

Christmas Presents Undisguised

by Lady Strange

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes Dumbledore's death in HBP was staged. *Contents may be disturbing to readers*

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 8

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Author's note: This story may not please everyone as it is not the usual fluffy Christmas story. The scenes depicted in this story may be offensive and objectionable to some readers for their explicit violence and gore. This story deviates from my usual writing. Emphases are in italics and titles of books &ca are underlined. Some readers may find my characterisation OOC, but I assure you, this is how I see them in the dark distant future. I assume that Dumbledore's death in Book 6 was staged and that's why he's still alive in this story. It is explicitly stated in paragraph 22 of this chapter that Harry still hates Severus for his so-called "attempted murder" of Dumbledore.

For Peri and her daughter, Anya

Christmas Presents Undisguised

Chapter 1

Assembled in the town square of Diagon Alley, at the heart of wizarding London, was a large crowd of observers of the spectator sport that was about to unfold. It was the first of December and the weather was cold out. Despite the biting winds and the smell of roasted chestnuts in the air, the assembled people were more preoccupied with the sight before them than with the shops advertising their Yuletide wares or the chill threatening them with pneumonia. No, these concerns were not on their minds. Their attentions were riveted on one Lucius Malfoy, who after five years of hiding since the fall of his lord and master, Voldemort, had finally been brought to justice. The crowd was unable to contain its amazement when Malfoy offered a few words of goodwill and good health to the Minister of Magic, Harry Potter. 'To the health of the People's Minister', as he called him in his salute (that many viewed as out of place), 'and to the long lasting reign of justice in the new wizarding Britain.' His stirring words left even the wizarding Member of Parliament for London, a loquacious, self-important, pretentious and pot-bellied creature with execrable manners, who was overly fond of the sound of his own voice (as he had formerly been Minister of Magic) and prone to proselytising at such moments, was too stunned to moralise on this occasion.

Was this the Lucius Malfoy they lived in fear of, the people whispered. Was this not the Lucius Malfoy who was incarcerated in Azkaban in 1995 and somehow escaped in 1997 to rejoin Lord Voldemort's cause? Was this the same Lucius Malfoy who proceeded to lead the remaining Death Eaters' resistance movement upon the fall of Voldemort? Was this the same cold-blooded Lucius Malfoy who took over the Minister of Magic on his escape from Azkaban and acted as Voldemort's Minister of Information and Propaganda for two-and-a-half years prior to Harry Potter's elimination of the Dark Lord? The crowd was astonished at the severely emaciated and scarred man who now stood before them. It was difficult to believe that this was the same man who fled into hiding on his master's fall in an attempt to launch an insurgency to

revive the policies of the said fiend. Was this man whose bloody deeds damned him to death really capable of uttering charitable sentiments toward the Minister of Magic he had (to all appearances) hated for the past seven years of his tenure in office? Indeed, it was difficult to believe that this scheming, subversive man, who had abandoned everything that was good, just, and noble for the wiles of Voldemort's pure-blood policy and had only reappeared sporadically to launch abortive coups at the present Potter Administration, could have a decent heart beating in his mutilated chest. The vulgar amongst the crowd shuddered at this unpleasant thought and turned their attention to Cornelius Fudge, the Member of Parliament for the Diagon constituency of wizarding London, as he cleared his throat. Fudge unrolled the scroll of parchment in his hand, pronounced the death sentence and looked a little fearfully at the man with the roughly shaved head. 'Lucius Caesar Malfoy, do you voluntarily repudiate your belief in Voldethingy's policies? Do you swear to recant the said being's destruction and desecration of our traditional beliefs that he and the Death Eaters sought to replace with the cult of him? Renounce these and we will take your word back to the Minister and the Wizengamot that on this, your final judgement, you willingly returned to our ways, embracing all that is good in our world? Recant and let us know if you seek the people's forgiveness?'

Malfoy, who had had difficulty standing since the bailiffs extracted him from the hurdle, muttered a weak, 'I regret nothing; but all the same, I crave the forgiveness of those who have suffered.' Following which statement, he smiled weakly at the executioners without any malice and said in painful difficulty. "Proceed. Do what you must; I will not hold it against it.'

A large graceful man clothed in black and whose head was shrouded in the usual fashion of chief executioners with a black hood and ominous-looking eye slits -- nodded briefly and turned towards his apprentices who were hooded in scarlet. The first apprentice came forward slowly with a pair of heavy thongs and bound the once handsome Malfoy's hands behind his back; the second carefully eased the noose over Malfoy's head and adjusted it to a tight fit around his neck. Throughout this display of the power and judgement of the Potter Administration and Wizengamot's power, Fudge averted his eyes out of delicacy for the unfortunate man. In the past years, he reflected, executioners at these show-executions and the Extirpation Department (as it preferred to be called) were readily amenable to bribes from the families of the sentenced so that the actual ordeal of death could be (for the right price) be swift. Very often, out of the decency of their pockets, such requests from the victims' families would be obliged with a little poisoned wine, a breaking of the neck, or a stab to the vital organ anything to ease the suffering of the loved ones of the afflicted. In those cases, the executioners had, as they had been doing in the past seven years in the Potter Administration, disregarded the public's cry for blood and satisfaction. However, they were unable to humour the distraught Narcissa Malfoy as her husband was too well hated. The execution of Lucius Malfoy must be carried out to the letter as outlined in the Execution Handbook Volume 3: Dealing with Treasonous Felons. This execution was calculated to placate the people's heightened emotions and sooth the grievances they had endured under Malfoy's hand and that of Voldemort, for Malfoy was the last of that villain's inner circle to be brought to justice. The rest had managed to arrange for relatively quick deaths for themselves on the scaffold. Lucius Malfoy was not given that opportunity and for good reason the Potter Administration had to appease the public's demand for blood.

Taking the signal from the chief executioner stoking the fire in which he heated his torture and evisceration equipment, the second apprentice waved his wand and removed the trapdoor from under Malfoy's feet. With that movement, the first apprentice saw it fit to cast a spell to draw up the rope around Malfoy's neck to a position near the top of the gallows. The crowd elicited a mixed response at this sight some gasped in horror in his writhing body while others applauded the spectacle that greeted the first of the December winds. The unfortunate Lucius had been a tall and handsome man with platinum blond hair that shone like the brilliant reflections off the surface of a lake. He had also been an indulgent father and moderately charismatic in his implementation of Voldemort's policies during his brief two-and-a-half years of power. His enemies even grudgingly considered him an able administrator and a good Propaganda Minister. However, the spasmodically jerking figure was now battered, reed thin and far removed from his customary state of elegance. The crowd gasped again as he twitched conclusively in his dirty bloody nightshirt. The more bloodthirsty of the spectators burst into another shouting and applauding fit at the sight of Malfoy's roughly shorn head turning brilliant red then deep purple. The applause drew many more viewers to the square, including the nearby shopkeepers and street vendors, who were temporarily arrested from hawking their decapitated traitor Christmas souvenirs.

A tall hooded man, swathed in black, stood apart from the gaggle of spectators safely behind the line of Auror Cadets, casually surveying the scene. The wind whipped up at that moment, forcefully throwing back his hood, revealing the tall gentleman's features. His heavy eyes narrowed in a scowl, emphasising the bags under his eyes and he shook his head at the sight, curling his lips scornfully at the vulgarity of the crowd of witnesses of the show-execution which he knew was far from over. His hooked aquiline nose quivered ever so slightly at the fulsome sight he witnessed, as he traced his lips with a tapered finger. Other members of his class were also witnesses to the scene from behind the Auror Cadets, away from the rabble. These individuals were dressed in their Sunday best and earned nothing but the contempt of the lone gentleman, for they were clutching vials of volatile salts to their noses lest they should faint with fright. 'Hypocrites', mused the dark gentleman, 'all of you knew Lucius socially. Damn hypocrites.'

Unlike the other members of his station, this singular gentleman cared little for his appearance and was not the least concerned when his raven hair fell forward with the gust of the December wind, neither did he show any concern for the man writhing on the gallows. While the people near him discussed Malfoy's chequered career, the gentleman fixed his eyes firmly on the gently swinging body. So grim did he look that observers would be unable to determine if he was for such brutal treatment of convicted treasonous parties or against such punishment. He was, as his appearance implied, not a man to suffer fools lightly and it might appear strange that his usual razor quick reflexes did not result in him whipping out his wand when a dirty bent beggar came ambling next to him. This beggar in his soiled clothes, a twisted facial expression and making crass utterances to all those who dared shoo him off was known to the gentleman, who recognised him as the Head of the Wizengamot and the Secret Head of the Secret Department of Unspeakable Unspeakables, Albus Dumbledore.

'Good morrow, Professor Snape', began the beggar, noisily sucking on a sweet. No matter how pathetically dirty and grimy he made himself, Albus Dumbledore could not disguise his quick intelligent eyes and refined, slightly laughing, voice. Not even Polyjuice or advance glamour spells could remove these indelible (and lamentable) traits from him, so strong was the character of his mind.

The gentleman narrowed his eyes and flicked back his curtain of hair violently. 'What do you want with me, old fool?'

'Tut, tut, Severus, do not say such things, you never know who may be listening.'

Severus Snape felt a nerve twitch at the corner of his mouth and suppressed his natural urge to hex the beggar. In a bid to calm himself, he kept his eyes firmly trained on the gallows and curled his lips dangerously before hissing acidly, 'Does Potter demand my presence at this scene as a sign of loyalty to his damnable administration? As if his government's approval of such outdated barbarism is desirable! It hardly makes our world civilised!'

The dirty beggar rubbed his smudged nose and sighed. 'Your friend Lucius could have had clemency if he renounced Voldemort's beliefs. Harry spoke to him personally on the matter when he invited him to dine at Godric's Hollow the previous day. And even then, Lucius refused to recant his views and acknowledge that replacing our sainted wizards and witches of old with Voldemort was a poor policy strategy. He refused to do so even with an offer to wipe clean his slate should he recant. He is much to be pitied.'

'What for? For his strong character? For having consistent beliefs? This show-execution is only a perverse method of casting him in the mould of martyr to the dying Death Eater cause. May Merlin have pity on our bloody souls.'

'It is unfortunate for you Harry is not here to hear your words, my boy. They could be considered treasonous, especially since you were a Death Eater and alleged murderer of yours truly,' cautioned the beggar with the hint of a chuckle in his voice, without once turning to look at his companion.

'How dare you hold it against me when you ordered me to do so! Has Potter forgotten that I went underground you and served your confounded little Order faithfully? Curse you, old man Lucius was my friend, let us leave it at that,' he quietly retorted, angrily clenching and unclenching his fists.

'You have accounted for enough of those hanging on the gallows and these executions, my boy. Recall the Lestranges, Macnair, the Goyles, and...'

Severus snapped in a quiet and clipped tone, 'I have no desire to be reminded of this! I will do what you order of me because of the debt I owe you. You are mistaken if you believe I would extend the same courtesy to Potter. I will gladly be the instrument of demise to those of my former compatriots who favour wanton killings. This... this cruelty...' he paused and inclined his head forward to the man on the gallows, 'is revolting.'

The beggar shook his head sadly, playing with the sweet in his mouth. 'Like it or no, Lucius is a traitor. He did seek to eradicate our way of life. He captured some of our former students at that time for Riddle, if you would but recall.'

'Whatever his failings, he was consistent in his beliefs. I do not like brutality meted out thus. That's why I have tendered you my resignation from the Secret Service of the

Unspeakable Unspeakables. I just want to be a plain research professor of Alchemy in St John's College, Cambridge.'

'Oh yes, your resignation,' chuckled the old man in a hollow manner that froze the blood of his companion. 'I have decided not to accept it.'

'What!' choked Severus, keeping back the rage that was fighting to escape from his throat by folding his arms crossly. He was about to continue his reasoning when Malfoy's body was magically brought down from the gallows. Though he appeared dead, the chief executioner pronounced him to be still alive, which drew a "Bravo" from Fudge. Upon removing the offensive ropes from the prisoner's body, the two apprentices stripped him naked and strapped him to a table, allowing the chief executioner the luxury to use the red-hot evisceration equipment from the fire he was stoking earlier. Brandishing the long slender knife and well-shaped silver hook, the chief executioner plunged into his task of slitting Malfoy from his ribs to his groin, filling the air with crisp smell of burning flesh. Hence, with that masterful gesture, the disembowelment and dismemberment portion of the traitor's execution sentence begun to much rapturous applause. Mercifully, Malfoy must have either passed out from the pain or died and was unable to respond to the crowd's rowdy cheers as his guts were slowly pulled out and laid on the ground in a little heap. Then, when there was nothing left in the body cavity, the second apprentice lifted a heavy axe and beheaded the corpse while his fellow partner quartered the body.

Turning away from the sight, Dumbledore shrugged and looked directly into Severus's dangerously glinting eyes. 'Before you say anything more, know you that you are too valuable an asset, too capable a spy among the Unspeakable Unspeakables; you are too valuable to *me*. I will not release your bonds to me.' Seeing that Severus was about to violently protest, he hastily continued with a quelling look, "Do you know what Harry could do to you once you leave my protection? He will issue you the same sentence he imposed on your friend Lucius. He would compel the other members of the Wizengamot, excluding myself, to vote his way on your sentence. He still hates you for your so-called "attempted murder" of me in his sixth year at Hogwarts. Regardless of the National pardon and his outward civility to you, you must know he is more vengeful than a woman and can certainly hold a grudge as long as you. He keeps you in your comfortable existence. Do not snort dismissively. He does allow it to be that you appear rehabilitated because you were a great help to the Order of the Phoenix. You are an asset to *me*. Harry allows you to continue your life in your academic pursuits without Aurors dragging you away from your lectures at Cambridge because it is favour *to me*. All I want in return for this favour is a little observation on your part. Surely, that is not too much to ask.'

Severus's blood boiled on hearing the old man's homily. He narrowed his eyes hatefully at Dumbledore to signal his tacit acknowledgement of his helplessness. Oh, he knew only too well how helpless his position was, however he would not allow himself to appear cowed. 'Your threats,' began Severus in a harsh whisper, 'are not new to me.' He willed himself to slow his breathing. 'You and that loathsome Potter are fully cognisant of the extent of my contribution to your precious order. Have I not already paid for my sins? Have I no right to be left alone with my books and research!'

'I must repeat I refuse to accept your resignation. If you insist on leaving the Unspeakable Unspeakables, the internal investigation division of my department of the Secret Unspeakable Unspeakables will be ordered to look into your reasons for doing so. And that occurrence may be troublesome and ... inexpedient to you.'

The Alchemist raised his hood over his head and glared hotly at Albus Dumbledore's unethical methods of persuasion. 'Damn you, old man. A plague be upon your house!'

'You may curse me as much as you like,' said Dumbledore calmly as he ambled away. 'Come along with me and we'll discuss how your talents could serve me one last time before I let you off to your books for good. Don't give me one of your black looks, I will handle Harry. You follow me now; Lucius's head will be displayed around Azkaban and his body parts displayed near the river. There is nothing more to see, come along. Hold on to this sweet wrapper.'

He did so and a moment later, Severus found that they had been Portkeyed to the Hog's Head tavern. On seeing his brother's arrival, Aberforth Dumbledore promptly ushered the new arrivals to a private parlour in the backroom of the tavern that was warded from other intruders and eavesdroppers. The room, which was as foul as the rest of the tavern had a single candle burning on a table. Whether he was more perturbed by the shadows dancing in the flickering candlelight playing tricks on his mind or Albus Dumbledore's look of quiet discomfiture, Severus did not know. He only knew that the conversation to follow would not be casual one.

'Tell me, my boy. Do you know anything of the Discedes, Alkane and Morosia areas of wizarding London?' asked Dumbledore at last, as he cast a cleansing spell over himself.

Curling his lips into a thoughtful smirk, Severus thoughtfully said, 'They are adjacent to each other, mainly squib in population. Morosia borders Knockturn Alley or it would if it were on the same side of the Thames. It's across the river and is the poorest of these residential districts. It adjoins Alkane and Discedes follows. Alkane is as filthy and pestilent ridden as Knockturn and Morosia combined. Discedes is only marginally better, but it can hardly be called a respectable neighbourhood. They are places I have no desire to be in. They are nothing but centres for poverty, disease and death; and oh yes, cheap housing. Though why anyone would want to live there is beyond my meagre understanding.'

'Do you read the newspapers?' chuckled Albus at the young man's description.

'No. What has this got to do with the rubbish you're mouthing!' he demanded, banging the table in frustration and suspicion.

'There has been a rash of dead bodies there,' muttered Dumbledore, transfiguring his dirty robes into his usual blue ones and removing the disfiguration charm from himself. 'Eight in fact.'

'Given the inhospitable areas, I am not surprised there weren't more. In fact, should there have been more bodies heaped there? Why are you telling me this? I am not to be taken in by your inscrutable reasons!' Severus barked, fighting his urge to hex his long-term acquaintance into oblivion.

'The situation in those areas is not improving. It is not a matter of merely eight murders. It is a case of merely eight ritualistic murders by the same hand,' declared Dumbledore quietly, as he rubbed his brow, furrowed from very real worry. 'Harry has put me onto it; rather, he has put the Unspeakable Unspeakables onto it. I need your help. There is no sense in the killings. The victims are unrelated and robbery is not the motive. The questions are: how were they lured to these slums? Why were they killed? Why the perverse madness? You should have seen the photographs of the mutilations. They are worse than the kinds you saw at your Dark Revels with Voldemort far worse. I have seen the pictures and they look ritualistic to me.'

The dark Alchemist raised a brow signalling his faint interest as he traced his lower lip with a long finger. 'The victims tell me about them,' he questioned in a cold calculating manner.

Dumbledore's voice faltered for a moment when he tried to speak, so awful was the image in his mind that he had to swallow hard before answering in a thoughtful yet distracted tone, 'The victims appear random to me. Each victim was wandless and brutally assaulted before they were stabbed to death in the throat. Upon the onset of death, I hope it was post-mortem, the bodies were disembowelled in the crudest way imaginable. This is not the work of a surgeon. I have ruled out a Muggle murderer because they do not have access to those "wizarding slums" as you so elegantly phrased it. The victims so far are Dean Thomas, old Augusta Longbottom, Zacharias Smith, Marietta Edgecombe, Colin Creevey, Susan Bones, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks.'

Severus sat upright in his seat and folded his arms, brusquely tossing his head to better glare at his companion. 'A fair cross section of our community. Could be the work of a lunatic squib.'

'The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has investigated that avenue and uncovered nothing,' replied Dumbledore, popping a sherbet lemon into his mouth.

'Werewolf attack?'

'No trace of werewolf saliva, blood or DNA.'

'Why come to me?' snapped Severus, clearly irritated by the answers. 'Ask the regular Aurors and regular Unspeakables to investigate!'

'They have drawn a blank. The Wizengamot is taking a personal interest in this,' Dumbledore casually mentioned.

Severus arched a brow, effectively masking his surprise. 'The Wizengamot interested in non-political murders? This is a brave new world after all! Potter's intervention no

doubt!"

'Politicians do nothing but form committees to form more committees to discuss the problem. Harry and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement have quadrupled the Auror patrol to these areas; warnings have been published in the newspapers; houses have been searched. All the usual procedures have been set in motion and they have yielded nothing.'

'How long as this been going on?'

'The past eight months, likely longer.'

Severus curled his lips contemptuously and glowered at Dumbledore. He understood it at last he was to play spy again, but instead of playing a spy to catch other spies and traitors, he was now asked to apprehend a ruthless, possibly mad, murderer on the loose. 'So,' he drawled in a slow deliberate tone. 'If I do this for you; you will accept my resignation?'

'Yes, wizard's oath, my boy.'

'Yet, I am not moved. A few dead members of our community makes no difference to me.'

'Ever the misanthrope,' chuckled the old man before putting aside his falsely gay air. 'It is a serious matter. Harry suggested that a 500-galleon reward be posted. The Wizengamot has approved it but the public has not come forward.'

Severus smirked at his "employer" and sometime psychological blackmailer. A part of him was pleased that the all omniscient Albus Dumbledore wasn't quite the character he was made out to be in the modern fables. It tickled the ironic portion of his brain to see the usually self-contained Albus Dumbledore disconcerted. 'What did you mean to relay to me?'

