

Golden Gain

by Doomspark

Sequel to Invictus, with more puzzles, problems, solutions, and such. Rated "M" for safety's sake.

NOTE: Not compliant with Canon after GoF.

Puzzles and Problems

Chapter 1 of 4

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Author's Notes: As this is a sequel to Invictus, it is AU as of OotP. Please read Invictus first; there are too many things here that won't make sense otherwise, and I'm not going to explain them all.

Golden Gain

"It is the finding of the Wizengamot, after consideration of all evidence and testimony set before us, that the accused, whatever his past actions may have been, was Soulstruck in error. Therefore, we order him acquitted without prejudice and direct the Aurors to return his wand and release him forthwith with the apologies of the Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic."

The cheers that greeted this announcement echoed throughout the room and seemed to rock the foundations of the Ministry of Magic. The tall, lean wizard sitting in the chair in the middle of the room reacted not at all. Only someone who knew him extremely well would see the subtle easing of tension in his shoulders and neck. He rose quietly when Amelia Bones, who'd become Minister of Magic on Fudge's death, personally released the physical restraints, and returned his wand, the one Minerva had given him a few months earlier.

It was finally over. He was the last of the Soulstruck to be retried by the Wizengamot, and the only one to be acquitted outright. Most were condemned to serve out their sentences in Azkaban. A few who were thought to be redeemable had their sentences commuted to "time served", though they would never be completely trusted ever again. The Weasley boy was one of those.

Lawrence Nott had died before he could be retried. In fact, it was within hours of his restoration. Severus privately thought it might be related to what McGaven had done to the Death Eater, but he couldn't prove it and he certainly did not want to complicate matters any more than they already were. Some of the former owners of the Soulstruck had been rather indignant that their property was being recalled, despite the full refund of purchase price that the Ministry had granted.

Snape tucked his wand up his sleeve with the ease of long practice, feeling complete again the moment his hand touched the smooth wood. Now he felt free to look up, to see who had come, and see who would meet his eyes. He wasn't surprised to see most of the Weasley clan there. They didn't blame him for what Percy had done. In fact, the entire active membership of the Order of the Phoenix was present. And she was there also the young woman who had risked far too much for his sake, the young woman to whom he was bound by an old magic that neither of them had managed to break thus far.

"Mr. Snape! Mr. Snape! What are you going to do now?" Snape groaned to himself as Luna Lovegood pushed her way through the crowd. After leaving school, she'd attached herself to her father's periodical as a freelance writer, filling her columns with a heady mix of rumor, gossip, and occasional fact. He already had a headache. Dealing with the press would only make it worse.

"Professor Snape will be returning to his teaching duties at Hogwarts, of course," Minerva answered, emphasizing his title as she took his arm and led him toward the door while other members of the Order cleared a path for them. Then, quietly, to Severus, "I'm glad this is over."

~*~

Six months later, Snape found himself summoned to afternoon tea in Headmistress McGonagall's office. Such invitations were rare; his colleague was far too busy keeping the school running smoothly. Much of this involved cleaning up the various messes that Albus Dumbledore had started one way or another. Just last month, she'd had the entire staff working together to clean out and permanently seal the Chamber of Secrets something that Albus had let slide for much too long. They'd found dozens of books, potions, and enough other Dark items to start their own shop in Knockturn Alley.

Minerva had immediately turned the obviously Dark items and books over to the Ministry. The rest she'd given to Snape to catalogue as he saw fit. Two or three innocuous tomes went to the library. Four other books went into the Restricted Section. The rest now lay under wards in a chest in his room. They weren't exactly dark, but they were questionable.

He climbed the stairs to the Headmistress' office and gave the staff password to the gargoyle "The Campbells are Coming." The door swung open and he entered the room. It wasn't the same as when Albus was there, but it was similar. She greeted him with a smile and offered him tea and honeycakes. Once all the social amenities were observed, she handed him a rolled up parchment.

Curious, he opened it, positive that she'd explain shortly.

Hallows relinquished? By opening emotions opals! Great Slytherin's thrice wizardly time; twice as realistic. O' Rowena! In Merlin's time, couldst light such torturous examples! Life's evil foe, in defensive tactics, by such shame. Ravenclaws expect horcruxes and cannot even recall the least yearning. Impossible! Fear

Ollivander not!

The cryptic note was signed with an ornate "3" in the same violently purple ink. Severus Snape put down the old yellowed parchment with a snort and turned to his colleague of years. "Where did you get this, Minerva?" He raised his teacup to his lips and let the hot fragrant liquid ease its way down his throat.

"Albus. He owed me this morning and said he thought we he meant you and I - might find it 'interesting.'" The Headmistress poured herself another cup of tea, scorning the sugar and cream. "I've no idea what it means. You?"

"It looks far too much like one of Aberon McGaven's puzzles," Snape replied slowly. "You'll forgive me if I'm less than enthusiastic about anything to do with that man." His fingers tightened involuntarily on the arms of his chair.

~*~

Between teaching his Defense Against the Dark Arts classes that afternoon, dinner in the Great Hall, and then two hours of patrolling the halls in search of wayward students that evening, the parchment note had slipped his mind entirely by the end of the day. Only after he returned to the rooms he still shared with Hermione did he remember it. Tonight, however, was the one evening of the week that they devoted to breaking the compulsion that the *Amorata* potion had placed on them months earlier. With an effort, he pushed the puzzle out of his head and reached for the books he'd been perusing the previous week, moving Hermione's kneazle kitten, Gingersnap, out of the way to do so. The kitten took the opportunity to climb onto his shoulder where it promptly began purring.

