room, her mouth agape and her eyes held wide open with a look of terror upon her face.

"Lucius, you promised me." The voice of his wife met his ears, as she took in his appearance.

"No more," she continued shaking her head, "it stops here. I let you drag our son into this madness, but you promised me that there would be no more of it in our home. I'm taking Draco to France in the morning." Her hands were balled into fists at her side; she was shaking with adrenaline, and she had the look of a very determined woman.

"How many times have I told you not to disturb me whilst I am in my private rooms?" Lucius's tone was quiet, so quiet that Narcissa had to strain to hear him. Then he was advancing, and Narcissa could not will her body to move; it was as though she were attached to the spot, and it was all happening in slow motion.

Suddenly, Lucius was upon her, his gloved hand around her throat.

Narcissa could still smell the blood on her husband and was startled into action. "The door was open, I just thought..." she started, true terror in her voice as she began to plead with her husband.

"You thought what? That you would come into my sanctuary and disturb my peace?" Lucius spat as the hand around her throat grew tighter. "You thought you could take my son away from me? You thought that you could stand up against me? I am your husband," he yelled in her face, and she could feel the bits of spit and his hot, panting breath on her cheek. Her eyes bulged as she struggled for air.

Narcissa's perfectly-manicured fingernails clawed at his hand, tightening around her throat, though it was doing her no good. She needed air and realised with fear that if she didn't get it soon, she would pass out or possibly die.

She used every ounce of strength in her body to bring her knee up to meet her husband's groin. As her knee made contact, Lucius let out a shriek of surprise as his hand dropped to protect his assets.

Narcissa stood gasping for air as she watched her husband fall to his knees, cradling his crotch. She had never done anything so undignified in her life, and the implications of her actions were only now starting to become visible as she gasped for air.

She scrambled for footing on the highly polished marble floor as she turned around and ran as best she could in her high heels. If only she could get to the foyer and Apparate anywhere, she knew she would be safe.

As that thought entered her mind she laughed out loud at the absurdity of that statement. Pureblood witches didn't run for their lives from their husbands; they stood there and took whatever was coming their way, as her mother and grandmother had done.

Narcissa could see the foyer within her reach as she rounded the corner and saw the daunting staircase in her way. Suddenly, she was knocked off her feet and sent sprawling to the floor. The wind had been knocked out of her, and she struggled for air.

She felt herself flipped over to face her abuser, her husband, as he straddled her body so she could not move. Her arms were pinned to her side by his knees as she felt his hands close once more around her throat.

She tried to fight back, but her attempt was in vain; her eyes bulged, and the last image she saw was that of her husband's unrecognisable face, twisted in madness, as her vision slowly faded.

Ron flopped onto Harry's bed in his room. Ron Weasley had been inducted into The Order almost a month ago, and since then he had seen many changes in his best mate. The most startling was the fact that he no longer hated Snape; in fact, he seemed almost cosy with him in the few interactions that he had seen.

Ron narrowed his eyes as he watched Harry pace.

"Oh, sit down," the redhead said, patting the bed beside him, "you're making me nervous pacing like that."

Harry stood still and slowly turned to face Ron.

"Sorry," he said, looking up awkwardly. "Just trying to use up some of my pent-up energy."

"It's okay, it's just that you remind me of Snape when you do that."

Harry cocked one eyebrow as he tried his best impersonation of Severus that he could manage.

"Gods," Ron moaned; he threw a pillow at Harry, which was narrowly deflected. "Now you're even starting to look like him." Ron hid his head in his arms. The sound of amusement made him look up to see Harry holding onto his belly and trying very hard to clamp down on his laughter.

"Prat," Ron said, smiling, and slowly getting up off Harry's bed.

Harry's laughter ended, and he looked at Ron. A serious look crossed his face.

"Everything is changing, Ron," Harry said in a small voice, and for a split second, Ron was reminded of the thin, young boy Harry used to be.

"I know," Ron replied looking at Harry honestly. "But it will be all right; after all, you have me by your side, and I'm not going anywhere."

Ron smiled then, one of those smiles that could chase away all of Harry's fears and doubts, and he smiled back at him.

"It's you and me against the world, Harry," Ron stated, his face serious now.

"Thanks, Ron. You're the best mate a friend could ask for," Harry replied, his hand coming up to rest on Ron's shoulder.

Ron's smile grew at that. "I know," Ron said plainly.

Harry's arm dropped from Ron's shoulder as he punched him good naturedly in the shoulder.

"Ow," Ron cried out, his arm automatically coming up to rub his shoulder. He looked up to find Harry holding in his laughter once more.

"You'll pay for that," said Ron as he crash tackled Harry onto the floor.

Yes, Harry thought as he narrowly missed Ron's elbow to the ribs, *I have really missed horsing around with Ron. He is the best friend a person can ask for.*

When they were both struggling to breathe, sitting up and rubbing their various wounds, Harry's eyes caught sight of the Marauder's Map, lying open to his side. Reaching over towards it, while straightening up his glasses, he saw a familiar name appearing near the gates and then proceeding up the front lawns of Hogwarts.

"Bloody hell," he swore under his breath as he reached over and pulled the map towards himself.

"What's the matter?" Ron wheezed, as he leant towards Harry to take a look at the map, which was now clutched in his hands.

Pointing at the map, Harry replied, "He has some nerve showing his Death Eater face around here," a tinge of bitterness lacing his voice.

Ron saw now what Harry was so worked up about as his eyes caught sight of the name Draco Malfoy, entering a passageway that led down to the dungeons.

"Wonder what he wants?" Ron said, screwing his face up as he stared at the dot on the map.

"I don't know, but I'm going to go check it out," Harry replied, as he struggled awkwardly to his feet.

Ron hastily stood too, as he clamped his hand down onto Harry's arm to prevent him from doing anything rash.

"Hold on a second, Harry, you don't have your cloak, and we don't know when Remus will be back with it. Besides, it looks as though he's heading towards Snape's office, and won't your newest pal tell you everything?" He looked over at Harry and smiled a mischievous smile which calmed his friend down a little. "Remus is probably off snogging Tonks in an unused classroom or something," he added as an afterthought.

"You're right," Harry said, running a hand through his dark, tousled hair. "I guess I'm just going to have to be patient with this one."

Harry looked down at the map once more, and therefore he missed the look of confusion that passed across Ron's face.

Draco detested this feeling in the pit of his stomach. He found himself trudging up the front lawns to meet his godfather in Hogwarts, a place he had sworn to himself he would never, ever set foot in again. But this was a matter of the utmost importance, at least to the son of a Malfoy.

It was dark, and Draco was under a Disillusionment Charm, so he felt confident that he would meet with no one until he made it to his destination. He felt no resistance crossing the wards into Hogwarts as he marched his way up the front lawns making his journey up to the ancient castle. Instead of heading for the entrance doors, he veered left and slid silently through a little known door at the side of the castle. His footsteps echoed almost musically off the stone floors and walls as he made his way down into the dungeons where he was counting on his godfather being present.

Peering around to make sure he was indeed alone, he lifted his wand up to his head, dropping the spell that hid his body and proceeded to knock respectfully on the heavy door leading into the Potions classroom. Draco was willing to bet that Severus was within. If not, he wasn't sure what he would do. After a moment had passed, the door was flung open, and Severus was standing in the doorway in the usual tight black robes he favoured.

"Draco," he said, his voice registering some surprise. Draco wondered if he was expecting someone else, but pushed that thought aside in favour of his own needs.

"Godfather, may I come in?" Draco asked politely.

"Of course." Severus stood aside and ushered him into the room.

Draco walked in as though he owned the classroom, his head held high and his back straight. The perfect picture of an aristocrat that would have made Lucius proud. But he didn't want to make his father proud, not with what he now suspected his father of doing.

"What can I do for you?" Severus asked civilly when the door was firmly closed, and he faced the boy once more.

Draco's face relayed that he had come to talk on a matter of grave importance and he opened his mouth a few times then closed it again as though he were trying to come up with a good way to start this conversation.

Severus didn't rush him; instead, he made his way over to his office before motioning Draco to follow him.

Once seated inside, Severus flicked his wand to the door and erected a heavy silencing charm. He noticed that Draco was fidgeting in his chair as he turned back to face the blond.

"There," he stated, "Now no one but you and I shall hear what you have to say. And I can only assume that you came here with a certain problem that you wished no one else be made aware of."

Draco nodded his head once.

Severus was a patient man and waited for Draco to tell him in his own time just what was so important as to bring him out here in the middle of the night.

Draco's thoughts were in turmoil. On his march up to the castle, he had come up with a roundabout way of hinting to his godfather that he suspected his father had done something dreadful to his mother. He had noticed the way she had become withdrawn, and the signs of abuse at his father's hand were becoming a frequent sight at the manor; but now, sitting in this small office with the wards erected against prying ears and eyes, his mind drew a blank.

Draco knew that Severus was waiting for him to begin talking, but he had no idea how to start the conversation. One does not just blurt out the fact that one thinks his father has taken his mother's life. His father was the most

influential person in his life, the right-hand man of the most powerful Dark wizard alive, and to blurt out his misgivings... well, it just wasn't done.

After sitting for what felt like an eternity in utter silence, Severus cleared his throat.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea? Or perhaps something stronger?" Severus asked, raising one elegant eyebrow.

Draco glanced up, "No, thank you, sir." He lapsed back into the eerie silence. He thought about all the repercussions of coming here today behind his father's back. And if his godfather was half as loyal to the Dark Lord's cause as he had led him to believe, he had to consider carefully what he could and couldn't tell him.

"Then perhaps this isn't a social visit, Draco. Maybe it would be best just to state what is on your mind."

Startled, Draco spoke, "It's complex, and I don't know where to begin." Draco's fingers were drumming on his thigh, a movement that exposed his anxiety.

"The beginning is usually the best place, though I would be open to anything at this point in time," Severus sighed. He was concerned for his godson. He hadn't seen him since he had left Hogwarts and feared he had become too much like his father to be saved. Although now, looking at the young man's face, so much like Narcissa's, he pondered whether he was wrong on that front.

Severus was startled when Draco spoke up. "I know he killed my mother," Draco whispered, head bent towards the desk.

"Who, Draco? Who has killed Narcissa?" Severus asked. He was startled by the fact that anyone would kill the pureblood matriarch, let alone leave the proof behind for her son to find.

Draco looked up and into Severus's eyes. "My father."

The two stared at each other, Severus trying to come to terms with what the young man was saying. One look into those grey eyes, and Severus knew he was speaking the truth.

"Do you have the necessary evidence? You cannot just go around accusing your father, a high-ranking member of the Dark Lord's army, of such a thing."

"I saw my mother," Draco replied solemnly.

"When?" Severus sat up straighter.

"It was last night, she came to me as a spirit and told me to be a good man. To live my life not under anyone else's thumb, but for myself."

Severus felt deflated. He could not go to Dumbledore with the fancies of a child. Although Draco was a young man, he was still considered a child within the Wizarding world.

Draco could see the disappointment on his godfather's face and hurried to explain himself.

"I haven't seen her in two weeks, and whenever I ask my father where she is, he states that she has gone to France and then refuses to shed any light on the situation. I fear that he could be somehow involved in my mother's disappearance. I know I shouldn't be telling you this, but you're my last hope. You always treated me fairly here, and I would like to think that, as my godfather, you would help me." Draco finished with a whisper. He looked up, and Severus could tell that this was clearly plaguing him.

"Why do you think that Lucius has anything to do with your mother suddenly going away to France? Have you even tried to contact her?" Severus asked. He wouldn't put it past the elder Malfoy to get rid of Narcissa if it would further his own agenda, but thought it best to hear the boy's full story before making his views known.

Draco scrunched up his face, a look of concentration on his countenance. "Yes – don't you think I have tried?" he cried out, dropping his head into his hands. His harsh breathing was the only sound to be heard in the office for a minute.

Severus stared at the younger man who was trying, and failing, to compose himself. He would offer the boy no coddling, as he wanted to hear the rest of the story first.

Finally, Draco looked up to see his godfather studying him. He laughed shakily before adding, "I tried to Floo to our holiday home in France, but that didn't work. It seems that the fireplace has been turned off; my letters come back unopened; I even tried Apparating there, but the house was closed up," Draco explained, rubbing at his temples.

"I saw my mother become a shell of herself after I left Hogwarts and spent more time at home. Or perhaps she was always this way, and I hadn't noticed. Either way, I saw the evidence of my father's hand upon her too often to call it a mere coincidence. I should not have merely stood by when my mother, the woman who loved and raised me, was being beaten by that animal; I should have done something," Draco yelled, slamming his fist onto the desk before him.

"And what precisely could you have done, Draco?" Severus asked, his tone sceptical. Perhaps the boy could be saved after all, though he hated that it was Narcissa who had to be sacrificed before the boy could see the error of his ways.

"I don't know. Anything. Stood up to my father and told him not to strike mother. You know, he never once allowed her to heal herself afterwards; it was as though she couldn't even perform a simply healing charm upon herself. Either that, or she was simply not allowed to. I watched my mother, when I did see her, limp around the manor with huge, ugly bruises upon her face, and I'm sure her clothing concealed more. I was at my wit's end last night and was about to go and demand answers from my father when mother appeared before me."

Severus could see he was working himself into a frenzy and stood up from his desk. Walking over to his cupboard, he opened it and brought down two vials, which he put before Draco on the desk.

Eyeing the vials suspiciously, Draco looked up into his godfather's face.

"It is not poison, if that is indeed what you are thinking. If I wanted to poison you I would have done so a long time ago, Draco. The first one is one of my stronger draughts for that headache that you are experiencing. The second is a calming draught."

Draco's cheeks reddened momentarily as he brought a shaking hand up to the desk and reached for the first vial. Uncorking it, he swallowed it in a single gulp, sighing with relief as the brew worked instantly.

"Thanks," he mumbled, his thoughts no longer a jumbled mess and his head clearer than it had been in a long time. He reached for the next vial and swallowed it the same way.

"Don't mention it," Severus replied, flicking his wand at the vials and sending them to rest below the cupboard. He would wash them later.

Seating himself once more behind his desk, Severus steepled his hands before him and looked across at Draco. The boy seemed unsure, as though it all sounded a little crazy, even to himself. He had said that Severus was his last hope, though for what Severus was uncertain.

"So why, Draco, have you come here to see me? I imagine that having your mother missing and showing up in your dreams," he sneered at this before continuing, "and your father feeding you misinformation was not the real reason for your visit. Was it just to get your misgivings off your chest, or was it something more?" Severus asked. Draco just shook his head as though he were fighting against an invisible barrier.

"So, I ask you once more, what are you looking for? Absolution? For you will not find it here." Severus tried to keep his face open and relaxed. He hoped the boy had come to his senses about the Dark Lord. He was brighter than Lucius was at the same age, and Severus knew he had better judgement than his father.

"Do you really think my father could have had something to do with it?" Draco asked, his grey eyes looking a little too bright, as if he might break down at any moment. Severus hated to be the one to break the boy's last illusions about his father.

"What do you think, Draco?"

When Draco refused to answer, Severus continued. "I know you are not brainless, Draco, and I thought after my teaching you to think for yourself for seven years, you would have come to the obvious conclusion."

"I did," Draco whispered, breaking eye contact.

Silence encompassed the room once more. Both men were deep in thought.

Draco used to love the fact that he had an influential father within the rank of the Death Eaters, and although he himself was quite lowly in their ranks, he was never treated like the other recruits were because of who his father was. However, it now seemed as though it were a curse instead of the advantage it once was. There was no one he could turn to for help; his so-called friends were busy with their own lives, and if his godfather could not help him, then he was truly lost.

"I hear, from father, that you have killed the Order's werewolf." Severus was so taken aback by the sudden change of topic that he had to hold himself upright with his arms on the chair he was seated on so that he didn't fall face first onto his desk.

Looking up towards Severus, Draco saw a moment of shock on his face.

"What?" Draco sounded surprised. "You can't tell me you cared for the mutt?" Draco scoffed when his godfather made no reply.

"Every life is precious, Draco," Severus replied. "Say I had been given the task to kill you instead of Lupin, how would that make you feel?" the dark-haired wizard asked.

Draco looked astonished, his eyes wide as he stared back at his godfather.

"You wouldn't?" he breathed out hesitantly.

"Wouldn't I? If I am given a command, I am to carry it out no matter how ludicrous it may be. This has not been the first, nor the last, order that I will have to see through."

Draco looked thoughtful for a second, his eyes unfocused briefly before they returned to their natural state as he stared up at the man he had looked up to as a second father when his own was too busy to be concerned with him. "But isn't that going against everything that the Dark Lord believes in? What I mean to say is, isn't our Lord always going on about blood purity?" he whispered, as though someone were listening in.

Severus sighed. He could always Obliviate the boy if things didn't go the way he hoped.

"You are the closest thing I will ever have to a son, Draco, and therefore I shall share some of my pearls of wisdom with you. Think for yourself; never follow anyone unless it furthers your own agenda; and never, ever, think that a half-blood—" Draco started at this and Severus nodded his head. "Yes, you heard me right – a half-blood wizard, even one as powerful as the Dark Lord, holds anything over you. Are you a Slytherin or not?" he asked the young man, who just sat there with his mouth agape, his eyes threatening to bulge out of their sockets.

"But I thought you were on his side," Draco said when he had recovered somewhat.

"I am on no one's side but my own, and you would do well to remember that. Slytherins look out for no one but themselves, and the sooner you realise that the madman you call your Lord would just as soon strike you down for a real or imaginary indiscretion, the better off you will be. I stand by Dumbledore because he is fair and just." Severus had to sneer at his own sentimentality. He wasn't being totally honest with Draco, but if he could get him to switch sides and somehow protect the boy, then he thought that he could die a happy man.

"I have given you enough to digest for the moment," Severus said as he stood slowly from behind the desk. "I shall make the necessary arrangements to meet with your father and see what I can deduce about this situation." He held up a hand when Draco was about to speak, stilling the boy for a moment. "I don't promise that I shall get to the bottom of this, but I do promise you that I shall try my best."

With that Draco stood and nodded his head once before following Severus to the classroom door.

His godfather had indeed given him enough to think about, and he knew that he would be in for some sleepless nights ahead. The thought made his stomach clench in fear. Could he go against everything he was taught from the very beginning of his life? An image of his mother flashed before his eyes, and he set his jaw.

He would try, for her.

A/N: If you enjoyed it, please be brave and leave a review. To my regular reviewers, I love you guys.

I'm not sure what you want to see next, so suggestions would be most welcome.

To my incredible beta, AmyLouise, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You are truly the best, babe, and I'm glad you can join me on this journey.

A New Spy

Chapter 17 of 25

The Order acquires a new spy.

Severus sat in the regal study of his former friend, a snifter of brandy held lazily in one hand. The midafternoon sunlight was trying desperately to break through the looming clouds overhead. Lucius was seated directly opposite him, one hand lazily caressing the silver-headed serpent cane at his side and the other holding a similar snifter. He was unperturbed; this was his manor, and inside it he was the king.

"So... what brings you here, Severus?" Lucius drawled, as though he were making small talk with a peasant.

"Is it so surprising that I have missed you, friend?" Severus replied, matching Lucius's drawl almost perfectly. He knew how to play this game, and Lucius was no different from the other cretins within the Dark Lord's ranks: always fighting amongst themselves for supremacy and lifting themselves up in their own minds to become the most significant individuals in the world. The sad thing was that most of them believed this delusion. Lucius had money and his own belief in his superiority, but Severus couldn't help thinking that without his wealth he would be nothing to the Dark Lord.

Lucius looked over at his friend and smiled. "No, I suppose not," he said, the ghost of a smile upon his lips.

"I trust Narcissa is well? It has been much too long since I have seen your lovely wife. Where is she today?" Severus watched Lucius's face for any hint that something was wrong.

Lucius stared at Severus for a full thirty seconds before answering, "Yes, very well. She is here, of course; however, she is in no state to entertain and is currently resting, I am afraid. Being a lady of leisure can be quite taxing on a delicate creature like my Cissy. I will let her know you inquired as to her well being."

Severus caught a shift to the left in Lucius's eyes, an explicit sign that he was lying. Even the most practised liars can give themselves away by a subtle flicker of movement that would go unnoticed by all but the most observant. And Severus was very perceptive to even the most obscure cues the ones that let him know if a man or woman was undeniably lying through their teeth.

Severus felt an uneasiness creep into his very soul. This was not the same man he had known a year ago, and it irked him to think he had once considered Lucius his closest friend.

"How are you coping with the brats and that fool of a Headmaster at the school?" Lucius asked, changing the subject.

"As well as can be expected," Severus answered, swirling the brandy around with a graceful hand. "The students are becoming more dim-witted as the days go by. I have found myself wishing your son were back at school, if only for the creative answers he would give."

Lucius nodded his head once.

"Where is the boy?" Severus asked. "I have to congratulate him for the raid he performed last week. I hear that it went well. You should be proud of him."

Lucius puffed out his chest a little, a look of pride taking the place of his indifference.

"I am," he replied shortly, "although he was nothing like me at his age, but he will soon learn his way, as we all do."

They settled once more into silence, each man lost to his own thoughts. Severus was pondering all the questions that Lucius had sidestepped, which in itself was a telling sign. Lucius was a close confidant of the Dark Lord; he knew this, and he realised there was no way to salvage their once comfortable friendship.

He mentally sighed as he sipped his brandy.

Severus stayed in Lucius's study for another fifteen minutes before standing and making his excuses to leave.

Making his way off the grounds of Malfoy Manor and into the crisp air, Severus left with more questions than he had answers. However, he now felt sure that Lucius had killed Narcissa; to what end he was not sure, and he highly doubted he would be able to probe any further to find out the reasons behind it.

Being in the Dark Lord's favour was always a precarious position at best; he had seen many followers rise, but from that peak there was only one way to go, down. Severus didn't want suspicion to be laid upon his shoulders, especially with no proof.

If the Dark Lord knew of Lucius's treachery, he didn't care, and that made Severus shiver inside, something he could blame on the cool air if he didn't question himself too closely. What was it that Lucius was doing for the Dark Lord? They had seemed a little too close at the last meeting when he had taken Mundungus away. Though he knew now, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the wizard was dead, it was unlikely that they would ever find a body to lay to rest.

He hoped that Draco would not do anything rash in his need for retribution. Severus knew how much he adored his mother, Narcissa, but he also knew the boy to be cunning, as he had taught him for seven years and had watched him grow before he came to Hogwarts.

He pondered this as he Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts. Whatever the answers were, he was not privy to them, and he could take it no further with Lucius, or the Dark Lord, at this point.

Severus sat in his dark chambers, the fire his only source of light. Winter was almost upon them, and he felt the cold down here in the dungeons more than any other place within the castle. He felt at peace in the dark; he trusted it, considered it a friend. He could not be ridiculed in the darkness, for few creatures could see him within its embrace.

His thoughts turned dark as a scowl took up residence on his face. Severus felt, beyond a doubt, that Lucius Malfoy a wizard he had once counted as a friend had killed his wife Narcissa.

How could a man do that to the woman he had spent the better part of twenty years with?

He just couldn't seem to wrap his mind around this concept.

After his unexpected meeting with Draco the night before, he had revealed his private chambers to Harry Potter in the hope of never being caught off guard again. Draco had figuratively thrown him through a Quidditch hoop by showing up uninvited to his Potions classroom. When the young man had revealed to Severus the true reason for his visit, it had hit him like a Bludger to the head, and only his years of spying had controlled the emotions that were threatening to overwhelm him.

Harry had come down to his chambers at first light demanding answers for which he had no response. Not that he didn't want to tell Harry the truth as he knew it; it was simply that he had yet to come up with a plan of action. He had reassured the Chosen One as to why Draco had come to his office, telling the boy what had been discussed. He felt no need to coddle the young man as many others had, and had told him outright how Draco, Harry's nemesis, had suspected his own father of killing his mother.

A look of understanding had crossed Harry's face as he listened. It didn't take a Legilimens to decipher that he had felt empathy towards Draco.

Harry had lost both of his parents before he had really known them, a pain that was still evident in the boy. He had looked green when the Potions master had described Draco's concerns, and he couldn't quite look Severus in the eye.

Severus's mind was reliving the events over and over again. He saw no way that he could possibly have stopped them, and he cursed out loud as he felt the telltale signs of a headache starting to form beneath his temples. Closing his eyes and breathing deeply, his mind replayed the scene he had witnessed this very morning.

Harry had sat in his private study, a look of bewilderment on his face. Severus had just concluded his tale and looked up to find that the boy had turned pale; his hands were shaking slightly as they sat in his lap.

Although Harry had never liked Draco, the mutual loathing that had formed between the two of them had as much to do with blood status and House rivalry as it did with any personal issues.

However, he did not wish Draco true harm and knew something of what he must be feeling because of his own situation. But to have one parent kill another that was unfathomable.

"What happens now?" Harry asked, bringing his head up to meet that of the wizard who was sitting directly opposite him.

"What do you mean?" Severus enquired, perplexed at the lad's question.

"I mean, what happens with Draco?" Harry asked, grimacing at having used his adversary's name so forthrightly. It was usually 'Malfoy' or 'Ferret', but never 'Draco'. Harry looked up at his professor's face, his green eyes probing; Severus found he couldn't look away.

"We wait," Severus replied, as though it was the simplest thing in the world.

Harry, not one to sit idly by and watch as injustice took place right under his nose, even if it were to Draco, jumped up suddenly.

Severus raised both his eyebrows, but Harry was undeterred.

"What do you mean, we wait? How can you be so unsympathetic?" he yelled, clenching his fists into a ball to prevent himself from slamming them onto the desk at which the dark-haired professor sat. Severus looked unnaturally calm.

"And what do you propose we do? Go to Malfoy Manor with pitchforks and torches, and demand that Mr Malfoy come out, and when he doesn't, threaten to burn the place to the ground?"

Harry could hear the sarcasm rolling off his voice in thick waves. "Anything is better than just sitting here doing nothing," Harry said sullenly. He deflated somewhat, realising that his demands were unreasonable.

"You are not ready for that, Harry." Severus spoke in a calm voice. "We have to wait and see what Draco will do. He will either come to the Headmaster, or stay on the same path as his father, and neither you nor I can make that choice for him."

"I know," Harry breathed out forcefully. Warily, he sat back down.

"Do you trust Draco to do the right thing?" Harry looked into the black eyes of his teacher and friend. He thought, at times, that the Potions master's eyes gave a hint of some of the emotion he was feeling, although the rest of his face was an impassive mask.

"I trust him enough to do what he feels is best. You forget he was brought up with two Slytherin parents who taught him from the cradle to act, walk and talk like a Slytherin."

"No," Harry interrupted, "what I mean to say is, do you *trust* him?" Harry still looked into Severus's eyes, an imploring gaze on his face. Severus felt that everything hinged on the answer he would give.

"Yes," he breathed out without thinking, and the conviction in Severus's voice was enough answer for Harry.

"If you trust Draco, Severus, then so do I," Harry said forcefully, as though he were making a public statement of his belief in the Potions master.

The shock of such a comment must have registered in Severus's face for he saw a frown crease the young man's forehead.

"What? Don't you believe me?" Harry asked. He suddenly sounded insecure, as though he were not sure of the relationship between himself and his professor.