'I'm glad you asked.' Dumbledore leaned forward and lowered his voice further, his hands idly drumming the table. 'Two of my best, most efficient, most intelligent Unspeakable Unspeakables will be duly appointed to bring this savage to justice. Harry has approved and I promise you, I will no longer hold you to your obligations toward me after this. You will be under the guise of your usual authority as an investigator with the British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry. I have already presented Hermione Granger with all the facts of the case and she will doubtlessly liaise with you at Spinner's End later today and apprise you of the details.'

'I do not see how this will help! *I will not* work with anyone else. Furthermore,' said Severus scathingly as he placed his hands in a steeple under his chin. 'What if your agents should fail?' He smirked at the sight of Dumbledore paling.

'They will not!'

'Confident, aren't you? What if *I fail*?'

'With Dr Granger, you will not!' insisted Dumbledore, gravity in his eyes. 'You cannot do this alone, Severus. Hermione is an expert on analytical philosophical Arithmancy; you're an expert on logical Alchemical theory together, you are the most feared thing in academia the philosophical logician.'

'Spare me your praise of the woman. Her blasted department is one floor below mine at St John's College. She still is a wretched know-it-all! I can see it in her published papers! How can you expect me to cooperate with her! You know these recent D.Mag.A dunderheads are full of their whimsical notions.'

'She has had her Doctor of Magical Arts for the past four years, Severus. Work with her, and I'll never call on your services for this sort of affair again. Trust me,' implored Dumbledore in a tiredly serious voice. 'You have never handled anything of this magnitude; her good sense will temper your bellicose impulses.'

'Very well,' murmured Severus bitterly once he realised Dumbledore had already made all the arrangements. He rose to leave and shot a parting question at the old man. 'What time did *you* tell her to call on me?'

'At half past two. Thank you, my boy,' Dumbledore said with a mixture of wary relief, to which Severus snorted derisively and swept out of the tavern

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I could mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out how it fits with the story. 'Presents' could also mean 'current' which would be another pun for Christmas now under the Potter Administration and Christmas then, under the Voldemort administration.

The execution here is based on 15-17th century accounts of executions at Tyburn. It may be disturbing to some readers. If you're interested in such things, please refer to V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

The other murders that will be in this story will be gory. If that horrifies you, do not read this story.

Mention of the 'decapitated traitor Christmas souvenirs' is a reference to the French Revolution where such souvenirs were actually sold during executions.

Chirurgion is Middle English for *cirurgian*, from Old French *cirurgien*, from *cirurgie*, surgery. Here it simply means 'surgeon'.

The Aurors operate out of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. In my opinion, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has many offices under its jurisdiction, the Aurory is one of them.

Readers may be put off by Albus Dumbledore in this story. I've always seen him as a bit of a tricky sort and I wanted to bring that across fully. If it does not suit your palate, I apologise.

Everything here on wizarding politics is entirely made up.

D.Mag.A stands for Doctor of Magical Arts. It's a made-up wizarding PhD.

Cf. paragraph 5. It is mentioned there that sometimes families bribe executioners to break their loved one's necks prior to the execution. Readers may not see the point of breaking the prisoner's neck if they are going to be hung, in which process their necks would be broken anyway but only if the drop is long and fast, otherwise, as my beta pointed out, the accused only drops a short way the force is not sufficient to break the neck, and instead the prisoner suffocates from the pressure of the rope on the larynx. The thing is in this story, the prisoners are not hung until they are dead. They are hung on the gallows as a means of public torture. It is a show-execution.

Traitors are not just hung in the Potter administration show-executions. They are also disembowelled and quartered. This is in keeping with the medieval executions in Britain. Families would bribe executioners to break their loved one's neck as soon as the noose was placed over the victim's neck. This way, they would already be dead when they were hung up on the gallows and would not be concerned when the executioners brought them down for a disembowelment session. Please note that in the best situations (according to the executioners, the administrators and sometimes the crowd), disembowelment is done when the prisoner is still alive

Readers may object to me calling Dumbledore's department (as will be revealed in later chapters) the Secret Department of Unspeakable Unspeakables because the agents there are more unspeakable than normal unspeakables. They are so unspeakable that they are secret. This will be apparent in later chapters.

The 'A plague be upon your house!' line is taken from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Marietta's surname is spelt 'Edgecombe' in my British edition of OOTP (2004). From my discussions with my beta, I understand that in some American editions, her last name is spelt 'Edgecome' (as evinced here on this website <http://www.mugglenet.com/infosection/characters/characters2.shtml>). However, I choose to follow the British edition.

The number of deaths is astonishing and set to rise. Everyone mentioned here (unless stated otherwise) comes from the HP universe in the 6 books.

In HP canon, Dean Thomas is a Gryffindor student and a contemporary of HP and gang. He is mentioned throughout the 6 books.

In HP canon, Old Augusta Longbottom is Neville's grandmother. Her name was mentioned in Book 6 HBP.

In HP canon, Zacharias Smith is a Hufflepuff Quidditch player. He was recruited into Dumbledore's Army in Book 5 OOTP.

In HP canon, Marietta Edgecombe is a Ravenclaw student, and contemporary of HP and gang. She was mentioned in Book 5 OOTP. She told Dolores Umbridge of the formation of Dumbledore's Army.

In HP canon, Colin Creevey is a Gryffindor student, a year younger than HP and gang. He is mentioned in Books 2-6.

In HP canon, Susan Bones is the girl in the long plait down her back. She was mentioned in Book 5 as a niece of Madam Bones in chapter 16 where she was recruited to join Dumbledore's Army.

In HP canon, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks are Aurors. They appear in Books 5 and 6.

P/S: As Christmas is a month away, I'm slowly releasing this story in lieu of the Language of Flowers. Les Fleurs will continue after Christmas when I've finished revising another draft of my thesis.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 8

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes Dumbledore's death in HBP was staged. *Contents may be disturbing to readers*

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Chapter 2

The day had been draining enough on Severus Snape and on his arrival home, he promptly retreated into his study. It was a modest room and the second darkest in his house, just off the sitting room. It was the most inhabited part of his house and the part where he felt he could best be himself. Stirring up a good fire in his grate, Severus glided to his desk and stared at his shelves of books, before finding the one he had been thinking of and added it to the pile on his desk. His desk creaked slightly at the weight of the books, papers, diaries, measuring instruments, vials, beakers, maps and all. He picked up the book on ancient wizarding blood rituals and tried to fit the information Dumbledore had revealed to him with the words of his book. With his mind thus occupied, he did not notice a knock on his door. As the banging became more protracted, he swept out to chase the idiot away from his residence. Before he could offer any cutting remark to the person at the door, Dr Hermione Granger, brushed past him, squeezed her way into his sitting room, and asked him for directions to his book room.

'Why?' he asked suspiciously, locking the front door while staring at the petite woman with her neat grey travelling cloak and loose hair bun.

'There is much we have to discuss,' she said brusquely.

Severus narrowed his eyes and snarled malevolently at his unwanted guest, 'I do not see why I should allow you into my private study. If you want to say anything, make it quick and be gone.'

'Look, Professor Snape,' she snapped before approaching him with a dangerous look in her eyes. 'I am as keen on this collaboration nonsense as you are. The sooner we get done with it, the better it will be for the both of us. I was under the impression that we each stood to gain certain freedoms if we finish this investigation, and I intend that we should do so in as methodological a manner as possible.'

'Do not presume to lecture me, insufferable woman!' he hissed, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her soundly.

'Only if you do not presume to lecture me, *sir*,' she answered, struggling out of his grip. As soon as she had done so, she knew that he had allowed her to wiggle free. It was a sign, she felt, for her to show herself out. She rolled her eyes at his diversionary tactics it would take more than that to discourage her. 'I did not ask to work with you or anyone else, Professor Snape,' she continued frostily, matching the temperature of the sitting room. 'If you will be so kind as to direct us to the book room, I will show you a legal document explaining why we cannot possibly work alone however much we may wish it.'

Curling his lips from self-loathing and hatred for Dumbledore and the woman in his house (a woman who did not paint her face thank Merlin), he dramatically drew his robes closer to himself and silently retreated to his study. Hermione took it as a sign that she should follow suit and did so. On entering, the well-kept book room, she sat down at a nearby tea table with an arch look on her face. There were tea-things placed there, evidently untouched and warm. As soon as her host had filled his own cup of tea and floated it to his desk next to his pile of precariously stacked books, he waved a hand dismissively in her direction. She took the gesture and the scowl on his face as an unwilling gesture to show her some hospitality as a colleague.

No sooner had she partaken of her first sip of scalding Earl Grey tea when the truculent host quietly narrated the events of the morning to her. She smiled silently when she was regaled with his comments on Dumbledore's character as he narrated his perceived concerns in this investigatory mission. On his part, though Severus appeared outwardly displeased, he was privately disposed to be a grudging admirer of Dr Granger's work in Arithmancy. In his relation of the events, he observed with a certain vicious satisfaction that the woman was gingerly sipping her tea in a most awkward manner, a circumstance to which he attributed to her having burned her tongue.

Hopefully, he mused, it would keep her quiet for a while and allowed him to mull over all the facts of the case as it presently stood. When he came to the probable ritualistic nature of the deaths, he noticed that she had removed her charcoal grey travelling cloak and was occupied with warming herself by the fire, clutching her teacup between her pale, slightly trembling hands.

'Dumbledore is asking a lot of us,' she commented thoughtfully, staring into the fire unblinkingly.

'No doubt he means us to be flattered,' sneered Severus bitterly, earning him an ironic smirk from his guest. 'What document did that stupid old goat issue preventing us from pursuing our own ends in this mission?'

'A trumped-up version of the usual British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry special powers multi-purpose warrant and pass,' she answered, setting down her teacup and withdrawing a scroll of parchment tied with a blue ribbon, which she floated to his desk.

'With Dumbledore's seal, I expect,' he spat derisively, folding his arms defensively, refusing to see what was written on the parchment. 'No wonder he said all was settled when I asked him for a BWCP warrant to question, be-spell, search, detain, maim and kill any person I saw fit vis-à-vis this matter. Barmy old rogue!'

Hermione inclined her head to one side and leaned closer to the fire. Her eyes though, somewhat amused by her colleague's outburst, belied the hard and grave note in her voice. 'I asked him for the same when he called on me in my office today telling me almost everything he had told you. Do you know what he did? He said he had the foresight to prepare one already and proceeded to fish it out of his robes.'

'Incorrigible!' agreed Severus in a livid hiss, who was so united in abusing Dumbledore's character with Hermione that he quite forgot that she was an insufferable know-it-all. 'If only his foresight was limited to solving this conundrum, we would not be in this situation.'

'You should peruse the pre-prepared document. It *already* bears our names,' she stated through clenched teeth as she rubbed her hands together. 'There's no escaping it, Professor Snape, we're magically bound to bring this barbarian to justice.'

'Damn his infernal cheek!' cursed Severus, throwing his teacup into the wall behind Hermione. 'His presumptuous ways will be the death of him, I pray! How long has he been planning this! More importantly, to what end?'

Twisting her lips to signify her annoyance at his sudden violent outburst, which she realised on hindsight was not unexpected, she rose and cast a spell to restore the teacup to its original state. 'How fortunate that end does not spell death by splintering teacup pieces!' she commented in a deliberately abrasive tone.

'The fact that you are capable of talking to me without a scratch on your person demonstrates that you are not hurt, Dr Granger; as such, there is no need to douse me with verbal vitriol,' he spat, perusing the warrant and silently cursing Dumbledore with the pox.

'Oh no, I have become so inured to *your vitriolic remarks* that they must have bounced off me and returned to you,' she answered coldly with a catlike smirk.

Pointedly ignoring her though he was inwardly seething with irritation, he reread the parchment and asked, 'What kind of a miscreant is this if such a desperate warrant and two Unspeakable Unspeakables are needed?'

'This fellow is not the usual lout or treasonous traitor. He or she strikes with no apparent pattern and is so brutal in his or her ways that society will soon pay attention to these killings if we do not do something,' replied Hermione as she examined a map of seventeenth century wizarding London above the fireplace.

Severus rested his chin on his knuckles thoughtfully and frowned. 'What could possibly be the connection between them? Why were the killings so heinously executed? It is not random, whatever Dumbledore says.'

'Now that we know what have to do, we can start tomorrow. What time shall I call here for you?' Hermione asked, putting on her cloak and making her way to the door of the study.

'Where do you think you're going?' he barked when she saw that she was making a move to leave.

'The Green Dragon. I bespoke a room there before I came here.'

'I will not have my schedule upset by waiting for you to come from that rodent infested inn without central heating!' he declared with great annoyance.

'What do you suggest then?' she asked, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

'My hours are irregular. You had better remove yourself here to the guest bedroom. Upstairs, second door on the right. When I wish to stir outdoors on this venture, I will drag you out, whether you like it or not, understand? Do not think this is a gesture of goodwill! It is my method of coming terms with this unpleasant mission as soon as possible!' As Hermione was staring blankly at his injunction, he continued, 'Well, what are you waiting for? Go get your things from that pathetic excuse of an inn.'

* * *

The sections of wizarding London across the Thames were indeed as bleak and foul as Severus had imagined. The alleyways were narrow and noisome. The buildings were mostly dilapidated, filthy and decayed, lazily leaning on each other, threatening to fall onto the equally foul streets or on the innocent passers-by or onto the equally foul streets. Even the roads, which were considered to be the main thoroughfares of Morosia, were dark and squalid, overrun by rodents (of both the *Homo sapiens* and *rattus* varieties) and smelled of sewage and human waste. Along these routes, which passed off as paths, rats and humans alike scuttled back and forth looking suspiciously over their shoulders. The Discedes, Alkane and Morosia areas of wizarding London stood in stark contrast to the sophistication of its sister Diagon Alley across the river. Where the other sections of the stretch in Diagon Alley (and even Knockturn Alley) were full of pre-Christmas cheer and teeming with street vendors and shopkeepers beckoning casual shoppers to patronise their mistletoe and holly bedecked stores where all kinds of seasonal treats were sold, from toys to foodstuffs and books, the other side of the river was a vortex of poverty, despair and helplessness. Little if anything resembling festive merchandise was sold. The only sounds vaguely resembling mirth in these slum areas of wizarding London were the cackling ill-formed throaty yowls of the many drunks. The griminess of that part of the city was emphasised by the constant burning of inferior quality coal and sodden wood fires, which frequent occurrence near every corner emitted thick black smoke spiralling up coating the buildings in more filth. The people, squibs, unfortunates, the blind, lame, mute, plain downtrodden and the criminal elements of the city gathered around these fires in unsuccessful attempts to keep warm, forming dark dirty shadows in the landscape of the city.

These were the sights and smells that assailed Professor Severus Snape and Dr Hermione Granger as they were conducted through that section of wizarding London by the Deputy Commissioner of the Aurory, Ronald Weasley. As they made their way through these disturbing elements, it occurred to both academics and Unspeakable Unspeakables that all manner of disreputable beings could freely move in the tripartite cesspit of Discedes, Alkane and Morosia. Severus and Hermione exchanged knowing glances when they saw that the individuals in that part of wizarding London were more animal than human in their behaviour and looked askance at strangers, cursing them through their silent reddish and rheumy eyes. Crime ran amok in such an environment that was plainly evident. While making their way to the scene of the very first of these murders, they saw that husbands and wives were prone to killing each other; children openly did each other in; parents and children embedded in an endless cycle of poverty, hate and senseless violence; members of both sexes sold themselves freely on the streets for they had no choice in the matter should they resist, their favours would have been forcefully snatched and no slimy coin payment would follow. Money gained in such circumstances was invariably spent on alcohol and apothecary so that they could drink themselves into oblivion, forgetting that their lives were completely miserable, or they could drug themselves into stupor hoping that they would never awaken.

As Hermione cringed at the sight of these elements so close to her, she found herself quite relieved when Ron stopped them in their tracks in the back alley of a poorly kept tavern. 'This is where we found the first body, Professors,' said Ron, slipping Hermione a toffee so that she wouldn't throw up from the stench.

Severus pushed him out of the way, examined the alley wall, and noticed that the bloodstains had not been scrubbed from it. Most likely no one cared enough to bother

cleaning the area, he mused with an ironic smirk playing at the corner of his lips. When he knelt down so as to better inspect the ground, Hermione proceeded to question her friend, 'So Ron, tell me everything about the body here.'

'Thought you would never ask,' said the redheaded Deputy Commissioner with a grin as he removed his notebook from his breast pocket. 'Marietta Edgecome, our first body, was found here murdered on the night of May 15th. She worked in the international financial bureau of Gringotts. We have no idea why she landed on this side of wizarding London.'

'How very informative, Weasley,' sneered Severus, getting up so as to glare at the young man from a better vantage point. 'You are a credit to the office you hold!'

Hermione spot a quelling look at Severus for she caught the sardonic hint in his voice. It was a hint that was missed by the young Deputy Commissioner. Ron took it as a rare compliment of his abilities and coloured violently, so much so that his skin colour matched his hair. Shifting his weight from one foot to another in apparent shyness, he murmured his thanks and revealed that he and his men kept careful accounts of each case.

'Very well then,' said Hermione quickly, as soon as she saw Severus's eyes glitter dangerously from the information. 'Give me the notebook, Ron. We will take charge of the investigation from here on.'

'Oh,' murmured Ron in shock as he handed his book to his friend.

'Ron, you can go. We'll be fine,' Hermione instructed in a peremptory manner as she perused the leaves of the notebook. Severus could not resist a smirk at young Weasley's expense for all his vows of friendship and claims of understanding his intelligent friend, it was abundantly clear that he did not. Her mind was forever shut off to him because they were unable to meet at any level. He saw that Ron had put on an expression of puppy dog eyes meant to signal his hurt feelings and gave a brief burst of laughter.

'Er, I don't think it's safe, Hermione,' Ron mumbled.

'Nonsense,' answered Dr Granger, meditating over something she had read in the notebook. "We'll be fine."

'I know you're a university prof and with that secret office and all, but there's no need to be so uppity about it!' he blustered, much to Severus's amusement.

'Your *friend* is working here, Weasley,' sneered Severus with satisfaction at the young man's fallen face. 'While her mind is at work, she will think of nothing else, not you or that blasted rat as large as a cat.'

'That doesn't give her a right to be so... so... you know, toward me! I'm one of her oldest friends, along with Harry!' insisted Ron stoutly, colouring again, but this time with a much different emotion.

'Ah, and where is your *dear Harry* now? Would one of Dr Granger's oldest friends ask for her to be sent to the worst of the country's slums to investigate a slew of murders? He has promoted you, I see, to your brilliant rank. I suppose you think you can lord it over is from your towering height,' spat the Alchemist in a chillingly biting voice. 'Your friend Dr Granger is far superior to that idiot you hero worship. She has an emotional equilibrium that you lack. Observe her now, thinking and pacing, can you see her for what she is?'

'Of course, I see 'Mione; a very cold 'Mione, probably a trait she learnt from hanging around greasy gits like you!'

Severus rolled his eyes and curled his lips in scorn at the young man. It was pointless to explain to a mere dunderhead the shrewdness of mind necessary to separate one's private sentiments from one's public persona; a cool impassive shell was necessary to the successful conduct of all these sort of secret Unspeakable missions. Severus folded his arms against his chest and mulled over Hermione's expression of deep thought indeed, he knew very well how and why one must never allow grief, fear, anger or any other sentiment to be displayed when one is on a spying and investigation mission. Intellectual enthusiasm when the game was afoot was entirely permissible and the only sentiment allowed in a dangerous game played by the forces in Dumbledore's Unspeakable Unspeakables. Hermione soon finished her perusal of the notebook and handed it to her colleague with the words, 'Curiousier and curiousier,' earning a raised brow of inquiry at her comment.

Unable and unwilling to leave his friend be, Ron stood helplessly aside, flashing his Auror's uniform to all who dared approach their party. Hermione, he noticed, continued pacing and muttering to herself. Severus, on the other hand, was coolly flipping through his notebook with a furrowed look of perturbation. Unbeknownst to the Deputy Commissioner, Severus and Hermione both found his notes unsatisfactory and sketchy at best but given the circumstances, it was better than nothing.

'Can you tell us anything else? Who consorted with the victims consorted? Where they lived and so?' asked Hermione trying to keep her annoyance of her friend's solicitous questions on her health in check.

'I've sent them to your flat. But we do not know whom they could have been with. We only have their home addresses and occupational addresses. No one at the scene of the crimes appeared to be bloody when we arrived on the scene. Local rumours blame the killings on spirits or demons,' said Ron sulkily when he realised Hermione was only interested in the case presently before her.