While they would have like to devote all their resources to this endeavor, the practical necessities of earning a living took precedence. Finally they'd agreed to limit themselves to this once a week night of research and experimentation while classes were in session. Holidays would be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Hermione came into the room and sat down on the sofa next to him, propping her feet up on the table. A quick swish of her wand summoned the periodicals she had been reading.

"Any new ideas?" she asked as she found her place.

"Perhaps," he replied, sitting down carefully so as not to dislodge Gingersnap, "but I admit to being distracted tonight." Before she could respond, he told her about Minerva's cryptic note.

"Anything that Albus finds interesting is not something to be ignored," Hermione agreed. "And yes, from your description, it sounds a lot like a McGaven puzzle. Hopefully it will be as easy to solve as the others were."

Snape snorted. "We didn't solve all those puzzles until we brought in several extra heads to look them over."

"I know, but once we had the idea, they were easy. There weren't any Confounding Hexes or Distraction Charms on them. Just Muggle tricks." She paused. "We could ask McGaven to look at it, perhaps."

"Absolutely not," he replied firmly. "For one thing, I want nothing more to do with him after his cursed spellcrafting wrecked my life. For another, Albus sent that note here rather than to him. That tells me that he didn't want McGaven seeing it." Gingersnap took this opportunity to transfer himself to Hermione's lap.

"I suppose that's true," Hermione answered, returning to her periodicals. "I'll ask Minerva to let me look at it tomorrow."

Snape went back to studying the essay on breaking compulsions that he'd found. "Apparently not everyone took kindly to Machiavelli's machinations. There's a reference here to it, and that many wizards and witches preferred to die screaming rather than submit."

"I can certainly understand that feeling," she muttered. "I had hoped the *Mens Sana* potion would counteract the *Amorata*."

"That was a good thought," he answered. "I had hoped that some of Mr. Weasley's curse-breaking spells would suffice." When she didn't answer immediately, he looked up from his book, one index finger marking his place. She was staring out across the room, her mouth slightly open.

"I've just had a wonderful idea!" She took a deep breath. "You won't like it, but it might work!" She jumped to her feet dumping the annoyed kitten onto the floor. "I need to Floo Harry right away!"

"Just what is this incredible plan, Hermione," he asked cautiously. Experience had taught him that her enthusiasm could sometimes be dangerous.

She bit her lip. "Well there's two pieces to the problem. We have to get rid of the physical compulsions, and we have to get rid of the mental compulsions. The problem is that they're very much bound together, and methods that break one don't or won't break the other."

"Logical," he allowed, retrieving Gingersnap from the floor and petting him until he settled into his lap.

"So we need to separate the two completely. I think a *Mens Sana* potion will do for the mental compulsions once the physical compulsions aren't in the way anymore. And Bill's curse-breaking spells will work on the physical end when the mental compulsions are gone. Our problem is that we've only been trying to fix one or the other, not

both."

"So you plan to quaff a *Mens Sana* potion at the same time that Mr. Weasley attempts a curse-breaking spell?" he asked.

She shook her head sending bushy tendrils flying. "No, I don't think that would work. I think the two would get in the way of each other. This damned *Amorata* was made to be difficult to dissolve."

"Then how do you propose to get around that difficulty?"

She took a very long breath. Then another. In a tiny voice she whispered, "I'm going to ask Harry to get permission from the Ministry for McGaven to Soulstrike me."

Potions and Plotting

Chapter 2 of 4

Sequel to *Invictus*, with more puzzles, problems, solutions, and such. Rated "M" for safety's sake.

NOTE: Not compliant with Canon after GoF.

Chapter Two Potions and Plotting

"You're going to do what?" Snape asked incredulously. "Have you lost your mind?" Only previous experiences with the blinding headaches caused by the *Amorata* if they quarreled too loudly caused him to moderate his tones.

Hermione sighed inwardly. "Think about it, Severus. It separates the two. Once I'm Soulstruck, Bill can break the physical part of the compulsion. Then I can drink a *Mens Sana* potion to complete the cure after I'm restored. Soulstriking didn't exist when Borgia modified the *Amorata* potion. It should work!"

"I was right," Severus told Gingersnap. "She's lost her mind. Entirely." Then, to Hermione. "Do you truly, honestly, think that I'm going to allow myself to be Soulstruck again? You have no idea what it was like!"

"I don't see any other way," she grumbled in reply. "How else can we separate the two pieces of it?"

"We'll come up with something else," he answered. "Anything else. We have time to work on it. In fact..." He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, absentmindedly petting the kneazle who purred and then fell asleep in his lap. His book lay forgotten next to him.

Hermione knew that he'd had the glimmering of an idea, and he'd voice it when he was ready and not before. She picked up her periodical again and found her place. If nothing else, she could Floo Harry the following day and discuss her idea with him.

"Everything we've tried has been thwarted by the interaction between both parts of the compulsion," Snape said half an hour later. "The mental part of the *Amorata* works on emotions, would you agree?"

"Yes, I think that's obvious."