Quickly rushing to reiterate what he intended to say, he added, "I mean, I trust you. There, I said it. God knows why, as you are still such a git, but you have been honest with me, which is more than I can say for some of the others." A hard glint entered his normally soft, green eyes, and it didn't take a genius to work out that he was referring to the headmaster.

Severus just nodded his head briefly, as though it were a normal occurrence for anyone, besides his own Slytherins, to put their trust in him. His heart swelled in the knowledge of how far their relationship had truly come, from adversaries to trustworthy allies. Severus made a promise to himself: he would not let down the Boy Who Lived, even if it meant sacrificing his own life.

With Narcissa out of the picture, Lucius had much more time on his hands to spend with his slave. He had never felt so carefree in his life. Certainly, he had other slaves, but the Mudblood was his favourite, although he had to remind himself that if he were not successful in asking his Lord for the boon of saving her life, then he would have to do without her.

This thought brought on a level of protectiveness he had never before shown towards any of his previous slaves, and he vowed to himself that he would make her pay for this weakness she had caused in him, although it was through no fault of her own.

He had ordered a small number of his many house-elves to arrange the disposal of the body of his late wife. He wondered where they had placed it. It didn't really matter to him, as all of his house elves were deathly frightened of him, ensuring their loyalty to only him, and he made sure that they remained so. They would keep their silence or be given clothes. Lucius made a point of reminding them of their service to him and him only, the Master of the Manor.

Lucius walked with a new spring in his step and often found himself whistling when he reached the Mudblood's door.

No, that will never do; Malfoys don't whistle, he thought idly to himself.

He had had to erect an enchantment upon the Mudblood's cell after his run in with Narcissa. The blood lust had been too great and he had taken it out on his slave, almost killing her in the process. He knew his Lord would exact revenge upon his person if he ever went so far, and so he had placed this enchantment upon her cell, one that would still his body when his slave was close to death. It was purely for self-preservation.

Something that was puzzling him deeply was his old friend, Severus. He had not come to the Manor in quite some time, a year if he remembered correctly, and to show up almost three weeks after his late wife had left this earthly plane well, it was just a little too much of a coincidence for his liking. He would keep an eye on his comrade and see if there were any signs that he suspected that something untoward had happened to Narcissa.

As he made his way down to the cell which held the Mudblood, his mind abruptly went blank as his needs made themselves known once more. Adjusting himself within his too-tight trousers, he quickly raised his wand to the door and felt the telltale tingle on his left forearm as the wards came down and the heavy door opened before him.

For more than a month, Draco had been fighting off his own personal demons, going through an internal struggle with his principles and his sense of right and wrong. That is why, on a Saturday night precisely two months after his talk with his godfather, he was standing in the headmaster's office, looking around with wide eyes at the various contraptions that littered his office.

He had chosen this night, as there were essentially no students around. Most of them were at home with their loving parents, tucked into their nice cosy beds, awaiting Christmas. Draco scoffed at this thought as he took in the wall to his right where there was the collection of the past headmasters's and headmistress's portraits. Most were feigning sleep, but some were staring at him openly with a look of distrust, as if he might get up at any moment and trash the place. He wondered for a moment what they would do if he did precisely that.

Smiling a knowing smile to himself, he grinned lazily at the portraits. He felt uneasy inside, but outwardly he looked calm and collected. This was by far the hardest decision he had had to make in his life, and it weighed heavily on his shoulders.

A squawk in the corner startled Draco, and he jumped, turning his attention to the phoenix that was occupying the perch in the corner of the office. It eyed him warily as though it were sizing him up. Before he could examine the creature further, a door appeared in the wall next to the perch, and Draco saw the headmaster strolling through.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Dumbledore said as he made his way around his impressive desk and took a seat. He held up one hand and motioned towards the seat that was directly opposite him.

Draco was frozen to the spot and thought that he must have looked like an incompetent child instead of the confident man he wished to portray.

"Take a seat, Mr Malfoy," the headmaster said with a grandfatherly smile on his face when Draco made no effort to move.

Draco hastily came to his senses and took the seat that the headmaster was motioning towards. However, he did not relax and sat on the chair's edge, waiting to jump up at a moment's notice.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

Draco looked up into the old man's face. Dumbledore's hands were steepled in front of him, and he had a look of curiosity on his face. He took a deep breath in to begin; his mouth suddenly felt dry, and he longed for a glass of Firewhisky to steady his nerves.

"Lucius killed my mother," he blurted out, not knowing where the words came from, but he felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off of his chest. Draco could no longer think of his father in any other way except by his first name. Even within himself he found this disturbing, but it was the only way of distancing himself from the atrocities that Lucius had performed and would continue to carry out unless he was stopped. Draco considered he had lost both his parents the night his mother had been killed.

The headmaster's eyes went wide and his eyebrows threatened to leave his face.

"I want a way out," Draco hurriedly continued before he lost his nerve, "a way out of the Death Eaters. I just want to live my life for me."

Dumbledore stared back at him with a gentle expression. He understood what Draco must be feeling; it was perfectly obvious from the empathy in his blue eyes.

"Draco, you know this is not possible," the headmaster started, "as I am sure you are aware from the brand on your arm."

Draco's right hand came up and clamped over his left forearm, a mixture of loathing and pleading showing on his face.

"Please, Headmaster," Draco pleaded, "I know I wasn't the model student in my time here, but if there is any way you can reverse this, I would be willing to lay my life on the line to have a chance at a future."

Draco didn't know where this verbal declaration had come from, and he was forced to admit to himself that it was nothing but the truth, even though he hadn't come here today to beg and plead like a commoner. Instead, he was going to offer up his services to the headmaster if it was the only way out. He knew that the Dark Lord could find him anywhere, and running to another continent wasn't an option. But it seemed as if the old man was going to turn him away.

Draco felt his eyes watering and quickly swiped at them with the back of his hand.

"I am not going to lie to you, Draco. The avenue which you desire will be fraught with danger; it may even cost you your life. But if you are sincere in wishing to follow this path, your soul may very well be saved, and you can undo some of the damage that has already occurred." The headmaster looked at Draco with seriousness. Draco no longer had the feeling that he was talking to someone's senile old grandfather. In the place of the old man sat a wizard of immense power.

Draco nodded his head slowly, knowing that this path he was about to agree to would either save him or kill him. His life was already forfeit if he continued on the course he was currently pursuing. This way, if he were to die, he could redeem himself in the eyes of his mother.

"If you are sure..." Albus let the question linger in the air between them, pushing up his glasses, which were threatening to slide off his nose.

Draco nodded his head once more, determination entering his steel grey eyes as he did so.

Dumbledore stood from behind his desk and Draco went to do the same.

"Sit," the headmaster said, looking over at Draco, who complied without a second thought. He watched the old wizard as he walked towards the fireplace and grabbed a pinch of Floo powder from the box that was sitting on the mantle.

Draco swallowed nervously. He wasn't sure what the headmaster was up to. Would he call the Aurors now to take him away to Azkaban? His head swung around, looking for a way out of the office before they could come and capture him. It was then that he heard a name that made his head turn abruptly towards the fireplace, and he froze as if in a trance. Severus Snape. What did he have to do with this? Did the headmaster not know that he was a Death Eater who was loyal to no one but himself?

All these thoughts ran through his head in the seconds it took Severus to step through the Floo and into the office.

Severus looked upon the scene before him. He was slightly shocked to see the boy in the headmaster's office so soon, but he made sure not to show it.

"You called, Albus," he drawled as he stepped into the office, brushing imaginary ash off his pristine robes.

"Yes, my boy," Albus countered as he once more took up his seat behind the desk. "It seems young Mr Malfoy here wants to deflect from the path he is currently on and has come here tonight to ask for a way out."

Severus's head snapped towards Draco, who sat up straighter in his chair.

"Is this true?" Severus asked, as though he needed to hear it from Draco himself.

"Yes, sir," Draco replied, struggling with himself to remain calm.

"I see," was the only response that Draco got as the Potions master came and took the seat next to him.

Draco blinked; he didn't remember seeing a chair there a second ago, but he dismissed this thought as his head turned once more to the wizard beside him.

"And what precisely would you have me do with this information?" Severus asked the headmaster.

"Nothing of course. I needed someone that the boy trusts to do the binding spell with, and you were the only logical choice."

Severus huffed as he folded his long arms across his chest.

"Come now, Severus, think of the information the boy could provide."

Draco's head shifted towards the headmaster as his eyes widened.

"I don't like it," Severus stated as he frowned.

"Well, that is not your decision to make, now is it, Severus? The boy came to me asking for a way out, and this is the only rational answer that I have for him," the old man said, his eyebrows challenging.

"Could you both stop talking about me like I am not sitting right here?" Draco said, anger clouding his voice.

Both men looked over towards him. "I am sorry, Draco," the headmaster said as he smiled towards him. Draco could now see why most thought of him as a sympathetic, even amiable old man, but he wasn't convinced of that; not after what he had just witnessed. Why else would the Dark Lord fear this wizard above all others, if there were not more to the story?

"Now Draco, I cannot blindly trust you, as much as I wish that were possible. Therefore, I must ask you to take an Unbreakable Vow. Severus will be our bonder, but ultimately you will be pledging your alliance to me, as head of the Order of the Phoenix."

Draco sat in shock as the seconds ticked by. An Unbreakable Vow? He had read about them and knew that there was no escaping the Vow once it had been agreed upon. You either fulfilled the task or died breaking it. It was true that he wanted to leave the Death Eaters and get away from the lunatic he had to call Lord, but he wasn't sure he wanted to answer to yet another demanding master. He suddenly felt very small as he realised that this was what his godfather had been doing for the better part of his life. Severus's words: "I am on no one's side but my own" rang in his ears once more, and he found himself sympathising with him.

He no longer wanted to follow the road paved with Lucius's expectations. He would not follow Lucius down that path. He knew what he had to do. He would make the Unbreakable Vow.

Draco looked up into the blue eyes of the headmaster and nodded his head. He didn't quite trust his voice to come out as firmly as he wanted it to.

Severus laid a hand on his arm, and his head spun around to face him.

"Draco, are you sure about this? You are aware that you will follow the Headmaster's commands unquestioningly, and if you fail to do so, it will result in your death?"

Draco raised his eyes from the hand that was clamped over his right arm and looked into the penetrating black eyes of his godfather. It was as though he were somehow trying to tell Draco something more, though what it was, Draco could not fathom.

"I am," Draco replied, blinking once.

Severus removed his hand then, and there was a rustle of movement as the headmaster stood up from behind his desk.

"Excellent. Shall we begin?" Dumbledore asked. When both wizards nodded, he moved to the rug before the fireplace. Kneeling down on the thick rug, Albus lifted his head towards the two wizards, his face no longer looking aged and decrepit. Instead, in its place was the aspect of a powerful wizard.

"Now, Draco, if you would kneel in front of me, we shall begin." Draco shook his head in disbelief at what he was about to do, but as if on autopilot, he stood and knelt down facing the headmaster. His mind was strangely blank, almost as if he were under the Imperius Curse.

"Join your right hand with mine," Albus continued as he grasped Draco's hand in his until they were linked firmly together. Draco was surprised by the strength that was in the headmaster's hand, but quickly shed this thought as he looked up into the rich, blue eyes of the prominent wizard before him.

Severus stood before both wizards, facing the fireplace. The fire was casting both light and shadow on their faces, and Severus was momentarily caught up watching the light play across the face of his young godson. Shaking himself mentally, he flicked his wand out of his right sleeve, holding it upright.

Draco felt suddenly very nervous about what was about to take place. He swallowed past the lump in his throat as he stared into the eyes of the headmaster, not even daring to blink.

"If we are ready to begin...," Severus stated curtly, and both men nodded their heads in agreement.

Draco took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out his mouth as he tried to calm his rapidly beating heart.

Severus thought to himself that he should have known that the old man was expecting this turn of events and figuratively kicked himself for not having prepared Draco for such an event; not that he had seen the boy since that night almost two months ago.

Another one of your plans, Albus? I truly hope you know what you are doing.

Severus was brought back to the room by Albus's rich voice. "Do you, Draco Malfoy, promise to uphold the beliefs of the Order of the Phoenix, striving for the downfall of Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort?"

"I do," Draco responded, never breaking eye contact with Dumbledore, even when Severus's wand touched their linked hands and a red rope-like substance wound its way out of the wand, binding their hands together. It made it impossible for Draco to pull away from the headmaster and break the bond.

"And do you promise never to impart any of the secrets of the Order to anyone but myself or our bond, Severus Snape?" Albus continued. Draco was still looking into his eyes, not daring to blink.

"I do." Another red rope joined the first, further binding their clasped hands together.

"Do you promise to follow the Order and myself, never questioning when given a direct order from me, the Order's leader?"

Severus's head snapped over to look at the headmaster as he realised that he was stating almost word for word the vow he had made Severus take twenty years ago. Severus frowned at the old man. He was shaken back into reality by Draco's reply of, "I do," as it rang through the otherwise quiet office.

Touching his wand once more to their entwined hands, he watched as another red rope slithered its way around their hands, working its way up to their wrists and finally settling up their arms. After the glow dissipated, Severus clapped his hands together, and the bond of red ropes disappeared, giving both wizards use of their right arms. Severus sneered toward Albus as both figures got to their feet.

It was true that when Severus himself had made the Vow with the headmaster, he had been nervous and would have agreed to anything that had been asked of him. He had nothing to live for at that point in his life.

He was woken from his musings when an aged hand came to rest on his shoulder.

"Thank you, Severus," the owner of the hand said, and Severus unexpectedly felt unclean; he needed to be gone from this place as he was assaulted by the memories of his own Vow.

He shot the headmaster a foul look, and shaking off his hand, Severus whirled around to face the occupants of the room.

"If that is all, I believe I shall retire for the evening. I have a most delicate potion brewing, and if I hurry back it may be salvaged. Good evening, Mr Malfoy." He nodded his head in Draco's direction. "Headmaster," he said, repeating the action before seizing a pinch of Floo powder and disappearing into the fire.

Draco's head swam with the repercussions of what had just happened and what he had agreed to. He would have to go to Knockturn Alley and purchase a Pensieve to view the memory once more and see what he had got himself into. His family name was still viewed with trepidation in the Alley, and he could count on the various shady characters not to mention a word to anyone of his purchase. He was sure that Lucius had his own Pensieve, but he wouldn't want anyone, least of all the Dark Lord, to find out what had occurred this evening.

Although he had made up his mind that he would bring down his father and the madman he followed, he hadn't really thought of the ramifications of changing sides. After all, it did happen rather abruptly, and Draco felt as though he had been tricked into doing something that he normally would not have done had he had some time to think about all the options. But really, what other options were there, besides ending his own life? He had already made up his mind that he wanted nothing to do with Lord Voldemort or Lucius ever again, but one does not simply give up on being a Death Eater and expect to live.

He needed to lie down, preferably in his own bed, and think about what had just transpired. He wouldn't know what he had truly done until he got hold of a Pensieve and viewed his own memories of the Unbreakable Vow.

All that he was certain of was the penalty for breaking such a Vow, which was death.

Albus glanced over to find that Draco looked exhausted. It was a consequence of the bonding, and he himself had felt the first stirrings of fatigue hit him. Making his way to his chair, he sat heavily.

Draco snapped from his trance and looked wearily towards the headmaster. He thought the old man would give him a mission right then and there; however, the words that exited the headmaster's mouth were filled with concern, something that Draco was not used to hearing directed at himself.

"Draco," Albus began, his voice sounding distant to Draco's ears, although he was but a few metres away from him. "I need you to go home and rest now. Keep your eyes and ears open to any plans that Tom or your father ..."

At the mention of his father, Draco staggered back as though struck. Albus recalled that throughout the evening, the boy had only mentioned his father by his given name, Lucius. He put this piece of information away in his vast memory to be examined later. He continued on as though he hadn't seen the blond lurch away at the mere mention of his father.

"...may be discussing. Please show due caution and do not do anything rash. I will be contacting you soon, but until that time I want you to act as though nothing untoward has happened on this night."

Draco looked into the headmaster's blue eyes; he felt sick to the stomach and nodded his head, not trusting his voice, as made his way down the spiral staircase and out of the castle. His mind was a whirl, and he thought for the briefest moment that he would not make it home. He was truly exhausted.

Nevertheless, Draco made it out the front gates of Hogwarts and somehow even managed to Apparate home to Malfoy Manor. A shiver ran down his spine as he made his way through the gates and up the path to the front door. This was no longer the happy manor he remembered growing up in; it was more like his prison, one he could never be free of.

He declared silently that he would take down his father if it was the last thing he did, and then burn this place to the ground.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who is still following my story. Hugs and kisses to those who have reviewed.

To my unbelievable beta, AmyLouise, thank you so very much for continuing to put up with me and my twisted mind.

Affiliations

Chapter 18 of 25

Voldemort calls a general meeting. Harry gets a nasty shock.

Severus rolled the small vial between his forefinger and thumb. The light from the burning fire lit up the contents. He had carried it with him, tucked securely into his left breast pocket, ever since he had started this dangerous game with his two masters. Although it looked rather inconspicuous, it contained the quickest and deadliest known poison, a potion of his devising. One drop would kill him instantly.

He was weighed down heavily with the thoughts of the battle that he was sure was but a few months away. Although he wasn't sure what Albus was planning nor what he had Draco doing, he had an inkling, seeing that the old man contacted him less and less as the months wore on. It seemed that his primary role in the war had changed from that of being a spy into one of a glorified baby sitter.

Wizards and witches had been saved, though Severus knew it was not on his information. There were the odd few who could not be reached in time, but the ones who were spared became eternally grateful to the Order when they showed up and whisked them away.

Severus heard about the rescues and failed assassination attempts by the Death Eaters through Remus. He had been shocked, though his face gave away nothing as he listened to Remus's tale. It made him feel obsolete, old, a has-been, and he sneered at himself for these thoughts of self-loathing.

He found himself, for the first time in his life, resenting his godson. He knew he was being childish and should be grateful to Draco for taking the Dark Lord's focus off him, if only for a little while, but against all reason, the resentment continued to plague him.

Draco's circumstances were ideal for performing Albus's bidding. With Lucius being the Dark Lord's right hand man and the highest ranking wizard among the Death Eaters, and Draco being his son, he thought that it made sense to use him thus, or so he tried to tell himself.

Albus understood very well the bond between the boy and his mother, so there had been no need to require an Unbreakable Vow from the boy. He would do whatever was asked of him to avenge his dead mother.

Severus had once loved his own mother that way, but he had grown up to resent her for being weak and pathetic, allowing her no-good husband to push around both her and her son. Severus had vowed that he would not turn out like his father and had joined the Death Eaters with power and vengeance on his mind.

He had gone to the house on Spinners End one bitter, stormy night and had turned his wand on the man who had given him life. Although he had long ceased to mean anything to Severus, the stricken look in his mother's eyes when she came upon her son standing over his father's lifeless body told Severus that perhaps there was something he had not understood about the relationship between the two. It appeared that perhaps in a sick, twisted way she still loved the man who had sired her only child. He would never forget the look of disbelief and betrayal on his mother's face.

Revenge had tasted sweet for all of thirty seconds as he stood there, panting, with a mixture of adrenaline and triumph, but then it had turned bitter as he realised that he had accomplished what he had joined the Death Eaters for. He could have completed the task on his own, as he had received no help from the Dark Lord himself or from any of his Death Eaters. He couldn't help but think he had perhaps sold his soul for this petty victory.

Severus felt resentment that his mother had never given any sign that she could forgive him for what he had done. Weren't mothers supposed to love their children more than life itself enough to understand and forgive anything? It seemed to him that love freely given and accepted was only for other families. For his part, guilt kept Severus from trying to contact her he knew that he had overstepped some unexplained boundary and felt that he had lost his mother's love forever. Severus could not remember a time in his childhood when he had felt loved and protected, and so the bitterness and resentment continued to fester over the years.

He had done the only thing he could do at the time; he had spun around and walked calmly out of the house, never to return whilst his mother was alive. Three years later he had inherited the house upon his mother's death.

Severus now felt ineffectual for the first time in his life, so he threw himself into training Harry. He pushed the young man to his breaking point and beyond, and Harry had surprised Severus on more than one occasion.

The Dark Lord was raising the stakes, sending out his followers on raids against both Muggles and wizards he perceived to be sympathetic towards the Light, and leaving no one alive wherever they appeared.

Draco had not been to see Severus. In fact, he had not seen Draco since the night during the Christmas holidays when the foolish boy had taken the vow. Severus had caught a glimpse of the boy now and then at Death Eater meetings; however, Draco had played his part well the perfect Malfoy heir and never approached him before or after the meetings. Severus was somewhat surprised he had pulled it off.

With little to do but bide his time, and with no dunderheads to watch over, as only a handful had remained over the Easter break, Severus's thoughts turned inward once more as his mind replayed all the names of those that had fallen in the never ending war.

He realised with a start that it was a year ago that Miss Granger had been taken from her home. He shook his head roughly. He hadn't thought about her in the last six months. He had had no time to himself as he had been tirelessly training Harry for the forthcoming battle where it would be up to Harry to either kill or be killed.

Severus's mind wandered back to Albus's cruel and casual dismissal of Hermione's abduction and Minerva's equally insensitive response to her favourite student. But, of course, Harry Potter was the number one weapon in this war, and although Severus didn't loathe the boy as much as he once did, he often had to wonder if he would have made it this far without Hermione's help.

He was startled when his psyche supplied the girl's first name. When had she become Hermione to his mind? Not that the answer truly mattered, as she was in all probability dead by now, but he found it quite odd that his mind reverted to her when he went on these bouts of self pity. Most likely the answers lay in the fact that he envied her. Here he was a living, breathing man whilst she, in all likelihood, lay in the cold dirt, God only knew where, and he envied her her peace and quiet. He laughed bitterly to himself.

He wished, in a way, that he could join her, wherever she was now. Severus was not a religious man, but he liked to believe that there must be an afterlife where something better might await him.

His eyes caught the iridescent light reflected off the vial in his hands. Oh, but it would be so easy to unplug the stopper and drink its contents. With a sigh he placed the vial back into his left pocket and then buried his face in his hands. There was no use in speculating what was to come after this life or rushing to get there before his time was up. He had to live what precious time he had left on this earth trying to protect Harry, and if that meant the end of his own life, so much the better, he thought bitterly.

It was several nights later, when Severus was preparing for bed, that he heard the sound of soft, almost inaudible, knocking on his chamber door. His hand automatically came up to the bridge of his nose as though starving off the headache that he knew was approaching. He quickly donned his robes and boots once more.

Few of his colleagues knew the whereabouts of his chambers, as he preferred to have them meet him in his classroom, though they rarely ventured there; instead, they preferred to attack him once he set foot into the staff room for the weekly meeting Dumbledore insisted they have, claiming they preferred the neutral ground. They would complain about his teaching methods or the amount of house points he took. Even fewer students knew where the opening of his chambers was, and he immediately dismissed the possibility that it was Harry, as he had allowed him to leave their practice about an hour previously.

With a scowl firmly in place, he briskly strode to the door, wand held erect, as he yanked at the metal handle and the door flew backwards. He stood there for the briefest of seconds, hardly believing his own eyes as he stared into those of his blond-haired godson.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Draco said, but it was his grey eyes, so much like his father's, that held back Severus's scathing remarks as he wordlessly stood back from the doorway and bid the young man enter.

"I see some things never change," Draco said with a haughty air of superiority.

The door slammed closed, and Draco found himself against the wall, the wand of his godfather pressed firmly into his jugular, and the arm of said man holding him powerfully across the chest.

He couldn't breathe, and his mind raced at the thought of what he had done to anger the dark-haired wizard so.

With a final shove against his chest, the wand and arm disappeared, and Draco hunched over, gulping in air as he rubbed his abused neck and chest. When he finally did look up, it was to find his godfather pacing across the chambers, not even looking in his direction.

"What was that for?" Draco asked, still rubbing his neck; however, he was now standing up straight, and he pushed off the wall.

The Potions master just glared at the blond as he quickly strode to the door leading into his study.

Draco made his way uncertainly over to the open doorway to follow the man. The walls, after all, did have ears even though they were in his godfather's chambers; he knew they wouldn't be safe until they entered either his study or his bedroom. Draco knew that he would never in a million years be invited to enter the hostile wizard's bedroom, and he knew that his godfather did not want to discuss whatever was on his mind out here in the open where anyone could listen.

Draco's hand went to his wand, which was in a holster around his waist, as he slowly made his way into the study. As soon as he stepped over the threshold and entered the room, the door slammed shut behind him, and he jumped out of the way as his godfather erected wards on the door.

Draco had never seen his godfather lose control like this, and it unnerved him to see the older man's usual steadfast level-headedness desert him.

"You little fool," Severus abruptly said as he faced Draco. "Did you even think of the implications for me when you made that Unbreakable Vow with the Headmaster?" he hissed, his eyes narrowing, and his arms held stiffly at his sides.

"But..." Draco stuttered, trying to come up with a reasonable explanation. He soon realised he had none and promptly shut his mouth.

"It's just as I suspected," Severus spat, a vein throbbing in his forehead. "I knew you were self-serving and you just proved my suspicions correct."

Draco just stood there, too shocked to even think, let alone speak. Severus was still talking, though Draco hardly heard the words. He was brought back to the room by the mention of Lucius.

"... And I know about your father's involvement in your mother's death; he may as well have just come out and told me. Though it was not spoken of, his body gave away the necessary clues to confirm your fears." Severus looked at Draco's stricken face. "I am sorry, Draco." He took a few steps towards him, his right arm outstretched as though he were about to give his godson comfort.

Draco jumped back from the dark-haired man's arm, and it dropped back to his side heavily. The young man was breathing rapidly now, his hands were furled tightly into fists.

"Don't you dare call him that," he growled.

The Potions master's face registered a look of puzzlement before he opened his mouth to say, "... But he is, after all, your father."

Draco's hand quickly shot to his holster, retrieving his wand, and he had it pointed at his godfather before either could blink.

"He is not my father," Draco snarled through clenched teeth, "I have no family left to speak of; they are all dead to me." His knuckles were white as they clenched around his wand.

Severus did not like the bitter glint in the young man's eyes.

Much too young to feel so much anger and resentment, Severus thought and was quickly overcome with memories of his own life.

"Don't make my mistakes, Draco. Take action for what you think is right, but not from hatred or revenge. I too joined the Death Eaters with a need for retribution, and look where it got me! In a job I loathe, serving two masters, neither of which I would serve had I known back then what I know now. Regret is all I have left. Half of my life has been wasted on petty revenge in one form or another."

Severus watched his godson's arm falter before it dropped to his side. Draco still held on to his wand, but mercifully, it was no longer pointed at him. He seemed to be getting through to the boy.

Silence reigned throughout the chambers as both wizards stared at one another, neither willing to break the all-encompassing silence.

Suddenly, Draco hissed and his face drained of blood until it closely resembled the parchment on Severus's desk. His wand fell from his hand as he brought up his right hand to cover his left forearm. As he looked up into the face of the Potions master, he realised that the man wore a similar grimace on his face.

"What the fuck do I do now?" Draco asked then; voice shrill, he was clearly panicking.

Severus was already moving towards a closet in the room, ignoring Draco's question.