'How bloody were the bodies?' asked Severus sternly as he traced his lips in thought.

'Very much so!' exclaimed Ron with some horror in his face, as he withdrew a medium sized envelope from his pocket. 'Marietta Edgecome had her throat cut very badly, the head was nearly severed. Her body was also savagely stabbed, with a long slender blade. She was badly cut up but not quite torn apart.'

Hermione took the proffered envelope and perused the photos of the corpses in them with mild disgust and her eyes momentarily glassed over as she tried to pinpoint the type of weapon used.

'Do you mean to say she was disembowelled?' snapped Severus peevishly, for he was frustrated with the Deputy Commissioner's limited command of the English Language.

With a firm shake of the head, Ron shuddered. 'Marietta was not gutted, Snape. The later ones were. The killings appeared to grow in intensity. They are by far the bloodiest things I have ever seen here. And that's saying a lot because murders happen here everyday. These ones, with this crazy killer are just scary... too bloody, too violent. It looks too complex for the people here who usually just kill cleanly.'

'The gutting was it like the kind sanctioned at the show-executions?' quizzed Severus.

'No, the things they do at the gallows and scaffold are clean. The ones you see here in these pictures,' Ron paused to indicate the pictures Hermione passed to Severus at that moment. 'The ones you see in these photos are not clean. There is much tearing and stabbing and hacking and slashing.'

'Gratuitous wouldn't you say, Dr Granger?' commented Severus in ironic tone.

'Quite right,' concurred Hermione with a thoughtful nod at her colleague when she caught the double pun in his comment. 'Come Ron; lead us to the other seven places where the bodies were found.'

'Why did you think of the show-executions?' Hermione asked Severus when Ron led them into the catacombs below an abandoned shrine to ancient Welsh wizards.

'An idle inclination, Dr Granger,' said Severus, a nerve twitching at the corner of his mouth in anxiety and annoyance. 'Decapitation and disembowelment sound very familiar don't they?'

'You think it's a government official?'

'Did I say anything like that?' he challenged, his eyes narrowing at her unflinching gaze.

Realising that they were at an intellectual impasse in their verbal fencing bout, Hermione decided to gracefully withdraw and pose another question. 'How do you think Ron can be told that his presence with us only keeps the suspect at bay? He is hell bent on refusing our exposure to this district.'

'Perhaps we should convince him of the merits of the salubrious air across the river?'

Hermione lowered her eyes and smiled at his dark humour. 'Good. I'll leave it to you to convince him that we are unable to interview the worst elements in these areas with his mother-hennish behaviour!'

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I could mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out how it fits with the story. 'Presents', as my beta pointed out, could also mean 'current' which would be another pun for Christmas now under the Potter Administration and Christmas then, under the Voldemort administration.

'Curiousier and curiousier' is a line from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 8

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes Dumbledore's death in HBP was staged. *Contents may be disturbing to readers*

Author's note: This story may not please everyone as it is not the usual fluffy Christmas story. The scenes depicted in this story may be offensive and objectionable to some readers for their explicit violence and gore. This story deviates from my usual writing. Emphases are in italics and titles of books &ca are underlined. Some readers may find my characterisation OOC, but I assure you, this is how I see them in the dark distant future. I assume that Dumbledore's death in Book 6 was staged and that's why he's still alive in this story.

Christmas Presents Undisguised

Chapter 3

The investigators were not the least surprised to discover that the other seven murder sites looked rather like the first in that they were in derelict lots, in abandoned buildings, in the dingiest and grimmest of the alleyways and so on. Examinations of the scenes of the crimes (as Severus and Hermione surmised) were all very well, but not quite as effective examining the bodies would have been. However, as the bodies were already either buried or cremated, they could not be exhumed as wizarding custom forbade the disturbance of cadavers who had suffered in life. This custom had its premise in the belief that a person who had died in a violent manner had suffered a great deal during his or her final moments and as such, should be allowed to rest in peace for eternity to compensate for the sudden brutal end the deceased had met.

Ron, the Deputy Commissioner of the Aurory, was kind enough to point out to the investigator the things he noted at the various scenes of the murder and the little that he recalled about each victim. As they arrived at the last murder site he was so moved by his own beneficence in protecting them from the undesirable elements in the wizarding London slums that he made so free as to give them his notebook to further their search for the deranged killer.

In their full tour of the murder sites, Severus and Hermione learned that the second victim was Susan Bones on June 27th; her body was cut up and nearly beheaded, very much like the first body of Marietta Edgecome. She was a clerk in one of the fashion houses for a Witches' magazine. Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Auror, was killed on August 24th; his body was severely mutilated and his head was left lying in-between his legs in a pool of his own blood. It was speculated that he was killed because he had uncovered the identity of the murderer. Dean Thomas's death on September 21st marked the first of the disembowelments. He was a banking officer with Gringotts and was most brutally hacked apart; the photographs looked almost as if he had been eviscerated from the inside out. Nymphadora Tonks, the Auror, followed on September 27th. October 4th marked the death of Colin Creevey, photographer for the *Daily Prophet*; Zacharias Smith, who was training to be a preceptor of ancient wizarding customs, was next on October 21st. He was followed by old Mrs Longbottom, who was the last victim thus far. She was killed on November 17th in a disused shed by the river facing the Chardobis district north of the Knockturn Alley. Her killing was the most brutal of all the killings. In addition to the decapitation and disembowelment, she was also sexually assaulted with the items found in the disused shed, such as cutters, harpoons, and a mop. She was not only disembowelled; her internal organs were also finely diced and laid out in neat piles around her body. Her head and heart were found mutilated and placed on display outside the shed, mounted on a broomstick and mop stick respectively.

'Interesting case, isn't it?' Hermione addressed Severus on learning the details. She had to keep talking to prevent her stomach from revolting on her and as if sensing her moment of temporary illness, Severus quietly linked arms with her and told her to eat one of Weasley's confounded toffees and be silent.

After obliging his friend with his packet of toffees, Ron asked the investigators, 'What kind of a monster you think did this? A demon?'

'No, possibly a devil,' mocked Severus with a stern look of disapproval at the Deputy Commissioner's superstitious imagination.

Hermione laughed weakly at their exchange and playfully added, 'Professor Snape should know, he has so many demons within himself that he is one. Trust me, Ron, demons become misanthropes. They have too much honour in them and too great a sense of justice to want to embark on a meaningless killing spree.'

Affronted by her all-too-accurate reading of his character, Severus glowered at her in what he considered to be his most intimidating manner and contemplated flinging her arm off. However, a second look at her pallor from the exertions and shocks of the day as well as her grave eyes during her comment made him change his mind. She was trying to tell him something, he felt, and after a moment's reflection, he hit on the exact meaning of her words.

'Demon or devil,' he slowly began, eyeing Ron contemptuously. 'Only man both wizard and Muggle commit such horrors. Everyday the newspapers will invariably publish a crime in which somebody is killed. You stated it so yourself, Mr Deputy Commissioner of the Aurory there are deaths occurring daily in the areas of Discedes, Alkane and Morosia. There *is* death everywhere, everyday, and it is reflected in the way we live and the way the newspapers, vulgar inventions of man, lap it all up. The whole history of man is associated with death and violence. Why can't we stop this? Because we *cannot* possibly stop human beings from killing one another. Why is this? Because people fear death, people fear dying a violent death. This informs us that there is something fundamentally frightening about human beings.'

Noting Ron's look of utter befuddlement on his face and observing that his lips were slightly parted for a retort that was most likely going to be rude, Hermione quickly

interposed, 'You have to understand, Ron dear, that Professor Snape is saying that we cannot eradicate evil from the world because it is, like it or not, a part of modern human existence.'

The redheaded Auror snorted and harrumphed at the two academics' theory. 'How did you get that idea, 'Mione? From your book learning? There are good things in this world. Harry's done a lot of good! He's defeated Voldemort; brought all those Death Eater swine to justice, re-imposed the death penalty; established law and order.'

'And yet the murders we are investigating continue,' sighed Hermione in exasperation, as she tightened her grip on Severus's supporting arm lest she should be tempted to reach out and throttle her friend or vomit over him whichever urge was stronger. 'My poor friend, you have fallen into the modern trap. You have become a happy slave. Has it even occurred to you that Harry's a politician and there are many things in our very midst that are disturbing?'

'Leave him be, Dr Granger. Do not waste your breath,' counselled Severus with a cold look at their redheaded guide. 'If he does not see that modern life has become a masque of fraud, deception and evil, which ordinary members of society adopted from politicians, let him be happy in his ignorance.'

'Sounds like something the realist wizarding philosopher Hans Morgenthau would say, "*The end of Machiavellianism is not just around the corner, it is not of this world at all. If it were, salvation from evil itself would be of this world.*" It is most depressing that our current investigations seem to evince this unhappy truth,' Hermione said wistfully, patting Ron's arm in a conciliatory gesture with her free hand.

Severus could not resist curling a corner of his lips into something akin of a smile. He was quietly impressed with Dr Granger's knowledge of realist wizarding philosophy, and owned himself pleasantly surprised by her diplomatic skills. He could not resist watching her pat and soothe the ignorant Ronald Weasley to his former grand notion of himself and his simple understanding of the world, with a raised brow of thoughtful amusement. He now understood why Dumbledore had assigned them on this investigation. Yet, something she said earlier in their initial meeting on this new assignment puzzled him. She had said something to the effect that they both stood to gain certain freedoms when they completed their collaborative efforts in the investigation. Just what did she stand to gain that was what he wanted to know. He shook his head to dispel all notions of such idle thoughts. His first and foremost mission was to complete this rampaging killer case, everything else could follow later.

With that thought and his newfound respect for her in his mind, Severus turned to Hermione with a question as to their investigation. 'Since we are agreed on the nature of this devil or demon being in human skin, a problem now presents itself what does the fellow gain by doing all this? Robbery is not his motive, for all the victims' valuables were near their corpses.'

'That's the thing that the Aurory's trying to figure out too,' interjected Ron enthusiastically.

'And on that note, Mr Weasley, our collaboration must end. Dr Granger and I must proceed on the rest of this fearsome journey without your protection,' Severus purred with false civility.

Ron stared incredulously at Severus before looking to Hermione and back to Severus again. He laughed uneasily, 'I thought I misheard you. I thought you said you were going to manage on your own hereon.'

'You did, *Captain*. Your duty is to ensure safety in our fair community. The duty that has been imposed on Dr Granger and I is to catch this villain. Do you understand me? Please do not let us keep you from your job as law enforcer. I would be loathe to keep you from your *assigned* duties,' Severus silkily drawled, much to amusement of Hermione.

After violently protesting the matter and informing them that Dumbledore's warrant would not ensure their safety in this most dangerous of wizarding London without Auror protection, Hermione assured Ron that they were armed with wands and fully capable of dealing any footpad mad enough to want to rob them. With a sigh, Ron had little choice but to allow the two best Unspeakable Unspeakables to be on their way. Before they parted ways however, Hermione instructed her friend to arrange with her landlady's house-elf to forward to Spinner's End all the information on the victims he had sent to her flat. At this command, Ron balked and glared at Severus, saying something to the effect that the Alchemist was too selfish to protect Hermione should this demon select her as its next victim. The investigators laughed at his notion and informed him that he had to only secure any future murder scenes of a similar nature and send for them immediately when he encountered one.

Before he could protest further, Severus and Hermione apparated back to the second murder scene to comb the area for any further clues. Once there, they both felt a multitude of eyes watching their every move. While Severus was accustomed to this on account of his days as a Death Eater, Hermione was discomfited by the thoughts of these observers' intents.

To diminish the fearful part of her brain, Hermione called on her training in analytical Arithmancy to focus the task at hand. 'Do you find it odd that Mrs Longbottom was so brutally slain, more so than the rest?' she asked Severus.

'What strikes me is how they were lured away from the main roads and killed, when it is such a short walk to the thoroughfare. Surely someone must have seen no, given the persistent smog here I would say that someone must have at least heard something,' murmured Severus.

'Whether the witnesses who have allegedly heard the screams and cries for help are reliable is another matter altogether, Professor Snape. I hope you realise people are going to treat us very shabbily when we start interrogating them about the crimes,' she ventured to comment with a dour look on her face.

'Ah, but when they interfere with us, they will have to deal with the force of the Ministry and the Aurory breathing down their necks,' purred Severus in a dark tone, hinting of his previous acquaintance with all that was ignoble.

They soon found a squib who claimed to be a witness to the third murder, but it turned out to be a drunk whose imagination may have once guaranteed him a livelihood as a journalist with the *Daily Prophet*. However, the site of the fifth murder scene proved to be more promising. The body of Kingsley Shacklebolt was found in an alleyway opposite the main door of a pub called 'The Septicemic Plague'. On Hermione's mention of the existing alcohol-vagrancy law, namely, once it was past the hour of two in the morn, stragglers in places that purveyed and vended alcohol were to stay the night in the pub, Severus thought it expedient for them to take their line of questioning into 'The Septicemic Plague'. Immediately on stepping foot in that pub, the investigators were greeted by the sight of an old man in sackcloth who appeared to have lost his legs. His hands, which trembled so severely that most of his drink spilled on himself appeared to be useless to him as well. Severus stood behind him and realised that from this old fool's vantage point, he could look directly out the window to the left of the door, where the murder was committed. Hermione tried speaking to the old wrinkled man who was really nothing more than skin and bones and all he would spout was gibberish. However, she noticed that whenever she and Severus mentioned the murder that occurred outside the pub, the old man would scrunch up his face into a contorted display of fear, roughly shape the words 'back' or 'hack' or 'lack' and rattle the iron tankard tied to his wrist as if it were talisman for warding off evil spirits. Severus and Hermione exchanged knowing looks when the old man did it for the fourth time and came to the conclusion that they had at least one reliable witness to the killings even if he did not form words and was in no condition to express himself fully.

Taking pity on the man, even if he did seem happy drinking himself stupid with blue ruin, Hermione slipped a knut into his cup and very gently asked him if he would be so kind as to tell them about what he saw in the shadows that so frightened him. Hearing her question, the wrinkled old man renewed his efforts in rattling his tankard and making 'ack' sounds.

Severus, who had little patience for idiots of whatever nature and age, narrowed his eyes and questioned the man in a dangerously quiet voice. 'Tell us what you saw.' He tried the same in question in Gaelic, Welsh and other languages, which only succeeded in frightening the man into banging his cup on the table furiously. Ignoring the din he was creating, Severus pursued his line of questioning, 'Did you see anything? Did you see someone choke to death?'

'Ack, Ack', went the old man, much to Severus's annoyance. If it were not for Hermione's timely intervention with a well-placed hand on his elbow, he would have knocked the helpless cripple to the ground. It was just as well that Severus did not strike the old man for a younger man which similar features as the cripple entered the pub and glared at that. Though his eyes were bloodshot and his face horrendously scarred, he showed no sign of surprise or fear at seeing the two investigators.

The new arrival narrowed his beady eyes and scratched his under arms as he approached them. 'Have the members of the Order of the Phoenix sunk so low as to resort to harassing squibs?' he asked, slurring a little on his vowels.

Instead of being affrighted by this vulgar-looking individual whom most civilised members of the wizarding community would peg as a ruffian, the two academics-turned-Unspeakable-Unspeakables looked carelessly at him with feigned disinterest. The petite Arithmancer perched herself on the table at which the old man with the tankard held his solo court. She coolly crossed her legs under her robes and heavy cloak and appeared to be intently examining the tankard. The alchemist, in contrast, was leaning a little on the table, with one gloved hand (unconsciously) balanced on the lady's shoulder and the other on the old man's head. From these studied poses, it became clear even to the illiterate and crippled old man that these people were somehow acquainted with each other. Severus, who had stiffened and drawn himself up to his full height on hearing that familiar crass voice of the newcomer, curled his lips in scorn. 'Mundungus,' he greeted coldly. 'You're still alive I see.'

'As are you,' cackled Mundungus Fletcher, stepping forward. 'What are you doing to my brother?'

'We gave him a little money,' said Hermione, incurably honest.

'Well, I guess you have some semblance of decency after all,' laughed Mundungus coarsely. 'So, what brings you to my neck of the woods?'

'All this is yours?' choked Hermione as she stifled a laugh, while waving around the pub.

Mundungus grinned slyly at the two investigators. 'Right you are, Miss 'Mione. The war has been kind to me. There's money to be made in death, you see.'

'Leave your business pursuits aside, you oaf. Speaking of making money in death, I wonder whether you might have some information for us,' Severus coldly intoned while gesturing for him to sit with them.

The crass newcomer plodded to them and sat down beside Hermione with a wink, before swinging his large sack up the table. 'This here is my haul for the day. I do not get very much from it. The municipality is getting tight-fisted these days.'

'We will pay you for the information,' added Severus nonchalantly.

It was a remark that encouraged the worst traits in Mundungus to manifest themselves. His eyes abruptly glittered and danced with renewed interest at his former compatriots. 'Will you really pay for it?'

'Naturally,' said Hermione in a conspiratorial manner.

'Good!' shouted the ruffian, rubbing his hands avariciously. 'What do you want to know?'

'We have been trying to coax your brother to speak on the murder of Kingsley Shacklebolt. We have reason to believe that he is a witness,' explained Severus impatiently, as he moved away from the distracting influence of the Mundungus's idiot brother's cries of 'ack, 'ack.

Mundungus narrowed his eyes in misgiving. 'Who are you to ask questions? Shouldn't the Aurors do this kind of thing? Just who or what are you two?'

'Investigators with the British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry,' Hermione quickly said when she saw Severus withdraw his wand. 'This warrant,' she continued, showing Mundungus the parchment, 'gives us the authority to take any line of enquiry into the murders of respectable members of the wizarding community in this part of town. Now,' she paused, pocketing the warrant carefully, 'that you know we are charged with apprehending the murderer of these horribly excessive citizens, perhaps you would deem it worth your while to cooperate with us?'

Momentarily, blinking hard few times in disbelief, Mundungus soon chortled aloud and slapped his thigh in mirth. 'You two catch the goddamn demon? You know you should know that this creature has a power far greater than even Albus Dumbledore's.'

'Active and wanton destruction of human life is not a display of power, it is one of fear,' declared Severus indignantly, folding his arms. 'Superstition only breeds fear and that is *exactly* what this murderous villain is doing. It is unjust, impious and base. It breeds slavishness in men.'

'All your fine words are lost me, Snape,' cackled Mundungus dismissively. 'A demon is responsible for this I say only a demon will lurk in the shadows and take joy in its killing. It's an evil one that comes and goes and it pleases almost like you, Snape, but this one takes joy in its dark deeds.'

'It must be quite an intelligent one then,' said Hermione in neatly clipped accents. While she was clearly weary of this roundabout conversation, she was determined not to give up her line of questioning. 'It has evolved in its methods. The first victim was merely stabbed in the throat and body. How did this form of killing become so perverse as to include decapitation, disembowelment and the dicing of internal organs? It was the work of man, 'Dung. Think about it,' she reasoned in a mildly pleading voice, impulsively deciding to use his superstitious belief against him. 'If this were truly a demon on a rampage, it would only demand blood. Once it was satiated, it would depart. There would be no need to play with the body and ensure that all the internal organs are diced to such precise measurements.'

'You're wasting your efforts, Dr Granger,' Severus said brusquely. Then turning sharply so that his face was only mere centimetres away from Mundungus's, he growled, 'Enough of this tomfoolery, oaf! Demon or no, this creature kills within metres of a place full of witnesses. Tell me what you know about it or I'll hex you to oblivion.'

'All right, all right. Don't get your knickers in a twist,' the ruffian cried with his hands outstretched and eyes mocking his questioners. 'No one has ever seen its face, only a shadow. People say they hear screams in the dead of the night, and the next thing you know, the shadow flees and a dead body appears.'

'Dr Granger, if you please, kindly enjoin him to take a swig of this Veritas serum,' purred Severus.

With the lady's wand pointing directly at his throat, Mundungus had little choice but to comply. After the usual questions on his identity to verify the working status of the truth serum, Severus continued his interrogation. 'If it has a shadow, it must be human. Describe this shadow.'

'I don't know. Some people say it's tall, some say it's short and fat. But we all know that our side of the river is not the only stalking ground of this shadow. It has killed across the river in the heart of wizarding London's semi-respectable areas as well.'

Hermione raised an enquiring brow and interrupted Severus's questions with one of her own. 'Where are these murders committed?'