"Then I postulate that a double-strength *Helix* potion might suffice to suppress emotions to the point where a curse-breaking spell could remove the physical compulsions. Then a *Mens Sana* potion, taken after the *Helix* wore off, would complete the cure."

Hermione opened her mouth to tell him that it wouldn't work, and then thought about what he'd said. "We've got both potions on hand. We really should get Bill to teach us his curse-breaking spells so we don't have to keep bothering him."

"Agreed," Snape replied, shifting the kneazle to the sofa and rising. "I will send Mr. Weasley an owl and arrange a time for him to meet us."

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The following morning, Snape strode into the Great Hall for breakfast in an uncharacteristically good mood. For the first time in far too long, he felt that there was an honest chance of breaking the compulsion of the *Amorata* potion. Taking his usual seat next to Minerva, he speared three slices of dark pumpnickel bread and began coating them with a thick layer of Marmite.

"You appear somewhat mellow this morning, Severus," the Headmistress said as she buttered a scone. "Does teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts agree with you so well?"

"I refuse to be baited until after breakfast," he replied. "But to answer your unasked question, o' curious one, I've had a thought that may allow me to complete my current research project."

The other staff members were trickling in and sitting down with their morning tea or coffee according to taste as he spoke. Minerva had made it clear that she preferred for the entire faculty to be present at meals. This display of unity encouraged similar behavior in the students. Poppy Pomfrey made a beeline for the empty seat next to Snape, getting there three steps ahead of Harry Potter. The Quidditch coach caught Snape's eye and rolled his eyes before sitting down on the other side of Madame Pomfrey. Hermione came in and sat down next to Harry.

The mediwitch gave Snape's breakfast a disapproving look. "Is that all you're going to eat, Severus? You're far too thin." She patted his arm.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Poppy, you've been saying that since I was fifteen. I like pumpnickel with Marmite for breakfast." He carefully removed her hand from his person squelching a desire to wreak havoc.

"It's not healthy!" She was going to say more, but Harry distracted her with a question about renewing the Cushioning charms on broomsticks. With a silent sigh of relief, Snape turned back to the Headmistress who smirked just slightly at him.

"It's really not funny anymore, Minerva," he said quietly. "In fact, it's becoming downright annoying. Isn't there anyone I can foist her off on?"

Minerva carefully brushed the crumbs from her muffin into a neat pile. "If I think of something, I'll let you know." She cleared her throat, catching the attention of the entire table. "Just one brief announcement. I received an owl last night from the board of governors confirming Professor Snape's appointment as Deputy Headmaster." She smiled and returned her attention to her breakfast.

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"I'm going to murder Poppy," Severus announced that evening as he threw his teaching robes into the hamper. The mediwitch had managed to sit next to him at all three meals that day, and made disparaging comments about his choice of food. At least she'd kept her hands to herself for lunch and dinner.

Hermione laughed as she set a dish of sardines on the floor for Gingersnap. "Is it just me or is she getting worse? I thought you were going to have an apoplectic fit when she patted you this morning."

"She's getting worse. At least it was just my arm she touched." His white linen shirt followed the robes. "I wish I knew what she saw in me! I'd remove it post-haste!"

"Poppy has a mother-complex, Severus."

"A what? Is that a Muggle term for being a congenital pest?"

She went over to him and pushed him gently into his favorite chair, enjoying the feel of his skin under her hands. "She took care of you for so many years, she feels in some ways like you're her son," she explained. "At the same time, she recognizes that you're not her son and that you're a grown man and she's attracted to you in that way as well. The two attractions are all mixed up with each other, much like how the *Amorata* works."

Snape gave her an evil grin and pulled her onto his lap. "I wonder if I can get the house elves to spike her meals with *Helix*."

"That actually might be a good idea," Hermione replied. "Once she's able to view her actions rationally, she may be able to control them better." While she spoke, she traced the heavy black stubble on his jaw. "You forgot your shaving charm this morning."

He exhaled slowly, the tension in his neck and shoulders easing. "Mr. Weasley replied to my owl. He said he can come this evening if we're both available, but otherwise it will be several weeks apparently Gringotts is opening up new branches in America and he is required to be there. I told him tonight would be fine." He rasped his fingers along his chin. "I'm thinking of letting my beard grow out."

"Tonight is definitely fine," she said. "While I enjoy your company, Severus, I hate the idea of being made to enjoy it. What time is Bill coming?" She traced his jaw again. "I think you would look dashing with a beard."

"I suggested 8pm in my reply," he said. "And I spent my free period this afternoon brewing up a double-strength batch of *Helix*. It's in the cabinet in the lab along with the *Mens Sana*." He shifted under her. "And if you keep doing that, we will be late."

"It's your fault for tossing your shirt in the laundry," she replied. But she took the hint and rose. "Do we need anything else?"

"Luck is fickle. Let us hope for success."

~*~

The Crystal Dragon was closed for the night. Growling under his breath, the man turned his back on the pub and headed for Diagon Alley. He could get a drink in the Cauldron even at this unholy hour. Slamming open the door, he took a seat in a corner and began drowning his sorrows with the bottle of Firewhiskey that Tom brought him.

Some time later, he was aware that he was no longer alone at his table. Another man sat there with him. A wizard. This one made no offer of conversation but simply matched him drink for drink, even paying for a second bottle. Halfway through the bottle, the wizard looked over at him rather owlishly. "I should let you know who you're drinking with. I'm Aberon McGaven."