"Did you hear me?" Draco yelled towards the man whose back was all he could see as he searched for something within the closet. "It will take me too much time to go back to the Manor and get my robes without making him suspicious. I knew I shouldn't have come here, but I thought you would be proud of me." Draco deflated as his shoulders slumped, and his head fell forward.

Severus said nothing, emerging from the closet with his arms laden with black material.

"Hurry up, boy, you don't have much time," Severus said gruffly as he approached Draco. "We shall continue this conversation later."

Draco looked up, to see his godfather standing in front of him, his arm held out in tribute as he offered what Draco presumed were his own Death Eater mask and robes.

"What are you going to wear?" he asked, the confusion in his voice almost making Severus grin as Draco quickly took what his Godfather had offered him, pulling the robe over his head without thought.

"Do you honestly believe that these are my only set?" he said flatly as he passed Draco the mask. "Being in the Dark Lord's company for as long as I have affords me some privileges. Don't put that on," he snapped as Draco went to place the mask on his face. "You are not at the Manor and could be seen leaving Hogwarts, you stupid child. It is a wonder you have survived as long as you have. Now calm down and clear your mind."

Draco stood there, staring at the dark-eyed man's menacing frown, before closing his eyes and taking a calming breath. Opening them once more, he nodded his head to indicate that he was suitably composed.

"Well, what are you waiting for? A written invitation? The Dark Lord will not wait forever, and I have to appear after you to make it convincing. If we are lucky, this will be a general meeting, and we may be able to arrive unnoticed."

Draco did not have to be told twice; he raced from his godfather's chambers and into the cold night. He stuck to the shadows as he made his way towards the Forbidden Forest and past the wards surrounding Hogwarts.

Out of a window high above the grounds, an old wizard watched silently as the boy in the Death Eater robes fled. He shook his head solemnly before turning away and whispering to the empty office, "So young." His only reply was a strangely soothing song from the phoenix on its perch in the corner.

Voldemort sat on his throne above his army of followers and gazed at the gathering of wizards and witches he had amassed. He knew who each of them was without having to see their faces.

Standing a little behind the throne and to his right was Lucius Malfoy. On his left was Severus Snape, his long-term spy in Hogwarts. Although Severus had killed the Order's werewolf, which had lifted him up in Voldemort's esteem, there was something about the dark-haired, dour wizard that Voldemort didn't quite trust, and the fact he had not been able to disclose the whereabouts of the Potter boy made his chances of survival diminish as the days wore on.

He knew the cagey old headmaster was keeping Potter's location a secret; he had many spies within Hogwarts, and they had all reported back to him that Potter was nowhere to be found. He had neither been seen nor talked about since he graduated; it was as though he had vanished off the face of the earth.

If he were to do away with Severus, he would be at a great disadvantage. No longer would he have inside information on Hogwarts and his old nemesis. So instead of cutting off that line completely, he had given information about raids upon the Muggles and traitors to various junior Death Eaters to see if they could be trusted. It looked as if his suspicion and lack of trust in his newest recruits was confirmed, when seven out of every ten raids were successfully thwarted by the Order.

Voldemort had not given the information to Severus; therefore, he was safe for now.

He eyed the congregation of black robes and silver masks, his cold gaze pausing on those who he believed might have betrayed him. The air was thick with anticipation; he could almost taste it in such an enclosed space. It was the largest room in his fortress, the room in which he held all but the most confidential of his minion's gatherings.

As the door closed on the last of his faction, he stood, and the harsh whispering and muttering of his followers fell into an eerie silence. Not one of his Death Eaters dared move or utter a sound for fear of bringing the wrath of their Lord upon themselves. Every single one of them felt the malignant force that was the Dark Lord.

The Death Eaters slinked back silently as Voldemort glided forward, his feet barely touching the ground. He stopped and stood deathly still in the centre of the semi-circle.

"It seems that we have a leak within our ranks." No one dared breathe lest they be implicated, guilty or not. They all knew that their Lord did not give second chances, and rarely were you able to speak once he brought his wrath upon you.

"As most of you are aware, we have been busy these last months." He allowed the insinuation to grow as he paused. "I told few of you all the facts, yet I still find my efforts thwarted at every turn. I cannot allow this to continue, to have my plans for purifying the wizarding world to be crushed by the likes of Dumbledore."

Voldemort spun to face one of the suspects. The junior Death Eaters were all huddled together in one mass, as though there were security in numbers.

"Wilkins."

Voldemort spoke the boy's name like a caress, and Severus cringed mentally, for he knew this game well, and he had no doubt in his mind that Wilkins would know it too before the night was out, if he lived long enough.

"Yes, my Lord," Wilkins replied, puffing out his chest like an overgrown ape. He evidently didn't understand that he was marked for death.

"Step forward."

The boy did so proudly. Severus had to wonder where the Dark Lord had found these children, as they were all as thick as two planks of wood.

"Reeder."

"Yes, my Lord." The boy, in his excitement, took a step forward without being told to do so. Voldemort's wand was up before he placed his foot down, and the boy was on the floor before anyone could blink. Those who stood closest to the fallen Death Eater took quick steps backwards, as they didn't want to be seen in the same light as Reeder.

Reeder was on the floor, screaming as he tore at the flesh on his body. His mask had fallen off as he clawed at his face.

Voldemort placed his wand arm to his side as he ended the spell. He looked down at the boy as though he were looking at a cockroach that needed to be eradicated.

"Stand up and join Wilkins," he said, the undertone of his voice conveying a sinister message to all those who knew him of old.

Reeder stood, half stumbling as he made his way over to the now shocked Wilkins who was standing there immobilised with fear.

Voldemort continued around the circle, lightly tapping his wand into his left hand. Most of the Death Eaters were standing stock-still, hoping not to be noticed. They were all clearly unhinged by what had just occurred.

Voldemort came to stand before Avery; he was evidently sweating underneath his mask. He spun away from the man, as he looked at another.

"MacBerry, come."

The young man took a faltering step forward; he was clearly shaking as he slowly walked towards Voldemort.

"Yes... my Lord." Speaking in an undertone that clearly betrayed how nervous he was.

"Go stand besides your comrades," Voldemort hissed, and MacBerry backed up, eyes still on Voldemort, his shoulders drooping as he made his way over to where Wilkins was supporting a dazed Reeder.

The rest of the Death Eaters had given the three a wide berth; they did not want to be hit by the backlash of Voldemort's anger.

Voldemort walked over to the three boys and flicked his wand once in the air. The masks which had previously hidden Wilkins and MacBerry from view were torn off their faces and both boys gasped in unison.

"Look upon the faces of those who have betrayed you, my Death Eaters." Voldemort hissed, his voice reverberating off the walls and carrying to the very corners of the room.

"But my Lord, I did not..." Wilkins began, but was silenced with a spell cast by the furious Voldemort.

"Did I ask you to speak?" he asked, his red eyes narrowing.

The helpless boy merely shook his head in fear as Reeder passed out.

"Lucius." Voldemort looked up at the wizard. "Ennervate the boy."

Lucius stepped forward gracefully; his hand resting on his snake-headed cane. He did not come down the stairs; he merely stood at the edge, and in one fluid movement, he pulled the wand from the cane and pointed it at the boy. "*Ennervate*," he said, almost lazily.

Reeder opened his eyes and blinked groggily, his mind still fuzzy. He stumbled to his feet as the scene before him began to clear. His legs threatened to give way again.

Lucius replaced his wand into its housing and, with a flourish of robes, turned around and went to stand in his position behind Voldemort's throne.

"Excellent," Voldemort proclaimed, his crimson eyes lighting up as he surveyed the three supposed traitors. He had given them all the information about the raids to test their loyalty, and they had failed him miserably.

He didn't care if they were not the conspirators, didn't even bother to use Legilimency on them. One of them was guilty, even if it were by association, and for that they would all die. This would show the others within his ranks what would become of them if they even had a notion of betraying the Dark Lord.

Voldemort was becoming more and more unstable as the days passed. Severus knew these young men were not guilty of anything except perhaps stupidity. He had to warn Draco to be more careful with the information he provided, for it would surely get him killed.

Severus thought back to his own dark days of serving both masters, which he still did in theory, although not on the same level as before. Dumbledore had found himself a new spy and was using Draco for his own ends. Would the headmaster even care if the boy died? Severus didn't think so; all the General of the Light cared about was ending this war and vanquishing Voldemort, no matter the costs. It sickened Severus, but he could not afford to get maudlin now, not in this lair of vipers that would rip his heart out with their bare hands.

Severus surveyed the sea of masks before him, most of which were thrumming with excitement at the promise of vengeance. He blinked once, hardly believing he had once been one of them, vying for the Dark Lord's attention, doing anything to please him. It made his stomach roll.

He looked at the three young men trembling inside the semi-circle. They were barely standing, and the aura of terror and panic rose off them in waves. Severus knew that they would die here tonight, but he felt no pity for them. Yes, they had most likely been set up, but they should have known that one slip up could cause their death when they joined this organisation.

"Bella, Fenrir, come forward."

There was a rustling of robes as the crowd parted to allow the two Death Eaters to step into the centre of the circle.

Fenrir Greyback wore no mask, and the look of delight upon his face made Severus's stomach churn. He kept his face impassive though, as he knew he could not show an ounce of emotion at what was about to happen to these young men.

Bellatrix came behind Fenrir, skipping along as if this were all a game. Perhaps it was to her; she was unhinged, and everyone knew it.

"Yes, my Lord." Bella spoke in a little girl's voice, her enthusiasm and eagerness were thrumming through her, and she could barely contain her excitement.

Voldemort turned to her then, and Severus thought she would pass out, but unfortunately she contained herself enough to listen to what her Lord was telling her.

"I want you and the werewolf to show my Death Eaters what we do to traitors." Voldemort's voice caressed her like a lover, and she all but swooned at having him direct her so.

"Yes, my Lord," she replied, her eyes closing for the briefest second as she shuddered all over. When she opened them, she spun around and faced the three junior Death Eaters with her wand in her hand. Fenrir was prowling behind them, breathing down their necks, smelling them, tasting their fear. He looked up into the eyes of Bella and nodded his head slightly; she blinked once, and then all hell broke loose.

Fenrir pounced on the nearest boy, Reeder, knocking him to the ground and tearing out his throat before he could even scream. Greyback came up for air, his mouth bloodied, a huge grin on his face, his mouth dripping with blood and his eyes looked deranged. He looked at the other two wizards who were standing there, frozen in disbelief.

"Playtime," he snarled, and he stood up from where he was crouching over the now clearly dead adolescent.

Bella clapped her hands in glee, a childish laugh coming out of her mouth.

"Can I play too?" the deranged woman asked.

Fenrir looked over towards Bella, and with a sweep of his arm and a tiny bow of his head, he acceded to her. "By all means," he stated, taking a giant step back.

"Oh, goody," she pronounced, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet, her wand clasped between her hands.

Voldemort watched the proceedings, taking in the varying body language of his Death Eaters. He glanced towards his throne and saw Severus standing there. He was ramrod straight; he never took his eyes from the proceedings in front of him, never showed a hint of emotion. His eyes then flickered towards Lucius. He saw the smallest grin upon his face. Even under the mask, he knew he got off on watching others suffer; that's what made him so good at what he did for Voldemort not to mention the vast amounts his vaults held.

Voldemort was so entranced by watching the various reactions from his Death Eaters that he missed the demonstration entirely; not that he minded, it was all the same to him. His eyes slowly went over the three bodies that were lying on the ground in front of him. They were all dead, a fitting end.

"Let this be a lesson to those of you who would even think of betraying me." His arm swept out, encompassing the body of the three young men. "There will be no forgiveness, no mercy shown. You have all witnessed here today what becomes of traitors. Now go." Those nearest the back hurried to leave the room and Apparate back to their homes.

Severus was the last to leave the room, and he nodded his head towards Voldemort as he left.

The door was firmly closed behind Severus and the room was cleared. Lucius remained, as well as the snivelling but valuable Wormtail.

"Wormtail," Voldemort said, admiring the mutilated bodies.

The rat-like man came scuttling over.

"Yes, my Lord." He spoke with trepidation.

"Dispose of the bodies." Voldemort did not even look over to see Wormtail's grimace as he went about his task.

"Lucius, join me," Voldemort demanded as he walked towards the exit.

Harry ducked and weaved, narrowly missing the spells that were being fired at him. Making his way to a particularly thick tree, he scrambled behind it as he doubled over and caught his breath. Running for one's life was never an easy task, and the adrenaline in his system was beginning to wear thin.

He knew Severus and Remus were out there somewhere; they had both been training him relentlessly until he had perfected what they had taught him, and they decided that now was the perfect time for a practical assessment.

"Flabra Aquilonis!" Harry heard Remus cast from somewhere behind the tree. Harry had to hold onto his glasses as a furious, bitter wind blew directly at him from the north. He stumbled to his knees, gripping his wand tighter in his fist.

Harry knew it was now or never. He wasn't going to just sit here and wait for the two professors to find him. Gathering his resolve, the wind still whipping at his bruised and battered body, he struck quickly, *"Debilito,"* and the ferocious wind died down suddenly.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, Harry knew he had now given his position away to the enemy, and that was precisely what Severus and Remus wanted. He made a quick decision and left his hiding spot behind the tree, but not before spotting another location to the north-east which was comprised of a few large boulders.

Praying he would be quick enough, he started to run in the zigzag pattern that Severus had taught him. Spells were thrown at him from behind; he knew they couldn't truly hurt him, but he wasn't ready to admit defeat. He dived quickly behind one of the boulders as a spell whizzed by his ear.

"Shit," he swore under his breath and in that same moment cast a swift *"Incarcerous,"* aiming his wand blindly over one shoulder. He heard a thud as his ropes hit their intended mark.

Silently cheering, he knew he wasn't out of the woods yet, and unless he could take down his other professor, he would have to acknowledge defeat, and he was not willing to do that. Not this time.

He eyed the immediate area. There were no safe spots for him to hide which meant he would have to either crouch down using the boulder as a shield, or stand up and hope that he could get a clear shot at Severus.

Harry fortified himself for what he would do next. His mind was made up. He would fight, and if he lost, so be it.

He was about to stand when the top of the boulder he was hiding behind was blasted and bits of rocks were showering down on him.

Cleaning himself off, he looked up and was staring at the tip of a wand.

"You're dead," Draco Malfoy taunted, grinning down at him.

A/N: Sorry for the long wait. Real life has been kicking my butt, literally lately, and I don't honestly know when the next chapter will be out.

Thank you to all my faithful followers. I shall try a write a little each week.

To my incredible beta, AmyLouise, I thank you for sticking with this story and for pushing me to write more. Loves you, babe.

Stratagem

Chapter 19 of 25

Draco and Harry come to an understanding.

Harry looked up, staring cross eyed at the tip of Draco Malfoy's wand.

How did he get in here? Where are Severus and Remus? His mind whirled as he panicked.

"What? Cat got your tongue, Potter?" Draco sneered.

Harry's mind went blank; he didn't know how Malfoy had managed to get into the school, let alone come to be a part of this game of survival. Severus had vouched for his loyalty to the Order, but looking into Draco's eyes, Harry wasn't so sure that he wasn't about to cast an *Avada Kedavra* on him.

"Do stop taunting the saviour of the wizarding world, Draco," Severus drawled, coming into Harry's line of view and offering him a hand so he could rise.

"But, but... how did Malfoy get in here?" Harry spoke before he thought about it, voicing his thoughts out loud for the two men to hear. He looked around wildly, taking Severus's hand without thought.

"Think upon what you have just said, Harry." Harry looked at Severus with a bewildered expression on his face.

"The battle that is to come will not be fought using simple courtesies that we have shown you. It will be bloody and fierce. Expect the unexpected; only then may you be able to survive." Severus nodded his head once before turning to Draco.

"Well done." He grinned at his godson.

"It really wasn't that difficult," Draco replied. "I thought you were meant to be teaching him." He sneered, his face looking just like his father's at that age.

Severus had to restrain the hurtful comment that was on the tip of his tongue.

"Indeed, although he is a Gryffindor after all, and you know how pig-headed they can be."

"Oy," Harry said, looking offended.

Draco smiled.

"You're okay, I guess," Draco responded looking Harry right in the eye.

"Thanks, Ferret," Harry said with a glint in his eyes. Draco ignored him.

Remus came bounding over to the group.

"Marvellous, Harry. It took me a while to remove the ropes you conjured," he said, slapping Harry on the back. "Oh, Mr Malfoy, when did you get here?" he asked. He wore a puzzled expression, and Severus knew he would be down in his chambers later that night demanding an explanation.

"Just got here." Draco replied, looking at Remus. He could not hide the look of confusion on his face. It was there for one second, and the next the mask was back in place. He had thought that his godfather had disposed of the werewolf, but clearly he had lied to everyone, Voldemort included.

Severus caught the look of confusion on Draco's face before he had cleared it of any emotions. He sighed out loud, and everyone's focus turned to him.

"Perhaps it is best if we all retire to my chambers where explanations will be forthcoming." He turned on his heel before anyone could respond and made his way to the door.

Stopping before the door, hand on the doorknob, he turned.

"All of you had better Disillusion yourselves before following me," he said pointedly, glaring at each of them in turn. "We wouldn't want mass hysteria to break out. How would I explain the sudden need for Calming Draught to Poppy? Besides which, I am much too busy to make it for her." He frowned, raising one eyebrow into the air.

The three men looked at Severus in shock.

Did he just joke with us? Harry thought. *He did.*

Severus didn't wait around to witness the two Gryffindors breaking out in huge grins as he spun around and opened the door, making his way out of the Room of Requirement and down to his dungeon home.

Her master was becoming more and more volatile. If he only knew that her intent was only to please him. She never knew what mood he would be in when the door to her prison opened, and this one fact scared her more than anything else.

Would he be in a good-humoured frame of mind today? She truly hoped so, as she liked him best when he was like that. There were times that she didn't much like him, but he was her master. Who was she to question him when he came in, his temper flying as he used her to excise his own demons?

She was nothing but his possession. A thing to be used at his whim. She had come to this conclusion early on, though it vexed her.

Her master had silenced her successfully. She had no voice, no opinion, though he loved to hear her scream; it always brought such a smile to his face. That was the only sound she could make whilst he was there in the cell. Of course, she had her own view on why he liked only to hear her screams, but she would never voice these aloud. They were her own thoughts, her own fanciful imaginings, and if he knew her thoughts, he would take them away from her like he had taken away everything else that was hers.

So she held onto them, locked them away with a key and padlock in the dark recesses of her mind that even she had trouble finding at times. It was only now when she was alone with no sounds or light that she could lie back on her pallet and imagine her master as she wished him to be.

She contemplated her feelings, spinning around her head until she almost felt faint from the press of them. She had no opinions, no voice, nothing that her master hadn't given to her.

She didn't recall her life outside of this cell. For all she knew she could have been born here, though she didn't think so. But thinking about her life up until this point was an inane task, as it gave her terrible headaches, so she didn't even try anymore. Her entire life up until now was meaningless; her master gave her meaning, an importance that she had never known before, and for that she was most grateful to him.

She sat up slowly, as though any quick movement might dispel the eerie quietness surrounding her. Her back still hurt terribly from her last round with the whip, though she knew if she reached back and touched it, she would feel nothing but unblemished skin. She crinkled her forehead in concentration, ignoring her various injuries as she turned slowly to face the rickety wooden table that was pushed against the wall, not truly seeing it, for the darkness surrounding her was all encompassing. She knew it was there though; she knew every inch of her cell, her home.

The four wizards were all seated in Severus's sitting room. Explanations had been given, and they were all silent, each one lost in his own thoughts. Both Harry and Remus had known most of what was repeated this night, but neither said a word as Severus told the tale.

Severus was watching the play of emotions on the two Gryffindors' faces; Draco's face, much like his father's, gave nothing away.

"I think," Draco said, staring into the flames, breaking the comfortable silence, "that something has to be done about Lucius."

Harry was about to speak and opened his mouth to do so, but a warning glare from Severus silenced him.

"He is the Dark Lord's right hand man, and I think if we can take him out of the picture, it will make our success all the more likely," Draco continued.

It was as though Draco was using the room, and the three wizards in it, as a sounding board to what was really on his mind.

"And what do you propose?" Severus spoke in a calm and reasonable voice. The boy had earned his respect as he had wound his way through the Death Eaters like an experienced, proficient spy.

"I have come up with a plan," Draco replied, turning his head to look at Severus, "but it is rather risky and has the potential to fail."

"Well, let's hear your proposal, and perhaps we can all help you with its execution."

Draco shook his head once, looking over to Severus. "No. I must implement it, for Lucius trusts no one. He would not see it coming from his son."

Severus nodded his head once. Remus and Harry wisely stayed silent.

Draco turned his head, staring at a blank stone on the wall. His eyes became unfocussed, as though this was the first opportunity to voice these thoughts out loud and not just in his head.

"Polyjuice," Draco said, as if that was the answer to the entire war.

Remus and Harry stared at each other, an identical look of puzzlement on their faces as they exchanged looks. They focused once more on Draco. Harry was holding his breath as though he were waiting for some miraculous plan to form.

"What of it, Draco?" Severus asked, and Harry looked over towards Severus to see his focus entirely on the blond-haired wizard who still had that far off look in his eyes.

Harry exhaled loudly, and Severus turned his head abruptly and gave him a scowl. Harry quickly ducked his head, his face heating up and taking on a reddish hue.

"I plan on taking my father out of the game, but I will need Polyjuice to answer the Dark Lord's call. The only flaw to my plan is the fact that he will have to be kept close, so that when he is called, I will be able to answer. I don't want the Dark Lord to become even more paranoid than he is."

Severus thought this through. He too had noticed how the Dark Lord relied on Lucius more and more as the days progressed, and who knew Lucius better than his own son? Severus tried to come up with another plan, one that wouldn't involve Draco, but his mind drew a blank. He knew that his godson would have to be involved, though he didn't like it.

"And where do you propose we hold Lucius?" Severus asked once the silence became too stifling. Harry and Remus remained blissfully silent.

"I don't know, but it will have to be nearby. It will need to have strong anti-Apparation wards, as I don't want him answering his master's call," Draco replied, finally looking at Severus.

Draco's face was devoid of all emotions, as if he wasn't planning his own father's execution. He was offering his father up to the Light, and although it may not mean his death, it could well do, as he knew Lucius would not go back to Azkaban willingly and would rather die than see the inside of that prison again.

Severus shivered within.

He tried to think of another way to dispose of Lucius, but everything his mind came up with was quickly discarded. He had to admit that the boy's reasoning was sound, although slightly insane. Severus knew that the only way to win this war was to take out its key players, and although he didn't like the idea of Draco playing sacrificial lamb, he had to admit to himself that he was in the best position to do so. So, reluctantly, he gave in to Draco's plans.

"Have you talked this through with the Headmaster?" Severus asked, his eyes boring into those of his godson.

"I thought I would run the plan past you first; see if there were any flaws. Thought I would bring Potter in on it too, though I never dreamed that Professor Lupin would be here," he said, giving Remus a shrug.

Remus just smiled at the boy, his eyes sparkling with humour.

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Draco started, holding up both hands in a mock surrender, "I am glad for all the help I can get."

"No offence taken," Remus replied, as he beamed at Draco.

The talk became serious once again. Draco looked almost in pain as he opened his mouth, the mask slipping onto his face more slowly than before.

"It's just that he has become increasingly unstable. He vanishes all of the loose strands of hair, and I am never allowed in his private rooms. It's as though he is hiding something, even from me." A frown appeared on his face as his eyes became glassy.

"I have noticed Lucius has been acting strangely too," Severus stated, "but I thought it was just his natural paranoia. One can never be too careful within the ranks of the Death Eaters and in the presence of the Dark Lord," Severus finished. All the men nodded their heads in agreement.

"It's just as well that I thought ahead," Draco said as he reached into his cloak pocket and pulled out a silken bag. Opening it up, he showed them all what was inside.

"Bloody hell, is that what I think it is?" Harry proclaimed.

"Yep," Draco said, looking smug.

Severus looked at the long, blond strands that Draco held within the silky bag. He was astounded at the boy's cunning, but was unsure about the mental stability of his godson. Although he didn't voice his thoughts out loud, he filed them away for later retrospect.

"Now, all I need is a Potions master who can keep me supplied with Polyjuice Potion as Lucius would become suspicious if I started to brew it myself." Draco grinned, looking over towards Severus. "Do you know of anyone we could trust, Godfather?" he asked, his grin breaking out to a beautiful smile which made him look more like his age than the man that this war had forced him to become.

Severus tapped a finger on his chin, appearing to be deep in thought.

"Yes, I do believe I do," Severus finally said, looking his godson right in the eye.

Harry was having a little trouble following the conversation between Severus and Draco. He would ask Severus later what it was all about. He knew that Draco had renounced his father, and who could really blame him after he had killed his mother? No one spoke it aloud, but it was the elephant in the room nonetheless.

So, to Harry's understanding, Draco was going to use the strands of hair that he had procured from his father for use in a Polyjuice Potion in order to impersonate his father in his meetings with Voldemort, while his father would rot away in a cell, being held against his will.

Harry knew that Lucius deserved to be in prison, but he could think of no place that would hold the Death Eater except right here at Hogwarts, which meant that Draco would have to stay close at hand too. Either that, or they would have to come up with some way of alerting Draco to his father's call.

Severus and Draco were still discussing their plans when Harry had a thought and gasped loudly, sitting up straighter.

All conversation stopped, and Harry found himself the focus of the three men.

"I had a thought," Harry blurted out.

"Well, we'd better call the Prophet," Draco replied smirking.

Harry paid him no attention as he barrelled on.

"Now just hear me out. What if we hold Lucius here, in Hogwarts?"

"That's your brilliant plan?" Draco sneered out.

Harry held up one hand and Draco fell silent. Remus laid his hand on Harry's back as though urging him on.

"When I was in fifth year, Hermione came up with a way of communicating with us all using a galleon. This way we could all meet for the DA, and no one thought to look at a galleon. What I mean to say is, if we hold Lucius here—oh, I don't know, say somewhere in the dungeons—one of us could keep an eye on him, and when we see that he is being called, we could send a warning to Draco via a galleon." Harry smiled then.

Severus froze at the mention of Hermione's name. He admired Harry if only because mentioning her name no longer brought that sad, far off look to his face.

"It would be the perfect way to get back at the Death Eaters for what they did to Hermione," Harry said when no one made a move to speak.

Remus's hand squeezed Harry's shoulder slightly.

"But that still leaves the problem of how we would know when Lucius is being called," Severus said. "I know for a fact that he is a master of his emotions, and would more than likely hold out on us when he is called."

"I was thinking of executing the Blood Bond," Draco confessed.

"What's that?" Harry asked, turning his face to look into Draco's eyes.

"I sometimes forget that you were raised as a Muggle," Draco replied, turning and facing Harry, but when he didn't comment, just holding Draco's eyes, he continued.

"In the old pureblood families there is a blood bond that is cast between parents and their children. We can feel the emotions of the parent or child, even knowing where they are if it is done correctly."

"How come I've never heard about it?" Harry asked.

"Because it's Dark Magic," Remus, who had remained quiet up until this point, whispered.