Severus nodded to her in acknowledgment that she had anticipated his query. 'Well?' he snapped at Mundungus. 'Is it at Knockturn Alley?'

'Yes and a little beyond its neighbouring northern district of Chardobis. But everything is hush-hush there and it's getting more savage by the day. The rumours say that the five constituencies of Chardobis are where it prowls in the *respectable* area of wizarding London.'

As Mundungus collapsed soon after that answer, the investigators left for Spinner's End. Hermione broke the pregnant silence between them by asking, 'Do you think this murder is killing for the sake of killing or is there a method to the madness?'

Severus traced his lips in thought. 'There is always a method to everything, madness and sanity, Dr Granger. It's a matter of finding the method. I presume you know what we must do now?'

'Well, Professor Granger, I'll write to the upper two constituencies of Chardobis and its various Aurory divisions there and obtain Weasley's reports on violent deaths in those areas. You'll write to the lower three constituencies and see whether those districts yield anything suspicious,' continued Severus as he opened the doors to his house.

'The replies are not going to be very forthcoming for the reams of letters we would have to write! Our next move may be delayed by at least a fortnight. The old goat is not going to be pleased,' cautioned Hermione gravely, as she locked the door behind her and following her colleague to his study.

Hermione waved her hand dismissively in the air at the same time that Severus tossed a pouch of coins onto his desk. 'It's our case now, not his,' he said firmly, 'hence it is out of his jurisdiction. He gave it to us and we'll jolly well do what we think is right! Two weeks of information gathering is perfectly worthwhile if we ultimately catch out man!'

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I could mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out how it fits with the story. 'Presents' could also mean 'current' which would be another pun for Christmas now under the Potter Administration and Christmas then, under the Voldemort administration.

The 'enjoin' reference may leave many readers confused as most here are American speakers. There are 2 meanings to this word.

(A) In American English (usually from published works such as articles in journals such as American Political Science Review and Political Theory, as well as other books I own published by American publishing houses) 'enjoin' means to prohibit.

(B) In British (Queen's) English, 'enjoin' means to 'urge', 'strongly request', 'command' or 'give an order for'.

I write in British English as I was educated in it. I was brought up and taught in my reading to take 'enjoin' as (B). This is the meaning that is intended in the text.

It was not until I was forced to study for TOEFL (due to the unfortunate circumstance of my country's national language being Malay rather than English never mind that the latter is the administrative and educational language of the state) for graduate school application in the Americas that I realised British and American English uses 'enjoin' differently. It also explains a slight misunderstanding that I had with an American friend over my usage of this term when he visited me several years ago. I enjoined him to sup with me and he stormed off in a huff now I know why. So readers, if you ever use this term in company, please specify whether you are using the British meaning or the American.

From Severus's lines of "There *is* death everywhere, everyday, and it is reflected in the way we live and the way the newspapers...." (at Paragraph 9) to Hermione's "...The end of Machiavellianism is not just around the corner, it is not of this world at all. If it were, salvation from evil itself would be of this world" (Paragraph 14), is taken from the Machiavelli and Hans Morgenthau's reading of the modern world. The words expressed in the above highlighted sentences are adapted from my lecture on Western Political Thought: Machiavelli to Nietzsche. Hans Morgenthau is the father of modern realism students of International Relations or IR will be familiar with him. Niccolò Machiavelli is the father of modern political philosopher modern because his writings mark the end of the medieval age of political philosophy. This marks a mini-lecture. You have been warned.

Many readers will object to my classification of human nature = evil as part of the modern condition. This is because your reading of humanity is based on the Confucian notion of man, i.e., man = good; the Rousseauian premise that man = ignorant happy savage, or the erroneous Machiavellian premise that man = bad. Let me stress that Machiavelli says human nature = bad, *NOT* man = bad. He says that evil is a part of man in the modern world, and this is completely different from the notion that man (since the beginning of time to the present) is and always be evil.

In all their major works, Machiavelli and Morgenthau hold that it is modern living which highlights man (as in humanity) as evil. This stems from their view of 'natural man' and the 'state of nature'. This means that the man that existed before civilisation came was 'natural man'. The 'state of nature' is the state where there are no societies, no families, nothing. In the state of nature, man is solitary. He feeds himself, fends for himself etc. If he has the urge to mate, he does so with the first female he comes across. Sex is brief and as soon as he is done, he leaves. Natural man is exactly like a wild animal. He does not have foresight. All natural man knows is to preserve his life, which to him means getting something to eat and drink and not being killed by the other wild animals out there in the state of nature. This self-preservation in the state of nature is not predicated on a need to be better than others or to lead others, or to show one's strength. As natural man has no foresight, he does not care for these things. He looks on others in the state of nature as beings he can leave alone when he is not threatened, bothered or hungry. Think about it.

Do you watch documentaries? Animals do not kill because they have a vendetta against someone. They only kill to (1) defend themselves or their home, or (2) eat. Cheetahs do not kill because they have something against the antelope. Cheetahs kill because they are hungry and want food which they see in the antelope. A full Cheetah can walk past a herd of antelope and ignore every single hoofed creature there because it is no longer hungry. However, should one mad antelope come charging at it, the cheetah would kill it to protect itself. The same goes for natural man in the state of nature. The state of nature is a state of plenty, which means there is enough food etc for every creature in it. In this state, natural man is always sated. He has no other needs that he cannot fulfil himself. He does not actively seek to acquire things like modern man.

Modern man is man outside the state of nature. This is man who desires things like property. The Natural man who wants to stop wandering in the forests, cuts down trees (even though he does not need to), fences off a part of the land that is common to all in the state of nature and says, "This part of the state of nature is mine and mine alone" is no longer natural man. He has become modern man because he has now the active desire to acquire. The desire to acquire is a modern one and not part of the natural ways of natural man. Natural man does not hoard. He takes what is enough for himself in the state of nature and leaves it at that. He does not seek to take all the apples from the tree and keep it. He only eats two because eating two makes him full. Understand? Modern man is never satisfied. He wants more and more. He no longer has needs; instead, he has wants. Want is linked to acquisition (because you want to have things), and acquisition is in turn linked to competition. When you want things, you have to have things that are better than your neighbours', right? This leads to competition. So, modern man is acquisitive and competitive. This acquisitiveness and competitiveness renders man greedy; greedy leads man to kill. That's why Machiavelli and Morgenthau say modern man is evil. That's why Machiavelli and Morgenthau say evil in man is a modern condition. This is most apparent in Machiavelli's The Prince and Florentine Histories, as well as Morgenthau's Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace (all editions each edition is different by the bye). When you read The Prince, you will note that Machiavelli will say some very shocking things as to what are the necessary things one ought to do in politics. Political realists like to take the view that there cannot be perfect justice in the world because we cannot eradicate evil from the world; and so long as evil is part of politics, politics is intimately associated with the presence of evil this then is part of the modern condition we are in and unable to escape.

Consider your modern condition and combine it with what I have said here and you will notice that it is true. What is modernity? What is it to be modern? Modernity is this obsession with change and we're experiencing it now with this period of radical change in the economy, in our way of life, in the way we live, in the way we work. And these changes are happening at an extremely rapid rate. It's hardly what we inherited; it's hardly what we desire. What do we desire? New things. We shop all the time. Why do we shop? Because we're a society and culture of shoppers. And what do you shop for? New things. All of you dress pretty fashionably, two years down the road; you might not be wearing the same clothes because they are out of fashion. So life is like that it's constantly new because it's changing all the time. And in the midst of this fast paced "progress", some of us feel disorientated and slightly out of place because our individual and personal values and beliefs do not coincide with mainstream society. But even those of us who are disorientated and misplaced realise that this is precisely what modernity is about it's about desiring new things. How far will you go to get your new things? You would kill for it. it doesn't matter if we're living in Singapore, Hong Kong or the United States, Paris, Milan etc. all citizens of first world countries have the same kind of anxieties and same kind of desires. Why anxieties? Because they, like us, are worried about their jobs. Why are they worried about their jobs? Because it's very expensive to live a modern life. Why is it expensive to live a modern life? Because we have this great desire to accumulate. And this is evident because modern things are not built to last; they go obsolete very fast. This is a very restless world; it is a world designed for people with a keen sense of adventure, but there is one catch. This adventure doesn't end. Why doesn't it end? Because we shop till the day we die. And one of the problems of life today as that we don't die when we retire from our jobs. Why? Because modern science, technology and medicine have made it possible for us to live longer. To be able to live longer means we have more time; it means we have more time to fill out. And we fill out that time with shopping and buying. And to buy things, we need money. And on top of that, you have to ensure that you have enough money by the time that you are 70 or 75, you can still afford to buy things. And you WILL NEED TO buy things. What are the most important things you need to buy when you are 70? You won't be going for clothes. Drugs, Healthcare, Medicine things to stay alive, and medicine has to be prescribed for every ailment of your body. And these drugs aren't designed to cure you, but to deal with the symptoms. Why? Because if you get cured, you don't need the drug anymore, you won't buy them anymore. This is a capitalist culture, you have to acquire and buy to live for the rest of your life. This desire to go on acquiring for the rest of your life gives you this violent streak that marks you as a modern person and hence dangerous.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 8

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes Dumbledore's death in HBP was staged. *Contents may be disturbing to readers*

Author's note: This story may not please everyone as it is not the usual fluffy Christmas story. The scenes depicted in this story may be offensive and objectionable to some readers for their explicit violence and gore. This story deviates from my usual writing. Emphases are in italics and titles of books &ca are underlined. Some readers may find my characterisation OOC, but I assure you, this is how I see them in the dark distant future. I assume that Dumbledore's death in Book 6 was staged and that's why he's still alive in this story.

Christmas Presents Undisguised

Chapter 4

Hermione and Severus spent the next day writing letters to the constituencies of the Chardobis district and compiling notes and other relevant bits of information on their case. In all their letters, they plainly stated their purpose and requested information on any mysterious and violent deaths within the last few years. If there were any, would the Aurory offices and Members of Parliament for those areas kindly forward the details of the cases to Drs Severus Snape and Hermione Granger care-of the British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry?

Although Severus expressed his pessimism at obtaining any further information from the bureaucratic dunderheads who swept anything bordering on the unusual under the carpet, his colleague assured him that there were at least some officers of the law and some clerks in the constituency offices who would think twice before offending an investigative team of the British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry. Many bureaucrats were uncertain what the British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry was supposed to do, but they feared it all the same because it enjoyed the patronage of the Minister of Magic and it was rumoured to be headed by the great Albus Dumbledore. It was also rumoured among members of the British wizarding Parliament that any letter from that dreaded Ministry foreshadowed an internal investigation into their administration. Thus, it could be naturally anticipated that Severus and Hermione's letters caused much trepidation to erupt among the ranks of the incompetent Members of Parliament of Chardobis. Hermione laughingly told Severus that those prone to acts of corruption readily cooperated with these officers from the British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry out of fear that they would be striped of their positions and power.

Within the next four days following their entirely reasonable enquiries, Severus was unpleasantly surprised when he discovered that his colleague was correct in her surmise. The replies they received were indeed promising and numerous. It was amazing what a little fear of the unknown could inspire in the hearts and minds of the foolish, Severus mused, smirking ironically at the folly of human nature. Upon his perusal of the letters and attached documents, he soon realised that many of them detailed ordinary deaths and he railed at Hermione for inundating them with more work.

'Well,' she said with a brief dismissive snort at his impatience. 'At least we have secured their cooperation, which is all things considered a moderately good outcome. We only have to weed through them to find the most violent or horrifying deaths! If you can't stand sifting through them,' she chided wearily, rolling her eyes at his tantrum, 'Go and take a walk. I'll sort them. Provided, Professor Snape, you try to see the connection in all this when you get back.'

'Are you chasing me out of my own home, your wretched woman!' he bellowed, giving vent to the frustrations he had kept bottled up over the mystery of this case.

'No,' she replied calmly, looking through the many letters and documents without lifting her head. 'I'm telling *you* that you *need* a break. Go out there, take the air and think. It will do you much good.'

'You presume to prescribe what I ought to do!' he barked, folding his arms in annoyance.

'Your powers of observation are astounding. Now, go on a herb hunting ramble or whatever it is you do and I will have all these things sorted out when you return,' she reasoned, adding a letter to the pile of unrelated killings.

'I will not have my study commandeered!'

'I'm only using it to sort the letters. Go take your walk and the letters will be sorted,' she said quietly, her voice acquiring the hard edge of irritation that Severus had become acquainted. 'Or would you rather reverse the roles and sort the letters?'

Muttering a dark '*you had better be all done when I return*' as if it were a threat, Severus turned around on his heels and dramatically swept out of the room. When he returned from his walk a few hours later, he reflected that the exercise had done him good. He had thought about their investigations thus far and was inspired enough to buy a map of wizarding London from Messrs Fred and George Weasley of the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes who though well-known for their amazing assortment of items fit for infusing unpleasant moments with laughter, were also famed cartographers of choice for those requiring '*non-conventional*' routes to their destination. The map, the proprietors told him, had only been sold to Ministry officials and was still in the developmental stages. They would not dream of unleashing it on the unsuspecting public who knows what the undesirable elements of the city might do with it! Thankful that the Weasley twins had acquired a modicum of civic responsibility, Severus duly bought the map and was about to show it to Hermione on his arrival home when he noticed his study devoid of the clutter of letters. It appeared that his walk was not a wasted enterprise after all, for Hermione had sorted everything out and only kept those letters and documents pertaining to the profile of the killings they had had on the Morosia side of wizarding London. He was even more surprised to find that his esteemed colleague had also taken great pains to make her own notes on each of these cases highlighting both their similarities and differences.

Hermione registered his presence with a curt nod and handed him a parchment containing her latest surmises. In return, he handed her the map he had but lately acquired. Severus frowned on reading the papers compiled by the Arithmancer. According to Hermione's notes, the killings on the Chardobis districts of Mortuary dated back to the previous year. There were two victims, one of each gender; both severely mutilated with some kind of a knife and the female nearly beheaded. The latest victim there, Terry Boot, was found slaughtered on November 22nd. Severus traced his lower lip in thought, and with narrowed eyes he flipped to the next sheet, which detailed the victims found in the Qualia and Talon constituencies. The killings were almost as brutal as the Morosia ones; the four victims there were gutted like fishes and had been rudely violated with an assortment of knives and sticks. It struck him as most interesting that Hermione heavily underlined two killings of a shopkeeper, Sarah Fawcett, and a farmer, Cuthbert Mockridge, who had apparently been slaughtered on June the 29th, in an alleyway with a secret wall leading to Knockturn Alley's infamous red light area.

'This is most disturbing,' murmured Severus, tapping his finger on his lip, lost in his thoughts.

'Isn't it?' Hermione mumbled in absent-minded response. While her colleague was engaged in perusing her notes, Dr Granger was eagerly surveying the detailed and beautifully drawn map of wizarding London. The Weasley twins have outdone themselves this time, she thought with a smile playing on her lips as she traced her finger from one point of the Talon constituency in Chardobis to Diagon Alley. They managed to list all the thoroughfares both common and hidden in their map and even had an

extra section detailing how one could make one's way to Muggle London from Mortuary, Alkane and Knockturn Alley's disused antique shop. While happily engaged in exploring this new innovation of the twins, Hermione looked up to chase away a spider that was hanging down near her left ear. Looking up at the spider's web and at the map, her eyes lit up and she suddenly gasped.

'What is it, woman?' snapped Severus testily.

Magically pinning the map on a small coffee table, she ventured a brisk reply, 'I've just realised something. Have you any tacking pins?'

'What? Why would I have something I have no use for?' he snorted scornfully while approaching her, clearly intrigued by what she had in mind.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation and withdrew her wand. 'Never mind,' she said, biting her lower lip in excitement. 'All the victims were found where they were murdered, right? Read out to me the places where the bodies were found.'

'What do you think you're doing?' he demanded, narrowing his eyes as he perched on the armrest of her sofa.

'Trying to see whether there is a pattern your "method in madness" principle. I think I have hit on the pattern,' she answered quickly, hovering her wand over the map. 'We'll be able to see it better once I've marked the areas. Now, kindly read out the places.'

Curious as to the train of her thoughts, Severus obliged her by reading out the places where the victims were murdered. At each place he named, Hermione conjured a magical iridescent multicoloured pin demarcating the area. Though was he was puzzled at first, he soon saw that there was definitely a pattern to the killings. As soon as the last place was named, Hermione waved her wand and all the pins lit up extending lines of green light to their neighbours. Once all the pins and their extending lines were conjoined, the two investigators stepped back to observe their labours.

'Who would have thought that the design was meant to be representative from the air,' said Hermione softly, thoughtfully chewing on her thumb. 'Eighteen dots. Eighteen killings on both sides of the river.'

Staring at the design made by the joined dotted lines, Severus commented cynically, 'Somehow it seems too good to be true.'

'Which means, it must be,' replied Hermione, intently staring at the concentric ring and lines which formed the shape of a small cobweb on the map. 'Assuming this is indeed the killer's web, where do we find the wandering spider?'

'No matter how far a spider wanders, it will always return to the very centre,' came the cold reply. 'In this situation, it would be the old Wizarding Shrine to the Sainted Few.'

'Then, that is where we should be going,' announced Hermione, suppressing a shiver of anxiety and fear.

* * *

The ancient Wizarding Shrine of the Sainted Few was presently a derelict building. It had not always been thus. In its past, prior to the days of Voldemort, it was where the British wizarding community paid homage to the ancient wizards and witches who bridged the divide between the Muggle and wizarding world. Not only were the Sainted Few exceptional wizards and witches who advanced the conditions of living for the wizarding world, they were also Muggle Saints in the Christian religion. They were exemplars of the best of the wizarding world in the days of old. When witchcraft was decryied by the Muggles as pernicious and self-serving, these daring witches and wizards chose not to retreat into the insular and paranoid wizarding community. Instead, they ventured forth into the Muggle world, mixing freely with them and assisting them where possible healing the sick, alleviating the plight of the less fortunate, advising monarchs and so on. Those of the Sainted Few who were fortunate enough to have been born into the European royal houses quickly used their status as Muggle-born witches and wizards to advance the way of life for both the wizarding and Muggle worlds, and easily stayed the unfair discrimination of wizards and witches. Despite this, the Muggles they assisted refused to believe in their skills at witchcraft. Instead, the Muggles attributed their wondrous abilities to spiritualism and considered the wizards emissaries from heaven. Thus, in time, these exceptional witches and wizards who were leaders in their own wizarding community came to be regarded as Saints by both their own wizarding community and the Muggle community. Though the days of Sainted Few were long past and none of the modern wizards and witches dared to expose themselves to Muggles, the wizarding community the world over still cherished the memory of those who were brave enough to bridge the Muggle-wizarding divide and in so doing, touching the lives of many.

The Wizarding Shrine of the Sainted Few was originally built in the 14th century for the expressed purpose of honouring these exceptional witches and wizards, and as the number of Sainted Few grew, the wizarding community commissioned more statues of their Saints and placed them in the shrine for all to admire and gain inspiration from. But, however grand the Wizarding Shrine of the Sainted Few was prior to rise of Voldemort, it was now an abandoned and dilapidated shell. When Voldemort successfully installed himself in power for the long two-and-a-half years, he was determined to eliminate any vestiges of the old ways and ordered the destruction of all the ancient shrines. The veneration of the ancient Sainted Few was to be replaced by the cult of Voldemort where all would acknowledge him as Overlord and pay homage to him as if he were a deity. During his time in power, Voldemort compelled many of his prisoners to participate in the destruction of these shrines in a perverse re-education effort. The cult of Voldemort, wizarding historians speculated, might have been successful if he was not so easily overthrown by Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

With the overthrow of Voldemort, Harry Potter became the new Minister for Magic and immediately set about restoring the old traditions that the wizarding community had lived by. However, due to the continual lack of funds, he was unable to realise his aim of restoring all the former Wizarding Shrines to their past glory. Despite its historical importance, the Wizarding Shrine of the Sainted Few was one of the places that suffered due to this lamentable want of funds. While the public readily accepted this officially published rationale, Severus was of the mind that the Wizarding Shrine of the Sainted Few was not restored because it lay in one of the most disreputable areas of wizarding London.

Severus and Hermione slowly made their way through this building with its smashed windows, fallen pillars and broken statues of the Sainted Few. The first statue to catch Hermione's eye was a woman balancing two eyeballs on a scale. "St Lucy," she muttered.