"Macavity Leech," the other man replied. "Heard your name somewhere, but can't remember where."

"Probably best," McGaven replied. "I'm not well liked."

Leech snorted. "Know that feeling, I do. I usually don't drink here. Too many people know me."

"But the Cauldron is always open," the wizard said glumly. "I know. I don't usually drink here either." He took another look at the man. "I've seen you before."

Now Leech raised his head and looked at McGaven carefully. "Yeah, I know. I worked for Minister Fudge until he died. You came 'round to his house a few times."

"I remember that much," the wizard muttered. "They Obliviated me, you know. The Wizengamot. I know I did something terrible, but I can't remember what."

"There's times I'm grateful for being a Squib," Leech answered. "The Wizengamot didn't have much use for me when they investigated the Minister's death just a few questions and then thank you very much. Now go find another job. Ha! Not many jobs for Squibs."

"How did the Minister come to die?" McGaven asked softly. "No one would tell me."

"It were an accident." The Squib drained his glass and refilled it while gathering his thoughts. "See, he got himself another servant some months back. A man named Sisyphus. Old Sissy that's what I called him was dumb as a brick and mute. I think he was a Squib too. Fudge treated him like a house-elf, always ordering him around. Anyway, the night he died, the Minister went out and took Sissy with him. Didn't tell me where he was going, not that he ever did. Said he'd be back late." He swallowed. "Next thing I know, the Aurors come by and tell me that Sissy had accidentally tripped him and he broke his neck in the fall."

"Accidentally?"

"That's what they said," Leech replied. "I've wondered if Sissy just got tired of being treated bad. Fudge never treated me like that in all the years I worked for him. Haven't seen Sissy since then, and I'm guessing the Aurors think the same thing and put him somewhere they can watch him."

"Wouldn't put it past them to do just that," McGaven said a bit sourly as he refilled his glass. "That damned Obliviate spell turned my life upside-down. I lost my job because of it apparently, and I can't find a new one. They took nearly six months of my life away. Six months where I can't remember anything."

"Huh." Leech scratched an ear thoughtfully. "Listen, McGaven. When Fudge died, he left his house and everything in it to me. There's a lot of magic stuff that I can't use locked up in the cellar. The Aurors didn't bother with it when they searched the place. I was going to sell it all, but I don't know what it's worth. I don't even know what some of it is. But you might. You could at least make a better guess. If you help me get a fair price, I'll split it with you."

Interested in spite of himself, McGaven asked, "What sorts of things?"

"Lots of books, a couple of cauldrons, a set of scales, and dozens of jars of I-don't-know-what."

"Sounds like a research lab." The wizard propped his chin in his hands. "I used to do research for the Ministry. I'll come take a look and see what you've got there."

They shook hands to seal the bargain, and agreed to meet the following evening.

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The headline for the *Daily Prophet* the next morning read as follows:

Lucius Malfoy escapes from Azkaban!

Squibs and Souljars

Chapter 3 of 4

Sequel to *Invictus*, with more puzzles, problems, solutions, and such. Rated "M" for safety's sake.

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The *Daily Prophet's* headline was sufficient to cause several members of the Order of the Phoenix to convene at Grimmauld Place as soon as they'd seen it.

"How the hell did Lucius Malfoy manage to escape from Azkaban?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked for the eighth time. "Don't tell me he's an Animagus like Black was!"

"According to the report," Rita Skeeter answered cautiously, "he was able to identify and exploit a weakness in the wards that allowed him to leave his cell. For some reason, he was not stopped by the Dementors, and as it was evening, there were no human guards around. Malfoy would simply have to walk to the shore and Apparate."

"With no wand?" Ron Weasley scoffed. "He had to have had help."

"It is much more likely that someone met him there with a Portkey," Bill pointed out. "And I don't like it that he found a weakness in those wards. They've been in place for centuries."

"None of the Death Eaters have had any visitors since their new trials," Rita replied. "I checked as part of the story. In fact, most of them are in rather ill health." She paused for a moment. "They reminded me very much of Mr. Potter's godfather."

"We'll have everyone here this evening," Alastor Moody grumbled into the silence that had followed Rita's statement. "Or at least, more of us. Can't take the Headmistress of Hogwarts and three of her teachers away during the middle of the day without causing a ruckus."

Bill brought his feet down off the table where they'd been propped with a thump. "Do we still have McGaven's notes, or did those get turned over to the Ministry?"

"Harry had them last I knew," Ron answered. "What're you getting at?"

"There's something in there about Malfoy. We didn't follow up on it at the time because we were more concerned with rescuing Albus and Black. And I can't remember now exactly what McGaven said."

"Mr. Potter can find them for us tonight," Kingsley said. "I'll remind him."

~*~

The shrilling whistle of a teapot woke Lucius Malfoy out of the best sleep he'd had in months. Being imprisoned in Azkaban was second on his list of experiences he'd rather not repeat, just under Being Soulstruck. Without help, he'd still be there. Come to think of it, he still wasn't entirely sure who'd been responsible for his restoration. He rose, wrapping his over-sized cloak around him for warmth and stepped out into the kitchen of the small house. His cohort in crime was there, as promised, with food and tea.

"You've surpassed yourself," Lucius said appreciatively taking the cup that was offered. "What plans have you for today?"