"Yes, it is," Draco said, turning his head a little to look at Remus. "But that is not the way that it is seen in pureblood families. It is most helpful when a child goes missing."

"So," Harry said, bringing Draco's focus back to himself, "why is this such a big deal?"

Draco studied Harry for a second, really looking at the young man before him. Harry's face was so open, so willing to listen, as though he were hanging on every word that Draco said. "Because no parent ever thinks that their child will betray them. In pureblood families, family is everything."

Harry nodded his head.

"No, Potter, I don't think you understand me correctly." Draco said as he stood up and started pacing again. Harry frowned up at him as he watched Draco pace back and forth.

"Then explain it to me. I can't help but be ignorant about pureblood families; hell, about families in general, never having had one to call my own." Harry's words were bitter towards the end, and they made Draco cease his pacing and face the young man.

Draco threw his hands up in the air and went back to his seat. He turned to face Harry, and the look in his grey eyes gave Harry a view of a vulnerability he had never seen before.

"The Blood Bond is an ancient spell that is usually cast when the child is born. The only problem I can see with it is the fact that Lucius would know that I had called upon that bond, so I can't use it until he is securely in his cell. This plan has no room for mistakes," Draco said, eyeing them each in turn, "for we only get one shot at it, and if it fails, then I'm afraid that my life would be forfeit."

"But it won't fail," Harry said with conviction with his voice. "How hard can it be? We have some of the finest minds right here in the room; we can't fail, not now."

Remus nodded his head while Severus and Draco just looked at Harry.

"We need to talk about the plan as a whole," Harry continued, "we must look at every angle, every contingency; break it down as we go, leave nothing to chance. That is all I can help you with Draco, as it will be your life on the line."

Harry looked over at Draco then, and Draco saw a fire in his eyes behind the glasses that he had never seen before. He was suddenly glad that he had switched sides, for he would hate to come up against Harry on the battlefield.

Severus, Harry and Draco made their way toward the headmaster's office. They had gone through the plan for many hours until they all felt that they had a good chance at its successful implementation.

Harry and Draco were following behind Severus; both were Disillusioned.

Severus said the password to the gargoyle that was guarding the entranceway and as it opened, he allowed himself to start the ascent up the spiral staircase. He felt rather than saw Harry and Draco following him.

Once he was before the heavy door, he knocked twice and was bidden to enter.

"Ah, Severus, young Harry... and Draco too, if I'm not mistaken," the headmaster said. His voice gave away nothing of his shock that the two rivals were in his office and blood had yet to be spilt.

Severus saw the flicker of emotion slide across his face before he smiled. He knew that it had thrown him off guard to see Draco and Harry together.

"And what can I do for you this fine evening?" he asked, still holding onto that pleasant smile.

Both of the young men dropped their Disillusionment Charm, once more becoming visible. Albus motioned them towards the chairs that were sitting across from his desk. Harry eagerly took one, while Draco just stood there as though he was not quite sure he wanted to be here at all.

As Albus made his way behind his desk, Severus saw the glimmer of a frown mar his features, but when he turned around and took his seat, he was smiling once more.

Severus made his way over to the fireplace, which was devoid of any warmth. He felt eyes on his back, watching, disapproving eyes, but when he turned around and leant up against the cold stones, he saw no one looking at him.

Draco had taken the seat next to Harry, although he didn't look quite at home, as Harry did. Although Harry was sitting up straight in the chair, he still had the air of relaxation about him.

If Albus was shocked at the fact that his two spies and his weapon in this war were together in this very room, he neither mentioned it nor even hinted at it, as he continued to smile that placating smile of his.

Severus wanted to grab the man by his robes and shake some sense into him. He balled his hands into fists to prevent himself from running across the room and doing just that. He took a deep, cleansing breath, in through his nose and out his mouth. It was Harry who broke the silence first.

"Sir," he began, "Draco has come up with a plan to aid us in our fight." He motioned towards Draco as he looked over to him, encouraging him with his eyes to speak.

Severus never took his eyes off the headmaster. He saw a frown cross his features; however, when Harry looked back towards the wizard, he was smiling encouragingly.

Draco cleared his throat. He was not used to the headmaster taking what he said seriously, and he had a sudden thought that this was a bad idea. His plan had sounded so reasonable within his own mind, even down in his godfather's chambers, but now it felt like a childish wish, and he didn't know why Severus had insisted upon going to see the head of the Order.

He knew he never should have told his godfather, not to mention Harry and Remus, but they had looked to him as though he could solve all of their problems; so trusting, so open, that he knew he could not, would not, fail with these men at his side. Besides, who would have made him the Polyjuice Potion that he so desperately needed if his plan were to succeed?

Draco had wanted to be taken seriously in this war, but sitting here in this office, he felt so small and insignificant. He doubted himself for the first time in months; he thought that it was a foolhardy plan. Did he ever believe that he could best his father, avenge his mother, and live? He wasn't entirely sure, but as he gathered his courage around himself, he knew he was willing to give it a try.

So he did what he had come here to do. He looked into the headmaster's eyes and told him of his plan. The old man sat there; he neither interrupted him nor berated him and allowed him to speak his mind.

Draco let out a loud sigh when he was done and slumped back into the chair. It was draining to explain himself twice in one night, and the sleepless nights were beginning to take their toll on him.

The elderly headmaster took off his glasses and polished them whilst he contemplated Draco's plan. He had to admit, if only to himself, that the boy had a brave, if foolhardy, idea.

"Well, Mr Malfoy," Albus said, placing his glasses back onto his face and looking down his nose at Draco, "you must understand when I tell you that I can spare none of the Order for this business."

Draco nodded his head as though he had thought the older man would just dismiss his plan.

Severus's eyes narrowed dangerously as he stared at the old wizard behind the desk. He had basically told Draco that if he failed, he was on his own to bare the brunt of his father's retribution. Severus's heart stopped beating for a second as his mind reeled with the implication of those words. Only Draco and he knew what Lucius was capable of, and even then he thought that Lucius had raised his son walking a fine line. He watched as Draco nodded his head, and for the first time, he realised that Draco did not truly know what his father was capable of. Severus knew only too well of the depravity that Lucius held within his soul; he had seen it in his eyes on more than one occasion and seen it in the flesh over the years at the dark revels. In that moment, thinking about that gaze that would come over Lucius's face in the heat of battle, he was truly scared for Draco. Scared at the atrocities that he would face if he failed in his mission, for he knew in his heart that he could count on no one but himself to save Draco from his own father.

Lucius had already proven, by killing his own wife, that he cared nothing for his family. Severus could not imagine killing his own son, and he considered Draco to be the son that he never had, but he doubted that Lucius had such scruples.

He wondered idly who was worse, the Dark Lord or Lucius? The Dark Lord was no longer human, and Lucius barely so.

Severus had not thought about this back in his chambers; he had been too caught up with watching Harry and Remus's faces and keeping an eye on Draco as he had paced the room. But now, hearing Draco impart his plans to the headmaster, something inside of him flared to life, and his chest began to ache. He suddenly felt protective of Draco and Harry; more so Draco, as he had truly no one out there to care or shield him from harm.

He vowed to himself, while watching Draco, Harry and Albus talking, that he would try his hardest to make sure that Draco survived this war, and Harry too, come what may. He prayed to anyone that would listen to his request to keep his godson safe from harm and for his plan to work out. Severus thought it couldn't hurt to pray, as they needed all the help they could get.

Thanks to my fantastic beta, AmyLouise.

If you don't review my story, please leave a review for another author, as this is the only payment we receive.

I would also like to thank everyone who is reading and reviewing my story. Although I cannot guarantee regular updates, I will not abandon this story just some RL dramas are happening at the moment. Once again, reviews and constructive criticism are very much appreciated.

Dark Times

Chapter 20 of 25

Dumbledore makes his plans known for the Order. Harry struggles with his forced isolation.

Severus watched Harry become increasingly restless as the weeks wore on. He was inattentive and often miles away when he was in fact within the same room as Severus. Harry mastered the spells that he was taught with an ease that made Severus search for more difficult ones, most of which were illegal: what some would consider to be Dark magic. Teaching and learning these spells could cost both of them time in Azkaban if the Wizengamot ever found out.

But the time for niceties was over; it had come and gone like the winds of autumn before the cold snows of winter sets in. Voldemort was not concerned with the use of legal spells, and most of the attacks that the Order had not managed to stop were brutal and twisted just like the Death Eaters that had performed the acts themselves.

Severus himself was restless, though he had many years on Harry to perfect the art of staying still and listening to everything that was going on around him. He was a spy; though no longer the main spy for the Order, he was the longest surviving one and spies don't usually grow old and grey without perfecting their art. Severus knew he was very good at what he did.

Voldemort's calls were coming closer together. The Dark Lord was erratic in his decision making, and he noticed for the first time that he was beginning to lose the faith of his followers.

Severus had not heard from Draco, but he had seen him standing behind Lucius at last night's calling. He had almost made up some business to talk to Lucius about, just

to be closer to his godson and ascertain for himself that he was in good health. In the end he had thought better of it. He knew he had to be patient, wait for the signal from Draco and hope for the best, but as the days wore on, and the temperatures dropped, he found himself taking his frustration out on Harry.

"Will you stop wool-gathering and pay attention?" Severus snapped, holding his wand out from his body.

Harry shot him a withering glance as he suddenly threw his wand to the floor.

"I am sick of this waiting. The summer has come and gone with no word from Draco. The students are back in the castle. When are we going to finish this war so that I can have a life?" he spoke harshly to Severus.

"Well then, by all means, why don't you march up to the Headmaster's office, and tell him that you are off to find the Dark Lord and finish him because you are bored." Severus raised an eyebrow as he looked down his nose at Harry.

"I have spent the better half of my life trying to do just that. But by all means..." Severus swept his arm in a motion towards the door, "go and get yourself killed. Better men than you have tried and failed at bringing down the Dark Lord. But what do I care? Which ever side is victorious, I come out smelling of roses."

Harry eyes widened.

"You wouldn't!" he exclaimed, his voice revealing the shock that Severus's proclamation had made.

"Wouldn't what, Potter? Don't forget for a single moment that I am Slytherin. We are a self serving lot who look out for themselves first and foremost." Severus crossed his arms, his wand still firmly held within his right hand.

Harry deflated; he hunched his shoulders and looked at the ground. Not lifting his head, he whispered, "You wouldn't leave me like that."

There was such anguish in his voice that Severus had to stop himself from taking a step backwards. He walked over to Harry and placed his left hand on the young man's shoulder.

"No," was all he replied.

Harry straightened up, lifting his head to look into Severus's eyes. A look of absolute trust overcame his face as he smiled at the dark-haired wizard.

"But if you don't learn these spells, it won't be me leaving you, it will be you leaving me," Severus said as he took his hand off Harry's shoulder.

Harry made his way over to his wand and bent over to pick it up. Severus sent a stinging hex in his direction.

Harry yelped and spun around, his wand held in his right hand as his left hand was rubbing his backside.

"Ow, that smarts."

"It will teach you to never turn your back on your opponent," Severus said with a grin.

Harry mumbled something under his breath as he went to stand before Severus once more.

"Shall we begin?" Severus asked.

Harry just nodded his head once, still rubbing his stinging bum.

Drip, drip, drip.

Her blood hit the stone floor at regular intervals. She was counting the drips, trying to make out patterns in the crimson pool. So far she had counted one hundred and seven drips. She tried to inch her arm a little lower so as to finish the pattern. To her it looked like a dog, and she wanted to make a tail for the creature.

Her master was cutting into her back again. She lay over the small bed he had placed in the centre of her cell as she felt the sharp sting of the knife as he carved into her flesh. It didn't hurt any more, not really, but he still liked to hear her scream whilst he did this. So she screamed, long and loud, for his pleasure.

He would come to her cell, take what he wanted, and then he would torture her for his own gratification. Sometimes he would torture her first, and he had said that he liked to feel her blood covering his body as he entered her.

She liked the knife best, as he would be careful to make only shallow cuts in her back and arms. She hated the whip, acid and flail.

A shiver ran up her back as she thought of this. Her master must have noticed and paused in his attention to her thighs.

"Had enough, my pet?" he asked, though she knew he didn't really care about the answer.

'No, Master,' she swiftly replied in his mind.

"Very well." He continued to slice her skin open on the back of her thighs, being careful not to make the cuts too deep, otherwise the spell that surrounded the cell would engage and cut his fun short.

She screamed.

As he made his way towards her inner thigh, he paused once more, tilting his head to the side slightly. His eyes were focused on a point somewhere over her left shoulder as he whispered, "The Dark Lord wants to come here and check on you."

She stopped in her bloody mission, the creature's tail halfway done, and looked over her right shoulder. She noticed the knife was shaking in his hand.

"He says it's almost time," he continued, his voice holding the barest hint of trepidation. "He wants to take you away from me, but I can never allow that." Lucius shook himself as though he were coming out of a trance. He looked directly at her then and grinned maliciously.

"No, I can't allow that," he stated again, this time more fiercely as he brought the knife down once more and continued to make her scream.

A whispered spell, and a thin piece of metal wire made its way around her throat, above the metal collar, and snugly tightening against her windpipe. Pausing in her screams, she tried to collect as much air into her lungs before the wire cut off her air supply.

Lucius continued to slice into the delicate area of her upper inner thighs. Suddenly he paused, the knife clattering to the ground. He laid his hands on her back, smearing the blood all over her, coating his own hands with her mudblood. Although it looked no different from his own, he knew that it was tainted, just as the woman beneath him was.

He quickly Vanished his clothing and breathed a sigh of relief as his restricted erection sprang free. It jutted out, surrounded by a nest of blond pubic hairs. He brought both

hands down off her back and stroked his penis with his blood-covered hands, moaning at the delicious friction it caused. Closing his eyes for a second as his hands wandered over his balls, he quickly made a grab for the Mudblood, gripping her thighs and yanking her half off the bed she was on until her feet touched the ground.

She made no noise; she was, after all, used to being handled in this way, only becoming like a limp rag doll. Lucius growled out his evident arousal before quickly slamming into her wet hole and pumping erratically.

His hands were gripping her hips tightly, fingernails digging into her side. She was sure she would feel the non-existent bruises later. The piece of metal wire was oh so slowly cutting into her neck, and she thought she would pass out before her master even came.

She tried to hold on, really she did, for she knew what would happen to her if she did not. But in the end the oxygen depletion was too much for her, but she thought she heard him roar out his completion before she lost consciousness.

Ron burst into Harry's rooms, breathing heavily as he scanned the room for his best mate.

"Harry?" he yelled out, half doubled over from his race to find him.

"Harry!" he yelled again, this time walking towards the sitting room.

Harry heard Ron calling his name and cursed under his breath. Turning off the water in the shower, he opened the glass doors and stepped out.

Grabbing a towel, he wrapped it firmly around his waist before snatching up his glasses and shoving them onto his face. Opening the door, he stepped out into his bedroom. He caught the look of panic on Ron's face as he scanned the sitting room for Harry's presence.

"In here," Harry shouted and saw the look of relief cross Ron's face through the open doorway as he made his way into Harry's bedroom.

"They attacked Fred and George in their shop," Ron started, an infuriated look crossing his face; his hands were balled into fists at his side. His whole body screamed of tension.

"Slow down, Ron," Harry said, holding up both of his hands. "Are Fred and George okay?" he asked, dreading the answer but wanting to know nonetheless.

"Yeah, yeah, but those bastards burnt down their shop," Ron went on, not noticing that the apprehension had faded away from Harry's frame as he gestured wildly, running his hands through his red hair.

"How'd they get out?" Harry asked, noticing now that he was dripping all over the floor.

"They were in their store closing up for the night when they heard the pop of someone Apparating into their shop. At first they thought it was a member of the Order, you know, with important business, but their Sneakoscopes started to go crazy so they Disapparated straight to the Burrow.

"Everyone's upstairs. Dumbledore's called an emergency meeting of the Order. He sent me down here to get you," Ron finished, finally looking up to see Harry standing there, dripping wet, breathing heavily like he'd just been the one to run all the way from the front gates.

"So, when you're ready we can go." Ron broke the silence. He saw the gleam in Harry's eye, and it made him uncomfortable.

"Harry?" Ron said, taking a small step forward and reaching out a hand to place on his shoulder.

Harry whirled around abruptly and stalked back into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Ron just stood there, his arm still outstretched. He dropped it suddenly to his side. He wasn't sure what was up with Harry, but he was determined to find out.

Making his way over to the closed bathroom door, he leant his whole body against it, holding his breath as he concentrated. Hearing a loud smash, and then the unmistakable sound of glass breaking, he jumped back from the door; his heart was pounding in his chest.

"Are you all right in there, Harry?" he asked, his voice holding a tinge of uncertainty.

"Yeah, give me a sec," Harry's muffled reply came from behind the closed door.

Ron let out his breath. He had never seen Harry like this, and it scared him somewhat. He had thought Harry would have been overjoyed that Fred and George had managed to get out in time and that no one was hurt, but seeing that look in Harry's eyes had terrified Ron. He knew he hadn't spent much time with his best friend, but he had been so busy; they all had.

Just then the door opened, and Harry stepped out, breaking Ron musing.

"You ready then?" Ron asked as he looked into his friend's eyes.

Harry just nodded his head and made his way to the door.

"Just give me a sec to grab my Invisibility Cloak," he said, not stopping as he made his way into the sitting room.

Ron's reply died on his lips as his eyes looked at the still ajar bathroom door. Inching closer, his eyes took a look inside, and he held back the strangled yelp that threatened to escape his throat. Looking around the bathroom, he saw that the glass doors to the shower had exploded, and the mirror above the vanity had suffered the same fate. There was glass covering the tiled floor but not a drop of blood, which meant that Harry had not been hurt by his outbreak of uncontrollable magic.

"All ready, Ron," Harry voice called out from the sitting room.

Ron swallowed nervously before he turned around and went to join Harry.

"Yeah," he replied, smiling faintly at Harry.

"Well then, let's get this over with," Harry said, lifting the Invisibility Cloak over his head before he disappeared in front of Ron.

Ron followed Harry out of the room, making sure to close the door to Harry's quarters behind him.

Everyone was assembled around the large table when Harry and Ron entered the room. All discussion stopped as the occupants of the room turned as one to face the door.

Harry whipped off the Invisibility Cloak before bunching it up in his arms and making his way over to the opposite side of the table next to Severus and Dumbledore. Ron followed close on his heels and, as they took their seats, Harry's eyes took in all of those present. He didn't notice Draco, but then mentally slapped his forehead as he realised that Dumbledore would not out his current spy, not even to the Order.

Both the twins were openly grinning at him, whilst Mrs Weasley sat beside Fred...or was it George? Harry never could tell...wiping some soot off his cheek with a handkerchief.

Harry was startled by Tonks's appearance. Her hair was not its usual vibrant colour; in fact, she looked quite ordinary with plain, brownish hair, and Harry had to look closely to see the lines of worry etched into her usually cheerful face. Harry had never seen her look so haggard and worn thin.

Mad-Eye Moody was sitting a couple of spaces down from Tonks; he too looked worried, though he held himself straight as a lamppost. The only sign of his agitation was his magical eye spinning wildly around in its socket, never once landing on anything for more than a split second before whirling once more.

Kingsley was there too; the big bald man, although formidable, today looked as tired as the rest of them.

What have they all been up to while I have been safely hiding out here at Hogwarts? Harry thought to himself, but didn't have any more time to ponder as Albus Dumbledore, the leader of the Order, opened the meeting.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," the headmaster said as he looked upon the room. There were nods of heads and small smiles on faces.

"As you all know, I do not call you all unless something big has happened. Today Fred and George Weasley's shop was attacked by Death Eaters." A couple of startled cries rang out as all attention turned towards the twins, who were both grinning. "Although as you see they are both fine, unfortunately their shop was burnt to the ground," Dumbledore continued. "They both managed to Apparate to the Burrow, from where I was contacted immediately. Tom has chosen his targets well, and I am fearful about who will be next on his agenda. If I could keep you all safe I would, but regrettably, I cannot."

The aging headmaster sighed. Harry saw that he too looked worn-out. This war was affecting all of them, slowly eating away at them until they looked like echoes of their former selves.

Why was he sitting around when he should be out there destroying Voldemort? Wasn't he ready? His thoughts were disrupted once more as Dumbledore spoke again.

"Tom has continually been striking at us where it hurts the most, and although he has made no big show yet, I fear it is only a matter of time. It is time for us all to leave the safety of our homes and go to our nearest safe location. We have Grimmauld Place, the Burrow, which Molly has gracefully offered to any Order member, or here at Hogwarts itself."

At Dumbledore's announcement, everyone started talking at once; it was almost deafening. Mad-Eyes's voice was heard over the din of the other Order members, and Harry made out his protests as he stated that he was not a coward, he would not leave his house, and if the damn Death Eaters wanted him, then they could bloody well come and get him.

Albus held his hands up and everyone settled down.

"I know this is a lot to take in, but need I remind you what happened to the Creevy family during the summer break," Dumbledore said as he pushed his glasses from the tip of his nose up to the bridge.

Harry was dumbstruck. He felt as if he had been psychically assaulted and felt his breath leave his body in a whoosh. What had happened to Colin and Dennis Creevy and why wasn't he informed? He looked around the table and saw the nodding of heads and general assent. He tried to catch Ron's eye, but Ron quickly ducked his head and turned to his father and started whispering close to his ear.

A look of fury crossed Harry's face. So everyone knew except for him. He was about to speak up and demand answers, but Severus laid a hand on his arm, which was under the table, and he looked over to see him shake his head slightly. He would insist on knowing the truth after the meeting, and if the dark man held anything back there would be plenty of hexing taking place in the dungeons later. Why was everyone keeping him in the dark? Did they think he couldn't handle the truth? Well, he would show them all.

Harry took a few deep breaths and tried to rein in his mounting anger. He felt Severus squeeze his arm before moving his hand away. Now was not the time to lose it.

Tonks stood, and all heads turned in her direction as she cleared her throat.

"The werewolves to the North need an out. Fenrir Greyback has been coming down on them hard; he even killed a few of the lesser wolves to prove a point. They are all scared of him and just want to be left alone, but since that is no longer an option, I was hoping that the Order could come up with a solution tonight, as I am due to take them their Wolfsbane tomorrow."

"A most pressing matter," Albus said. "Hagrid, would you go seek out the Centaurs when the meeting concludes, and see if they could be temporarily allowed refuge in the Forbidden Forest?"

Hagrid nodded his huge head. "Sure thing, Professor," he said, swelling up with pride at being sought out for such an important job.

"As it is well past curfew and tomorrow is Sunday, I want you all to go home and pack up your belongings, taking only that which is necessary and then no later than noon tomorrow, I want you all situated in your chosen safe house. Mark my words, I will not be moved on this. Remember that you are no good to the Order dead." Albus looked directly at Mad-Eye when he spoke the last words.

There was a general nodding of heads as everyone started to push away from the table. Some, like Hagrid, left immediately to carry out their task.

Severus looked over at Harry as he stood and flicked his eyes in the direction of the door. Harry stood, his body tense as he nodded his head at the twins. They grinned back at him. Molly was still fussing over them as Harry followed Severus out the door.

The door to the Potions master's classroom slammed behind Harry. He didn't even flinch as the walls seemed to shake. He was so sick of being kept in the dark. Wasn't he supposed to be the saviour of the Wizarding World? If so, then wasn't it their responsibility to keep him up-to-date on the going-ons in that world?

Harry shook his head in anger. He was hot, although the temperature down in the dungeons was always chilly. Every muscle in his body hurt from being kept so rigid that he thought he might explode. He had to settle down. He knew, deep within himself, that Severus wouldn't keep something from him deliberately. As he started to calm down and think on it rationally, Severus turned to face him and spoke for the first time since they had entered the classroom.

"The Creevys were attacked on the last day of the summer break. I knew nothing about the attack beforehand. It seems that I am not trusted for the Dark Lord's missions any longer."

Harry heard the self-loathing in his mentor's voice; his heart went out to the man. He had no family to call his own. Harry vowed then and there that he would see to it that Severus lived after he defeated the Dark Lord, so he could be free of the madness. Lost in his internal musing, he just realised that Severus had started to speak once more.

"Didn't I tell you? Didn't I warn you that this would happen? This is war, Harry, and like it or not people *will* die. Good people. Honest people. People who have nothing to do with this war and have never heard the Dark Lord's name. Believe me when I say that I care for each and every one of my students, past and present. Don't you think that each one of their deaths is a personal blow to me? Think, Potter, think upon how many students have passed through these halls in the twenty years I have been teaching." Severus gave Harry a pointed look. His hands clenched into fists as he tried to control the growing rage inside himself.

"Believe me, I wanted to tell you, I never wanted to keep you in the dark. The Headmaster thought otherwise, so I kept my mouth shut, against my better judgement."

"You're right," Harry said in a defeated voice. "I didn't think how it would affect you, Severus, and for that I am truly sorry, but I don't want to be kept in the dark any more. Everyone thinks I'm so fragile, so breakable, and since Hermione's disappearance everyone, except you, has been tip toeing around me like I might snap at any moment. Granted, I might have done so in the past, but not any longer. You have taught me more than I could ever imagine, Severus, and for that I shall forever be in your debt."

Severus waved away his gratitude, not used to praise of any kind. It was his redemption after all, a way of making right the atrocities that he had performed when he was solely on the Dark Lord's side. He didn't know now how he could have been, and it felt like a lifetime ago.

"But it's true, Severus, do you honestly think I would be even a fifth of the wizard I am today without your help?" Harry asked.

Severus nodded his head once.

"Just please tell me from now on what is happening. I can't promise you that I won't go off the deep end, but with you around to pull my head out of my ass, I'm sure we can see it through... together." Harry looked up to see a look of wonderment on Severus's face.

"That being said, I think I shall call it a night. 'Night, Severus," Harry said as he turned around and left the classroom.

Severus had to swallow the pride that was swelling inside of him, for in the place of the young child who had stood before him in time past, there now stood a man.

Thanks to my fantastic beta, AmyLouise.

Real life has reared its ugly head, but I am honestly trying to write. Not many chapters left now as the Final Battle approaches.

If you don't review my story, please leave a review for another author, as this is the only payment we receive. I know I cherish each and everyone of my reviews.

Jaws of Darkness

Chapter 21 of 25

Voldemort visits the Manor.

Draco sat in the library of Malfoy Manor, a place he had once called his sanctuary, but it no longer held that endearment in his mind. It was cold and uncaring, just like the monster that ran the household.

His mother had brought a breath of life to the Manor; she had been its only warmth. Now that she was gone the Manor was dark and lifeless.

His chin rested on his hand as he stared into the burning fire.

Draco had been in charge of the mission that ultimately ended the lives of the Creevy family. The only redeeming factor in his mind was that the Dark Lord had said that they had to die, but had never stated how. Not a drop of blood was spilt. Draco had given the order that they all be in and out as quickly as possible.

It had still sickened him, and he was violently ill when he had completed the mission and had some time to himself. The other Death Eaters who had accompanied him had all been smiling and congratulating each other. The only light on the whole damned situation was the fact that he had given the Creevy family a quick death.

His plan was ready, or as ready as it would ever be. The one flaw that he couldn't get around was the reality that the Manor had enchantments placed upon it, enchantments Draco knew meant certain death to anyone who attempted to take out the Manor's master. He needed to get Lucius away from the Manor and its surrounding area, but how to do this?