'Indeed,' said Severus, 'Muggle patron saint of blindness, wizarding saint of foresight.' He viewed the statue dispassionately and noticed that it was hacked in many places, her face chiselled with pockmarks and her body full of angry gashes.

'How barbaric to destroy such craftsmanship,' opined Hermione with a disapproving frown. 'It is fortunate then that this Shrine was only targeted in the last year of Voldemort's reign.'

'The Dark Lord may order the destruction of the shrines, but these gashes, knife strokes and angry slashes are all recent work of some person. The Dark Lord would not have left any statue standing if he had his way. This is the work of someone else familiar with his thoughts.'

'Perhaps someone who converted to his cause later in the war when his power was waning,' suggested Hermione.

'Perhaps, perhaps,' was the quiet purring reply.

They moved on to the next statue, which was a lady holding her severed head in one hand, and her other outstretched in benediction. She too was hacked and vandalised. Severus remarked that this lady must have been St Dymphna, the Muggle and wizarding saint for the mentally afflicted. 'Ironically, she was beheaded for trying to protect her virtue,' he drawled carelessly.

St Francis of Assisi, Muggle and wizarding saint of animals, was next and the dove on his right hand had been chopped off and lay at his feet. His head was bashed in and his body bore innumerable angry gashes. St Vincent de Paul suffered the same fate as his unfortunate friend. All the other statues on the Wizarding Shrine of the Sainted Few bore such marks of destruction. St Bartholomew had his hands chopped off, St Matthew, the Muggle Saint of bankers and wizarding saint of shrewdness, was beheaded, his limbs and abacus mutilated.

The destruction of the previous statues did not prepare Hermione for the horrors committed onto the next one. It stood on a marble plinth, clutching a lute. Her crown of lilies and roses was grossly battered and countless strokes of a knife or hook adorned her delicately carved slender neck. Sts. Peter and Paul next to her had been

powerless to protect her from the savage attack.

'Poor lady,' murmured Hermione to the Muggle saint of music and the wizarding saint of polyphonic charms for plants. 'Who would do such a thing to you you who are gentle, fair and just?'

'Do you discern a pattern, Dr Granger?' asked Severus, examining the St Paul statue with great care.

'The mutilations on these statues are exactly the same as on our victims?' she offered.

'Other than the obvious. He's playing a game with us, our murderer.'

'That is obvious, Professor Snape,' cried Hermione in exasperation.

'That's not quite what I meant. Insufferable know-all-it! How can you analyse something when you have not seen the connections! How well do you know your Saint Days? Muggle and Wizards share the same dates if your confused brain doesn't already know. Quick, St Paul what is his feast day?' retorted Severus, spinning around sharply and catching her by the wrists.

'The 29th of June,' she answered, meeting his penetrating gaze, wondering whether he had gone quite mad from sleep deprivation.

'St Peter?' he continued harshly.

'The 29th of June,' she answered slowly.

He increased the pressure of his grip on her wrists. 'Now, Dr Granger,' he purred in a dangerously low tone. 'In the reports from the Chardobis districts, who were killed on the 29th of June?'

'Sarah Fawcett and Cuthbert Mockridge.'

Raising a trembling finger at the statues of St Peter and St Paul, he hissed, 'On their saint days. Do you see a pattern here, Dr Granger, or do I have to go through the list with you?'

'Mere coincidence,' she said, attempting to break free from his iron grip.

'*Coincidence?*' he barked, inching closer to her face, without relinquishing her wrists. "I'll show you the kind of perverse ~~coincidence~~ this is!" He narrowed his eyes in malicious intent and continued his assault of her mind, 'Who was killed in the Qualia district of Chardobis on 22nd November?'

'Dolores Umbridge.'

'Feast day of St Cecilia,' he paused and slowly exhaled. *Coincidence*, you say? I'll show you "coincidence". Quickly now, who died on 15th May?'

'Marietta Edgecombe.'

'Feast day of St Dymphna,' he answered, his eyes strangely glittering in a mix of intellectual stimulation and something else he could not quite place. 'Still think it's all *coincidence*, Dr Granger? Susan Bones, dead 27th June!' he barked, leaning closer toward her face, hoping that she would keep up with his thought processes.

Glaring at him so as not allow him the satisfaction of having frightened her, she answered, 'Feast day of St Emma.'

'Kingsley Shacklebolt, dead 24th August!' he commanded, backing her against the statue of St Cecilia.

Hermione felt her breath hitch and she spat her response hastily, 'Feast day of St Bartholomew.'

Severus quickened his pace of questioning. 'Recall the pattern, Dr Granger. It is a most ingenious one. Dean Thomas, dead 21st September!'

'Feast day of St Matthew.'

'Nymphadora Tonks, dead 27th September!'

'Feast day of St Vincent de Paul,' Hermione answered in a near vicious manner, when she abruptly realised her intellect was intrigued by Severus's train-of-thought. He forced her to think and to see the connection between the desecrated statues at the centre of the spider's web and the victims they had encountered so far. While she despised his highhanded manner of apprising her of his notions, she was more concerned with mentally trying to plot the killer's next move to be bothered with Severus's slightly savage method.

'Colin Creevey, dead 4th October!' he hissed, breaking into her reverie.

'Feast day of St Francis of Assisi,' she answered with a gasp as her breathing picked up a notch.

'Zacharias Smith, next on 21st October!'

'Feast day of St Ursula.'

'Augusta Longbottom, dead 17th November!'

'Feast day of St Elizabeth of Hungary.'

Severus's questions continued in this vein until all the other victims were covered. By the end of it, the two Unspeakable Unspeakables stood staring at each other, their noses touching and their breathing heavily ragged.

Hermione found that her colleague's eyes had softened in their intellectual encounter and demurely lowered her eyes. 'Let me go, Professor Snape, before I lose the use of my wrists,' she said at last in an uncomfortable cough when she saw that he was intently studying her expression. He did so, mumbled something akin to an apology and swept away to examine the statue of St Lucy.

The investigators were stunned by their discovery that their killer was a rational creature who planned every meticulous detail. Hermione shivered slightly in the realisation that this person was most likely going to kill again and they had no way of knowing where or when he would strike. 'This Sainted Few theory is problematic,' she said, rubbing her wrists gently so as to encourage better blood circulation.

'And how is that?'

'Every day is a Saint Day,' she answered slowly.

'Be that as it may,' he said thoughtfully tracing his lips and staring at St Lucy. 'This theory gives us a suspect. This murderer is one who was deeply affected by the Dark Lord's policies of eliminating the old ways.'

'Former Death Eater? Crony of Lucius Malfoy perhaps?' she offered, wondering who this individual was. Whoever it was, it was evident that he was badly scarred by the events that occurred in the civil war when Voldemort was in power and when Harry was rebuilding the British wizarding world.

'That I do not know,' answered Severus truthfully. 'However, I do know this whoever it is, he patronises this gothic establishment and uses our unfortunate ladies and gentlemen,' he waved dismissively at the statues with his back toward Hermione before continuing. "as target practice. Come, Dr Granger.' He spun around and offered his shivering colleague his gloves. 'Let us leave this place before I have to explain to the old goat why you froze to death.'

They made their way back to Diagon Alley proper in silence, neither seeing nor hearing the sounds of Christmas cheer in the air. Hermione broke the silence by asking, 'What do we do now?'

'I'm mentally compiling a list of all my former acquaintances who are skilled in the arts of bodily mutilation and relish the killing of innocents,' he said sardonically, with his hands in his pockets, trudging through the human traffic.

'All the Death Eaters have either been incarcerated or executed. Who is left to commit such atrocities? Even if there are a few left running amok out there, they are surely mad to try something like this!' She cried out.

Instinctively, without turning around, he knew that she had been borne a little distance away from him by the crowd. He waited a few seconds for her and when she finally caught up with him, he silently hooked her hand to his elbow. 'Death Eaters are not mad in the traditional sense, Dr Granger. These killings are not the work of a lunatic. And I am beginning to suspect that the victims are not quite so random after all.'

Momentarily stunned that he had linked arms with her without even offering her the use of his arm, she quickly assumed that he did not want to waste time waiting for her to catch up to his strides. 'So which Death Eater is it?'

'I have my doubts as to whether he is a Death Eater,' he muttered under his breath. Looking up at the heavens for a sign and finding none, he replied, 'We shall make a trip to Azkaban and check the records.'

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I could mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out how it fits with the story. 'Presents' could also mean 'current' which would be another pun for Christmas now under the Potter Administration and Christmas then, under the Voldemort administration.

Leninist-Stalinist overtones in paragraph 28 are intentional. Also of the Cultural Revolution in Maoist China as well as the Saddam regime and the post-Saddam regime. Think about and you will see what I'm getting at. It is not my intention to alienate readers with leftist views it's a way of bringing politics into the plot...

Terry Boot is a Ravenclaw in the HP books and a contemporary of HP and gang. He is a friend of Michael Corner and a member of Dumbledore's Army. He appeared in Book 5 and his name can be seen in the 'Quidditch Through the Ages' Book, he was supposed to have checked out from the library.

Sarah Fawcett is a Hufflepuff in my Harry Potter books (my family reads the British edition of everything). It is unknown whether she belongs to the same year as Harry. I am inclined to think that she is academically one year his senior. Rowling is ambiguous on Miss Fawcett's age. Miss Fawcett was in the Duelling Club in Book 2 and appears in Book 4 where she grows a handsome beard for attempting to bypass the Goblet of Fire.

Cuthbert Mockridge is mentioned in Book 4 as the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office and I have always suspected that he was a part of Albus's Order.

The line 'Thankful that the Weasley twins had acquired a modicum of civic responsibility' is Severus's thoughts on the twins. It is intentionally ironic.

(1) St Cecilia's feast day is on November 22nd. She is regarded as the patroness of music (because of the story that she heard heavenly music in her heart when she was married), and is represented in art with an organ or organ-pipes in her hand and crowns of flowers in her hair. St Cecilia's story starts in Rome. She was given in marriage to a youth named Valerian. She wore sackcloth next to her skin, and fasted, and invoked the saints, angels, and virgins, beseeching them to guard her virginity. And she said to her husband, "I will tell you a secret if you will swear not to reveal it to anyone." And when he swore, she added, "There is an angel who watches me, and wards off from me any who would touch me." He said, "Dearest, if this be true, show me the angel." "That can only be if you will believe in one God, and be baptized."

She sent him to Pope S. Urban (223-230), who baptized him; and when he returned, he saw Cecilia praying in her chamber, and an angel by her with flaming wings, holding two crowns of roses and lilies, which he placed on their heads, and then vanished. Shortly after, Tibertius, the brother of Valerian, entered, and wondered at the fragrance and beauty of the flowers at that season of the year.

When he heard the story of how they had obtained these crowns, he also consented to be baptized. After their baptism, the two brothers devoted themselves to burying the martyrs slain daily by the prefect of the city, Turcius Almachius. [There was no prefect of that name.] They were arrested and brought before the prefect, and when they refused to sacrifice to the gods were executed with the sword.

In the meantime, S. Cecilia, by preaching had converted four hundred persons, whom Pope Urban forthwith baptized. Then Cecilia was arrested, and condemned to be suffocated in the baths. She was shut in for a night and a day, and the fires were heaped up, and made to glow and roar their utmost, but Cecilia did not even break out into perspiration from the heat. When Almachius heard this he sent an executioner to cut off her head in the bath. The man struck thrice without being able to sever the head from the trunk. He left her bleeding, and she lived three days. Crowds came to her, and collected her blood with napkins and sponges (think you on this tidbit), whilst she preached to them or prayed. At the end of that period she died, and was buried by Pope Urban and his deacons.

Alexander Severus, who was emperor when Urban was Pope, did not persecute the Church, though it is possible some Christians may have suffered in his reign. Herodian says that no person was condemned during the reign of Alexander, except according to the usual course of the law and by judges of the strictest integrity. A few Christians may have suffered, but there can have been no furious persecutions as waged by the apocryphal prefect, Turcius Almachius, and described in the Acts.

Urbanus was the prefect of the city, and Ulpian, who had much influence at the beginning of Alexander's reign as principal secretary of the emperor and commander of the Pretorian Guards, is thought to have encouraged persecution. Usuardus makes Cecilia suffer under Commodus. Molanus transfers the martyrdom to the reign of Marcus Aurelius. But it is idle to expect to extract history from romance.

In 1599, Cardinal Paul Emilius Sfondrati, nephew of Pope Gregory XIV, rebuilt the church of St. Cecilia.

(2) June 29th is the Feast Day of two saints - St Paul and St Peter. While Peter's chief feast day is June 29, he is also honoured on February 22 and November 18. In liturgical art, he is depicted as an elderly man holding a key and a book. His symbols include an inverted cross, a boat, and the cock.

St Paul, the indefatigable Apostle of the Gentiles, was converted from Judaism (and changed his name from Saul to Paul) on the road to Damascus. He remained some days in Damascus after his Baptism, and then went to Arabia, possibly for a year or two to prepare himself for his future missionary activity. Having returned to Damascus, he stayed there for a time, preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. For this he incurred the hatred of the Jews and had to flee from the city. Throughout his life, he was constantly imprisoned until the year 67, when he was finally beheaded.

(3) May 15th is the feast day of St. Dymphna, who is the patron saint of those suffering from nervous and mental afflictions. Dymphna was fourteen when her mother died. Damon (Dymphna's father) is said to have been afflicted with a mental illness, brought on by his grief. He sent messengers throughout his town and other lands to find some woman of noble birth, resembling his wife, who would be willing to marry him. When none could be found, his evil advisers told him to marry his own daughter. Dymphna fled from her castle together with St. Gerebran, her confessor, and two other friends. Damon found them in Belgium. He gave orders that the priest's head be cut off. Then Damon tried to persuade his daughter to return to Ireland with him. When she refused, he drew his sword and struck off her head. She was then only fifteen years of age. Dymphna received the crown of martyrdom in defence of her purity about the year 620. She is the patron of those suffering from nervous and mental afflictions. Many miracles have taken place at her shrine, built on the spot where she was buried in Gheel, Belgium.

(4) June 27th is the feast day of St Emma. Emma was a relative of Emperor St. Henry II and also known as Hemma. She was raised at Henry's court by St. Cunegund, and according to legend was married to Landgrave William of Friesach. Their two children were murdered during an uprising at mines owned by William. Grief-stricken, he made a pilgrimage to Rome and died on the way back. Emma then decided to devote her life to God. She gave liberally to the poor, founded several religious houses and a double monastery at Gurk, Austria, and may have become a nun there. Despite the above legend, scholars believe she was of the Friesach family rather than the William one and that her son was killed in a battle twenty years after the death of her husband, Count William of Sarngan, about the year 1015, and it was at this time that she began her foundations. Her cult was confirmed in 1938.

(5) August 24th is the feast day of St Bartholomew. All that is known of him with certainty is that he is mentioned in the synoptic gospels and Acts as one of the twelve apostles. His name, a patronymic, means 'son of Tolomai' and scholars believe he is the same as Nathaniel mentioned in John, who says he is from Cana and that Jesus called him an 'Israelite...incapable of deceit'. The Roman Martyrology says he preached in India and Greater Armenia, where he was flayed and beheaded by King Astyages. Tradition has the place as Abanopolis on the west coast of the Caspian Sea and that he also preached in Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt. The Gospel of Bartholomew is apocryphal and was condemned in the decree of Pseudo-Gelasius.

(6) September 21st is the feast day of St Matthew, who is also the patron saint of bankers. St. Matthew, one of the twelve Apostles, is the author of the first Gospel (he edited the gospel from two earlier books). This has been the constant tradition of the Church and is confirmed by the Gospel itself. He was the son of Alphaeus and was called to be an Apostle while sitting in the tax collectors' place at Capernaum. Before his conversion, he was a publican, i.e., a tax collector by profession. He is to be identified with the "Levi" of Mark and Luke. For more information, please refer to this website 'Who Wrote the Bible?' <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/intro.htm>, an excellent source recommended by my lovely beta, Peri.

His apostolic activity was at first restricted to the communities of Palestine. Nothing definite is known about his later life. There is a tradition that points to Ethiopia as his field of labour; other traditions mention Parthia and Persia. It is uncertain whether he died a natural death or received the crown of martyrdom.

St. Matthew's Gospel was written to fill a sorely felt need of his fellow countrymen, both believers and unbelievers. For the former, it served as a token of his regard and as an encouragement in the trials to come, especially the danger of falling back to Judaism; for the latter, it was designed to convince them that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus, our Lord, in Whom all the promises of the Messianic Kingdom embracing all people had been fulfilled in a spiritual rather than in a carnal way: "My Kingdom is not of this world." His Gospel, then, answered the question put by the disciples of St. John the Baptist, "Are You He Who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Writing for his fellow citizens of Palestine, St. Matthew composed his Gospel in his native Aramaic, the "Hebrew tongue" mentioned in the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Soon afterward, about the time of the persecution of Herod Agrippa I in 42 AD, he took his departure for other lands. Another tradition places the composition of his Gospel either between the time of this departure and the Council of Jerusalem, i.e., between 42 AD and 50 AD or even later. Definitely, however, the Gospel, depicting the Holy City with its altar and temple as still existing, and without any reference to the fulfilment of our Lord's prophecy, shows that it was written before the destruction of the city by the Romans in 70 AD, and this internal evidence confirms the early traditions.

(7) September 27th is the feast day of St Vincent de Paul, who is also the patron saint of charitable societies. St. Vincent was born of poor parents in the village of Pouy in Gascony, France, about 1580. He enjoyed his first schooling under the Franciscan Fathers at Acqs. Such had been his progress in four years that a gentleman chose him as subreceptor to his children, and he was thus enabled to continue his studies without being a burden to his parents. In 1596, he went to the University of Toulouse for theological studies, and there he was ordained priest in 1600.

In 1605, on a voyage by sea from Marseilles to Narbonne, he fell into the hands of African pirates and was carried as a slave to Tunis. His captivity lasted about two years, until Divine Providence enabled him to effect his escape. After a brief visit to Rome, he returned to France, where he became preceptor in the family of Emmanuel de Gondy, Count of Goigny, and General of the galleys of France. In 1617, he began to preach missions, and in 1625, he lay the foundations of a congregation which afterward became the Congregation of the Mission or Lazarists, so named on account of the Priory of St. Lazarus, which the Fathers began to occupy in 1633.

It would be impossible to enumerate all the works of this servant of God. Charity was his predominant virtue. It extended to all classes of persons, from children to the elderly. The Sisters of Charity also owe the foundation of their congregation to St. Vincent. In the midst of the most distracting occupations, his soul was always intimately united with God. Though honoured by the great ones of the world, he remained deeply rooted in humility. The Apostle of Charity, the immortal Vincent de Paul, breathed his last in Paris at the age of eighty.

(8) October 4th is the feast day of St Francis of Assisi, who was founder of the Franciscan Order, born at Assisi in Umbria, in 1181. He is also the patron saint of Animals, Merchants & Ecology. He advocated living as austere a life as possible and suffered a great deal in his final days when blindness overtook him.

(9) October 21st is the feast day of St Ursula. According to a legend that appeared in the tenth century, Ursula was the daughter of a Christian king in Britain and was granted a three-year postponement of a marriage she did not wish to a pagan prince. With ten ladies in waiting, each attended by a thousand maidens, she embarked on a voyage across the North Sea, sailed up the Rhine to Basle, Switzerland, and then went to Rome. On their way back, they were all massacred by pagan Huns at Cologne in about 451 when Ursula refused to marry their chieftain. Yes, as Peri (my dear beta) pointed out, there were many pagans in one place for the Huns to kill Ursula + 10 ladies + 10,000 others. That's the legend, so I'm telling it as it appears in my notes.

According to another legend, America was settled by British colonizers and soldiers after Emperor Magnus Clemens Maximus conquered Britain and Gaul in 383. The ruler of the settlers, Cynan Meiriadog, called on King Dionotus of Cornwall for wives for the settlers, whereupon Dionotus sent his daughter Ursula, who was to marry Cynan, with eleven thousand maidens and sixty thousand common women. Their fleet was shipwrecked and all the women were enslaved or murdered. The legends are pious fictions, but what is true is that one Clematius, a senator, rebuilt a basilica in Cologne that had originally been built, probably at the beginning of the fourth century, to honour a group of virgins who had been martyred at Cologne. They were evidently venerated enough to have had a church built in their honour, but who they were and how many of them there were, are unknown. From these meagre facts, the legend of Ursula grew and developed.