"I've been thinking about how to get a wand for you, sir. Dumbledore had a box of unregistered ones in his office, and I was thinking to, ah, liberate one."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "You have more talents than I gave you credit for. I don't suppose those talents extend to breaking into Ollivander's? No? It was but a thought. One of those unregistered wands will do magnificently."

The other man poked the fire carefully, releasing more heat into the room. "It'll be tricky. When I bring your dinner tonight, I'll let you know more. I'd like to get a house-elf to take care of this place for you, but that could be a problem. You know how they like to gossip."

"Definitely." Lucius looked around the room again noting the pile of blankets, the double layers of carpet on the floor, and other non-magical ways of retaining heat within the building. "Once I have a wand again, this place will become much more habitable." He paused a moment. "I've not properly thanked you for helping me. You'll be well rewarded."

The other man gave him a grim smile in return. "I'm counting on it. If some people knew what I'd done, I'd be dead and you'd be back in Azkaban before you could say Dementor. And there's not many around who'd stick their necks out for you like I did."

"Then it's in our best interests to make sure no one finds out," Lucius replied, tacitly acknowledging the truth of the other's words. "You'd best be getting back to Hogwarts before you're missed, Argus."

~*~

"I don't think it worked," Hermione said as they met for lunch in their rooms.

Snape looked at her blankly for a moment, allowing the *Daily Prophet* to fall into his lap. "What?"

"Last night. The breaking of the *Amorata*." She stared back at him. "Don't tell me you've forgotten already!"

"I plead distraction," he replied. "I've spent most of the morning wondering how Lucius could have escaped from Azkaban, and the rest of it trying to pound sense into the

dunderheads I'm teaching." He took a mental inventory of his thoughts and feelings. "Why don't you think it worked?"

"I'm here meeting you for lunch, instead of eating with everyone else in the Great Hall," she answered promptly.

"That's ridiculous! We always have lunch together."

"It is not either ridiculous! The only reason I eat lunch with you is because you insist on it!" Her voice was rising.

"That's only because I enjoy your company, you insufferable Gryffindor!" His voice rose in response.

"Let me just remind you that this insufferable Gryffindor saved your sorry arse!" Now she was shouting.

"How do you feel?" he asked mildly.

The complete non-sequitur took her by surprise. "What? I... I feel fine!"

"Hermione, we've just roared at each other. I don't have the beginnings of a headache. If you don't, then I believe we've broken the compulsion."

She opened her mouth and closed it again as the sense of what he'd said sank in. "You're right. But why do I still want to spend time with you?"

He pulled out a chair for her and sat down across the table just as he had for the past several months. "I can only guess that we have become friends as a result of our recent shared experiences."

"That makes a certain amount of sense," she said as she took a sandwich from the platter between them. "But where do we go from here?"

He pointed with an elbow at the Prophet still lying on the sofa. "First things first, Hermione. I suspect we'll be meeting with friends tonight."

"The Order. Yes, I would expect so." She took a bite of sandwich. "Hopefully Arthur can get an accurate idea of what exactly happened." Another bite and she changed the subject. "Minerva gave me a copy of that odd message Albus sent to her."

"Oh? What do you make of it? I admit that I've done nothing but read it the once. It..."

"It reminds you of McGaven's puzzles," she finished for him. "I can see the resemblance. It's very old; it's been under a Stasis spell for centuries. I'd very much like to know where Albus got it. That might provide a clue."

"Send him an owl and ask. You'd think the meddling old codger would think to include such little tidbits of information." He put down a mostly eaten sandwich and reached for the tea.

"I think the meddling old codger is regretting his retirement and looking for an excuse to come back to Hogwarts in some capacity," Hermione returned. "I didn't think he would stay in southern Italy forever, even with a War Hero stipend to live on."

"The owl came from London, not Italy, so Minerva told me," he replied. "I suspect your hypothesis is correct."

"I'll ask when I owl him about the parchment," she said with a grin. "If I phrase it so that I know he's coming back, he might even answer."

"Are you sure you weren't supposed to have been Sorted into Slytherin?" he asked. "That is not the kind of tactic a Gryffindor should think of."

"I think you'll find that I'm not a typical Gryffindor."

"Thank Merlin!"

~*~

Aberon looked at the blank wall in front of him. "Are you sure there's a doorway here? I certainly can't see it." He gingerly pushed one finger against the painted surface. "It feels solid."

"It's right here, see?" Leech replied, stepping into the wall and disappearing. His voice came back distorted. "I've got a lantern here. Now come on."

The wizard considered. "Did Fudge ever say anything about how the door worked? All I see, all I feel is wall."

Leech reappeared. "Well yeah, he had this little thing he always said. Let's see... oh yeah *Nil nisi bonum*." He chuckled. "The Aurors never thought to ask and I wasn't going to volunteer."

"Nothing but good," Aberon muttered to himself. Then facing the wall, he spoke the Latin phrase wondering what would happen. Before him, the wall twitched and faded into non-existence, revealing a well-lit flight of stairs descending into a soft pool of darkness below.

"Nice!" Leech stepped through again and took the lantern from its hook next to the doorway. "Mind the stairs; they're kind of steep."

McGaven followed him down nearly a hundred stairs. Obviously this was wizard-work rather than Muggle construction. At the bottom, Leech threw open a door with a flourish. "And here, sir, our fortune awaits!"