He tapped a finger on his cheek.

He could use Harry for bait, but he would never use the young wizard that he had come to know as a friend like that. But what else could he do? He hardly saw Lucius any more; he was always away doing some secret work for the Dark Lord, and when he was here he was often distant and self-absorbed.

Draco was startled and jumped from his comfortable chair in the library when he felt the wards around the Manor shift. This could only mean one thing. The Dark Lord was paying them a visit, and Draco's heart raced with the implication of what that meant as his face contorted with panic.

Lucius had not mentioned that they would be playing host this afternoon, unless he had just found out himself.

Maybe the Dark Lord was not here to see him. Perhaps he had some business to discuss with Lucius. But why was he coming to the Manor and not calling Lucius to his side?

Draco willed his heart to beat slower as he quickly plastered a look of indifference on his face. His godfather had taught him well, and he mimicked the outward calmness that Severus always portrayed.

He went over to one of the bookshelves and grabbed a random tome from its shelf before seating himself once more before the fire. He would stay here, in the library, unless asked to present himself to the Dark Lord.

His mind was racing a million miles per hour even as he opened the book cover and began to look at the words displayed there, not really paying any attention to them.

Lucius paced his study. Back and forth, back and forth. The anticipation was killing him. He had a speech prepared for his Lord and went over it again and again in his mind.

He had been down to see his slave and give her a plain white dress to put on. No shoes, for slaves weren't permitted shoes. She had looked at him quizzically, but had made no protest as she had pulled the dress over her head and awaited further commands. He had told her that the Dark Lord would be seeing her this afternoon, and that

she was to be respectful and follow his orders without hesitation. She had frowned at this, and he left her there, with the frown on her face, as he shut the door and made his way to his study where he had quickly downed a tumbler of Firewhiskey.

He had dropped the wards surrounding the Manor a mere five minutes ago. They would only permit entry to his Lord.

He had been summoned to the Dark Lord's side earlier that morning, where he was told that he would pay Lucius and the Mudblood a visit that afternoon. Lucius had felt the first stirrings of terror deep within his gut, but he simply nodded his head.

His Lord wouldn't take his slave away from him, would he? He would give Lucius this one boon, for he had asked for nothing else in all the long years of service to his Lord's campaign. He would grant Lucius the Mudblood after he had defeated Harry Potter, and she would be his. He could then move her out of the dungeons and into her own suite within the Manor. Everything would be perfect.

The feel of the wards around the Manor dropping and the sound of Apparation made Lucius turn and cease his pacing. The time had come to prove his worth to the Dark Lord and see that his galleons were put to good use. After all, Malfoys had deep pockets. What he couldn't charm out of people, he usually bought.

Straightening his immaculate clothing, he made his way out of the study and down to the entrance hall to meet his Lord and Master, silently praying that all would go well.

Severus sat in his office. He could feel the migraine developing at his temples and he rubbed furiously at the sides of his forehead with both hands.

First year essay marking was never enjoyable, and he doubted it ever would be.

He paused in his marking and looked up as he saw the door to his office open and close. A moment later, Harry and Remus were standing before the closed door.

He sighed loudly as they made their way towards his desk. Harry wore a big grin on his face whilst Remus just looked worn out.

"How are you doing, Severus?" Harry asked as he stopped before Severus's desk. Remus stood to his right, slightly behind the young man.

"Do you know how strenuous first year essays are?" Severus replied, scowling slightly. "It seems that the newest batch of miscreants to grace the halls of Hogwarts are complete and utter idiots."

Harry's smile widened even more.

"Well, I hope my essays weren't that bad," Harry said. The gleam in his eye was contagious, and Severus felt the corner of his mouth pull upwards, threatening to turn into a grin of his own.

"No," Severus replied. "Now if you have come here and dragged that mutt with you to talk about your days as a first year, I simply don't have the time, but if you have come here to discuss something of importance, then I would ask you to ward and silence the room."

"Play nice, Severus," Harry stated as he flicked his wand at the door using a nonverbal spell to hide their conversation from prying ears. Severus's scowl deepened.

Harry turned back to look at the dark-haired wizard, who was looking at him and wearing a scowl on his face.

"Now, everyone is situated in the safe houses and here at Hogwarts. All the werewolves have been settled in the Forbidden Forest, and everything seems to be going according to plan," Harry started, marking each point off on his fingers.

Severus held up one pale hand before Harry could continue.

"Why, precisely, are you telling me all of this?" Severus drawled.

Harry rolled his eyes before crossing his arms over his chest.

"You weren't there to oversee any of this. I know you have been locked up in here doing God knows what." Harry gave Severus a hard glare.

"Yes, contrary to your beliefs, I do have another job," Severus replied mockingly, his hand sweeping across the desk to encompass the grading he was doing before he was interrupted.

"Oh, yes, we mustn't forget about the first years Potions essays," Harry spat out, the frustration growing in his voice.

Severus just lifted one eyebrow in response as he waited for Harry to continue.

"In case you haven't noticed, we are all preparing for war whilst you sit in here 'marking' these oh-so-important essays," Harry said.

Remus let out a chuckle, and two sets of eyes looked in his direction.

"And why did you have to bring the werewolf down here to tell me this?" Severus asked Harry, though his eyes never left Remus, who felt himself begin to redden at the Potions master's continued scrutiny.

"Remus was concerned about you; we all are," Harry replied, looking back at Severus.

Severus scoffed at his words.

"Well, as you can see, I am fine, nothing to report, nothing to do, except mark the first years' essays," Severus said, a hint of resentment in his tone.

Harry knew now without a doubt that Severus's problems were those of his own resentment towards Dumbledore. They both had discussed their ongoing feelings of uselessness, sitting around whilst others were out there fighting and dying every day. Harry knew that Severus was not a man who was used to being idle and created more work for himself than strictly necessary.

"When do you think you will be finished with those?" Harry asked as he nodded towards the ungraded pile sitting on the Potions master's desk.

"An hour, perhaps two. It would proceed quicker without your presence though," Severus calmly replied, rubbing once more at his temples and closing his eyes.

"You've another headache, haven't you? Let me get you a potion for that," Harry said, already making his way to Severus's storeroom.

Severus sighed loudly, his eyes still closed.

Remus stood there in shock. He had lost count of the times he had tried to befriend the wizard sitting behind the desk and had been pushed away and snarled at for his efforts. It seemed to him as though Severus had found an unlikely companion in young Harry. How many other things had he missed whilst he had been too busy with his own needs and those of the werewolves?

Harry came back with a potion in his hand. He came around the desk, placing it next to Severus's right hand whilst placing his left hand on his shoulder.

"When was the last time you ate?" Harry asked. His voice was laced with concern as he watched the man before him uncork the potion and swallow it in one gulp. His hand never wavered from his shoulder, and Severus didn't cast him aside, as Remus was expecting him to.

"Last night some time, I think," Severus sighed as the potion started working immediately.

"Remus," Harry said, looking up to the wizard, startling him out of his own thoughts. "Would you be so kind as to Floo the kitchens and ask them for some lunch for the three of us?"

Remus nodded mutely as he turned around and headed for the hearth, his brain not quite catching up to what his eyes had seen. Harry Potter had somehow managed to get under Severus Snape's icy exterior, and in doing so, had earned himself a most loyal and dependable comrade.

Lucius met the Dark Lord in the foyer of his Manor. He bowed low before speaking, "My Lord."

"You may rise, Lucius." The reptilian wizard spoke, and Lucius rose from his bow.

"This way, my Lord." Lucius said, the reverence in his voice speaking volumes as he swept his arm to indicate that his Lord should follow him. Although he knew that the Dark Lord always liked to lead the way, he also knew that pureblood traditions dictated that the Manor's master always led his guests to the place that he wanted them to go. The Dark Lord made sure to follow pureblood convention as long as it suited his needs.

Lucius made his way down the hall and to his left, where he stopped abruptly before a blank wall. There was no difference to be seen in this stretch of wall, and only the few who had the honour of knowing that this was indeed where Lucius kept his prisoners even knew of its existence.

Taking his wand from the silver-headed serpent cane, he pushed it against a series of bricks. There was a much easier way to open the door, but Lucius was nothing if not an exhibitionist, something that the Dark Lord was well aware of.

As a set of narrow stairs materialised before him, he placed his wand back into the cane and started the descent down into the bowels of the dungeons. The sconces on the wall lit up immediately as he placed his foot on the first stair, bringing dazzling light into the passage.

Making his way to the final cell at the end of the narrow passage, he lifted up his left arm, bracing it against the hard wooden surface of the door. The door immediately clicked open, swinging inward on its hinges. The sconces instantly flared to life, showing his slave seated on the small cot. She immediately jumped up and assumed the position of submission.

Lucius grinned.

The Dark Lord preceded Lucius into the room, taking in the various furnishings...of which there were little...with a sweep of his red eyes before they settled on the Mudblood.

"I see you have taught the Mudblood her place." His master spoke, never taking his eyes off the girl who was sprawled before him.

"It wasn't too difficult, my Lord. Mudbloods and the Muggle filth they come from pose no real threat to a wizard of either your or my calibre to break. Their puny brains are really quite suited to this kind of servitude," Lucius drawled, his tone signifying all the pureblood snobbery in his lines.

"Very good, Lucius," Voldemort replied, his eyes narrowing as he watched the Mudblood on the hard, cold floor.

He cared not for her comforts; he knew she was a tool to win this war. Throw that Potter brat off course. His face broke out in a grin as he pictured the scene within his mind.

"My Lord," Lucius said, breaking Voldemort from his musings. "What is to become of the Mudblood once you have been successful in killing Potter?" Lucius's tone was cautious, and although he tried very hard to appear nonchalant, Voldemort could tell he was hiding something.

Voldemort spun around and faced Lucius, his eyes narrowing and his face taking on a look of anger.

"What business is it of yours Lucius?" he whispered menacingly. "You are not to question me...ever. Is that understood?"

Lucius was taken aback at the Dark Lord's tone. He hastily took a step backwards and quickly fumbled for a response, "No, of course not, my Lord," he spoke quickly, bowing his head. "I was merely curious is all. I meant no offence."

"Once her usefulness has ended, she will be disposed of. Preferably whilst Potter is still alive, but if it is after he is dead, it matters not," Voldemort answered.

Lucius tried to not show the dismay on his face as his mind scrambled to come up with a way of keeping his slave alive.

"My Lord, if you will, may I ask you for a boon?" he asked. His whole body was shaking with nerves, though none of this showed outwardly.

Voldemort considered this and then nodded his head for Lucius to continue.

"I wish to keep the Mudblood here, after you win the war, as a message to the other Mudbloods and blood traitors," Lucius improvised hastily. He knew that the Dark Lord was getting irritable, and it was never wise to speak to him when he narrowed his eyes so. But Lucius had nothing to lose really, and he felt if he lost his slave now, he would in fact be losing a part of himself.

"And why would I need this Mudblood to do as you suggest?" Voldemort asked, his voice merely a whisper to show his growing anger.

"Because, my Lord, she is a close friend of Harry Potter; what better way to crush those that will oppose you than to show them all what will become of them?" Lucius held his breath as he awaited his Lord's decision.

"Potter thinks her dead. Severus told me himself that the boy is inconsolable and prone to fits of rage. I too have felt his growing depression and despair, and I think that when the time is right, to have her brought before me and killed in front of Potter will break what little resistance he has left. The Order will be useless without their precious Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived-Only-To-Die-Again. It will be a slaughter worthy of the history books, and I shall triumph and live forever." Voldemort finished his long winded speech, something he was not prone to doing without an audience.

This conversation was not going as planned but Lucius knew to hold his tongue.

Finally, after what seems like hours, but actually was only a handful of seconds, Voldemort continued.

"Lucius, although you have been one of my most faithful servants over the last few years, you know it is not possible for me to grant you this boon. You will have your choice of Muggles and Mudbloods once I have defeated Potter," he replied, turning his back to Lucius once more and facing the Mudblood, who hadn't moved an inch.

"Such a shame too, it appears you have taught her well, but as you say, it was a simple task, one which I am sure you will be able to recreate." Voldemort threw Lucius's words back at him.

What have I done? Lucius thought, as he hung his head further in failure.

Malfoys weren't used to not getting their way, and in a last ditch effort he spoke once more.

"But my Lord, if only..."

"I have made my decision on this matter, Lucius. You will not question me on this; do I make myself clear?" Voldemort's voice was getting quieter and quieter as he finished his sentence. Lucius knew better than to argue with him.

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius replied, his tone one of defeat.

Voldemort clapped his hands together.

"Good, now show me all that you have taught the Mudblood," he said, conjuring himself a chair in the corner and sitting down in it gracefully as though he were about to watch the opera instead of torture.

Lucius, with a heavy heart, went and stood before his slave. He would take out his anger on her, as to do otherwise would be suicide. Malfoys were, after all, big on self-preservation.

"Draco!"

Draco jumped, half dropping his book in the process as he heard Lucius call his name using a Sonorus Charm. Draco was sure that the whole of the Manor had heard Lucius calling him.

"Draco, come down here this instant," Lucius bellowed once more. Draco was sure his eardrums would never be the same.

Draco winced as he rubbed at his sore ears, his face screwing up into a look of worry as he quickly exited the library. Making his way to the top of the stairs, he looked down to see Lucius standing at the bottom. He was dishevelled...everything, from his clothes to his hair, was unkempt, and if Draco hadn't looked closely, he would have thought that Lucius had been in a wizards' duel, as there was blood decorating his usually immaculate clothing.

"Yes, father," Draco said from the top of the stairwell, although it pained him to call this monster his father.

"Go and get your cloak, we are going out," Lucius commanded; the glint in his eyes showed Draco just how unstable he was at this precise moment.

Draco swallowed the retort that was itching its way up his throat and quickly nodded his head, turning around and hastily making his way to his room.

Once inside he slammed the door and quickly made his way over to the hidden hole under his bed. Lying down on his stomach, he silently opened it, the wards recognising only him, and reached inside to grab the Polyjuice potion and the locks of Lucius's hair.

It's now or never, he thought to himself as he flicked his wand at the smallish sized hole, closing it and straightening up. He picked up the travelling cloak off his bed, placing it over his shoulders and doing up the clasp. He carefully put the bag and potions vial in one of the pockets. He made sure that the vial was unbreakable before he made his way to the door.

He paused, his hand on the knob, as he took a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth. Steadying himself for what was to come.

You can do this, he told himself sternly before he exited the room.

One thing was certain: tonight, he would either succeed in his mission, or die trying.

She was cold, oh so very cold.

Her body ached and her various cuts and gashes were still bleeding slightly. Her Master had never before failed to heal her completely after he exited her home, and she was confused as to why she was now in this state.

She huddled down further in the straw that was to be her new bed. Her bed had been stripped of its hard mattress; the frame was upright against the wall, its twisted metal and springs showing her Master's displeasure.

She felt as though he was dismissing her, disappointed in her. She had tried so hard to please him. She tried not to listen in when the other man came into her room...the Dark Lord, her Master had called him...but it was hard not to do so. She did not understand everything that went on between the two men, but she had thought that she had heard frustration in her Master's voice.

Was it directed at her? She couldn't be positive, although they were discussing her, and someone named Potter, so it must have been.

He had treated her more roughly than he had previously. The cut of the whip had stung a little more, been a little deeper, as had his use of the knife, which he usually wielded so skilfully. Not this time, however, as he cut into her with no regard for her flesh. He had made his wounds deep, the blood flowing freely.

When he finally emptied his seed into her, she was startled to hear clapping coming from the corner and lifted her head up, perplexed that they were not alone. She had forgotten that they had had an audience. Catching a glimpse of the other occupant in her home, the thought brought a fresh wave of shivering through her body, although this one had nothing to do with the chill in the air.

He was almost snake-like in appearance; his legs were neatly crossed at the ankle, and he wore the most hideous smile on his face. She quickly looked down at the ground, ashamed that she had actually looked up at her master's companion, this Dark Lord.

He had never let anyone view them before, and she was interested as to why now he was doing so.

When they had both left her, she had crawled up to the bed and curled up upon it. She started to drift off, not sure whether it was from the blood loss or the fact that she was just so tired.

She was awakened a short time later by the door slamming against the wall. She was too exhausted to move.

"Wake up, you useless Mudblood!" Her master screamed at her, kicking her in the legs with the toe of his boot, causing her to stifle a scream.

She tried to get up, but her arms and legs would not support her.

Grabbing her by the hair, he yanked her off the mattress and on to the floor.

"I said GET UP," he yelled, once more kicking her in the ribs, and this time she did cry out, and she heard a distinctive snap of bone.

"Now look what you made me do," he said. There was however, not even the slightest hint of remorse in his voice.

She whimpered as she attempted to roll over and struggled to get into the submissive position that he seemed to approve of.

"Useless cunt of a Mudblood. Look at you. Crawling around on the ground like a worthless piece of shit, you aren't even worthy to lick the underside of my boots," he said in a ragged voice filled with contempt.

She was trying, she truly was, but her limbs wouldn't co-operate with her brain. She was so tired, so very tired.

She started convulsing on the floor then, and his eyes opened wide. He quickly pulled his wand from the cane and set about fixing his slave. Although not repentant, he still cared for her in his own way.

After healing her somewhat haphazardly, he sat down heavily on the cot. His breathing was erratic.

The Dark Lord had said that she was to be killed, and soon too, if he understood correctly. What did her comforts matter to him?

"Fuck it all to Hades," he cursed loudly and stood up. Whirling around, he had taken out his frustration on the small bed.

Satisfied that he had destroyed something, he had left, shutting the door firmly behind him with a bang.

She had lain there, as quiet as could be, while he had destroyed her small measure of comfort.

Hardly daring to breath lest he turn his wrath on her, she had waited until he ran out of steam.

After he left, she had taken stock of her body and found that she could breathe a lot easier now. That was a relief. Her cuts were no longer oozing blood, but she still felt slightly light headed.

She had seen the pile of straw materialise before her eyes and crawled towards it, dragging blood all the way across her home. She would use the dress that her Master had brought her to wear later to tidy it up, when she wasn't so dizzy.

She huddled down in the straw, covering herself in it. She still ached, but it was nothing compared to how she felt about angering her master.

She lay there, shivering from both her thoughts and the cold, and closed her eyes.

Thanks to my fantastic beta, AmyLouise.

I am still trying to complete this story and apologise for my lack of updates.

If you don't review my story, please leave a review for another author, as this is the only payment we receive. I know I cherish each and everyone of my reviews.

Turncoat

Chapter 22 of 25

Crookshanks is back and Draco is Summoned.

Peter Pettigrew stuck to the shadows and crevices deep in the dungeons of Hogwarts. It was easy for him to come and go within the wards of Hogwarts, as that daft old man had not changed them to exclude him since he had been discovered to be an Animagus a few years back.

People rarely looked down; too busy running here and there. He gave a toothy grin at how easy it truly was in this form.

His rat ears picked up the sound of a door opening, and he quickly turned his head in the direction it came from. Scurrying hastily, he made it to the door just as it closed. Cursing his bad luck, he found a darkened corner to wait. He knew he wouldn't be noticed here within the shadows.

Peter was waiting in the darkness when the door finally opened. His beady little eyes were glued to the exit of the Potions classroom, and his ears were straining to hear any sound in the dank corridor. He saw the door close, but he didn't see anyone exiting.

"Ow, that's my foot, Remus!" Harry whispered.

"Sorry about that, Harry," Remus replied, his voice holding a hint of amusement.

"I guess this cloak isn't big enough for the both of us," Harry joked.

Peter's heart was in his throat. So this is where Harry Potter was hiding. He nodded his little head at the brilliance of the old headmaster's plan, to hide the Potter boy in plain sight. Perhaps he wasn't as daft as he had previously thought. Peter had thought Remus was dead; hell, he could have sworn to it, as he had seen the projected image of Snivellus burning the body of the werewolf. Something wasn't right here. They had just exited the Potions classroom, which meant that Snape knew about their whereabouts and had not told their Lord.

His mind was working in overdrive as the footstep slowly faded down the passageway. Shaking himself out of his whirling thoughts, his resolve suddenly strengthened. Yes, he would tell his Lord about Snape, and then perhaps he would become Voldemort's favourite once more.

He scurried off as fast as his little legs would carry him, out of Hogwarts and in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

Voldemort sat bent over at the desk in his personal study. The strategic maps of Great Britain were spread upon the desk, and he frowned lightly to himself. The fire in the hearth was the only source of light in the room. Nagini was curled up in a coil in front of the fire, seeking its warmth.

He was interrupted from his scrutiny by a knock at the door. Hissing out a profanity in Parseltongue, he called out for the intruder to enter. This had better be good, otherwise there would be one less of his followers tonight.

Peter scuttled in, eyes downcast; he was wringing his hands together as though nervous.

Voldemort's red eyes narrowed as he looked at Peter.

"Report," he hissed out, his tone menacing.

"My Lord, I have discovered the whereabouts of Harry Potter!" Peter exclaimed, looking nervously at his master's face.

Voldemort could hear the excitement and anxiety fighting against one another in Peter's voice as he focused on him.

"Tell me," he demanded, his red eyes boring into Peter's features.

"He is at Hogwarts, my Lord, and Snape knows about it. I overheard them talking when they left his classroom. It was Potter and that werewolf, Remus," Peter stuttered out quickly.

"And you saw this with your own two eyes?" Voldemort asked, his body unnaturally still at the thought of Severus's betrayal.

"No, my Lord, they were under Potter's Invisibility Cloak, but I did hear them as they exited, and there was no mistaking it as they called each other by their names," Peter replied, his hands visibly trembling. It never did any good to disturb his Lord on hearsay, and a grievance against your brother was a serious offence in Voldemort's eyes, but Peter was hopeful that his Lord would overlook this one infraction on the promise that he would finally get his hands on Harry Potter.

Voldemort stood, coming around his desk and closer to Peter, as he took an uneasy step backwards.

"You will go back to Hogwarts and watch and listen," Voldemort hissed, his eyes holding an unnatural sparkle. "Gather all the information you can and come back here."

Peter nodded his head as he turned to leave, noticeably relaxing.

"Oh, and Peter," Voldemort whispered, the tone of his voice menacing, "you had better not be wrong on this, or Nagini will make a snack of you, and it will bring me oh, so much pleasure."

Peter gulped as he nodded his head once more and scurried out of the study and away from his master and the bloody big snake.

Draco hastily marched through the dungeon corridors with the prone body of Lucius, levitating close in front of him. Lucius's snake-headed cane was clutched in his left hand. Draco's heart was beating way too fast in his ears, and although Disillusioned, he thought his ragged breathing and unnaturally loud heartbeat would give him away. Luckily for him, it was past midnight on a school night, and all of the students should be in their dorm rooms if not in their beds.

He made a sharp left-hand turn, waving his wand at the blank stone wall, and an opening appeared which he quickly passed through. The sconces flared to life, the iron bars to the cell were opened, and he placed the monster that was Lucius on to the small bed in the corner, none too gently, as he tossed the cane down on the ground in front of him. He knew he wouldn't wake up until someone ended the spell on him.

Draco sighed; the task he had set himself on what seemed like a lifetime ago was now complete.

Sensing movement, he whirled around, his wand held in a death grip, but he relaxed as he saw it was only Severus standing at the opening to the prison.

"Draco," Severus whispered, and Draco dropped the Disillusionment Charm on both himself and Lucius.

Severus knew that it was either the Headmaster or Draco that had entered the hidden prison as they were the only two, besides himself, that knew of its existence. He had placed wards surrounding the area to alert him if anyone opened up the wall. He did this for Draco's protection, as he didn't know how badly the young man would be injured upon executing his foolhardy plan.

The gaol was secure; once inside the bars, Lucius would be like a Muggle, all his magic stripped from him as long as he stayed inside the cell. Anyone that entered the caged prison would become a Muggle too, for as long as they stayed in there. Severus had lifted the idea from the wards of Azkaban.

Quickly organising his thoughts, he looked Draco over, his eyes quickly surveying his body for any outward injury. Besides his ragged breathing, he could discern none.

"Are you harmed?" he asked, his eyes not leaving Draco's face.

"I am fine," Draco replied, willing himself to take deep, even breaths.

Severus looked through the bars and over towards the cot. Lucius looked a fright. He was sporting a rather large bruise on his face, his clothes carried the unmistakable traces of blood and dirt, and his hair was dishevelled.

Severus took a few steps towards the cell, coming to stand in front of Draco before pulling him into a hug. Draco sobbed into Severus's jacket.

"It is done now," Severus said.

"I know, but the worst is still to come," Draco replied, pulling back from his godfather and looking up into his eyes. He swiped his left arm across his eyes.

Severus dropped his arms to his side, reluctant to take his eyes from his godson.

"I know," Severus replied.

"I guess I had better activate the Blood Bond now," Draco said, looking back over his shoulder towards the cot where Lucius lay.

"Give yourself a few minutes to compose yourself, clear your mind, and erect your Occlumency shields. He is not going anywhere," Severus replied, his eyes looking in the direction of the wizard on the small bed.

Draco took a couple of calming breaths, willing himself to calm down. The first portion of the plan was over. He never thought he would actually pull it off, but looking back he realised that all of their careful planning had really paid off. He couldn't have asked for it to go any better.

When Draco was as collected as he was going to be, he nodded his head towards Severus. Turning around and lifting his wand, he levitated Lucius off the bed and put him onto the floor outside of the metal bars. Bending down, he rolled up the sleeve of the man he had once called father before doing the same to his own left sleeve.

"Do you need help?" Severus asked. He was still standing where Draco had left him. There was a hint of sadness, whose meaning Draco couldn't comprehend, in his voice, but he brushed it off as he knelt down and shook his head.

Pulling a small silver blade from his boot, he made a shallow incision along Lucius's forearm before duplicating the same on his own arm. Placing his arm on top of

Lucius's, he allowed the blood to mingle there for a few seconds before raising his wand and whirling it through the air whilst saying the Dark spell that would complete the Blood Bond. It didn't require the exchange of blood, however it was not unheard of to use body fluids, and Draco wanted to be certain to use the strongest form of the Bond.

He felt lightheaded as a bright light erupted from his wand, but he kept his arm firmly pressed to that of Lucius as he clenched his teeth together, squeezing his eyes shut as the force of the spell took hold.

Draco suddenly felt dirty all over, it was as though a thousand fleas were crawling all over his skin. He shivered once, his eyes held tightly shut, willing this feeling to pass.

As suddenly as it had begun, the feeling was gone, and Draco lifted his arm from Lucius's slowly. He felt weak, and he stumbled to his feet, pointing his wand at his arm as he closed the long gash. He looked down at the man he used to hold above anyone else. It would serve him right if he left his wound to fester.

Shaking his head as if to clear it, he pointed his wand at the knife wound on Lucius's arm and closed it.

Still leaning over the battered wizard who lay haphazardly on the floor, he thought maliciously *He deserves to die; he killed my mother.*

Draco shook his head at the uncharitable thought and sighed. It would do him no good to do away with Lucius; he was not going anywhere for now. He would be secure in his dungeon cell.