(10) November 17th is the feast day of St Elizabeth of Hungary. the patron saint of bakers, countesses, dead children, falsely accused, the homeless, nursing services, tertiary institutions, widows, and young brides and is represented by her symbols of alms, flowers, bread, the poor, and a pitcher. St. Elizabeth was born in Hungary in 1207, the daughter of Alexander II, King of Hungary. At the age of four, she was sent for education to the court of the Landgrave of Thuringia, to whose infant son she was betrothed. As she grew in age, her piety also increased rapidly. In 1221, she married Louis of Thuringia and in spite of her position at court began to lead an austere simple life, practiced penance, and devoted herself to works of charity.

Her husband was himself much inclined to religion and highly esteemed her virtue, encouraging her in her exemplary life. They had three children when tragedy struck - Louis was killed while fighting with the Crusaders. After his death, Elizabeth left the court, made arrangements for the care of her children, and in 1228, renounced the world, becoming a tertiary of St. Francis. She built the Franciscan hospital at Marburg and devoted herself to the care of the sick until her death at the age of 24 in 1231.

Chapter 5

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes Dumbledore's death in HBP was staged. *Contents may be disturbing to readers*

Author's note: This story may not please everyone as it is not the usual fluffy Christmas story. The scenes depicted in this story may be offensive and objectionable to some readers for their explicit violence and gore. This story deviates from my usual writing. Emphases are in italics and titles of books &ca are underlined. Some readers may find my characterisation OOC, but I assure you, this is how I see them in the dark distant future. I assume that Dumbledore's death in Book 6 was staged and that's why he's still alive in this story.

Christmas Presents Undisguised

Chapter 5

The weather at Azkaban was overcast as usual. Hermione and Severus had been huddling under their cloaks as the little boat left the wizarding port of Ayr at the northernmost point of Scotland. Their boatman, a wrinkled weather-beaten shell of a man with hollow eyes and no soul, mechanically rowed the boat steadily and unhurriedly to the island where lightning clouds never dispersed. The stench of the water as they approached Azkaban assailed their olfactory senses. Disconcerted with the silence and the gloom that seemed to reach out and choke her soul, Hermione kept her eyes trained on the macabre waterborne path that kept the boat travelling slowly to Azkaban. How in the world the Potter Administration got so many heads and other fragments of traitors to sit on pikes to light the way to the prison, she did not know. While it was a sobering display, Hermione wondered if those fragments of treasonous traitors' heads and body parts were meant to be a deterrent. If these unnecessarily violent killings were anything to go by, she was certain that the murderer they were currently tracking was mocking the very displays the boat passed. Hermione could not help but stare at the sight in horrid fascination as she noticed that the closer they got to Azkaban, the heads were increasingly more decomposed. The boat passed by one that was rotted down from the nose down, the eyes glassed over with a thick murky film of shock, staring back at whoever who dared meet its eyes. Hermione turned her head aside, wrapped her wet cloak closer to herself, and wished that they would reach the prison soon.

'Frightened by Rodolphus Lestrange?' sneered Severus, raising his voice a little to be heard over the driving rain. 'A fitting end for him, don't you think?'

'Wasn't it enough that Mr Malfoy's head was the first we saw when we embarked from Ayr?'

Severus snorted briefly in ironic humour. 'You may take comfort in the fact that the Lestranges are dead and are not the chief suspects in this mystery.'

Hermione nodded grimly. She knew only too well the violence of the Lestrangle brothers. They were brutal excessively so and when Voldemort was in power, the brothers' exploits were published in the newspapers as if they were heroes. They had attempted to flee when their master fell, but were apprehended by Severus and returned to wizarding London where they were tried and sentenced to death. Unlike Lucius Malfoy, the Lestrangle brothers were more fortunate in that they managed to kill themselves before the show-execution. Their deaths, however, did nothing to prevent the new Potter Administration from treating them any differently from the other traitors their corpses were still publicly disembowelled, beheaded and quartered. While Hermione could take comfort that the Lestranges' reign of terror was over, she wondered how long it would take before the current spell of bloody terror would lapse.

On touching the land (for land it must be called) at Azkaban proper, Severus and Hermione were greeted by the Chief Custodian and the prison's Administrator, a man known to both our Unspeakable Unspeakables as Neville Longbottom. Neville had grown to be a tall and muscular young man over the years and had steadily risen in the Aurory ranks since his graduation. It came as some surprise to his friends that he was by-passed in promotion for one of the higher end Aurory positions and appointed the Chief Custodian of Azkaban. Regarded in the Aurory as a job with no prospects for further promotion, the Chief Warden's job was more stressful than the Commissioner of the Aurors'. Now that the Dementors were gone, wizards had to take over the day-to-day administration of the place. These same wizards were also responsible for the interrogation, transportation and upkeep of the prisoners within its walls. Neville seemed to have taken to his responsibilities as Chief Warden very well. He was discreet and that was why the Unspeakable Unspeakables always spoke highly of him. He knew who they were and he never sought to reveal their identities to anyone. Hermione, who cordially shook his hand, thought that he never looked better. He had put on a little weight and seemed to take everything that came his way with a laugh.

When the Unspeakable Unspeakables announced their mission to him on their way up to his office in the central tower, he paused in the middle of the stairs and looked down on them. 'You mean to say Gran was killed by this monster!' he exclaimed in horrified accents. 'If one of those damnable Death Eater swines has returned, I hope you catch him and wring his neck.'

'Returned?' murmured Hermione as Neville showed them into his office. 'That presupposes that some have left.'

'It is my contention that our murderer never left us,' Severus answered coolly, glaring Neville as he used to in his Potions classes.

'These degenerate Death Eater scums! The Ministry should have known, eh!' Neville commented, nodding sagely to Hermione 'It explains everything.'

'Your sentiments on my former comrades are well-known, I assure you. If rumours are to be believed, you are quite an expert in torture here in Azkaban,' Severus growled, privately wondering why he bothered talking to this imbecile.

'Oh, you...' stammered Neville, nervously wiping the sweat from his brow. 'You wanted help. Didn't you? What can I do for you?'

'I want to view the Azkaban records from the period marked by the Dark Lord's fall from power to the present,' Severus demanded with a great deal of irritation in his voice.

'Of course. They are with the administrative people in the east wing. Please wait while I fetch them,' Neville said, hurrying to the door. 'Oh and 'Mione, help yourself to the biscuits and lemonade on my desk.'

'You still have it in you to scare the pants off Neville, Professor Snape,' chuckled Hermione, as she started nibbling on a ginger snap.

Severus rearranged his face into a faint look of feigned outrage. 'And why would I do that, Dr Granger? I have no desire to examine his genitals!'

'I never said you did,' laughed the Arithmancer. 'What are you looking for in the record books? We already know who have been incarcerated here.'

'How in the world did you get your D.Mag.A, Dr Granger? Although simplistic thinking is to be applauded in the most complex situation, it is useless when we are dealing with a criminal mind who is a match for you and I,' said Severus, curling his lips. 'The Azkaban Records will not only inform us who have been here and the dates of their imprisonment; they will also inform us who have been released and when they were set loose on the world. They will also tell us the procedures that were used to extract confessions, the participants in those procedures as well as those civic-minded public-spirited officers who are responsible for the holding and release of these unfortunate souls here.'

'Knowing Neville, you'll have the most thorough records ever to have come out of Azkaban,' Hermione said. On receiving a dark look of warning from her colleague, she made no further attempt at conversation. She had long been used to his moods. Indeed, at St John's College, he was called the dark spectre because his mood was often dark and morose. Yet, Hermione knew that for all his loyalty to Dumbledore and his aloof stance to the world, Severus Snape had a humanistic streak in him. This did not mean that he routinely displayed signs of sympathy far from it. Rather, he had a sense of justice and honour. She observed that if one overstepped his threshold for what he considered to be permissible, honourable or just, he would not hesitate to lash out at the sorry individual. Harry would not consider him an ideal member of the British wizarding public, Hermione mused with an ironic glint in her eyes. No she knew her sometime friend regarded loyalty to himself, the Minister of Magic, as loyalty to the British wizarding community. Severus, she noticed, did not bother with personality cults of strong charismatic leaders. His first loyalty was always to his sense of honour, his pursuit of knowledge and truth, and perhaps to the over-arching state of justice in the general public. He cared little for the masses, that was certain. Hermione had heard him call the ordinary people they came in contact with in the course of their investigations, 'the *mobile vulgus*'. She smirked at the realisation that he was partially right on that score, for people (in general at least) were a mass of vulgar entities. Despite his cynicism, she knew he possessed flashes of something else she could not

quite put her finger on. His absentminded kindness towards her through their duration as colleagues in the present murder mystery under the auspices of the Secret Department of Unspeakable Unspeakables evinced that he was more than the icy image he chose to portray. She wondered whether their pleasant social intercourse would remain on this present level when they returned to Cambridge when the semester reopened. Her reverie on his character was not to last, for Neville returned with the record books.

Severus immediately pounced on the books and thoughtfully read while pacing back and forth, occasionally mumbling to himself. Neville, who was a silent spectator to all this, finally plucked up enough courage to twist his handkerchief nervously and utter something that he thought might be important to their investigation. 'Did you know that Antonin Dolohov was released some time ago? He happened to be Voldemort's man in Azkaban while he was in power. He was an interrogator and jailer here. I was one of his prisoners in those days.'

'Dolohov still prowling the British Isles? Now, *that* is news, Mr Longbottom!' sneered Severus, who despite looking disparagingly at Neville, picked up the Azkaban record book detailing the prison's activities during Voldemort years and looked up his former associate's details.

Disturbed by her friend's distress, Hermione clicked her tongue in annoyance at Severus's charming interaction skills and promptly sought to soothe Neville's trepidation. 'Would you mind telling us more about Dolohov during the Voldemort years?'

'His exploits within and without Azkaban were infamous! His torture techniques were reputedly so brutal that our people at Ayr could hear the prisoners' screams.'

'Is there someone here who could tell us more about him?' Hermione asked.

'I have an even better idea,' announced Neville proudly. 'I'll let you meet him!'

As soon as Severus had perused all the record books of his choosing, Neville led the two Unspeakable Unspeakables down four flights of winding stairs, many draughty passageways to a place he called the first level basement dungeons of the South Wing. The South Wing was, as the number of guards in place suggested, one of the main prisoner holding areas. The person he wanted them to meet (or so he informed them) was at the fourth level of the basement dungeons. The stairs to this area was guarded by a tall and muscular man in a hood whom Neville addressed as 'Glazier'. The air down in these levels of the South Wing was as foetid as it was dark and the steps were so slippery that Hermione might have stumbled and broken her head had not Severus silently linked arms with her. Once her balance was regained, she noted with some disquiet that the stone walls were crumbling in places. Her discomfort grew as she heard muffled screams and crying. She was shocked that the gentle Neville whom she had known at school would actually sanction such acts of cruelty for the sake of extracting a confession. Fortunately for her, Severus espied the fear and trepidation dancing in her eyes and whispered an instruction to her to focus her energies on the finding the murderer.

After descending the stairs for what seemed to be an indeterminable period of time, Neville asked the investigators to await the guard in the Guards' pantry. The cheerless place suited Severus and he made himself at home on the sparse furnishing, and gestured for his companion to do the same. Two screams from the bowels of the dungeons and a minute of rattling chains later, Neville returned with a guard he introduced as Davey Gudgeon, the longest serving guard and interrogator in Azkaban.

Davey Gudgeon appeared to be very well built for an old man and it was clear to both Hermione and Severus that he was as broad as he was strong. His bald, slightly pointed head, coupled with his heavy-set grey brows and beady eyes gave him a look of overall unpleasantness, and Hermione would swear that had she encountered him on the street, she would have pegged him for a ruffian. After affecting a nod to both the investigators as if they were members of the same station in life, Gudgeon said in a rasping voice, 'The guv' 'ere said ye wanted to know about Dolohov. I remember that one. He was one of 'em dark wizards. Voldy came and placed him in charge of Azkaban when he made himself Minister. He was bloody good at interrogations this Dolohov could give the Lestrangle brothers a run for their galleons, I would say.'

'I'm sure that's all very interesting,' drawled Severus lazily. 'Now, if you would tell us how he conducted his interrogations?'

'Aren't ye one of their group? How come you don't know their methods?' asked Gudgeon suspiciously.

'In my day, it was fashionable to allow the Lestranges to do what they choose. The Lestranges were extremely persuasive. I merely wondered on the level of intellectual curiosity how Dolohov, who was more a doer than a thinker, compared to them,' Severus answered with a black scowl.

'Why didn't you say so, guv'? He was a nasty one, Dolohov. He treated the men and women equally in these walls. They were all chained up by their thumbs and toes, whipped, branded, cut into. I remember one time; he was silencing this pretty little witch by snapping off her fingers, one joint at a time. And he didn't stop when she tearfully confessed to be a separatist resistance leader even though she was a mere flower shop girl down at Diagon Alley.'

'He was a beast,' added Neville quietly, refusing to meet Hermione's searching eyes.

'Right about that too, guv',' agreed Gudgeon with a hearty snort into his sleeve. 'They say he took an unnatural pleasure in other's pain. He once told me he felt a connection with the people he had "handled". He would accompany them to the executions. Executions in Voldy's day were worse than the show-executions we have now. In those days, you were kept alive while they dismembered you one joint at a time. Dolohov would accompany them to the execution grounds for he was also the executor. All throughout their final journey, he would exhort them to buy into Voldy's principles in exchange for a quicker death whatever that meant! The guv' here,' he paused and indicated Neville with his head. 'The guv' was one of his last prisoners afore e' was shipped off to tear down one of your shrines don't ye know! Two months after the guv' was shipped off, young Potter came into his own and took over as Minister.'

Hermione shuddered at his graphic description and paced around the pantry in a bid to shake the sense of foreboding hanging over her head.

Gudgeon, blissfully unaware of anything but his narration, continued excitedly, 'Then when Potter was made Minister and Voldy worst than dust, Dolohov was imprisoned here. There was enough evidence to charge him but not enough to send him to the gallows though because he was not one of those fellows who went around telling other people to kill Dumbledore's people or anything. He was none too smart in the head, if you know what I mean. He was imprisoned here for five years before he was let out a year short of his sentence. The internal court services thought him to be sane enough to be "re-introduced" to society, whatever that means! Between you and me, guv', I say this Dolohov fellow is still queer in his attic. No telling what he might do. Why when I think of the times I see him grinning and laughing like a banshee, he was always torturing somebody!'

'From what you've told me, Hermione, he sounds like your man,' said Neville.

Hermione looked to Severus, her arms tightly folded. 'This looks like the man we were looking for, Professor Snape.'

Severus leaned back in the dingy chair and traced his lips pensively. 'I would never have thought that Dolohov had it in him to be Death incarnate. He lacked ambition. All you heard here is that he enjoys pulling his victims apart joint by joint.'

'Whereas our man prefers to play surgeon with the bodies,' continued Hermione, following her colleague's train of thought.

'Who's to say,' added Neville, paling a little at Gudgeon's words. 'I read somewhere that killers and their methods evolve. It is likely that Dolohov went from hacking at joints to hacking up peoples' insides.'

At which comment, the two Unspeakable Unspeakables exchanged meaningful looks of resignation and unsettled anxiety.

* * *

A further two days of investigation revealed nothing on the location of Dolohov or any other suspects, much to the two academics' chagrin. In their discussions, they both owned that Dolohov was too convenient a suspect. It was as if he was deliberately thrust under their noses. However, as they were unable to come up with a more plausible suspect, they had little choice but to give his name to Dumbledore when he recalled them to his office.

'A runaway Death Eater? How novel!' exclaimed Dumbledore, spinning around his chair and sagely stroking his beard. 'It certainly takes the biscuit! Antonin Dolohov, very

well done!"

Hermione, who was looking out on the London skyline from his office sighed in dissatisfaction. 'We are not one hundred percent sure.'

'Nothing is one hundred percent certain, my dear,' chuckled the old man as he noisily chewed a sweet. 'Harry will be pleased when I tell him the news.'

'Ha!' spat Severus in a mocking accent. 'He's sure of himself. Is he so sure that he will apprehend Dolohov? Is he so sure that Dolohov is the man? If Dr Granger and I cannot be sure on it, how can he rest on the reports you submit to his notice?'

Dumbledore waved his hand over his quills and they started scribbling warrants and instructions on their own accord. 'Harry has stated he *will* double the reward money to 1000 galleons. Money is a definite incentive, my boy.'

'That's assuming that he is being sheltered by someone,' commented Hermione, fingering a glass bauble on the Christmas tree. 'What if he's managing on his own?'

"For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" Dumbledore,' interposed Severus before the old man could say anything. 'There will be people out there who are so avaricious that they will claim their kneazle is Dolohov for the reward money. When will you policymakers learn that money is not a valid incentive for instilling the value of public-spiritedness?'

'I'll send word to young Weasley to paste up Dolohov's old "wanted" posters,' said Dumbledore matter-of-factly. 'Sherbet lemon, Severus? Hermione? No?'

Hermione signalled her displeasure with a harrumph. 'How will it help those uncouth philistines on the streets? Don't tell me you're actually thinking of keeping your word and paying the reward money?'

Severus curled his lips at the dotty old man stroking his pet phoenix's head and stalked over to Hermione's station by the window. 'Dr Granger, I believe it is obvious from that annoying twinkle in his eyes that he has no desire to pay. The Potter Administration can ill afford it it is in debt and there are all the other rebuilding efforts requiring funding. 1000 galleons is a prize that is too good to be true.'

'I recall your lesson on this, Professor Snape and verily, I believe you that which is too good to be true most likely isn't true.'

'Quite right, my dear,' acknowledged Dumbledore, surprising his two best Unspeakable Unspeakables with his honesty. 'Sooner or later, one of young Ronald Weasley's pups or the other wizards in our department will catch hold of this fellow. A great show-trial and great show-execution later, wizarding London would be safer and more revenue would pour in, allowing for further improvements in our world.'

'What a *coup de grace*!' ejaculated Hermione, not bothering to hide the disgust in her eyes.

'Ah, such is life outside the ivory tower, my dear,' chuckled Dumbledore placidly. He shuffled his papers briefly and signed two documents. 'In either case, it will be a show of this Administration's efficacy, strength and efficiency.'

'Or it could make a mockery of the system and render Dolohov a martyr for the remaining Death Eaters out there,' Severus ventured to state.

'Severus, Severus, there will always be martyrs and there will always be people to disabuse the martyrs' foolish followers. Thank you both for your efforts; you have done well. But you do understand that I cannot allow either of you to leave the service of the Secret Department of Unspeakable Unspeakables until the accused is caught and sentenced?'

'And Severus,' he added, just as the younger wizard curled his lips into an ugly smirk. 'You do realise what Harry will do to you if you leave my service without my blessing? He'll never forget what you did to me in his sixth year at Hogwarts.'

'It was under your orders!' barked Severus viciously.

'Harry does not seem to believe that. He is of the mind that you intended to kill me then to aid the rise of Riddle. Tread carefully over this case and I'll keep Harry in check. Who knows, he may be persuaded to look on you in a new light. Disregard my counsel and request and you might very well end up like your friend, Lucius. You know Harry's temper...'

His companions' reactions were as Dumbledore had anticipated: one cast him dark looks of abhorrence, while the other nodded cynically at him. Then, satisfied that he would say no more that day, they left him alone to mull over their reports. 'How quickly the young become jaded,' Dumbledore murmured to the phoenix perched next to his desk. 'Do not worry, Fawkes,' he muttered, as he watched the sunset from his office window. 'I will keep my word and set them both free from their obligations to me. I only need them to apprehend the real killer.'

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I could mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out how it fits with the story. 'Presents' could also mean 'current' which would be another pun for Christmas now under the Potter Administration and Christmas then, under the Voldemort administration.

D.Mag.A stands for Doctor of Magical Arts. It's a made-up wizarding PhD.

Davey Gudgeon was mentioned in Book 3 as a Hogwarts student in the 1970s who tried to get past the Whooping Willow. In so doing, he nearly lost an eye. The Harry Potter Lexicon states that 'Gudgeon' comes from the Latin 'gobion', a variant of 'gobius'. It is from the Middle English 'gudyon' from Old French 'goujon' and refers to something to be used as bait, or a gullible person. This nomenclature is significant to the Davey Gudgeon we see in the final chapter of this tale.