Cautiously, expecting there to be wards or other booby-traps, McGaven entered the room. It was definitely a laboratory, with well-filled bookshelves filling one wall, racks and racks of potions ingredients, several cauldrons of different sizes neatly stacked one inside the other, and a diamond-topped workbench that had to have cost a fortune. Sitting on the workbench in neat rows were dozens of dark blue glass jars a bit bigger than his fist. He counted them automatically there were forty-two. For some reason the number stuck in his head.

"Leech, did Fudge keep any personal notes here?"

"Not that I know of." He pointed to the jars. "Those things there what are they?"

"They're important. They're very important," McGaven replied. "I know I used to know what they were. It's part of what they took from me!" He stared at the jars for a long moment. "They're called Souljars... I remember that much."

"No kidding!" Leech rubbed his chin. "What about those cauldrons? Any idea what they'd be worth?"

McGaven considered, going over to the items in question and making a show of inspecting them for damage. "Two hundred galleons for the set, more or less." He walked over to the bookshelves. "There's easily a thousand galleons in books alone. Probably another thousand in equipment and ingredients. And," he added, "A lot of those ingredients would get the owner sent to Azkaban just for having them around." He pointed. "Hand of Glory, graveyard earth, powdered human bone, all things that have no use other than Dark potions."

"I'll take everything down to Knockturn Alley tomorrow. I'm sure Borgin and Burkes will be interested."

"If you sell all this at once, you'll draw a lot of attention to yourself," Aberon pointed out carefully. "It would be better much better to sell off a few things at a time to different shops. If we worked together, we could probably dispose of everything in two or three months."

"Damn! I was hoping to be rid of it all in a week at most!"

"You'd need to find a wealthy dark wizard," McGaven replied. "Very wealthy. One who needs a lab." He looked around the room again. "A fully-stocked lab and a library."

"How hard would that be?"

"Not hard to find one, I wouldn't think but finding one you could trust not to kill you after the sale would be harder. They'd almost certainly want to guarantee that you wouldn't report them to the Ministry. And obviously, you can't report them if you're dead."

Leech grumbled to himself for a minute. "What about this? Can you tell what's Dark and what isn't?"

"Yes..." Aberon wasn't sure where this was going.

"I'm thinking we could sell all the books and equipment that's not dark all at once."

"Still risky. The Aurors searched the house. If they notice that you're selling things, they may come back and search it again."

"Damn it, McGaven! Are you trying to queer this up?"

"Not at all! I don't want to be sent to Azkaban!" He forced his voice to become reasonable. "If we're patient we'll be free and wealthy in a few months. Isn't that better than being broke and imprisoned?"

"All right, all right. You're right about that, at least." Leech stood beside him looking at the massive tomes that graced the shelves. "Pick out two books, give me a price, and let's get started."

Remorse and Revelations

Chapter 4 of 4

Sequel to *Invictus*, with more puzzles, problems, solutions, and such. Rated "M" for safety's sake.

NOTE: Not compliant with Canon after GoF.

Chapter Four Remorse and Revelations

A few, a very few, people knew that Poppy Pomfrey actually owned a small house in Hogsmeade. Now that the war was over, it was actually possible for her to live there again, instead of living in the back half of her office in the Hogwarts Infirmary as she had while the fighting was at its worst. And living in Hogsmeade made her life so much simpler.

People just didn't understand what a Healer's Oath really meant especially the part about helping and healing everyone. Not just the people on one side. More than one of her colleagues had been investigated for giving aid and comfort to the enemy. More than one had barely escaped Azkaban. Fortunately, that nonsense seemed to finally be over.

But that didn't make her current situation much easier. She knocked on the door to the guest room in her cottage and stepped inside when it opened to her touch. Her guest was lounging on the bed, books stacked neatly beside him. "Good evening."

"Evening, Poppy," he growled. "Had a good day?"

"Well enough, Peredur," she answered. "Have you decided yet what you're going to do now that you're healed?"

"Leave sooner rather than later. If anyone finds out you've been sheltering me, we'll both be in Azkaban or dead, if we're lucky."

"I've given it some thought. You'll have to leave Britain to be safe."

"That's going to be quite the trick. I can't Apparate, you know."

"If you were disguised as a Muggle, could you manage to get into Europe?"

"Maybe. I'd need those identification papers they have."

She thought for a long moment. "What about hiding you here in plain sight? No, hear me out! I know a lot of cosmetic spells; I can change the color of your hair, your eyes, the shape of your face and they'll be real changes, not Glamours. After about a month, the residual magic fades, and no one would be able to tell."

"That might work. If you're willing to put in the time and effort."

"You're my brother, Peredur. My twin! Of course I'll put in the time and effort! But there's one thing."

"What?"

"I need to understand. You never told me why."

"Why what? Why become Tom Riddle's lapdog?" He shrugged at her nod. "Lotta reasons, I guess. You were part of it."

"Me? I never told you to toady up to a madman!"

"No, no... but see, you went to Hogwarts. I couldn't. Never got the letter. It's Hell to be a Squib. Most everyone laughs at you when they think you aren't listening, and sometimes when they know you are."

Like Argus, she thought, *only he found a place for himself at Hogwarts.* "I never laughed at you."