Lucius was Stunned, and at the moment, Draco didn't want him to wake up until this war was over. But he knew they would have to wake him at some point, and he had hoped he would be there when it happened, if only to rub Lucius's face in the fact that he now held everything that the elderly Malfoy had once held dear. Lucius's wealth, property, freedom and even his status with his Master were things that Draco now held in the palm of his hand, and Lucius was not getting those things back ever, if Draco had a say in it.

He patted his breast pocket, making sure that it still held the Polyjuice Potion and the hairs from the man who was still unconscious. He reached down and yanked out viciously a few more blond hairs from the man. He and Severus had discussed the fact that it wouldn't be good for Lucius to see him after he awoke, and although Draco was unhappy with this, he soon relented. They had already made a schedule of trusted Order members to look after Lucius. Severus, Draco and Harry were not on this list.

"Shall we go and see the headmaster?" Severus asked, his voice teetering on the brink of concern. Draco had forgotten that he was there with him.

"Why not? I am done here anyway," Draco replied, turning to face his godfather as he securely tucked the strands of Lucius's hairs into his pocket. He would add them to the others later.

Draco went to walk past Severus and was stopped when his godfather held out Lucius's cane towards him.

"Don't forget this," he said as he passed it to Draco.

Severus levitated Lucius onto the bed before he closed and locked the door to the cell. Raising his own wand, he placed a few more spells upon the cell. When he turned around, Draco was already Disillusioned, and as they passed through the stone archway, the stones magically melded back into a solid wall.

Hermione sat up quickly when she felt the wards surrounding her cell flicker. Her eyes were held wide open, and she dared not breathe. Then the wards all came crashing down around her, and she felt an excruciating pain engulf her whole body. She screamed as though she were dying.

This is unbearable! her mind wailed before she passed out on the cot, her body thrown down, broken and bleeding.

Crookshanks was on high alert. He had been sulking in the shadows of the castle for what seemed like an eternity, waiting for his mistress to return. She never came.

He had grown fat from the attentions of the little elves. They had given him bowls of cream and milk, and glorious tuna. He had grown complacent and had forgotten about his mistress. He was a bad kitty.

But not anymore.

This morning he had woken up and the fog had been lifted. He had sensed a ripple in the wards, a sixth sense which told him that a certain rodent was up to no good. It prickled at his mind, and he thought of the missed opportunity to get his paws on the rat oh, so long ago.

He hunkered down, ready to pounce when he came closer to his target, treading ever so lightly. All of a sudden, he leapt gracefully into the air and landed, pinning the rat between his forepaws. It gave an almighty squeak, and he could feel the rat's heart beating almost out of its chest.

Picking it up by the neck, careful not to crush the life out of the rodent, he trotted off with his prize.

Severus was seated in his office marking some barely intelligible essays. He felt like he should burn the lot of them and give all the students failing grades. Slashing through an entire page with his infamous red ink, he wrote a scathing comment on the top before shoving it onto the completed pile.

When would these dunderheads ever learn to read a book and show the foresight not to copy entire sections from the volume that he had assigned?

Placing his quill back into the inkwell, he closed his eyes and rubbed furiously at his temples, willing away the headache that he was currently experiencing. It was no use; he would need one of his stronger brews if he was to complete the task tonight.

He went over his meeting with Draco and the headmaster a couple of nights ago. Albus had not once congratulated Draco on fulfilling his part of the plan so far, only saying that there was still ample work to be done.

Couldn't that damn Gryffindor for once praise a Slytherin? Couldn't he at least pretend to be proud of Draco? If it were Harry, Dumbledore would be tripping over himself with accolades and praises.

Shaking his head, he thought it no use to be pondering on the workings of the mind of the Great Albus Dumbledore, for taking that path surely would lead to madness.

Putting both of his hands on the desk, he pushed himself up and went in search of a headache potion.

Upon his return he was startled to find an unsightly ginger cat sitting on the pile of unmarked work. It looked as though it had taken a Bludger to its face for it was truly hideous.

Sighing loudly to himself, and swearing bloody murder and a hefty point loss to the dunderhead who owned this unfortunate creature, he approached the desk with a scowl firmly set on his face.

"Shoo," he said, motioning with both his hands. The cat blinked and sat there staring at him. Severus's scowl deepened.

He got within range of the cat and was about to push it off his desk when something caught his eye, something shiny. Stilling his hands and peering down at the cat's front

legs, he saw that the bloody thing was sitting on a rat. A rat with one glistening, silver paw.

Severus gasped and stumbled backwards in recognition. This repulsive, overweight cat had caught Peter Pettigrew.

Slowly, so as not to startle the cat, he inched his hand closer to the rat. The cat eyed him. Just as he was about to grab Peter, the cat swiped him up into his jaws, and in the blink of an eye it shook its head and snapped the rat's neck.

Severus stood there, frozen in place by some unseen force. Disbelief clouded his thoughts as the cat dropped the now very dead Peter onto Severus's desk, before leaping off and sauntering to a corner of the room, where it proceeded to clean itself.

Severus stood there, mouth agape as his swirling thoughts raced around his head.

Peter Pettigrew. Here. In Hogwarts.

He propelled himself into action, grabbing the rat off the desk by the tail and making his way to the headmaster's office.

As the door slammed behind him the only sound to be heard was that of one very proud, purring cat.

Voldemort had not heard back from Peter, though he was not concerned, for he never troubled himself with anyone or anything, except perhaps that tiresome Potter brat. But Peter rarely failed not to make a nuisance of himself. Always there, in the background, quietly listening to everything that went on. He made the perfect follower, a yes man, though Voldemort rarely used him for the important missions, as he didn't trust him. What kind of wizard would hand over his friends to his enemy and then join his enemy's side? A weak-willed wizard, his mind supplied.

Voldemort knew that if Peter's assumptions were correct, he was walking a very fine line. Perhaps he had somehow managed to get himself caught. Well, it was no great loss to his cause, but something just wasn't right about this situation. It had been some weeks with no sign of Peter. At first he had been too distracted to notice, and he had actually put Peter's ramblings to the back of his mind, but now when he was free to let his mind wander, his thoughts circled back to the wizard.

Oh, he would be infuriated if Peter had been wrong and had scurried away and gone into hiding somewhere. He would find him, and when he did, he would make an example of him. It was time to call him back to the fold and to see what he managed to drag up at Hogwarts.

Taking his wand out, he focused on his rat, making Peter's Dark Mark burn with agonizing heat.

As the minutes ticked by and nothing happened, Voldemort lifted his wand once more and closed his eyes. He concentrated on Peter, following the link that held him as one of his own. His eyes opened wide as he hit a brick wall. The link had been severed, which meant only one thing: Peter was dead.

His anger boiled to an infuriating peak as a fine mist of red covered his eyes.

Flicking his wand in a sharp and precise movement, he called upon his most trusted follower. Lucius Malfoy.

Severus made his way up to the headmaster's office, Peter Pettigrew held firmly by the tail in his left fingers, hidden inside his cloak.

Not bothering to knock, he entered the office, closing the door before walking up to Albus's desk. His body was awash with emotions, though he displayed none of this outwardly.

"Headmaster, we seem to have a problem," Severus stated calmly, holding the dead rat up and raising both eyebrows.

Albus looked up from his seated position, fixing his glasses and peered at the rat. A look of surprise crossing his face.

"Is that Peter?" he asked, his voice holding a tinge of astonishment.

"Yes, and I am unable to speculate as to what he knows of our plans, who he's seen, and what he has told my other Master. It is no good to question him...as you can see for yourself, he has expired," Severus replied. Although seemingly composed, inside he was plagued with chaos as his mind ran through all the incriminating events that he had participated in and how it would look to his Dark Master.

Both men looked at each other. Albus opened his mouth, and Severus had no doubt he was about to spew forth more platitudes. Quite frankly, he was sick of being told that it would all work out in the end, even if it was coming from the most powerful wizard alive. He mentally sighed and braced himself for more inane babble when suddenly the door slammed open. Severus whirled around, dropping the dead rat on the headmaster's desk as he grabbed his wand. Draco appeared before the two men, his eyes quickly taking in the scene before resting on the headmaster's face.

Severus relaxed his wand arm, stowing his wand back into his robes.

"I've been Summoned," Draco blurted out, a look of complete panic on his face. When both wizards just stared at him, he clarified. "I don't mean me, I mean Lucius."

Review wanted. Inquire below.

Thank you to my fantastic beta, AmyLouise! She is a wonderful beta, and I couldn't ask for better. Thanks so very much, babe.

If you don't review my story, please leave a review for another author as your reviews are the only payment we receive.

I would also like to thank everyone who is reading and reviewing my story. Kudos to you for sticking with it. Once again, reviews and constructive criticism are very much appreciated.

The Edge of Doom

Draco sees Voldemort as Lucius for the first time. Will he be able to pull it off?

Draco appeared in the gloomy entrance hallway where Voldemort and his Death Eaters were residing. Snake-headed cane in hand, he walked confidently, an air of arrogance about him, towards Voldemort's study.

He quickly turned a corner before pulling up short as he came face to face with Yaxley.

"You here to see the Dark Lord?" Yaxley asked somewhat stupidly as he flicked his head in the direction of Voldemort's study.

Draco just nodded his head once; he felt that if he opened his mouth he would give the game away. He flinched as he heard the unmistakable sound of china smashing against the fireplace.

Yaxley chuckled low in his throat before leaning close to Draco's ear.

"Well, it's better you than me. The Dark Lord is in a terrible snit," he whispered.

Draco puffed his chest up before he pushed past Yaxley and made his way towards the door. He turned his head to look back at the Death Eater, but he had disappeared.

Taking a fortifying breath, he squared his shoulders, checked that his Occlumency shields were firmly in place, and knocked once on the door.

"Enter!" Voldemort's high-pitched scream came from the room.

Without giving himself a moment to think, he opened the door and took a step over the threshold, closing the door behind him.

"You called, my Lord," Draco said, bowing slightly as a sign of respect.

"Lucius, so nice of you to grace me with your presence," Voldemort snarled, his face a mask of pure venom.

"I came as soon as I received your call. I was..." Draco started.

"Spare me your excuses, Lucius," Voldemort spat, his body held tight as a bow.

Draco stood stock still, inches from the door, waiting to see how the madman would proceed.

Draco cautiously flicked his eyes around the room, noticing that the study was in disarray; things were strewn around the room, broken and battered. Nagini was nowhere in sight.

"It has come to my attention that Peter is dead," Voldemort said coolly. Having vented most of his anger, he now seemed to be a little calmer. He was pacing in front of his desk as though he were a lion waiting to pounce. Deadly.

Draco opened and then closed his mouth. He didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to himself. Voldemort had called him here for a reason, and he would wait until Voldemort was finished.

Coming to stand before Lucius, Voldemort narrowed his eyes, looking at his most trusted servant.

"Do you know what he told me before he disappeared?" he asked, his voice low as if they were sharing a secret together.

"No, my Lord," Draco whispered back at him, his senses on high alert.

Voldemort abruptly turned around and paced back to his desk, placing both hands upon its surface.

Draco let out a tiny breath.

"No, I don't suppose you do," Voldemort replied, his back still towards Draco.

He spun around suddenly, his cloak whirling around him.

"He told me that Harry Potter is living in Hogwarts. That Severus knows about this, and that he never killed that werewolf, just made it appear so," Voldemort spat, his face scrunching up so that it looked as though he were in pain.

Draco's heart stopped beating then, as all the colour drained away from his face. His legs felt weak, and he had to steady himself upon the cane he held in his right hand.

"I see that you are as shocked at this news as I was. Who would have thought Severus was so cunning? And to think, I gave him everything, and he still sided with the old headmaster. He shall pay for his deceit, mark my words," Voldemort said, a smile forming on his inhuman face.

"What would you like me to do, my Lord?" Draco asked after he had gathered his wits about him. He still had a role to play, and he wasn't about to give it all away. Besides, it would be better for their side if they knew what Voldemort knew and could stay one step ahead of him.

"Severus and yourself are close?" Voldemort asked, although he already knew the answer to this question.

Draco nodded his head, still as white as a sheet.

"Good. I want you to go to Hogwarts and get a feel for what Severus knows. Naturally, I could call him to my side, but I want to be one hundred percent certain that what Peter told me was correct, for he had no proof to back up his claim. It would be such a shame to kill off one of my most fearless followers," Voldemort smirked, cocking his head to one side.

"As you wish, my Lord," Draco uttered, before Voldemort waved his hand at him indicating that he was dismissed.

Closing the door to the study behind him, Draco felt his whole body begin to shake. If he met any Death Eaters on the way out of the fortress, they would think he had been hit with the Cruciatus Curse and would not question him further.

Walking as quickly as he could manage, he exited the fortress and quickly disappeared.

Severus looked up from the book he was perusing as Draco, still appearing as Lucius, rushed through the door. He was very pale, sweating and shaking, but otherwise did not appear to be physically harmed.

Severus stood quickly, his book forgotten on the arm of the settee as he rushed to Draco's side.

Severus led the shaking young man over to the settee and sat him down. Going over to the liquor cabinet, he grabbed two glasses and poured a measure of Firewhisky in both before seating himself on the sofa next to Draco. He handed him a glass and watched as he drained its contents in one gulp.

Draco shuddered as the whisky slid down his throat.

"Better?" Severus asked, as he took the glass from Draco's loose grip, placing it on the table in front of the settee.

Draco nodded his head.

"Do you need a couple of minutes to compose yourself?" Severus asked as he stared at Draco.

"No, I'm fine," Draco choked out. He took a couple of deep breaths before turning on the settee to face his godfather. He fiddled with the cane in his right hand.

"He knows." Draco spoke softly, his eyes never leaving Severus's face.

Severus blanched. He was prepared for this, but it was still a shock. Nodding his head for Draco to continue, he sat there and waited.

"It seems that Peter, before his death, shared his knowledge with the Dark Lord. He knows, Severus, he knows everything. About Harry, even about Remus; he knows, and he has sent me here to try and discern the truth. What am I to tell him? What am I to say? Please Severus, tell me what I am meant to tell him, and I shall." Draco's eyes were wide, imploring Severus to come up with something, anything, that would get them both out alive.

Severus sat there, the fingers of his right hand stroking his chin, looking at the flames in the fireplace. He knew his number was up. There was no way of getting back into the Dark Lord's good graces, not when the rat had told him everything.

"He said that he had no proof, just your word against the dead rat's. Oh, Severus," Draco groaned, "how are we to get out of this?"

"I don't think I will." Severus looked up into Draco's face.

Draco grabbed hold of Severus's hands and squeezed them tightly. The cane fell, and made a loud clanking noise on the stone floor. Both men ignored it.

"Don't say that, Godfather. You will find a way, you always do." Draco implored him to heed the force of his plea.

"Not this time, Draco." He squeezed Draco's hands before letting them drop. He stood then and walked over to the fireplace, before cradling his head in his arms on top of the mantle.

Draco was struck dumb by his godfather's response. He felt the familiar tingling enter his body as his appearance changed into the young, blond-headed man. He shivered, although he wasn't cold.

"You will go back to the Dark Lord and tell him of my treachery," Severus stated calmly, as Draco felt tears flowing freely down his face.

"Tell him that you heard whispers, use whatever you must to survive this. You are young and still have a life ahead of you. I knew my time was limited. Twenty years I have been at this game. Twenty lengthy and tedious years, and I feel as though my appetite for it has worn thin. Please, Draco, you must promise me that you will do anything to survive this, and after the war is over and we have won, go out and live your life; be happy, live."

Severus turned around to see that Draco was back in his own body. Tears were streaming down his face and collecting on Lucius's expensive cloak. He smirked ever so slightly at the thought of Lucius's cloak being used as a tissue box before his face grew solemn once more.

He went back and sat down next to Draco. Draco did look quite ridiculous in Lucius's clothes, which were too big for him. He gathered Draco's hands once more in his, his body turned towards the young man.

"You will promise me this?" he asked, taking one of his hands and lifting Draco's chin with it.

Draco just nodded his head, looking at Severus in abject horror and misery.

"Good boy," Severus replied in a small voice. "Give me one week to put my affairs in order, and then you shall tell Voldemort all about my deceitfulness."

Draco just continued to stare at the man whom he had held as a father for so long. How could he just give up like that? He stood shakily, letting Severus's hands fall away, and walked out of Severus's rooms as though in a dream.

Harry heard an owl tapping on his window. He went over to the glass and opened it up, letting the bird in. Taking the missive from around the owl's leg, his eyes quickly scanned it.

Come to my classroom now!

S

Dropping the scroll to the floor in his haste, he grabbed up his Invisibility Cloak and raced out of the room. Harry didn't even stop when he knocked over a suit of armour; he was so focused on making it to the Potions classroom.

Yanking open the door, he scanned the classroom, and not seeing Severus inside, he raced down the back through to his office.

Harry's eyes widened as he saw Severus pacing, holding on to his Death Eater mask in one hand, his cloak and hood nowhere to be seen.

"Good, you made it," Severus said by way of greeting him. "Sit, I don't have much time." Severus motioned towards the hardbacked chair that was usually reserved for wayward students, and as Harry sat, he started.

"I haven't been totally honest with you, Harry," Severus began, and held up a hand when Harry opened his mouth to speak. "No, hear me out; as I said, I don't have much time." Harry nodded his head.

"Minerva and I went out on the headmaster's orders to investigate the Grangers' home. We discovered that they had been Obliviated and had no memory of their daughter. I believe she was taken as part of an agenda of one of the more zealous Death Eaters, but to date have not heard a thing about her whereabouts."

Severus was standing still. He was staring at a point somewhere over Harry's shoulder; his face was a blank mask. Harry recognised now that it was the face that Severus wore when he didn't want his emotions to get the best of him. Harry quickly braced himself, as he knew Severus wasn't through yet.

"By now, I have given her up for dead, and believe me when I say I have tried, but I thought that you would want to know." Severus looked at Harry while he spoke these last words; he knew it would upset the boy, but had thought he had a right to know.

Severus knew he was being vindictive, but if the old man was sending him to his death, which he was sure was the case, he was willing to do this as his last act of rebellion towards the man that he always considered a father. As his own father had done, Albus Dumbledore had sold him down the river, but he wasn't going without a

fight.

"But... Dead? But... you mean Dumbledore *lied* to me?" Harry sputtered as he looked up at Severus, his brain not quite comprehending what Severus had told him. Severus's eyes told Harry that he was being not untruthful. Harry's shoulders slumped.

"Then he lied to Ron, too. Ron is going to be pissed when he finds out," Harry said, his voice cool as he mulled over the implications of Ron's reaction.

He stood suddenly; his hands were shaking, and he felt like he had just been punched in the gut.

"No, Mr Weasley can never find out about this. Do you honestly want to open old wounds right before the battle, when you are all going to be fighting for your lives?" Severus asked, looking into Harry's green eyes.

"Then why tell me? Why tell me any of this?" Harry enquired, facing Severus, shaking his head.

"Harry..." Severus's voice was pleading as he walked over to the wizard and placed a hand on his shoulder. "... I never meant to hurt you; I just wanted to make you aware of the truth. Remember, we said no more lies?"

"But why tell me all of this now?" Harry asked quietly, his eyes searching the face of the taller man before him.

"Because we may not get another chance to talk, Harry," Severus answered, his voice taking on the finality of good-bye.

"No, you are going to be fine Severus, we will both see this through to the end, we will grow old and fat together." Harry willed the dark-haired man before him to believe this, even if he didn't quite believe it himself.

"I'm afraid not, Harry, for I believe I shall not return from where I go tonight," Severus said, the hint of sadness in his voice easily recognisable to Harry.

"No!" Harry shouted as he placed a hand on Severus's arm that was on his shoulder. "I won't let you go," he said stubbornly.

"Harry, we both know that is not how this works. I must go, for it is my destiny, just like it is yours to defeat the Dark Lord."

"But why? Why must you go? Stay here with me; I don't know what I will do without you. Who am I to trust?" Harry's voice cracked on those final words as he willed himself not to cry.

"Trust Draco, tell him that I command him to look after you, though you hardly need it. I know you are ready to face this world and anything it throws at you. You couldn't have done it without my help though." Severus grinned at Harry.

"Your mother would be proud of you, as am I. You have grown into a fine man, Harry," Severus said softly as Harry pulled him into a hug, his mask still in his hand. "Remember that."

And just like that, Severus abruptly turned and left Harry standing there. As he made his way out of the office and through the classroom to meet the Dark Lord, his mask was held to his chest. Harry was not aware how long he stood there looking at Severus's retreating back even after he had passed out of the classroom. All he knew was that he felt numb inside and out.

The Headmaster was sitting at his desk, shuffling papers around aimlessly. He was disturbed by the latest news from Severus, particularly as he would be losing a valuable spy. He did care for the boy in his own way, but war had made him tough. He used to wear his heart on his sleeve and that had got him nowhere; he had had to toughen up or crumple into a heap.

He felt the wards to his office shift and heard a loud pounding on the stairs. He breathed out a sigh.

So it begins, he thought, as he laced his fingers together on the desk and looked up expectantly at the door.

The door came open with a crash as it met with the stone. Harry Potter didn't even flinch as he came to stand before Albus's desk, his hands balled into fists, his breathing shallow. Albus noticed that he had not worn his Invisibility Cloak, and frowned.

"Tell me that you don't know anything about Severus's leaving?" Harry asked, and a look of profound melancholy overcame the headmaster's face.

"No!" Harry gasped, backing away from the desk.

"Harry..." Albus started, standing up from behind the desk and holding out his arms to the boy.

"How could you? He trusted you, and you send him to his death!" Harry howled, shaking his head from side to side.

"This is war, Harry..." Dumbledore began.

"Don't give me that old line, I am more aware that this is bloody war than anyone. Isn't it my life that it all comes down to in the end? I have to face that abomination and either kill or be killed," Harry yelled, his breathing ragged.

"I have been trying to prepare you, Harry, for that very moment," Albus said, dropping his arms to his side and walking around his desk.

"No, you haven't! If you call lying to me preparation, then congratulations, you have done a fine job at that, but don't stand there and tell me you have been preparing me when you couldn't even tell me the truth about Hermione," Harry said, and he saw a flicker of fear enter the headmaster's eyes before quickly being replaced with a look of sorrow.

"I didn't think you could handle the truth, Harry. You were so emotional after Sirius's death. We all tip-toed around you, afraid something would set you off. I did what needed to be done. For you, Harry," Dumbledore stated, his voice soothing, as he took a few more steps towards Harry.

"Oh, don't give me that crap, Albus. It was all for me! Ha! I'm sick to death of the games you play with other people's lives," Harry replied. He was feeling quite vindictive at the moment and could not care less if he hurt the old man's feelings.

Albus took a deep breath and then deflated. After all he had undertaken for the boy, he never expected that Harry would turn on him.

"But don't you see, Harry, everything I have done since the day you first defied Tom has been for you?" Dumbledore said, looking Harry directly in the eyes.

"Even giving me to my aunt? That horrible woman! She and her family inflicted more pain and suffering than you will ever know, Albus," Harry said, not backing down from Albus's eyes.

"Yes, Harry, even that. First we must learn humility before we can appreciate all that we have," Dumbledore stated.

"Yes, just like Severus. He has not known another human being who had his interests at heart. He pledged himself to you, Albus, and what did you give him in exchange for his loyalty? Nothing but pain, sorrow, and a death not even worthy of a dog."

Harry's eyes were blazing, and he willed himself not to cry—to show weakness before an enemy was to leave yourself vulnerable, and right now he considered Albus to be the enemy. Severus had taught him this much, and he would rather endure the Cruciatus Curse than let Severus down now.

"I know you have been hurt in the past, Harry..." Harry made a scoffing noise in his throat as the headmaster barrelled on regardless, "... and I know your trust has been tested, but please hear me out before you race off to get yourself killed."

Harry folded his arms across his chest and nodded his head for the headmaster to continue.

"Severus knew the risks. He has been a spy for a very long time. He knew this day was coming, that his life would be drawing to a close. That is why he is the way he is, never letting anyone get too close to him. He knew it would be too hard to say goodbye, and he would become reluctant to go. As for lying to you, I never lied to you, Harry; I simply omitted certain facts on occasion. As far as Hermione goes, I feared it would break your resolve, and you would give up on your quest, something that I could not allow to happen. So if I did indeed keep the truth from you about that one fact, then I did so with a good reason. I would have told you eventually, Harry, after the war has been won."

Albus looked at Harry expectantly, willing him to believe the words he was saying. Harry had his Occlumency walls up so that Albus wasn't able to get a good reading on the boy. He wondered when he had learnt to Occlude so well?

Harry stared at Albus with a look that to the old headmaster strongly resembled hate. Albus was taken aback by the force of magic that the boy was holding in check. He could feel it prickling on his skin.

"Please Harry, believe me when I say I never meant to hurt you," Albus implored. He was now truly desperate and would do and say just about anything to get the boy to believe him. He couldn't afford to lose the one weapon that could turn the tide of the war in their favour: Harry Potter.

Harry's anger abated a little, but he still looked hostile.

"I shall wait in my rooms for Draco to get back from the meeting, and then the two of us shall come up with a strategy on how to end the war. And when it is done, I never want to lay my eyes on you again, is that understood?" Harry said forcefully.

Albus nodded his head once. He understood at last the depth of the boy's anger.

Harry turned around and marched through the door, not looking back.

Albus sighed and hunched over, placing both his hands on his knees. It was just as well that Severus was to be exterminated tonight because if he were still in the castle, Albus would do the deed himself. But what was done was done. They all had to focus on the war now; the children would be leaving the castle soon for the Christmas holidays, and he would have to find a replacement Potions teacher.

He made his way back over to his desk and took his seat. Waving his hand towards the door, he closed it. He started shuffling through the papers on his desk, once more deep in thought.

Yes. He would have to hire someone for the Potions placement that was about to become vacant, and he had just the person for the job.

It had been a week and a half since the Dark Lord had told Draco of his misgivings about Severus. Yesterday, he had been called to Voldemort's study to report all that he had learnt.

His stomach was in knots; he felt as though he was in danger of betraying the one man he trusted above all others. In the end he had done what he had promised Severus he would do. He would never get the evil grin on the monster's reptilian face out of his mind.

Draco hadn't slept at all last night; he was on edge, waiting for the word that Severus was dead. His only hope was that Voldemort would want to make Severus's execution as public as possible. He felt he owed it to his godfather to be there as the light left his eyes and his body grew cold. He owed it to that valiant, impossible man.

When the call finally rang through the Blood Bond, Draco, in the small room he had been given in Hogwarts, jumped up and quickly downed the Polyjuice Potion. He had worn Lucius's clothing all day, waiting for the call. The clothing was too big, and he looked far too young. He took a look in the mirror to make sure everything was in place. He was ready.

Turning away from the mirror, he gathered up the cane and mask and rushed outside towards the Forbidden Forest, through the hampering snow, his breath like smoke in the air.

Hiding in the hollow of the tree, he quickly donned his Death Eater robes and mask. Straightening up, he pressed Lucius's wand to his Dark Mark with fumbling fingers.

He was disoriented when he appeared on a marsh. The air was frosty and damp but completely devoid of any snow. He turned his head sideways and saw the gathering of Death Eaters a small distance away. Occlumency shields in place, he made his face show nothing but his superiority and arrogance, as though this meeting place was far below that of a Malfoy, and paced over to the gathering.