'For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows', is a quote from 1 Timothy 6:10. It is generally misquoted as 'Money is the root of all evil'.

'*Mobile vulgus*' is Latin for 'mob of people'.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 8

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes

Author's note: This story may not please everyone as it is not the usual fluffy Christmas story. The scenes depicted in this story may be offensive and objectionable to some readers for their explicit violence and gore. This story deviates from my usual writing. Emphases are in italics and titles of books &ca are underlined. Some readers may find my characterisation OOC, but I assure you, this is how I see them in the dark distant future. I assume that Dumbledore's death in Book 6 was staged and that's why he's still alive in this story.

Christmas Presents Undisguised

Chapter 6

For the next two days, excitement ran high in wizarding London over the news that a large reward was offered for the capture of Antonin Dolohov. 'A thousand galleons!' whispered the gossips to each other. 'Imagine what we could do with the money! If only we could catch Dolohov! Oh, a thousand galleons!'

The unfortunate man's old wanted posters adorned every available surface in every district and constituency of wizarding London. The *Daily Prophet*, the premier British wizarding newspaper, also devoted two pages to the increased reward for the capture of the gutting murderer, and reported daily sightings (all apocryphal of course) of this runaway Death Eater. The public's avarice was inflamed so much so that all it could talk about was the capture of Dolohov and the large windfall that would befall it if they could be the fortunate ones to apprehend the alleged killer. All this talk of apprehending Dolohov ironically pushed the coming Christmas season out of the minds of the *mobile vulgus*.

Conveniently for him and the Ministry, Dumbledore mentally noted, the members of the wizarding community had neglected to pay attention to the full clauses of the reward one had to personally apprehend Dolohov; if one had sighted him and called on the Aurors to make the arrest, no reward money would be forthcoming. Oh well, he shrugged, more money for the Secret Department of Unspeakable Unspeakables to use in their investigations, then. With the talk of the price on Dolohov's head, all Christmas chatter died and was replaced by a rash of false accusations where neighbours reported alleged sightings of the wanted man in each other's homes. The *Daily Prophet*, as could be expected, lapped up the drama eagerly, publishing widely on these feuding neighbours, leading other small wizarding presses to print and distribute pamphlets explaining what to do should the reader come across rogue Death Eaters.

Following the speculation on the reward money and Dolohov's capture, people came to show an interest in the places where the murders were committed. This drove tourists and curious onlookers to the eight known and publicised sites (information on the other similar slayings in the Chardobis districts was not released to the press). A circumstance that led many fingersmiths to plumb their own pockets for the Yuletide season. More than one known felon silently thanked Dolohov for drawing attention away from his nefarious activities. The murder sightseers who flocked to the disreputable part of wizarding London in exhilarated trepidation discomfited the usual residents there. While they were pleased that the series of sensational murders in their area so close to Christmas had brought the much needed tourist knut into the dingy denizens, they were displeased that the disruption of their everyday lives. As such, the inhabitants of Morosia, Alkane and Discedes were glad that the murderer whoever he was was still on the loose, for this meant they could have their districts to themselves come sundown.

Hermione and Severus observed these events with jaundiced eyes from the relative comfort of their respective homes, not bothering to stir outdoors lest they too meet these sensation-hungry mobs. Both Unspeakable Unspeakables dismissed Harry Potter's personal effort to thank them via Floo and declined his invitation to supper. Instead, they chose to remain secreted in their studies thinking about the investigation. Hermione returned to her flat in wizarding Banbury, Oxfordshire, stationed herself at her desk, writing, making extensive notes, thinking and making extensive Arithmantic calculations as to where the killer would next strike. There was something about the investigation that dissatisfied her it was as if it were still incomplete. Despite the announcement of the increased reward money for the capture of the Morosia-side murderer, Hermione was still pacing her flat with her notes on the case firmly in her hand and mind.

She was interrupted in her thoughts by a Floo-chime. Clicking her tongue in annoyance at the unwanted interruption, she turned sharply to the offensive Floo-caller with a ready insult only to find that it was Severus. He began brusquely without preamble, 'I have received a communiqué from one of my contacts. The game's still afoot, Dr Granger. Come over to Spinner's End. I need your expertise.'

She nodded to the head in the greenish flames briefly, grabbed her cloak, wand and papers and entered her fireplace before Severus could close the Floo connection. Eyeing her slightly sooty cloak with haughty disdain, Severus silently cast a cleansing spell over her and gestured for her to sit. 'My contact from Northumberland has alerted me to something which I think you will find interesting, given your penchant for the method of "thinking simply".'

'Am I right to assume then that you do not think Dolohov to be our man?' she asked, looking at him as he paced the length of the study.

'It must have occurred to you, Dr Granger, that the evidence against Antonin is entirely circumstantial. Something does not fit with the evidence.'

Hermione frowned. 'That puzzled me as well. My private enquiries have yielded nothing new.'

'You do not have my contacts, Dr Granger.'

She rolled her eyes. '*Your contacts*? Very well, Professor Snape, what did your mysterious contact say?'

'He informs us,' Severus began, shuffling through the papers in his hands until he came to the right one, 'there had been a spate of violent attacks in the one of the Muggle districts in Northumberland some four hundred years ago. These attacks are of the same nature, bloody, brutal and senseless. The killings went on for nearly two years and the perpetrator was surprisingly indiscriminate in his choice of victims, more so than our mysterious Morosia-side man. The Northumberland fellow gamely included children in his repertoire of farmhands and shop girls. All the victims there had their necks broken, their tongues torn out, their bodies mutilated and indecently assaulted. According to the Muggle reports, not all his victims had the misfortune to die. There were three survivors who were severely mauled. However, they were in too much shock to be of any use to the investigation. The local authorities at that time combined what little rationality they had and came to the conclusion that supernatural forces were at work. They initiated a hunt for the infamous *loup-garrou* as the original records stated and uncovered *nothing*.'

Hermione held out her hand for the papers he held and after scowling darkly at her, he reluctantly slapped them in her palm. Severus smirked at himself when she gave no further indication of wishing to interrupt him and duly continued, 'In case you are unable to read late medieval English handwriting the papers inform the careful reader that the authorities eventually found a suspect who was neither a wizard nor a werewolf. He was caught after someone saw him leaving a faintly moaning whore in some alley. He was as much of a mortal human being as you and I. As soon as this Guillaume Wydevyll was caught, he readily admitted to the crimes. Naturally, being the catholic thinkers that they were in those days, they believed that a man was incapable of such deeds and used various *unorthodox means* to obtain Wydevyll's confession that he was a werewolf or wizard.* Despite the torture and the threat of death that was held over his head, Wydevyll maintained that he was neither a werewolf nor wizard. He was in fact, a beggar by trade, not a prosperous one, and enjoyed going about in his dirty ragged clothes. He was not particularly remarkable and could have slipped through the streets of any 16th century England town without drawing attention to himself. According to the accounts in your hands, his countenance was not frightening and he was not very strongly built. He only wanted an outlet for his *urges* and any being fortunate enough to fall within his vision was prey for his needs. The surviving witnesses confirmed him as the murderer when they cowered away at the sight of him. He was subsequently tried, found guilty and burnt at the stake.'

Severus noted Hermione's thoughtful silence and approached her sofa. 'Well, Dr Granger,' he purred, leaning forward, tightly grasping the armrest, thereby fencing her in her seat. 'What conclusions can you draw from this cautionary tale?'

Affecting a nonchalant air, she met his obsidian eyes coldly. 'There are some astounding similarities the belief that a demon or monster was responsible for the killings, the *modus operandi* of violent killing for its own sake and so on. What strikes me,' she said, chewing on her thumb, 'is the discovery that the killer was an ordinary man whom no one suspected. No one would even pay attention to him for he was one of the nameless, faceless people in the town. That's frightening.'

'Precisely,' answered Severus, sweeping away to his desk. 'Now, we need to find a modern wizarding equivalent to Guillaume Wydevyll. Once we find this man who is so much of a nothing that he strikes out at those who are something, we have our man. Power is a drug and if killing and torture inspires fear in the victim, little wonder that our man is addicted to it.'

'This disqualifies Dolohov from our list then.'

'Do you think that stupid Minister would allow Dumbledore to call off the hunt for Dolohov? Of course not!'

'I sincerely doubt anyone would believe us if we told them that the criminal they seek is somebody yet nobody,' said Hermione, leaning back into the sofa.

'Somebody yet nobody... That is an interesting turn of phrase and apt, very apt,' murmured Severus, bending over his books. "Do you think..."

His words were cut off at that moment by Ron Weasley's head in the Floo. 'Hey, 'Mione,' the Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement greeted her, excitement bubbling in his voice. 'And you too, Snape,' he added coldly before cracking a grin at his friend. 'We have Antonin Dolohov in custody.'

'He must be the what tenth one today?' snorted Severus, with his fingers a delicate steeple under his chin.

'This one is the real thing all right. He's at Azkaban. He surrendered himself to Neville at Azkaban!' Ron chattered excitedly.

Hermione and Severus exchanged meaningful looks of alarm. 'Then that's where we're going,' the Unspeakable Unspeakables declared, simultaneously rising from their seats.

* * *

While the investigators managed to keep whatever private sentiments they had at the surrender of Dolohov to themselves, they could not help but lash out at the Chief Warden at Azkaban on learning that Dolohov was already in the deepest recesses of the South Wing racking room.

'I knew you were stupid, Longbottom, but not this stupid! You were supposed to wait for orders from either Dr Granger or myself! Did I order you to put him to torture?' Severus barked at the cringing Neville as he was led down the winding stairs to Dolohov's holding cell.

'B...but Dumbledore's office said we were to begin interrogation immediately,' stammered Neville, looking to Hermione for support. 'He said that we had to do whatever we could to extract the how and the why of the killings.'

'Precisely,' snapped Severus, his eyes narrowing dangerously into slits. 'The orders were to interrogate ~~NOT~~ torture. Have you no dictionary you might perhaps use to remedy your ignorance?'

'If he's the man you're after, he'll crack sooner or later and you'll have your confession,' squealed Neville, nervously wiping his brow.

'The Department of Magical Law Enforcement offices are incompetent!' rejoined Severus angrily. 'Aren't you all trained in the wizarding common law of the British Isles? The wizarding common law plainly states that there is to be no torture in criminal enquiries! A person will often say anything under torture, surely the Voldemorts years must have taught you that!'

'But I thought that because he was your man and all, getting the detailed confession was of the utmost urgency,' offered Neville weakly as he trembled in his shoes.

'Precisely, Mr Longbottom, you *didn't think!*' spat the Alchemist.

'Have you thought of using Veritaserum?' interposed Hermione as quickly as she saw her colleague stretching out his hand, presumably to throttle her friend.

'The Department of Magical Law Enforcement limits the use of chemical influences to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement offices, not Azkaban. As you know, Azkaban rules are clear that no magic is to be allowed. This means no wands, no potions,' Neville explained. 'Even if we could slip him a little Veritaserum, we would require Ministry approval. A Ministry appointed Potions master must brew it for us in our premises witnessed by the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and a representative from Dumbledore's office. The process to secure Veritaserum use can take up to a month!'

As the Unspeakable Unspeakables were ushered into Dolohov's holding cell at that moment, they had to keep their opinions on the bureaucracy to themselves. The cell was a sparsely decorated room with the stench of blood and human waste. The most notable feature, observed the investigators, was a steel frame three metres long and one metre across housing the stretched body of Antonin Dolohov. His wrists and ankles were manacled to the rusted pulleys at all four ends and his body severely whipped. Severus approached the accused and stared at the face and the sunken eyes and cheeks. His limbs and body, the alchemist noted, were more bones than flesh and his face bore signs of heavy beating.

Gudgeon, who was in the corner working the racking device, ceased his ministrations on the machine and looked up at the newcomers with a twisted grin on his lip. Dolohov's limbs were already fully extended and the chains holding him down were so taut that Hermione thought they might break at any minute. From the awkward twist of his left arm and right leg, Hermione surmised that those appendages were already broken. As he turned his head to better view the investigators, a trickle of blood fell from his mouth down his chin as he convulsed slightly.

'Antonin, we meet again,' said Severus tonelessly.

Dolohov bared his bloodied teeth in a greeting. 'So the two-headed snake still lives!'

Neville sniffed in mild disgust. 'You see how unrepentant he is! Stubborn Death Eater Swine!'

'Isn't this torture extreme?' asked Hermione. 'We just want to question him.'

'It may seem extreme to you,' answered Neville, patting his former schoolfellow on the shoulder bracingly. 'But this is absolutely necessary. These idiotic Death Eater pigs can hold out against the rack for days. Pity Dolohov isn't doing his own torture.'

'Mr Longbottom,' Severus drawled deliberately with false civility. 'Need I remind you that he is not here because he is Death Eater spy? He is here because he is accused of murder.'

Dolohov looked imploringly at his former comrade and twitched his lips into a friendly smirk, blinking away the wetness in his red-rimmed eyes. Neville could only stand aside and gape at Severus's injunction, while the alchemist favoured him with a contemptuously curling of his lips. Cowering at the sight of his former Potions master's quelling gaze, Neville flushed hotly and stammered, 'Murder is very bad, very bad indeed. I will tell Gudgeon to cease applying the rack if you want it. But we dare not do so lest we are deemed to be neglecting our duty.'

'Duty?' laughed Severus ironically. 'Do you know what duty is?'

Hermione hastily interjected. 'What Professor Snape means to say is that while we understand the reasons for your usage of this device, for we are cognisant of the fact that certain occasions do merit specific methods, we view the rack and any torture device to be left as the instrument of last resort only.'

'Do you want me to release him to your custody then, Hermione?' offered Neville.

The two investigators glanced briefly at each other; one set of eyes glittering and unfathomable, the other enquiring and soft. Whatever their eyes communicated to each

other, they both were aware of the uses of torture in Azkaban; thus, they shook their heads at the Chief Warden. 'Not yet,' said Hermione, breaking the silence.

'Tell us how he came to be here, Mr Longbottom,' demanded the Alchemist.

'He knocked on the gates of the prison and said that he wanted sanctuary before someone caught him,' Neville stated. 'He was dressed in tattered robes of black and wore an omega chain around his neck. It was as if he wanted to give the impression that he was repenting for his damnable deeds in life.'

'Yes,' whispered Dolohov bitterly. 'The ancient sign of repentance for wizards was to mark my regret for the things I've done under the Dark Lord's orders. They took my omega away from me, Severus.' He grimaced in pain. 'When I was in Azkaban in this great fat oaf's position, I was doing what he's doing to me now only what I did was far worse, far worse.'

'Impudent dog!' shouted Gudgeon. 'How dare you compare us to you!' To further emphasise his opinion, he drove a hammer into the device's crank-handle and turned it slowly so much that all present heard the cracking of bones and Dolohov's howls.

'Stop it!' commanded both Hermione and Severus, much to the surprise of the prisoner.

'Antonin, tell me something to convince me of this change of heart. Tell me why you gave yourself up after years of hiding. If you want me to help you, you must help me in this murder mystery,' Severus pleaded in his former comrade's ear.

'I came here on my own free will when I saw the posters at Mornay. From the day of my release many years ago, I lived like a beggar on the streets, ignored by people at best and beaten by those who thought I got in the way. Without a wand, I was no different from a Muggle. I didn't know how to live like one. One day, I came across an out-of-the-way farmhouse. I slept every night in the stables there. The farmhouse was owned by a mud...Muggle-born witch, a widow. Normally, I would reject any charity from their kind. I always thought they hated our kind. However, she was different. She didn't look on me as if I was a loathsome beggar. She always gave me something to eat every night. She never asked any questions and it suited me. Sometimes, she would ask me to run into town to get something for her and I did. I lasted for I don't know how many years like that. Living like that made me think. What it was like to be a mendicant and friendless and suddenly someone who clearly knows you are and what you have done, feeds you. It made me feel like a bloody bastard.'

'Which you are,' added Neville hotly.

Gudgeon snorted and laughed savagely. 'Doesn't sound like a Death Eater to me!'

'You could have continued your life there, why did you surrender to us?' enquired Hermione gently.

'I want to show that I am innocent,' whispered Dolohov weakly.

'Stupid move,' commented Severus with something akin to regret in his voice

'Right you are there,' chuckled Neville. However, the grave look on the faces of the Unspeakable Unspeakables disconcerted him and he asked, 'You don't mean to say you believe him!'

Hermione spoke for both herself and Severus when she honestly declared that they were presently undecided in their views. Severus turned away from Dolohov and rubbed his brow as if nursing a headache. This was very different from the Dolohov he knew in his Death Eater days. Could he be the murderer or couldn't he? A part of him wanted to believe that the note of sincerity in his voice was genuine. However, try as he might, he could not put aside the knowledge that the Dolohov he knew enjoyed torturing others. Did this then mean that he was the perpetrator of the murders? Severus did not know.

'If you two don't know what to think, I do!' announced Neville, resuming the full weight of his authority as Azkaban's Chief Warden. "Gudgeon, I want a confession out of him as soon as possible. Proceed with the next stage!"

Unable to bear the sight any longer, both the Unspeakable Unspeakables swept indignantly out of the cell. Puzzled by the case, which only seemed to be yielding indefinite answers, Hermione and Severus stayed the night at Azkaban. During the course of the night they went down to Dolohov's cell to beg him to tell them the truth. However, all Dolohov did was to repeatedly protest his innocence at the Unspeakable Unspeakables questions. Neville, it would seem, was convinced of his guilt. Despite Hermione's protests over the torture methods he ordered Gudgeon to put the prisoner through, Neville remained steadfast in maintaining his point-of-view. Whenever she objected to the torture on grounds that Dolohov was too weak to withstand further questioning without fainting away, Neville told her that his experience at Azkaban had taught him that prisoners always broke down in the end and confessed to their crimes, it only took some time and physical persuasion. This comment earned him a look of scorn from Severus and a shocked look of repugnance in Hermione's eyes. The backbone he had apparently grown in his tenure as Chief Warden did nothing to recommend him to the Unspeakable Unspeakables, however amiable he might be towards them. Revolted by the gross techniques that Gudgeon applied on Dolohov, the Arithmancer and alchemist begged him to confess: if he did kill those witches and wizards, he could be guaranteed a swift death at the gallows. He need not fear disembowelment for his crime was not treason. Even if he were innocent, they pleaded, he should confess so as to stop the torture. They even promised to plead for a quick death on his behalf. Dolohov chose not to heed their petitions and staunchly remained true to his story. He maintained his innocence, defiantly claiming he did not commit any of the murders of which he was accused. At first, they had assumed him to be delirious and questioned him about the individuals he had tortured while in Voldemort's service. Nevertheless, when he readily confessed to torturing those in his care to death, Hermione and Severus grimly conceded that he was speaking the truth.

At three o'clock in the morning, it became noticeable to Hermione and Severus that Dolohov was looking very ill indeed. He passed out frequently, writhing his chained body in pain. His limbs were no longer grey but bluish black and were scarred with bloody welts. All four limbs by then had twisted grotesquely out of shape and appeared to be broken in many parts. His nose had begun to peel with the continual onslaught of mucus and blood, and his eyes no longer rained tears but little rivers of blood. Unable to bear with it anymore, Hermione confronted Neville. 'I do not care if Dumbledore and Harry sanctioned this! This is inhumane. You can see that it's getting nowhere. He gives us the same answers to everything. If there's anything I've learnt in my position, it's this consistency is usually the truth.'

Nonplussed by her statement, the Chief Warden shrugged and ordered Gudgeon to remove the prisoner from the devices. Severus cast Neville an evil look as soon as Dolohov was brought down from the iron maiden. 'So, this is what the Chief Custodian does! No wonder the administrative paperwork of Azkaban is so much in order,' he said.

'I'm very glad you realised that,' said Neville, wiping the sweat off his brows and rolling down the sleeves of his robes. Hermione noticed with a wry twitch of her lips that Severus's insult slid neatly off her friend's self-contained complacency of his position. She looked up at the mouldy stone ceiling and privately wondered whether the air of cruelty inherent at Azkaban turned their Chief Wardens into obsessive creatures who only cared for extracting confessions from their prisoners.

'Has it ever occurred to you that information extracted through torture is most likely unreliable and untrue?' Hermione asked, saying the first thing that came to her mind.

Neville nodded briefly at the veracity of her utterance. 'But it is a just way,' replied he with a slight smile.