"No you didn't. But you were so happy... and you'd come home on holiday and show Mum and Dad what you'd been learning... and then you'd leave and they'd look at me and I know how disappointed they were. Hell, Poppy, they never sent me to any kind of school, never got me a trade or a skill. And they never let me forget that I was a burden to them." His voice caught on a half-strangled sob. "So, you were part of it because Mum and Dad loved you best."

"And then..."

"And then I got hurt." He traced the long-healed scars that ran across his face and disappeared under his collar with a long-fingered hand. "Mum and Dad were going to have me put down like a dog. I heard them talking about it. So I... left."

"They told me you'd run away from home and gone into the Muggle world," Poppy said softly. "I wish I'd known."

"No you don't. I would've dragged you down with me. That's why I changed my name. You never would have become a Mediwitch with me as a millstone around your neck." He sat up on the edge of the bed. "Tom promised me power and gold. He said he didn't care that I was a Squib; I was useful to him and I felt like I belonged for the first time in my life!"

"And then he reneged?" she guessed.

"It was when he quit being Tom and became Voldemort that it changed," he answered quietly. "Instead of being his friend and confidant, I became his pet monster. And when I didn't do what he wanted, he put me under the Imperius curse and had me kill for him. After the first five or six murders, I was in no position to disobey any more. I would've gone to Azkaban." He laughed, a harsh and bitter sound. "Not that Tom cared. He kept me under that damned curse for years. Only when that Potter boy killed him was I freed!"

"Oh, Peredur!"

"Turnabout, Poppy. You never did tell me how I ended up here instead of Azkaban."

Poppy wiped her eyes. "I found you on the edge of the battle where you'd been knocked out. Once I recognized you, I put you under a Disillusionment charm and then brought you here to take care of you properly."

He shook his head. "Foolish Hufflepuff. What if someone from Hogwarts had seen you? What if someone follows you now?"

"That's not likely, there's only a handful of Death Eaters still on the loose none of them very powerful. Albus is in Italy, and Minerva has her hands full with the school. And I've taken pains to make sure Severus will avoid me."

"Snape? He's the one I'd be most wary of. He keeps his thoughts close, he does." He shook his head. "It's hard to imagine him as a spy for Dumbledore. I don't know whether to kill him for treachery or shake his hand for helping dispose of Tom."

Poppy took one of his hands in hers. "If you were under the Imperius curse all the time, surely that's grounds to have all the charges against you dropped."

"With no proof? Just my word."

"A Pensieve! Your memories of Vold... Tom putting you under the curse should be enough."

"Maybe enough to keep me from being Kissed instantly, I'll allow but do you really think I'd be pardoned for everything I did? Can you imagine the headlines in the Prophet? Fenris Greyback pardoned! It'll never happen."

~*~

"Where'd Mum and Dad go?" Percy asked, coming into the kitchen of the Burrow.

"Put the kettle on, would you? They've gone out." Ginny reached into the cupboard for teacups.

"Left you behind to mind me again?" he asked bitterly as he poked the kettle savagely with his wand. The kettle promptly began heating itself.

"Don't you dare feel sorry for yourself," his sister exploded. "This is your own damned fault, Percy Weasley! You were the one who turned your back on our family and friends to join with Voldemort. Did you really expect everyone would just forget about that?" She banged the cups on the table with such force that one of them shattered. "*Reparo!*" Then more calmly, "you haven't done anything to make people think you're trustworthy. All you've done for months is sit in your room and mope!"

"But I haven't anything to do!"

"Stuff and nonsense! You have a wand. You could tidy up the garden some, help Mum with dinner... you could even Apparate or Floo to Diagon Alley and do the shopping for her."

"How would that make people trust me?" he asked.

"It wouldn't. But it would please Mum no end. You know she put herself and Dad too at risk by breaking the Soulstriking early. And how have you repaid her? By sulking like a five year old who isn't getting his way. You want people to trust you, you need to start with your own family, Percy. Don't wait for Mum or Dad or me to tell you what to do. You've got a brain, and you can see that there's plenty to be done around the house." She poured the now-hot tea and pushed one cup across the counter to him.

Percy looked around the kitchen, for the first time seeing the shabbiness of the room. Accepting the tea, he said quietly, "Thank you, Ginny. I guess I needed a verbal kick in the pants." He drained the cup and took out his wand. "I'll be outside. I think some of the basic maintenance spells could use reinforcing."

He didn't see the small smile that his sister directed at his back.

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"There is nothing wrong with the wards at Azkaban," Kingsley said at the emergency meeting. "I had them checked by half a dozen Aurors. I would love to know how Malfoy managed this." As expected, virtually the entire Order of the Phoenix was present.

"He must have had a confederate though that begs the question of how he got in contact with one. Did he have any visitors?" Harry pulled his hair in frustration.

"Not according to the prison log. Also, a visitor to anyone there is rare enough that the guards would remember."

"What if he didn't need any help?" Bill asked, putting down the stack of notes he'd been flipping through.

"Malfoy is a good wizard, but nowhere nearly powerful enough to break those wards and then Apparate off the island," Minerva reminded him.

"You're forgetting something." He opened the notebook to the page he'd marked. *"I have done some more experimenting, and I've successfully transferred magic essence from one Soulfar to another. I chose Nott as the donor because he wasn't a powerful wizard, and I wanted to be careful. I added it to Lucius Malfoy's jar. I still can't believe*

he was a Death Eater! If he's ever restored, the extra magic will be some form of reparation."