He moved to Lucius's place beside Voldemort and cautiously surveyed those who had assembled here. He counted around fifty Death Eaters, all deathly quiet as they awaited their orders. Some were shifting ever so slightly as though they too were nervous. One never knew what to expect from the Dark Lord.

"Ah good, Lucius, you have finally arrived." Voldemort spoke low as though trying to contain his amusement.

Draco was at an unfair disadvantage staying at Hogwarts. He had to sneak out under a Disillusion Spell and then make the long trek to the Forbidden Forest before he could Apparate to the Dark Lord's side. Add the fact that it was now snowing in Hogwarts and had been for some time, it hampered his ability to make it quickly to the Dark Lord's side.

"Yes, My Lord," Draco replied.

Voldemort took a grand step forward and raised both of his arms, the breeze flowing through his robes making them look like they too were alive.

"My most loyal Death Eaters," Voldemort began, as chests were puffed out to make the wizards and witches stand even taller. "It has recently come to my attention that we have a traitor in our midst." Voldemort paused, looking at each and every one of them in turn, delving into their minds in a matter of seconds, seeing all.

He turned away from them, pacing a couple of lengths away from the gathering back towards Lucius, before abruptly spinning around. He loved the awe, fear and complete attention he received when speaking to his Death Eaters. He had seen nothing amiss when he scanned briefly through the minds of his followers here tonight. Well, nothing of great importance to his agenda anyway. What did he care if one of his followers were sleeping with another's wife? They would work it out between themselves. Their worries were petty when compared to his thoughts of a magical society with himself as the Supreme Overlord of all.

He paused, letting the delicious anxiety of his followers mount.

"In four days we shall attack Hogwarts and put a stop to Harry Potter and the headmaster who has been harbouring him for almost two years. We shall be united as one, an unstoppable force, and none of them will see it coming," Voldemort said, his eyes lighting up.

His wand appeared in his hand and he flicked it towards the soggy ground in front of his Death Eaters. They all started and jumped back as a man appeared before them,

not moving.

Draco's eyes went wide as he held his breath. There on the ground before him was a naked, broken and bloody Severus Snape, looking for all the world as though he was dead.

Reviews wanted. Inquire below.

Thank you to my fantastic beta, AmyLouise! Without her, I would be lost.

If you don't review my story, please leave a review for another author as your reviews are the only payment we receive.

I would also like to thank everyone who is reading and reviewing my story.

Endless Night

Chapter 24 of 25

Voldemort makes his move.

A hushed murmur ran through the crowd of assembled Death Eaters as the body of Severus Snape, most trusted of servants, appeared before them.

Voldemort eyed the crowd vigilantly, taking in every reaction and even those who didn't react. His vision was momentarily consumed by a giddy response from Bella, as she skipped around laughing loudly whilst clapping her hands together. Voldemort smiled faintly.

As the crowd settled, and all looked from the Potions master back to Voldemort, he continued.

"See what happens when you deceive me. Take a good look at your brother. You all swore an oath of service to me, as the Mark on your left arm shows quite clearly. Still there are those," he spat, "who attempt to betray me. This is what will become of you. Mark my words," he said, eyeing each of his Death Eaters present, "I will know."

Voldemort let the silence stretch. No one moved.

"You are all dismissed." When no one moved, Voldemort pointed his wand at the assembled mass. He menacingly whispered, "Now." The crowd of Death Eaters dispersed quickly. Bella looked as if she wanted to linger until Voldemort gave her a pointed look. Her face fell as she too Disappeared.

Voldemort held his hand up to Lucius, who was standing next to his Lord. He knew this to be a sign that he wasn't dismissed just yet.

"Lucius," he said, breaking the stillness, "take the traitor away."

"Yes, My Lord," he replied, making to move past the Dark Lord and collect Severus. Voldemort's hand was on his shoulder, causing Draco to cease all moment and become still.

Leaning close to Lucius's ear, Voldemort whispered, "Make him pay for his treachery and bring that of which we spoke to Hogwarts. I can't wait to see the look on Harry Potter's face," he finished cryptically. Draco could feel the smile on his near non-existent lips as he finished.

Draco swallowed before nodding his head.

Voldemort dropped his arm before straightening up.

"It is a pity I do not have the time to finish off Severus, for there is nothing I would like more than to watch him die slowly, pleading for his pathetic life. But I shall leave him in your more than capable hands, Lucius."

Draco took a step forward, turning to face Voldemort. He knew this could go either way. He hoped that he could get Severus back to Hogwarts soon...he didn't even know if he was still alive, though Voldemort's obscure words hinted that he was. He wouldn't know the extent of his injuries until he managed to get him to the hospital wing at Hogwarts; he just hoped he wouldn't be detained for much longer.

Voldemort turned his reptilian head slowly from side to side, as though he were studying Lucius. Draco straightened up significantly at the perplexing look his Master was giving him.

"You know of my intentions regarding traitors, Lucius. I want them carried out to the full extent for this one." He spat as he kicked his heavy boot into Severus' ribs. The man lying on the ground didn't even give so much as a groan.

"I shall enjoy watching your memories when the war is over, Lucius. Be certain to make him pay for his deception; make him beg for his life...or death." An evil smile crossed Voldemort's serpentine face as his eyes narrowed and unfocused.

"Yes, I shall get much pleasure from those memories," he said before turning his back on the traitor and Lucius.

Draco made his way over to the lifeless body of Severus Snape. Taking out Lucius's wand from the cane which held it, he placed a feather-light spell upon him and then took up Severus's limp body into his arms. Draco held the wand and housing, which fortunately worked well enough for him, and prepared to Disappearate. He was halted mid-spin by the Dark Lord's voice.

"Meet me at Hogwarts when I call for you. I shall be in the Forbidden Forest," Voldemort stated.

Draco turned to face his Lord and abruptly nodded his head. He lifted the wand again, taking a few steps before the Dark Lord spoke once more. Draco thought he had changed his mind and would torture Severus himself. Stranger things happened when it came to dealing with the megalomaniac. Draco froze, about facing, and successfully controlled the fear welling up inside of him, throwing every last ounce of strength into his Occlumency shields. He felt dizzy, as if he were about to throw up. He quickly swallowed the bile that made its way up his throat. He knew that the 'Great Lucius Malfoy' would under no circumstances be that undignified.

"And Lucius, just so I make myself very clear, do not forget the Mudblood." Voldemort saw a flicker of tension enter the man's body before he nodded his head and Disappeared with the traitor.

Idiots, the lot of them. He was working with incompetent morons. Lucius would have to be taught a lesson once the war was over. Desiring a Mudblood, no matter how good she was, was unbecoming of his second-in-command. When he ruled the Wizarding World he would make sure that those of his supporters who were too dense to grasp the concept of a simple order would meet their doom. But first, he needed all of those within his ranks, no matter how dim-witted, for in just a few days Hogwarts would be a smouldering pile of useless rubble, and all of its inhabitants would come to their knees and bow before Lord Voldemort.

Draco raced through the grounds of Hogwarts, levitating the prone body of Severus before him. He had placed a warming charm upon Severus's naked body before covering him with his Death Eater robes when they had first appeared outside the gates of Hogwarts. Time was something neither of them had.

He burst through the infirmary doors, noticing at once its lack of occupancy, and placed Severus on the nearest bed. He started at once shouting out frantically for Madam Pomfrey, whilst running towards her office.

Poppy stumbled out of the door next to her office, wiping sleep from her eyes and doing up her dressing gown. She wondered briefly to herself who was making such a racket at this hour. She yawned, rubbing her eyes as she came through the door, almost colliding with Lucius Malfoy. She gasped as she held a hand to her heart.

"What are you doing here?" she spluttered, taking a step backwards into her room.

"It's Severus," Draco said, his breathing frayed. He indicated the man that was lying on the bed closest to the doors.

Poppy gasped once more, switching into mediwitch mode as she rushed over to attend to her patient. The taboo of Lucius Malfoy forgotten, she didn't even notice that Severus was covered with the robes of a Death Eater; she was solely focused on saving his life.

Pulling out her wand, she immediately set to work casting diagnostic spells and cleansing charms. She didn't blanch when she saw the deep lacerations on Severus's back and upper thighs.

When Severus's wounds were no longer oozing blood, she calmly Summoned the necessary potions vials. Poppy made Severus drink the various potions, every so often swishing her wand in an arching motion above his body, checking his vitals.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Draco, Poppy breathed out a sigh of relief when Severus's heartbeat and breathing stabilised. Wary of moving her patient more than necessary, she changed him into a nightgown and covered his naked body with a fresh sheet. She suddenly remembered that her unwanted guest, Lucius Malfoy, was the one who had brought the Potions master in. Whirling around, wand at the ready, she gave a startled shriek when she saw Draco standing in his place. Poppy rubbed her eyes, thinking that her own mind was playing tricks on her. Opening them and blinking rapidly, she saw that the clothing Draco wore was the same that his father, Lucius, had worn not moments before, and that they were ill-fitted to his frame.

"What is going on here?" she demanded, placing both of her hands on her hips, her wand still in her hand.

"I will explain all later. Please, just tell me that my godfather will be okay?" Draco pleaded, his eyes beseeching the matron.

Her hands dropped to her side as she looked at Draco, his face showing a vulnerability that she had never before witnessed in the boy.

"He will recover," she replied, taking pity on the boy who looked so concerned for Severus. "Though it was a close call. A few minutes longer, and I fear there would have been nothing that I could have done for him."

Draco slumped forward, casting himself on the nearest bed. Poppy thought she heard him let out a sob, but when he looked up towards her, his face was clear of tears, and he looked as if a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders.

"I must go and speak with the headmaster now, but I promise you, I will reveal all that I can when I return," Draco stated.

Poppy nodded her head once, her mind still reeling with all that she had witnessed this night.

Draco marched out of the infirmary, Poppy thoughtfully watching his departing back.

Lifting her hand, she waved her wand at the closed infirmary doors, putting up wards to alert her if she would have more visitors this night. She wearily walked back over to stand before Severus's bed. He was stable for now, but he wasn't out of the woods yet. She would have to move him soon to the teachers' section of the hospital, away from prying eyes.

Dumbledore was standing towards the back of his office, looking out the window at the darkened ground of Hogwarts. The portraits had alerted him to the presence of Lucius Malfoy, levitating the body of Severus Snape. They were headed towards the infirmary. Albus wasn't too concerned, as he knew that the real Lucius was locked away in his dungeon cell, safe and sound.

He was preparing himself for Draco to come through his door at any moment, and he took a hefty breath in and slowly let it out.

As though on cue, Draco burst into the room, breathing as though he had just run a great distance, and Albus supposed he had.

"The Dark Lord attacks, here at Hogwarts, in four days," the blond burst out, his breathing ragged.

Turning around slowly, Dumbledore raised both his eyebrows.

"Ah, Draco, I see you are back. How did the meeting go?" he asked calmly.

A look of confusion crossed Draco's face as he ran his left hand through his already tousled hair, his right hand clutching onto Lucius's snake-headed cane.

"Did you hear a word I just said?" he asked, his voice getting louder. "I told you the Dark Lord plans to attack Hogwarts in four days...he knows that Harry is here; he almost killed Severus, and all you can ask is how the bloody meeting went."

Albus's face took on a look of shock at the mention of Severus's name.

"You say that Severus is alive?" he asked, his voice a mere whisper.

"Barely. I managed to get him to Madam Pomfrey on time, but it was a close thing. She will either need to be Obliviated, or given some form of explanation, as I fear I gave her quite a scare, turning up as Lucius," Draco said. He was perturbed at the fact that Dumbledore had singled out the information on Severus first, as he thought he would be more concerned with the fact that the Dark Lord was planning on attacking the school.

"Come. Take a seat, and let's discuss how the meeting went," Dumbledore said, motioning towards his desk.

Draco nodded his head, running his left hand once more through his hair. Albus glanced towards Draco's right hand at the cane he still gripped in his fist.

After both men were seated, Albus motioned for Draco to begin.

Taking a deep breath, Draco began his story.

Harry was startled awake by the Bloody Baron's disembodied voice and the feeling of icicles all over his body. He quickly jumped up and collapsed almost immediately when his legs wouldn't cooperate. They must have fallen asleep, his brain sluggishly supplied. His back and neck didn't feel much better. Stabilising himself on the armchair he had fallen asleep on in front of the now-dead fire, he was thankful that his wand was still clutched in his right hand, and he cast a *Lumos* on the room.

Taking off his glasses, he rubbed at his eyes. The Bloody Baron was standing a few feet away, looking mightily put out.

"I thought you would want to know that young Mr Malfoy has been at your door for the past thirty minutes," he said, by way of explaining his intrusion into Harry's private rooms.

"Oh, thanks," Harry mumbled, still half asleep. The icy wake-up call was not pleasurable and he shivered noticeably.

Finding the Marauder's Map lying on the floor next to the armchair, he bent over and picked it up, immediately regretting it when his back gave a painful twinge. Grimacing, he folded the map up and put it into his back pocket before rubbing his throbbing back.

The Bloody Baron nodded his head, seeing Harry to the door, and kept on gliding through the wall.

Opening the door, Harry saw that no one was there. Sticking his wand out into the corridor, he peered out first to the right and then to the left. He was just about to give up when he felt someone brush by him and into his rooms. Spinning around quickly, wand held at the ready, he was just about to shoot off a stunning spell, when Draco appeared before him.

Harry went pale as he noticed the blood on Draco's robes, as well as the tired and weary way he was standing. He opened and closed his mouth a few times before settling on the first thought that had crossed his mind.

"What happened to you?" Harry could have slapped himself as soon as his brain caught up with his mouth, and he stammered around searching for the words to make this right whilst he closed the door with an audible click.

"What do you think happened?" Draco's sarcastic drawl came out before Harry could take the words back. However, Draco's derision lacked its usual bite.

"I didn't know you knew where I was staying," Harry said, changing the topic quickly. Draco either didn't care or was much more tired than he let on.

"Severus told me. I have been waiting outside your room for ages. Luckily, the Bloody Baron passed by, otherwise I fear that I would still be out there. Aren't you going to offer me a seat?" Draco asked, his voice showing his exhaustion.

Harry motioned towards his discarded seat in front of the fire, and as Draco took it, he sent *arIncendio* towards the fireplace. Harry still felt the chill from the Baron's wake-up call. He quickly turned around, to see Draco cradling his head in his hands. At a loss as to what to do, Harry swayed slightly on his feet, looking nervously about whilst playing with his wand.

Draco finally looked up into Harry's anxious green eyes.

"Do take a seat and quit your hovering," Draco sneered, his behaviour ingrained after eight years of animosity between the two wizards. He sighed as he ran a hand through his hair.

"I didn't mean to snap at you, Potter, it's just been a really trying night," Draco said, sounding weary.

"That's fine," Harry replied, taking a seat on the settee that occupied the room. "I have to confess that I haven't slept that well tonight either, as I was waiting for you to return," Harry said, rubbing his neck. He shifted slightly, taking the Marauder's Map from his pocket and holding it up so Draco could see.

"What's that?" Draco asked, a look of confusion on his face.

"This is the Marauder's Map," Harry stated, unfolding it before pressing his wand to the map and stating, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Tucking his wand away, Harry leant forward and handed a bewildered Draco the map.

"This is amazing," Draco whispered, awe in his voice as his eyes greedily scanned the map in his hands. It was Hogwarts, complete with the names of everyone that occupied the castle. He saw that Albus was currently in the infirmary, standing close to Madam Pomfrey. He wondered if he had already performed the Obliviate on her. "You didn't make this, did you?" he asked, looking up from the map and into Harry's eyes.

"Nope." Harry shook his head, "My father and his friends made it when they were at school here," he said proudly, sitting up a little straighter.

"Have you looked at the map since I arrived?" Draco enquired, raising both eyebrows as he waved the map in Harry's direction.

"No," Harry confessed, looking away from Draco and into the fireplace. "I admit to having fallen asleep in the very chair you are seated in; that's why it took me so long to answer the bloody door." Harry looked towards Draco then, grinning sheepishly.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Draco asked, waving the map at Harry once more. He was wearing his own grin.

Taking the map from Draco, Harry pushed his glasses more firmly up his nose while asking, "And where exactly do I look?" He was confused, and his mind was still trying to wake up.

"Where do you think, Scarhead, the infirmary of course," Draco sighed, a hint of laughter in his voice.

Harry didn't take Draco's ribbing to heart as his eyes immediately went to the infirmary. Scanning it, his eyes first noticed that Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were there, but then he gave out a gasp as his eyes landed on a name on the map: Severus Snape.

"But how?" Harry blurted out, his eyes shooting up to Draco's face with a look of bewilderment.

Draco grinned from ear to ear.

"It's a long story. Needless to say, it wasn't easy. The Dark Lord told me to dispose of the body, and I brought him here instead. It was a close call, but I think he should be all right," Draco said.

Harry jumped up off the settee, tossing the map aside, and crash-tackled Draco. He threw his arms around the stunned wizard, as he crushed him, laughing out loud.

"Thank you so very much, Draco," Harry said, between bouts of happy mirth.

"You are welcome," Draco replied through gritted teeth, pushing at Harry. "Now will you get off me, so I can tell you the bad news?"

Draco sounded put out. He was not used to open affection. Nobody in Slytherin would be caught dead hugging like this, especially two blokes.

Harry straightened up and looked down at his feet, suddenly feeling embarrassed about his reaction. He had forgotten that this was the Prince of Slytherin that he was hugging. It was just that all of Gryffindor were very touchy-feely. It had unnerved him at first, for he had experienced no affection of any kind from the Dursleys, but after seven years and with best friends like Hermione and Ron, he had got used to the hands-on approach.

Harry walked back to the settee in a daze. Severus was alive and well. It didn't matter to him what Draco would say; there was no way he was coming down from his euphoric state any time soon.

The feeling of the room suddenly changed as Draco sat up straighter and looked directly at Harry. He wore a frown on his face, and Harry knew that what he was about to say was important.

"The Dark Lord and his Death Eaters are coming here, to Hogwarts, in four days' time," Draco stated, looking at Harry, waiting for a reaction once he was seated again.

Harry just shrugged his shoulders as though it wasn't of any concern. He was still on a high, knowing that Severus was going to recover and would be there by his side.

"We all knew this was coming," he started, "and if it's on our own grounds, so much the better."

"The Dark Lord will want me by his side; I will not be able to openly fight with you, Harry," Draco said, his voice cracking as though the mere thought of this action was deplorable to him.

Harry sat up straight then too. He felt the importance of Draco's words, in both what he was saying and what he was not.

"I know, Draco," Harry sighed. "Just promise me that you will do everything in your power to stay safe. I would find myself at a loss without your ferret face around," Harry joked trying to dispel some of the tension that had entered the room on Draco's last words.

This tentative relationship, though just beginning, felt somehow right to Harry, and he found, to his surprise, that he meant every word of what he had just said.

Draco nodded his head slowly before turning his head towards the fire.

Severus awoke, his body shaking with the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse. He lay still and tried to relax, eyes still closed, and waited for the shaking to subside.

He felt relatively whole, and he gradually opened his eyes, staring at the wooden door that was across from the bed he was currently residing in.

'Not dead then,' he thought sarcastically as he looked down at his body. He took in the clean white sheet that was draped over him and lifted a sluggish hand to push it downwards. Looking at his body covered in a standard hospital gown, he scowled. This had the trademark stamp of Poppy Pomfrey written all over it.

As if that one thought had power, the door opened and the mediwitch herself appeared. His scowl deepened.

"Oh, Severus, you've finally decided to join the land of the living, I see," Poppy joked as she made her way over to the bed and waved her wand over his body.

He grunted a reply as Poppy bustled around, checking his wounds and tut-tutting as she did so. Severus allowed this; he knew from past experiences that the school matron was not to be trifled with, and it only made matters worse when one tried. So he begrudgingly allowed her to accomplish her task.

When she was done, and the sheet was once more pulled up to his neck, she conjured a glass of water and helped him drink it. He sneered openly at her once he had finished the water.

"I'll have none of that, young man; you almost died last night," Poppy said in her no-nonsense voice, usually reserved for the likes of Severus and her other difficult patients. "The headmaster wants a word with you," she continued, "and I told him it could wait until you were awake. Did you know that he wanted to Ennervate you last night?" Poppy asked, looking him right in the eyes.

"It wouldn't surprise me," came Severus's croaky reply.

Poppy shook her head at that, the glass still in her left hand, wand in her right.

"Well, I told him in no uncertain terms that you were not to be disturbed. It was rather touch and go last night, and I feared that any more magic would have pushed you over the edge." Her voice softened. She put the glass down on the side table next to the bed and patted his cheek. Severus had to avert his eyes from the look Poppy was giving him.

'She always had a soft spot for me,' Severus thought, gruffly. Though his facial expression did not change from that of the truculent child he once was, his posture softened demonstrably.

And it was true. From the first time he had appeared in the infirmary a scrawny, sullen, under-fed eleven-year-old, Poppy had taken him under her wing and treated him as though he were her own. This had galled the young Severus, and he remained surly throughout Poppy's poking and prodding. Inside, however, he was relieved that someone showed a scrap of concern for him, although he revealed nothing to demonstrate this to the mediwitch.

"Well, then, I'd better tell Albus that you're awake. He is not to distress you, mind, and I shall tell him that myself. I shall keep this meeting as brief as possible," Poppy said, a tone of warning in her voice, and Severus didn't envy anyone who had to go up against this formidable witch. When it came to her patients, no one crossed Madam Pomfrey, ever.

The door closed behind Poppy, and Severus sighed out loud. He was sure he would get the answers to the question that had been plaguing him since he had awoken: who had brought him back to Hogwarts? The last thing he remembered was the Dark Lord using him for target practise. He closed his eyes and scowled deeply, racking his brain for any memory of the previous night. He came up empty.

He opened his eyes at the sound of the door opening and Albus walking through. Albus closed the door and conjured himself a comfy chair before seating himself and looking expectantly at Severus.

'So, he is here for a while, at least,' Severus thought to himself as he looked at the man in question making himself comfortable.

"Severus," Albus began in what sounded to Severus like a belligerent tone, "it seems as though Tom will be marching on Hogwarts in four days' time, and I found myself speculating as to what you could possibly have told or shown him to make him believe he could accomplish such a task?"

Although it was a question, Severus didn't for one moment believe he could get away with feigning ignorance. He knew he had disappointed The Great Albus Dumbledore, but right now he couldn't care less.

"I may have shown him a hole in our defences near the Forbidden Forest," he stated, looking at the white of the sheet that was currently covering him. He fiddled with his fingers which were mercifully hidden under said sheet. He couldn't bring himself to look at his employer at that moment.

"And why, in Merlin's name, would you have done such a thing?" Albus posed in an enquiring voice.

Severus took a deep breath in before looking up and meeting Albus's eyes.

"Do you know what it is like to be held under the *Cruciatus* until you are literally begging for death to take you? All the while trying to hold onto secrets you know will tip the war in the favour of the lunatic who is currently using your body as a particularly nasty potions ingredient. I had to get him to stop, Albus, so I could at least die with a little dignity." Severus whispered. His voice still felt as though it was not his own, scratchy and uneven.

"I am well aware, as are you, what would become of you had Tom ever established your duplicity," Albus stated coldly. His usually sparkling blue eyes were glaring daggers at Severus, who felt the room suddenly drop about five degrees.

Severus nodded his head. He found it hard to look into the wizard's cold blue eyes, and it took every ounce of willpower he had not to look away.

"You will be by Harry Potter's side when Tom and the Death Eaters arrive. You will sacrifice yourself if it means that Harry will have even a couple of seconds more to defeat Tom. Do you understand me?" Albus's voice was a mere whisper, but the iciness and finality behind it made it clear to Severus that they were all just pawns on Albus's checker board. Disposable.

Severus could do nothing but nod his head numbly. He felt hollowed out, sick to his stomach, like a starving man shown a most welcome feast, but then told he could not eat.

"I shall leave you, then," Albus said as he stood and Vanished the chair. He walked to the door as Severus's eyes followed him. Albus did not look back.

The only thought running through Severus's head was that he never had been given the chance to ask how he turned up here, in his own private room in the infirmary no less, and who had brought him home.

That very night Severus was up and moving around his hidden rooms. He needed to start planning and couldn't do this from a bed. Besides, he was getting antsy cooped up in here and was not prepared to wait another minute before he left the hospital wing.

Although his muscles gave the occasional twinge, he ignored them as he continued to do up his frock coat.

Draco and Harry had been down that very morning, after Albus had left, under the cover of Harry's Invisibility Cloak. It appeared that they had both taken Severus's words to heart and formed a silent truce. Draco had filled in the gaps in Severus's memory from the previous night with a grin on his face. Harry had looked at him with adoring eyes and the largest smile he had ever seen coming from the brat. Severus had to look away. He was no one's hero. From the admiring look on Harry's face, he supposed the boy thought otherwise. Brainless, gullible Gryffindor that he was.

Severus was relieved when Harry pulled something out of his pocket, if only for the fact that his attention was diverted away from Severus's face. At one point he thought the boy was going to throw his arms around him and give him a hug. Perish the thought. Harry enlarged the package, and to his relief, he saw that it was his usual attire: boots and socks included, and he almost groaned out loud, but managed to restrain himself. He nodded his head in thanks when Harry passed him the enlarged clothing and placed it under his pillow for later, his boots going under the bed. He would bully Poppy into letting him leave...either that, or he would just up and leave on his own, and the mediwitch be damned. They had just over three days to plan and execute the battle, and he'd be damned if he were going to be lying in bed like an invalid waiting for Death Eaters or Voldemort himself to finish him off.

Straightening up and rearranging his face into its usual look of indifference, he marched towards the door to meet his destiny.

There had been much arguing and yelling within the Order. It seemed that they all had different opinions on how the battle was to take place. Albus didn't want anyone alerted that they knew of the threat of Voldemort's imminent arrival and therefore wanted to leave most of the students in ignorance. Harry had agreed, although begrudgingly, stating that those who were too young to fight would have to be placed into the Room of Requirement while the battle raged. Those that were willing to fight would be given the opportunity. After all, they would be fighting to free their world of the terror and deprivation that Voldemort stood for. If Voldemort won, there would not be one among them who could live in a world ruled by Voldemort and his lackeys without fearing for their lives.

It was agreed that Kingsley and Mad-Eye would be in charge of the Aurors when the time came to call for them. Fred and George Weasley, along with Madam Hooch, would be in charge of the air assault. They would recruit those who possessed outstanding talent on a broomstick, whether or not they played Quidditch. Hagrid would be in charge of the grounds due to his extensive knowledge. Severus would stay by Harry Potter's side until the final confrontation with Voldemort, a move that both perplexed and delighted Harry immensely. Harry would trust no one else, besides perhaps Draco, to have his back. Not even Ron, his best mate, but he wasn't likely to voice that opinion. Ron would be by his side anyway, although almost a full year had passed by with little or no contact from the redhead. Harry could still not bring himself to forgive Ron for keeping the deaths of the Creevy family from him.

Remus and Tonks would be out in the Forbidden Forest with the werewolves who had made it their temporary home. The werewolves were by now familiar with the terrain and, having already agreed to fight, would only make their side stronger.