"Magic essence?" Arthur asked.

"It's what McGaven calls the part of the mind / soul / whatever that makes a wizard into a wizard instead of a Muggle. I'd forgotten about that," Hermione answered.

"The point is, McGaven did something to Malfoy while he was in the jar to make him more powerful and then we, with the best of intentions, restored him and..." Ron said.

"Let the genie escape," Snape finished. "Where is McGaven? We need to ask him about this."

"He probably doesn't remember any of it," Alastor Moody said. "He was thoroughly Obliviated."

"A little too thoroughly, from what I've seen," George put in. "He lost his job at the Ministry because he couldn't remember how to do basic tasks. He's not much better than a Squib now."

"We'd need permission from the Wizengamot to even attempt to undo the Obliviate," Rita pointed out. "And that's not likely to happen. They're terrified of the Soulstriking process being duplicated. I can't say I blame them."

"I spoke with Amelia Bones today," Kingsley said. "She's ordered an extra guard to keep an eye on Draco and Narcissa. She thinks Lucius will try to get them out the same way he did. And of course, we've got Aurors in Diagon Alley, and at Malfoy Manor."

"Too obvious," Harry opined. "Malfoy isn't stupid enough to go home, and I don't think he's stupid enough to be seen in public. I don't know if he'll try to get his family out or not."

"I agree with you," Kingsley answered, "but this is what the Minister ordered. I'm hoping that the Order of the Phoenix can come up with some more likely possibilities that can be quietly investigated. If we can find him, I can get the Aurors to take care of him."

"The Muggle World," Arthur suggested. "It would be the least likely place for him to be."

"He couldn't survive there," Bill scoffed. "He's one of those hoity-toity purebloods who's lost without half a dozen house-elves to take care of him."

That earned him an exasperated glare from Snape. "Lucius is both clever and adaptable, Mr. Weasley. I don't know what adding Nott's magic essence has done to him, but it will not do to underestimate him. If we are to find him, we must consider all possibilities."

"Who would be his most likely choice of confederate?" Hermione asked. "After Fudge's purging, there are only a few Death Eaters still at large. Half a dozen, or so, by my count."

"Most of those are minor players though," George said thoughtfully. "They'd be as likely to turn Malfoy in for a reward as to help him."

Bill drummed his fingers on the table. "Fenrir Greyback, maybe? He's not smart, but he's strong and cunning, and he was unquestionably loyal to Voldemort. And we have no idea where he is there haven't been any reports of werewolf sightings lately."

"That's an excellent thought!" Kingsley agreed. "He was reported to have been at Glastonbury with Voldemort, but no one's seen him since."

"He was there," Molly said. "I threw a few curses his direction, but lost track of him." She looked at the floor. "I got distracted," she finished softly.

"I think we were all distracted, given the circumstances of that day," her husband replied gently. "And I think we're agreed that we should attempt to find Greyback."

"He's as dangerous as Malfoy, but in a different way," Minerva reminded them. "You're best off taking him with hexes from a distance. If he gets within arm's reach, it could be very bad." She didn't point out that they would need to keep an eye on the lunar calendar as well.

"Greyback's dangerous, no question," Moody grumbled. "But here's something: it's been months with no werewolf sightings, and nothing in the Muggle world either. So how's he managing while he's shape-changed? Someone's got to be helping him either getting the Wolfsbane potion for him, or keeping him confined. Or maybe he's dead and we just haven't found his rotted corpse yet."

"To summarize," Rita said, looking at her notes, "We need to locate Lucius Malfoy, and identify anyone who has been aiding him. We also need to determine if Fenrir Greyback is alive or not, and locate him if the former. Someone should gently interrogate McGaven and see if he remembers anything about what he did to Malfoy's jar. In fact," she added, "we may want to see if we can come up with a job for him that won't feel like make-work. If he feels useful and grateful, he will be more inclined to help us."

"We're not going to try to get McGaven's Obliviate reversed?" Harry asked.

"Let's keep that as a last-ditch option," Arthur answered. "It could mean answering a lot of questions from the Minister and Wizengamot that we may not want to."

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The Ministry of Magic had been focused for months on cleaning up the messes left behind by Cornelius Fudge. Fully two-thirds of its employees had been cronies of the now-deceased Minister or appointed by those cronies. All those had been fired; Amelia Bones was determined to make a new start. The punitive and self-serving laws Fudge had put in place were being struck down, and the revamp of the budget was in process. The *Daily Prophet* was being quite helpful in calming the populace.

Now the Minister felt free to turn a portion of her attention to the minor issues that had gone unattended for so long. There wouldn't be any trouble about getting legislation passed; these days, everyone at the Ministry was quite cooperative. Malcontents were quickly identified and quietly transferred into non-essential roles. There weren't very many. "We cannot afford to be fighting among ourselves," Amelia had announced when she first took office. "If you are unable to work together, with me, to make our world a better place, it is best you find a new situation."

She summoned several rolls of new parchment, her specially-Charmed quills, and thought about where to begin. "Begin at the beginning," she said to herself. "It's obvious that some people are not doing their jobs properly." She waved her wand and the quills quivered as rolls of parchment uncurled under them. "It is the opinion of the Minister that the actions of Thomas Riddle, Cornelius Fudge, and their sympathizers (colloquially known as Death Eaters) would not have taken place had Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft been properly supervised. Therefore..."