Albus didn't want to involve the shopkeepers and the people who made Hogsmeade their home. He argued that if they were told about the attack and there was a leak from within their ranks, which was very likely, Voldemort might just change his mind at the last minute, and all of their careful planning would be for naught. They had all agreed that discretion was the key.

With everyone assigned a role in the forthcoming battle, and just seventy-two hours to prepare, nerves were frayed and tempers raged.

Therefore, three days later, in the frosty wind and bitter cold of a mid-November's night, when the unmistakable sight of a sea of black on the pure white snow-laden landscape of Hogwarts was seen from the castle, marching out of the Forbidden Forest towards its goal, the side of Light was prepared for them.

Love it or hate it. Have I left anything out? Please leave a review and let me know your thoughts.

Thank you to my fantastic and ever patient beta, AmyLouise! Without her, I would be lost and I am truly blessed to have her.

If you don't review my story, please leave a review for another author as your reviews are the only payment we receive.

I would also like to thank everyone who is reading and reviewing my story. Thank you for your patience and understanding as I am currently going through some tough times in RL.

One more chapter is left. How will it end? Well, I have some idea, but shall keep you all in suspense.

The Last Spell

Chapter 25 of 25

Harry, Severus and Draco's last spell.

The night was dark and still as Voldemort and his Death Eaters Apparated to a clearing within the Forbidden Forest. The snow hadn't touched this part of the forest, as the trees which gave their cover overhead caught the worst of the flakes. Not a creature stirred within the forest, as if they all knew that something truly evil was amongst them.

Voldemort observed his troops. A few of the more daring of them had lit their wands. There was an air of nervousness within his ranks, though he knew this to be the type of nervous energy of those spoiling for a fight. His eyes finally stopped on Lucius. He frowned slightly, before motioning Lucius forward.

"Where is the Mudblood?" Voldemort hissed out as he turned his back towards his troops angling Lucius away from them. His voice was deadly as his eyes were narrowed into tiny slits.

Draco's mind was racing; however, before he could formulate an answer that would appease the creature before him, he felt the curse hit, and he was thrown to the ground and began to writhe in agony. Every muscle in his body felt like it was expanding and contracting to the point of being disconnected from his very bones. It was like being flayed alive, and a scream tore from his throat, breaking the silence around them.

As quickly as the pain had started, it ended. Draco rolled onto his back, Lucius's cane lying several feet away from him. His eyes were closed as he panted, waiting for the next round to start. He was never a huge fan of the Cruciatus Curse.

He felt someone leaning over him and, in his fogged state, he rolled onto his side, away from the thing that promised more pain. He bit into his cheek, drawing the coppery taste of blood.

"Rise," Voldemort said in disgust, and Draco rose unsteadily before him, his hair and clothing in disarray with bits of leaves and twigs stuck within them. He drew in a shaky breath, doubling over as he coughed—the after-effects and the shaking were what made the curse so horrific.

Some of the blood from his bitten cheek escaped his mouth and splattered onto Voldemort's leg and robes. Voldemort sneered.

"I would dispense with you now, if I didn't have need of you. Mark my words, Lucius, you have disappointed me greatly. The Mudblood will die, and it will be at your own hand now."

Draco's eyes widened; Voldemort took the look for a different meaning and smiled.

"Yes, I shall enjoy watching you kill her," he said with a manic gleam in his eye. "I may even keep Harry Potter alive long enough to witness it, once Hogwarts is secured, and I am in charge. But if he dies before then, it is of no consequence to me," Voldemort stated, his hand flitting about like a small bird.

"You will make yourself useful, Lucius. You shall follow behind me and watch my back; if so much as a curse hits me, it will be you that will next join Harry Potter. Am I understood?"

"Yes, My Lord," Draco quickly spoke, his eyes averted, and his muscles twinging involuntarily.

Voldemort was seething, and he did nothing to hide the aggravation he felt. His followers were simpletons—morons, the lot of them. It was a pity that he had to dispense with Severus—now there was a wizard who could follow the tasks set out for him to the letter, even though he had turned out to be a traitor.

"Fenrir," Voldemort spat out, motioning the werewolf forward, "I want you to stay here. Keep some of your kind with you," he added, a sneer marring his reptilian face.

Fenrir nodded once, his eyes sparkling with the promise of new pack members and blood. Fenrir called over a few of the burlier werewolves, and they took off into the surrounding trees, not even making a sound.

Once the werewolves were gone, Voldemort motioned his troops to march forward and extinguish their wands.

Voldemort paused before they reached the gates which were keyed to the Headmaster and his staff. No one else could enter the premises without Dumbledore's say-so. Voldemort's amassed Death Eaters halted and turned towards him as one.

Voldemort turned abruptly, the black cloaks parting before him like the Red Sea parting before Moses. Draco was one shaky step behind. Voldemort made his way up to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, to the very brink of the wards.

Grabbing the Death Eater closest to him, he threw him at the wards. Voldemort gave a cry of triumph when the unknown Death Eater came to no harm and managed to pass through the wards with nothing but his pride hurt.

Raising his wand, he regarded the hole in the wards. It was large enough for his Death Eaters to fit through but, alas, the giants would not be getting in until the defences were down completely. No matter; he still had the Dementors and werewolves, and once he had secured Hogwarts, he would allow the giants to pick off any of the stragglers.

Calling forth the Dementors, he watched as they made their way through the wards and floated off towards the castle.

Severus and Harry were standing on the topmost turret of the castle, looking down towards the Forbidden Forest. The bitter winter winds swirling around them forced Severus's hair into his face. Neither of them felt the bite of the frigid air. Thank the gods that it was no longer snowing. The half-moon provided little light, but the only sound was that of the howling wind. Harry's Firebolt was clutched tightly in his right hand. They both saw when the Dementors were unleashed onto the grounds.

Turning towards Harry, Severus placed a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Are you ready?" he asked. His voice held a steely resolve.

Harry stiffened ever so slightly, but as he turned his head to look into the Potions master's eyes, Severus saw the look of a man who was more than ready to have this war over and done with. Harry had been fighting the war against Voldemort and his Death Eaters for almost as long as he had known about Hogwarts, and it showed on the young man's face.

"As ready as I'll ever be," he replied. "Let's do this."

Severus nodded his head once, dropping his hand back to his side and facing forward once more. He saw that the Death Eaters had started to make their way across the school's grounds, marching in formation.

The first inkling Voldemort had that it was a trap was when they were halfway to the castle. Although paranoid about even his closest followers, he saw nothing to indicate that this was indeed an ambush, and the eerie silence led him to relax a little, although it was clearly not noticeable to his followers.

The first and second line of Voldemort's troops suddenly vanished. It was as though the ground had just opened up and swallowed them whole. There was panic and discord amongst the Death Eaters who didn't fall into the earth, as they pulled up short, halting the progression of Voldemort's forces.

"Silence," Voldemort bellowed out, his voice deadly as the Death Eaters halted and turned to face him. He had sent his newest recruits out first to take the brunt of any resistance they would find. He had thought them expendable, and it surely had paid off in this case.

"Bella, go and investigate," Voldemort said, flinging his hand towards the front of the lines.

Bella, who was standing at her master's flank, responded immediately. Her wand was held out in front of her as she shoved those not fortunate enough to get out of her way quickly enough to the side.

Getting to where the men had disappeared, she peered over the edge to discover the great divide of what was once a perfect white oasis.

Looking over her shoulder, she turned to face an impatient Voldemort.

"They are gone, My Lord," she said, her voice breathy, as though her eyes didn't quite believe what they were seeing. She hated being the bearer of bad news, especially to her Lord.

"I can see that," Voldemort retorted, his voice demonstrating his disapproval.

He lifted his wand as he spun on the spot. Nothing happened. As his face distorted into a mask of pure fury, he cursed the closest Death Eater, who happened to be Macnair, and as he fell to the ground writhing in agony, Voldemort felt some of his rage dissipate.

"I see that they are not totally unprepared for us," Voldemort declared to his troops. "It matters not, for we shall still be victorious." Voldemort addressed the men and women before him as he waved his wand towards the trench, and the earth closed up once more, looking like the snow-covered hill that it was before.

"Bella, Lucius, and Rodolphus, you are to wait here with me. The rest of you," Voldemort said, looking at what remained of his forces, "are to go on to the castle; the Dementors should already be inside. Anyone, teacher or student, is fair game, except for Harry Potter. If you find him, bring him to me, and you shall be rewarded. Failure is not an option."

Voldemort watched his Death Eaters turn and start marching towards the castle. He could see they were determined but still a little weary after losing so many of their comrades.

Remus's head shot around even as his nose crinkled up in disgust.

"What is it, Remus?" Tonks whispered, holding her wand out before her in the darkness.

"Fenrir," Remus responded. That single growled-out word spoke volumes to Tonks, but before she could reassure Remus, he was off like the Snitch through the darkness.

Albus stood at the window of his office, overlooking the grounds of Hogwarts. He was alone, save for Fawkes, who sat on his perch in the corner. He saw the Death Eaters disappear into the earth—they were not dead, merely transported to a cell in the dungeons where he knew they could not escape, their wands having been taken from them, as well as any other weapons that could be used.

Everything was in place. He knew the plan was a good one. It all came down to Harry now and whether he had the strength to defeat Tom. Not having trained him himself, though it was not through lack of trying, he did not know if he would defeat Tom or not.

He sighed out loud; Fawkes trilled loudly from his perch and then flew over to rest on his shoulder.

"I know," he spoke to the phoenix, bringing up a weary hand to stroke his neck plumage. "I didn't think it would end this way, either. I for one envisioned Harry standing here next to me. But perhaps it is for the best." He sighed once more before straightening himself up as he made his way to the door, Fawkes still perched on his shoulder.

Minerva and the rest of the professors had managed to get all of the students who were too young to fight tucked safely into the Room of Requirement. She had given the task of looking after them to some of the older house-elves and knew they were in capable hands.

Sealing up the exit with her wand, she breathed out a sigh of relief. Now that she knew the students were taken care of, she could focus on the battle that was to come. Running a hand along her bun to make sure that no hair escaped its confines, she looked around at the faces of the remaining professors. Nodding her head once, she signalled that they should take off in separate directions to take up their respective posts.

Remus raced through the forest. His exceptional vision, sense of smell, and hearing—due to his lycanthropy—was no longer a curse, but a blessing, as he shot off, ducking and weaving through the trees.

Stopping as he reached a clearing, he saw Fenrir had pinned Angus to the ground and was taking strips of flesh off the werewolf with his sharp claw-like hands.

Remus didn't even give it a second thought as he let out a howl of rage and sprinted across the clearing. He shoulder-barged Fenrir off Angus, who was whimpering pitifully. Angus immediately started to back away on his hands and feet towards the tree line, never taking his wide eyes off the pair. But Remus didn't even look towards the injured werewolf for his vision had narrowed down to the one true threat—Fenrir.

Holding his broom aloft, Fred looked over to his twin brother George, who grinned at him. The rest of the flyers were stationed around various parts of the castle.

"Ready?" Fred asked as he smiled back at his brother.

"I was born ready, O brother dearest," George replied, swinging his leg over his broom.

Lifting their wands in perfect sync, they each laid a Disillusionment Charm over the other as they took off into the sky, headed towards the Death Eaters that were

approaching the castle.

Tonks knew better than to light her wand or even to call out Remus's name. She stumbled blindly through the Forbidden Forest, her other senses hyper-aware of everything around her. Her wand was clenched tightly in her right hand as she weaved and ducked her way past branches and logs.

Coming across a clearing, she stopped, her heart pounding in her chest and her breathing ragged. She could hear a fight going on and just make out two men; one, she swore, was Remus, fighting in the middle of it. They had abandoned their wands; instead, they were fighting with their claws and bodies like Muggles.

Tonks rubbed her eyes before taking a deep breath and walking quietly in to the clearing. Both men were so focused on their opponent that when she lifted her wand and sent a *Stupefy* their way, neither of them were prepared.

The Dementors were restless; they couldn't get inside the castle to feed, as the enchantments were too strong. Instead, they waited, circling the castle like a pack of hyenas. They were patient, though; they had waited this long, and the Dark One had declared they would have free reign to feast upon the souls within the castle. So they continued in their relentless pursuit of that which they had been promised.

Ron was searching the sky anxiously. He knew Fred and George were out there somewhere, although he could not see them.

In the back of his mind he knew that both Fred and George were excellent flyers, but he had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach and hated the thought of his brothers out there when he himself was safely behind the castle walls. No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than the skies and grounds of Hogwarts were lit up with spells and curses, and he narrowed his eyes to try and pick out Fred and George amongst the blinding lights.

And that is when it happened, and his mind could not make his eyes believe what he was seeing. He saw Fred's Disillusionment Charm fail as he was hit by a hex, and he plummeted towards the ground.

Ron's feet were faster than his brain as he raced out of the castle, through the enchantments that kept them all safe if they stayed in the castle. His wand was drawn as he made his way down the stairs and towards Fred. So focused was he on getting to his brother, that he never saw the Dementor as it swooped out of the sky—all he felt was dread as he fell to the snow covered ground at the foot of the steps, and the Dementor started to feast.

Harry tensed and gripped his Firebolt harder as he saw the spells light up the night sky. He heard the cries from the surprised Death Eaters as they were hit by hexes and curses, and he saw Fred—or was it George?—crash into the ground.

Severus was speaking to him now, though he didn't hear a word of what was said as time stood still. Then he heard the entrance doors open and saw another redhead coming out of the castle and start pelting down the stairs and across the snow towards his brother.

Ron, his mind screamed as his head reeled at Ron's carelessness. The plan was going to hell and it was all Ron's fault.

He saw the Dementor fly down and stop into front of Ron. Ron was frozen in fear as his hand relaxed and his wand fell to the snow. Ron just stood there staring at the thing before him.

Harry hadn't even noticed that he had mounted his broom and thrown on his Invisibility Cloak until a hand reached out and held onto his cloak. Turning around, he took in Severus's posture, noticing it to be stiff and unyielding.

"We mustn't change the plan," Severus yelled above the howl of the wind.

"For everything that Ron's become, he was once my best mate, and I can't leave him out there like that," Harry shouted back, his eyes hard as he stared back at Severus.

"Bugger it all," Severus swore as he let go of Harry's cloak and quickly Disillusioned himself.

Harry took off, the bite of the wind not deterring him as he quickly made his way over to where the Dementors were surrounding Ron. More had joined the first, and there were five of them huddled around the prone Ron.

"Expecto Patronum," Harry yelled out in mid-flight, his wand held aloft in his hand as he landed his broom one-handed a few metres away.

Prongs' glowing form materialised from the tip of Harry's wand and went charging towards the Dementors, bowling them out of the way. They gave out a high-pitched cry as they took off into the sky with Prongs close behind.

Harry raced over to his friend, only to find Ron's slack jaw and unblinking eyes gazing back at him. Ron's face was pale; as white as the snow that he lay upon. He was still breathing, as was evident through the steady rise and fall of his chest. Harry knew he would never be the same again, and it was then that a little piece of himself broke away. Harry stood there, not daring to touch Ron, staring down at his once best friend.

He heard a commotion behind him and whirled around, his wand held up, as members of the Order ran up to him.

"I couldn't stop him," Mr Weasley panted, holding onto his side as he looked down with sadness in his face at his youngest son.

"It's no one's fault," replied Minerva; she too was out of breath as she clutched onto her wand, her breath coming out like smoke. She took in Ron's deathly still figure in the snow. "I shall take him up to the hospital wing," she continued, breaking the silence that had descended upon the macabre scene, "and see what Poppy can do for him."

She aimed her wand at her former student, levitating him from the ground and turning back towards the double doors that lead to the entrance hall, Mr Weasley following close behind.

Severus had observed all of this still under the Disillusionment Charm. He felt a twinge of regret at what had happened to the Weasley boy, but he also knew that they had a crucial job to do. There was still fighting going on further down the hill, and now was not the time to mourn, as there would be plenty of time for that when this night was over.

"Harry," Severus said as Prongs melted away.

Harry swivelled around, looking for Severus.

"There will be plenty more losses before this night is through. Now concentrate—if you want this war to be over with tonight, then you must stay focused," Severus said, his voice a steely rasp of fortitude.

Harry nodded his head once and drew himself up. He understood that in war there were casualties, but he had never expected them to come so soon.

"I have to finish this now," Harry spoke, his voice held the undertone of his inflexible determination.

"Then we have to get back to the plan, stay focused on the goal," Severus replied.

"No. I have to finish this now, with or without you," Harry stated, his eyes searching the darkness for Voldemort.

Severus sighed and blew an exasperated breath out of his mouth. He knew Harry to be headstrong and unwavering once his mind was made up.

"Let's hope that Draco has played his part in the plan because there will be no second chances," Severus said. "You have one shot at this Harry; let us hope that your wand arm aims true."

Harry nodded his head as he threw down his Firebolt. He wouldn't be needing it again this night.

Wands raised, the two wizards took off across the grounds in search of Voldemort.

Tonks made her way over to where Remus and Fenrir were frozen on the ground. Her wand was held tightly in her hand, and the adrenaline was still coursing its way through her bloodstream.

She shot off a *Finite* towards Remus and immediately held her wand on Fenrir.

Remus came to and shook his body much the way a dog would. His breathing was laboured, and the look on his face was still that of a feral beast. He tried to calm down when his eyes took in the form of a stupefied Fenrir. Tonks had the werewolf under guard.

"Tonks...." Remus's voice was hoarse, and he had to swallow several times before he continued. "Thank you," he said, his voice small, as though he were embarrassed to have Tonks fight his battles for him. He was a man, and the werewolf gene helped him become stronger than most. For this slip of a woman to come and take down the strongest werewolf in all of England was quite a feat.

"Not a problem, Remus," Tonks replied, never taking her eyes off Fenrir.

"We'll have to bind him, and then I'll go and find Angus and tend to his wounds," Remus stated, stepping over to where Tonks's wand was aimed at the werewolf.

Tonks nodded her head once, and then Remus watched as ropes shot out of her wand, encompassing the prone form of Fenrir.

Remus let out an unsteady breath as he touched Tonks's arm gently.

"I have to go now," Remus whispered. He sounded as though he didn't want to go, but duty came first.

"I know," Tonks whispered back. "Stay safe," she finished, but he was gone before the words left her mouth.

Severus and Harry made their way over towards Voldemort. Harry's cloak was still in place, as was Severus's Disillusionment Charm.

There were several battles going on before them, but the Death Eaters were busy looking up at the night sky, firing off curses, to hear them pass by.

Severus knew it was risky, being out in the open like this, and his senses were screaming at him to find cover, but there wasn't any, so he had to push his common sense to the back of his mind and focus on the task at hand. He was busy trying to do just that as well as trying to avoid the Death Eaters, when his foot caught on a rock and he stumbled, his Disillusionment Charm fading away into nothing.

He righted himself just as the first Death Eater saw him. Bringing his wand up, he shouted the first curse that entered his mind *Rictusempra*, and he watched as the Death Eater fell to the ground rolling around with laughter.

Severus had mere seconds before the other Death Eaters nearby would notice their fallen comrade, so he did the only thing he could think to do—he ran.

"Keep up," he shouted over his shoulder, and he felt Harry take off after him.

Severus knew they were running towards Voldemort, and there was nothing in the plan that foresaw this outcome; however, he didn't know what else to do. They were outnumbered and out in the open.

He felt a spell brush past his right ear, too close for comfort. He knew they were sitting ducks out here, and if it wasn't for Harry, he would have taken to the skies and flown all the way to Hagrid's hut.

All of a sudden, a light so bright that Severus had to close his eyes lit up the night sky. Dumbledore was not aware that the plan had been shot to Hades when Harry had decided to run off through the grounds in search of Voldemort, and therefore was still proceeding with the agreed strategy.

As the light faded, Severus caught a glimpse of Voldemort in the distance.

"Follow me," he shouted in the general direction of Harry as he found his footing and sprinted away towards Voldemort.

When the skies lit up as though it were daytime, Draco knew he had one shot at this. Aiming his wand at Bellatrix, he quickly fired off the Killing Curse. He hated his aunt with every fibre of his being, so he wasn't surprised to see the green light hit its mark. There was no time to rejoice, however, as he quickly fired off the same spell towards Rodolphus. Both witch and wizard lay dead in the snow at Voldemort's feet before he even had time to register what was happening.

Voldemort turned, looking at Lucius—the expression and malice on his face would haunt Draco's dreams for the rest of his life.

Severus and Harry were nearing the spot where they had last seen Voldemort. Breathing heavily, his body pumping adrenaline, Severus saw the first spell as it ricocheted off what he could only assume was Draco's shield.

"Up ahead," he yelled over his shoulder to where he could hear Harry's rapid breaths coming from under the Invisibility Cloak.

As he turned his head back to look towards where he was going, he saw the spell coming straight for him, and in the back of his mind, he knew he wouldn't have time to block it.

In the next split second, he was falling. He had collided with something solid, and it let out an unholy screech as he tripped over it. He put his hands up to make contact with the hard, snow-covered earth. His hands didn't make it in time, and he heard the sickening crack of his nose breaking just as he felt the blood start to run down his face.

Severus felt a hand under his arm helping him to stand. When he was righted, he dazedly asked, "What was that?" as he swiped his left sleeve underneath his bleeding nose and winced.

"I think it was Crookshanks," Harry replied, his voice a little uncertain.

"What is a Crookshanks?" Severus asked; he was breathing through his mouth, and his question came out nasally.

"He is Hermione's cat, but how he got here, I'll never know," Harry answered, perplexed.

"That doesn't matter now," Severus replied, "we can discuss it all later after we have defeated Voldemort."

Harry nodded his head in agreement as they hurriedly made their way over to the battle between Voldemort and Draco.

Voldemort was facing away from them as they came upon him. Draco looked as though he was exhausted, but he was still fighting. Severus looked towards the spot he assumed Harry was standing in and nodded his head once. He then hastily rolled up his left sleeve and lifted up his wand silently saying a slicing hex.

The blood welled up on Severus's arm, but before even a drop could fall on the snowy ground beneath his feet, he siphoned it up, using his wand.

Harry followed Severus's lead. Although they had discussed this very moment on numerous occasions, Harry still felt his wand hand shake slightly as he collected his blood within his wand. He turned towards Severus, before throwing the Invisibility Cloak to the ground and taking a deep breath. This was it.

"Voldemort," Harry yelled turning his body slightly to face the back of the Dark wizard.

Voldemort froze as he heard the unmistakable voice of Harry Potter. Sneering, he turned around. It was as though time were slowing down. It had been this precise moment that Voldemort had anticipated for the last eight years.

"Harry Potter, the boy that lived, come at last to seal your..." The words died upon his lips as he turned to face the thorn in his side. The boy was not alone, for there beside him was none other than Severus Snape.

Severus raised one elegant eyebrow. "Surprise."

"You!" Voldemort stuttered in rage, gripping his wand with white knuckled fury.

The look on Voldemort's face was priceless as he took in both Severus and Harry. Harry would have laughed out loud if they weren't in the middle of a war.

Voldemort stood there as though he were hit with a *Stupefy* as he looked back and forth from Harry to Severus. And then it was as though it all clicked into place. Lucius's betrayal; Severus standing before him when he had told Lucius to finish him off; Lucius's refusal to bring the Mudblood to Hogwarts; everything. How long had they all been plotting against him? No matter, he would dispose of the lot of them.

Neither Harry nor Severus said a word as they raised their wands.

"You think you can defeat me?" Voldemort bellowed, "I am the most powerful wizard alive!"

Draco had prepared his blood in his wand, and as he watched Harry and Severus lift up their own wands and point them towards Voldemort, he did the same.

As one the three wizards spoke the words to the ancient spell.

"*Impreco vindictam sanguis*," they said in unison as the blood fired from their collective wands hit Voldemort.

Voldemort recognised the ancient spell too late. There was no counter. The three participants had to use their own blood willingly and act together.

Voldemort's wand fell from his limp hand as he started to rip at his robes. He was burning literally from the inside out. Gasping for air, he felt his lungs begin to burn as he fell to his knees.

It happened so quickly. One second Voldemort was standing in front of Harry and the next he was on his knees clawing at the ground. Before his very eyes he witnessed Voldemort take his last breath before his entire body went up in flames.

Harry took a step backwards and felt Severus and Draco do the same. He could not take his eyes off the macabre scene before him.

As the smoke cleared, the three wizards, still with their wands pointed out, looked down at the smouldering piles of ashes where the Dark wizard had once stood.

In the end, it took the power of three to end Voldemort's life. As Harry, Severus and Draco stood in a circle, they looked up into each other's eyes. They dropped their wands to their sides, and Draco fell to his knees and wept. Severus and Harry said not a word, as they were going through their own emotions.

It was done, for now, and the wizarding world could once more feel secure in the knowledge that the Dark Lord was vanquished.

Day turned into night and back into day, although Hermione knew little of the passage of time. She sat in the all-encompassing darkness, her thoughts drawn inwards. Her breath came out in little puffs of smoke as she huddled on the bed of straw for some warmth. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark, and her abrasions had stopped bleeding and had become itchy. She scratched at them, just to feel something, opening up the wounds which would, on occasion, ooze tiny rivers of blood.

She became edgy. Time stood still.

She had broken her bed in an episode of uncontrollable rage; its twisted metal coils were sharp, and she had cut herself on one of them. The mattress was no more. She had expected her Master to show up then, to chastise her for her act of rebellion, but still he refused to come. A bed of straw appeared in the corner; it was scratchy and uncomfortable, but it was better than lying on the cold floor.

Her meals still arrived promptly by some unseen force. It was as though it were magic, as she never heard anyone enter or exit her home.

She was bored, and remembered a day in what seemed like another life when she wished for nothing but peace. Well, she had received her wish and she was truly regretting it now.

She had yelled, sounding more like an animal than a human being, banging on the door for hours until her hands bled, and her whole body ached. She had lain down and abased herself at the door in the submissive position that her Master liked until her whole body became numb and she was terribly thirsty.

Still, her Master refused to come.

It had to be some kind of test. She was good at those, wasn't she? Perhaps he was punishing her. She had done nothing wrong, at least in her mind—or had she?

Her head hurt if she thought too much; it hurt when she didn't. There was nothing to do but eat and sleep, but that soon became tedious to her.

She had gone on a hunger strike; her stomach twisted in knots until she could fight it no longer, and she had gorged herself on the meagre meal on the table. She had thrown up into the hole that had appeared in the middle of her home. The smell was unbearable; it crept into her nose, eyes, even into her pores. Soon it too became part of her hell, so she noticed it no more.

She felt as though she would die without his presence. It felt like a lifetime ago when she had seen him last.

Still her Master refused to come.

Well, there you have it. Sorry for the wait, I hope that it was worth it.

There will be a continuation of this story entitled 'From Darkness Comes Life', but I want to get a few chapters written before I start to post.

Thank you to my fantastic, and ever patient beta, AmyLouise! Without her, I would be lost, and I am truly blessed to have her.

I want to thank you all for reading and reviewing 'DIO', as it has been a story that has never left me even through my long absences.

Thank you to those who have stuck with me from the very beginning.

Love to all, Sonia

Translation of the spell Severus, Harry and Draco used on Voldemort is, "I invoke the Vengeance of the Blood."