'Really? Pray, Captain Longbottom, edify me. What is the "just way"? Why is it "just"? sneered Severus. Sensing something awry, for her colleague had addressed the custodian by his Department of Magical Law Enforcement rank for their first time in their investigation, Hermione gently placed her hand at the crook of his folded arms to stay him from any violent outburst.

Neville adjusted his robes and stomped on the dry hay to remove the muck and blood from under his shoes. 'It's actually very simple. When person is put through pain, we will know whether he is truly good and innocent. If he is good and innocent, then he will have the strength of mind to come out of it. Justice will prevail. So long as this good and innocent person holds out, something or the other will happen to add to his strength of character and the real guilty party will be caught. If a person is bad and guilty, then he'll crack. The fact is, innocents are never sent here now that Harry is the Minister of Magic. Every heinous felon sent here is guilty of something. It says so in our Custodian's Guide to Azkaban, "Every man is guilty of something; he just needs help remembering what it was". We here at Azkaban only highlight the guilt in our methods. It is our duty to see that we help the law. Thus, the torture will serve its purpose.'

Severus and Hermione exchanged glances. 'So,' began Severus, not bothering to hide his disdain. 'Let us say, hypothetically, you have an innocent man incarcerated here. How long would he have to proclaim his blamelessness through torture before you are convinced of his innocence? A week? A month? A year? Or do you take the simple route and torture him until he "cracks" and proves himself to be a bad, guilty felon so that you might call off the instruments of pain?'

'You know I just follow the system,' Neville said quietly, stammering and cringing a little at Severus's uncomfortable line of questioning. 'It's the way it has been done and the way I do it. Simple as that I do my duty.' With a final look at the cell so as to ascertain that he did not leave anything behind, the Chief Custodian of Azkaban proceeded to lead them out of the deepest recesses of the South Wing.

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I could mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out how it fits with the story. 'Presents' could also mean 'current' which would be another pun for Christmas now under the Potter Administration and Christmas then, under the Voldemort administration.

I kept the Victorian term for thief/pickpocket, 'fingersmith', because I like it. Besides, the wizarding world is a little behind the Muggle world and an old-fashioned word (in my opinion) gives it a little charm.

"The game's still afoot, Dr Granger." pays homage to Sherlock Holmes' remark to Watson in The Abbey Grange, where Holmes says, "Come, Watson, come! The game is afoot!" <http://www.classicreader.com/read.php/sid.1/bookid.397/sec.12/>

* Paragraph 11 'Naturally, being the catholic thinkers that they were in those days, they believed that a man was incapable of such deeds and used various *unorthodox means* to obtain Wydevyll's confession that he was a werewolf or wizard.'

Catholic here has several meanings: (1) open-minded, wide-ranging, broad, all-embracing, broadminded in which the usage in the context of Severus's speech would be ironic, (2) Christians holy communion for the Anglicans and Methodists (I'm not sure about the rest), refer to all Christians as 'Catholics'. It is *NOT* a reference to the Catholic Church, (3) Catholic as in the Catholic Church. All three meanings are implied herein.

'So long as this good and innocent person holds out, something or the other will happen to add to his strength of character and the real guilty party will be caught...' is a reference to the Salem witch trials. According to my beta, the old trials went something like this - if the witch drowns when dunked under the water, she's innocent. If she lives, then she's a witch and put to death. She adds, 'Either way, at least in Puritan-time Massachusetts, the accused died.' Now, think about how this applies to the Potter administration of this story and how disturbing it is...

Neville's line from his fictitious handbook, "Every man is guilty of something; he just needs help remembering what it was", was actually a popular proverb in Stalinist Russia. My beta informs me that it was heard in the television show Man from Uncle, don't you love Ilya Kurakin (sic) in that show...

The usage of the standard Nazi answer of 'I just follow orders' in Neville's response in the last paragraph is intentional.

And yes, Harry is Minister of Magic and his administration (as mentioned frequently in this tale) is terrible. As that's how I envision the actual game of politics, little wonder that I prefer to be a political philosopher trying to teach people aware of the self from within rather than dabble in politics. I can't play power politics for now, as attested by my problems with the poli sci department where I'm at.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 8

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes Dumbledore's death in HBP was staged. *Contents may be disturbing to readers*

Author's note: This story may not please everyone as it is not the usual fluffy Christmas story. The scenes depicted in this story may be offensive and objectionable to some readers for their explicit violence and gore. This story deviates from my usual writing. Emphases are in italics and titles of books &ca are underlined. Some readers may find my characterisation OOC, but I assure you, this is how I see them in the dark distant future. I assume that Dumbledore's death in Book 6 was staged and that's why he's still alive in this story.

Christmas Presents Undisguised

Chapter 7

'Severus... Professor Snape...' a voice softly called out to Severus. He slowly opened his eyes, allowing them to gradually adjust to the darkness near his face. He had been drifting in a deep dreamless slumber and as such, was a little disoriented on waking. The sounds of fabric being relentlessly dragged across the window made him sit up. The dazzling winter light hurt his eyes and for a moment, he wondered whether he was having a dream. He squinted a little in the direction of the voice and found Hermione leaning over him and fussing over his blanket. 'What time is it, Dr Granger?' he mumbled, scratching his neck.

'Noon,' she answered, her eyes dancing with a mix of excitement and fear.

'I thought I set the alarm clock for ten,' he mumbled, climbing out of bed, allowing her to make his bed.

'You must have been tired. You haven't slept in days. Besides, we only arrived back from Azkaban at four this morning. It's high time you woke up,' she said with some urgency in her voice.

Stretching his limbs in his grey nightshirt, he suddenly narrowed his eyes, grabbed his wand by the bed-stand, pointed it at Hermione and hissed, 'What are you doing here? How did you get into my house?'

Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes. 'You told me to stay and make tea while you had a nap. I caught forty winks on the sofa. Put that wand down, Professor Snape, and get dressed,' she chided, as she crossly folded her arms. 'We must go as soon as possible.'

'What happened?'

'I've just received word that there has been another murder.'

'Morosia?' He asked with a frown.

'No, Discedes, across the river.'

* * *

The day was unusually cold and as such, the streets were relatively empty. Not so at the place of the murder – a large crowd of onlookers had gathered there, pushing and shoving each other along the dirt encrusted paths and its adjoining filth strewn alley, hoping to get a better view of the mangled body. The spectators there were mainly wholesalers, pack-workers, fishmongers, and porters. So thick a thicket did they form that it was not easy for the investigators to find their way to the right wharf. However, Hermione flashed her British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry warrant and the crowd parted silently for the investigators. All the onlookers were eyeing them suspiciously, until Severus growled for them to go away.

While Severus bent over the body, Hermione approached the Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Ronald Weasley, who was taking notes. 'About time you arrived,' he said by way of greeting. 'The oyster girl reported it to the Discedes Aurors division. I told my men not to touch anything. I expect you want the scene all to yourself now.' He swallowed hard. 'It's a terrible sight, almost as bloody as the last.'

Ron pointed to the water's edge and the investigators looked down. There appeared to be some puce rags floating in the shallow waters and mud, but closer examination revealed that a metre away from the landing stage was something vaguely resembling a head, a torso and an arm. The face, they could see, was slashed and beaten so much so that there was no inch of skin left without a mark. The beating, hypothesised Severus, was not the cause of death. It was plain even to the casual observer that the woman had been cut open, butterflyed like a de-veined prawn, and her body severed open from her throat to her genitals. The bloody organs bulged and quivered slightly through the long inexpert slit. As the investigators moved closer to the edge of the wharf to better examine the body, two ravens perched themselves by the slit, possessively pecking and pulling at the red innards, angrily glaring at anyone foolish enough to deprive them of a free meal.

'Witnesses to the crime?' Severus asked brusquely, turning to Ron.

'None. The oyster girl found the body as she was plying her wares, something about a pre-Christmas offer on clams 'alive-alive-oh'. You will notice that the mud is clean. There are no foot prints or signs of magic usage,' Ron mechanically pointed out to the Unspeakable Unspeakables.

Hermione cocked her head to the side and felt her mouth go dry at the sight of the body. She had seen dead bodies before when she fought against Voldemort in the war. She looked back at her brief career as an Unspeakable Unspeakable, and tried to recall the bodies she had seen – none of them approached the ferocity of these murders. Ron, who caught her expression of numb shock, placed an arm over shoulder and tried to soothe her.

'Cease molesting my colleague, if you please, Weasley!' barked Severus, violently flicking aside a lock of his hair that fell forward.

'Oh well,' murmured Ron, ignoring his injunction. 'Shall I tell my men to remove the body?'

'Not yet,' Severus answered, flinging off the young man's arm from Hermione's shoulders. 'I have to consult my esteemed colleague.' Once Ron had moved away from her and addressed a junior Auror, Severus hollered at him, 'Whatever you do, make sure no one touches the body until I say you may. This poor female is already dead and wouldn't object if we stared further at her wounds.'

'So, Dr Granger,' he continued, handing his gloves to Hermione. 'Put on my gloves, you're shivering.'

'This undisturbed scene of crime is disturbing me,' she offered by way of apology.

Severus turned away from her, tracing his lower lip in thought. 'The woman was killed yesterday no doubt. Your thoughts, Dr Granger?'

'It's apparent that her body was dumped somewhere up the river,' Hermione said, earning her an enquiring look from Severus who raised a brow, inviting her to continue. She swallowed hard with one hand at her throat and the other gesturing to the trail of mud around the woman. 'See the tidal mud-flat she's lying on? The ebb-tide left her there.'

A smirk of faint admiration played at the corners of his lips. He wondered whether he should move to disabuse her of her erroneous theory. 'This means that our dear friend, Antonin Dolohov, could not have done it. By the way, Dr Granger, she was killed this morning in the early hours, before dawn.'

'Your reason for this, Professor Snape?'

'The blood, my dear Dr Granger. Look at her, she's covered in her own blood, even the mud has traces of it. If she had been here since last night, the river would have washed her quite clean. Then there is the small matter of the dates.'

'Yesterday was a saint day. Every day is one!' she responded, not bothering to brush his hand off her elbow.

'Not every saint day is a holy day in the wizarding tradition, Dr Granger. The same holds true in the Muggle tradition, does it not? Yesterday was a saint day *but* a holy day. Today, however, is both,' he explained without any patience. Severus narrowed his eyes at her curious liquid ones and conjured another cloak over her when he saw that she was still shivering. 'The cold has killed your brain cells perhaps?' he mocked.

'I so hate to disappoint you – only half of them are dead,' she rejoined, wrapping the cloaks around herself. 'This still does not prove that there is a method.'

'Have you forgotten that which we saw at the Wizarding Shrine to the Sainted Few?'

Hermione gasped, realisation dawning in her mind. 'Is that the pattern? The statues there?' she asked in quick succession, her hand flying to her mouth in shock.

'Your talent for stating the obvious astounds me, Dr Granger, *I never thought* you had it in you. Today is December the 13th, the feast day of St Lucy.'

Ron, who had been listening to his conversation, was determined to have his say as well. 'If this woman was indeed killed this morning as you say, Snape, then she must have been dumped here at low tide when the water was out. However that couldn't have been the case. There are no footprints, no marks in the mud, no drag marks nothing! Our killer does not use magic! He must have done everything manually!'

'No, ye of little grey matter!' hissed Severus, stalking towards Ron and grabbing him by the collars of his robes. 'He does not use magic because magic kills too cleanly. It's quick and painless. An *Avada Kedavra* does not give you mutilations, decapitations and disembowelments! Our man is a wizard – I'm sure of it. He deliberately seeks to kill without magic. A very clever fellow to think so. He takes too much care to ape the Muggle-styled murders in the Victorian era. It has to be a wizard with an insight into Muggle history; one would think it would be a supreme irony to do something like this, leaving most of the superstitious wizarding populace horrified.'

'Oh yeah?' challenged Ron, searching his pockets for his wand. 'How do you know that? You can't even catch the fellow! I still say that the body was washed here.'

Hermione gently pulled Severus away from her friend's throat and patted his arm. Somewhat pacified by his companion's gestures, Severus narrowed his eyes dangerously and hissed, 'What if I told you that the body was thrown down from this very wharf?'

'Thrown? How could she have been thrown?' Ron stared at him like a gaping fish in his initial surprise. That shock however soon turned to disbelief as he shook his head. 'She must have been three-and-a-half metres away.'

'Exactly.'

'I still don't follow,' complained the redheaded Auror, blushing for his inability to grasp the meaning behind Severus's words.

Hermione laughed lightly to diffuse the tension. 'You know, in our department, there is a precept, that Professor Snape invented when one has eliminated all the impossible facts and probabilities, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth.'

'I find that hard to believe,' opined Ron stoutly, scratching his shock of flaming hair.

'Well, Ron,' laughed Hermione uneasily, 'stranger things have happened.' Shooing Ron away to one of the junior Aurors who wanted him, Hermione turned to Severus. 'Our suspicions were right. It wasn't Dolohov, the timing is off he's in Azkaban.'

'It's not just the timing,' drawled Severus silkily, as his fingers traced his lips. 'It's the fact that she was thrown three and a half metres. Our friend, Dolohov is slightly built and when we left him, he was not in condition to move on his own. Even if Azkaban provided Skele-grow for its inmates, which it does not, the bone regeneration time does not coincide with the murder. Furthermore, he had been on the run for too long. You saw him yesterday. He was emaciated. He couldn't even strangle your little neck even if he wanted to.'

Ron, who dismissed his junior Auror, returned to participate in their conversation. He was still unconvinced of the investigators' theory. 'If whoever did this ~~did~~ throw her from the Wharf, he must be very, very strong! He must have been a giant or something. A Troll maybe?'

'Trolls have better brain functions than you, Weasley,' snapped Severus testily. 'Whoever did this is the killer.'

At this pronouncement, alarm surfaced, bubbled and radiated out in a smooth ripple back through the rapidly restless crowd of spectators. People started to push and shove, to argue, to accuse, to hurry away seeking refuge from the killer or to spread the word that the murderer was still running loose. All around the wharf, the cry went up that the Morosia-side murderer had demonic powers and could have been a giant or an ogre. Ron and his Aurors struggled desperately to keep order. However, the population of the Discedes, Alkane and Morosia areas of wizarding London were not known for keeping peace with each other, let alone with officers of the law. In these areas where cheating, poverty, murders and vice were integral parts of their people's lives, the Aurors could not hope to really keep the mob at bay. Punches were soon thrown and spells to stun and immobilise were soon fired. This led to much shouting and screaming, which in turn led to arrests being made. Hermione, much shaken by the sight of the body, clung to Severus's arm, suddenly frightened that the people would go wild and tear them apart. Only Severus remained calm in the chaos and he silently placed a comforting hand over the shivering young lady's. He studied the panic-stricken scene with steely indifference. 'The same thing must have happened in Northumberland before they caught Guillaume Wydevyll.'

'Ignorant buffoons!' Hermione hissed, the colour returning to her cheeks at the feel of his cold hand on her gloved ones. 'It clearly is the work of a man a wizard.'

'You and I are well-aware of that, Dr Granger. But the ignorant, as you know, do not want to see what is outside the cave. They would rather stay in darkness and ignorance. When will they learn that man and his very nature is more frightening than any monster or devil from mythology. Only man can smile and smile and deceive everyone. His use of fraud, deception and evil gives him the illusion of power and endows him with mythological traits. The whole history of man is associated with death and violence because you can't stop human beings from killing one another,' he mused to his companion whose hand he was unconsciously patting.

'This butchery has to end, Professor Snape. This madness cannot continue, and we are no closer to unveiling the killer than we were when we were first assigned to this mission,' Hermione lamented.

'Oh no,' he answered with a thin smirk. 'We already know who he is.'

'We do?' she queried, tightening her grip on his arm. 'For Merlin's sake, tell me who?'

'Let me answer your question with a question. Where have we seen similar displays of decapitation and disembowelment? I'll give you a hint it's sanctioned by our very dear own Minister of Magic,' he said with an irrepressible sneer.

'At the show-executions,' she said. 'But the connection is tenuous at best, unless you mean a public servant.' She paused and gasped in sudden realisation. Then before she could register the shock to her system when she realised that the person whom Severus hinted was the murderer was known to her, she was overtaken by a feeling of tremulous nausea. Doubling over and spattering her bilious vomit on the ground, she came to appreciate how it was all connected. The stench of the river, the sight of the latest body and the knowledge that she was well acquainted with the killer it was too shocking to be true. Yet it must be, for all the evidence, as she now realised with horror and regret, pointed to that individual.

'Is it *that* shocking to you?' he asked in a gentle tone, handing her a handkerchief. 'You really should eat something before vomiting so profusely. Having bile burn through gut is not a pleasant sensation.'

'I see it now,' she murmured weakly and allowed her colleague to support her by her shoulders. 'The victims were all either stabbed in the throat or had their windpipes crushed, disembowelled and decapitated. He did it all while they were still alive. He wanted them to feel their pain; he wanted them to watch what he was doing to them and their bodies; he wanted them to fear him! But surely, he must realise he is not alone. He has an active occupation and is a useful member of our society!'

'Precisely. But when man is dissatisfied with himself, he returns to the state of war of all against all,' he whispered softly to her. 'Come,' he continued in bracing accents, his resolve riding high, 'we must confirm our theory.'

'How will do that?'

'If you would but listen to me, I will tell you. I am confident that by this afternoon or early evening at the very latest, we will be in a position to unmask the killer.'

Hermione gazed at him with a faint smile of approval and squeezed his arm. 'You're not going to do something stupid and get yourself killed, are you?'

After patting her hand in a bid to assure her that he would not (for he had an unfortunate affection for the art of breathing), he curled his lips into a self-satisfied smirk and thoughtfully bade her to follow his instructions to the letter. 'I need you to go on a few errands for me, if you please. You must do all these tasks personally and see to it that they are done. You are on no account to delegate these responsibilities to others. You must personally call on Longbottom at Azkaban. I'm sure the prison can spare him for a few hours. He has his deputy waiting in the wings to run the place. Have Longbottom call out his chief jailer, Gudgeon, and bring them to the Wizarding Shrine to the Sainted Few at the Chardobis district of Mortuary. They must arrive at four o'clock this afternoon. Tell them that we are about to unmask the real Morosia-side murderer and are in need of his urgent assistance. Also, arrange for Antonin Dolohov to be released and his charges cleared. See to it that this is the first thing that you do. The moment his release is secured, Antonin is removed to the infirmary at Ayr where the air is more salubrious for the recuperation of broken bodies.'

'What about you, Professor?' she asked in a small uncertain voice, as Severus Apparated them both back to the Leaky Cauldron.

'I have my own set of things to do,' he said curtly. 'Do as I say, Hermione. It will be for the best.'

After calling for a small luncheon to be served to his colleague, he promptly left, leaving Hermione to wonder how he would succeed in his task.

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out how it fits with the story.

December 13th is the feast day of St Lucy, who is the patron saint of blindness. Lucy's name means "light", with the same root as "lucid" which means "clear, radiant, understandable." Unfortunately for us, Lucy's history does not match her name. Shrouded in the darkness of time, all we really know for certain is that this brave woman who lived in Syracuse lost her life during the persecution of Christians in the early fourth century. Her veneration spread to Rome so that by the sixth century the whole Church recognized her courage in defence of the faith.

Because people wanted to shed light on Lucy's bravery, legends grew up. The one that is passed down to us tells the story of a young Christian woman who had vowed her life to the service of Christ. Her mother tried to arrange a marriage for her with a pagan. Lucy apparently knew that her mother would not be convinced by a young girl's vow so she devised a plan to convince her mother that Christ was a much more powerful partner for life. Through prayers at the tomb of Saint Agatha, her mother's long illness was cured miraculously. The grateful mother was now ready to listen to Lucy's desire to give her money to the poor and commit her life to God.

Unfortunately, legend has it, the rejected bridegroom did not see the same light and he betrayed Lucy to the governor as a Christian. This governor tried to send her into prostitution but the guards who came to take her way found her stiff and heavy as a mountain. Finally, she was killed.

As much as the facts of Lucy's specific case are unknown, we know that many Christians suffered incredible torture and a painful death for their faith during Diocletian's reign. Lucy may not have been burned or had a sword thrust through her throat but many Christians did and we can be sure her faith withstood tests we can barely imagine.

Lucy's name is probably also connected to statues of Lucy holding a dish with two eyes on it. This refers to another legend in which Lucy's eyes were put out by Diocletian as part of his torture. The legend concludes with God restoring Lucy's eyes.

The line "When one has eliminated all the impossible facts and probabilities, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth" is taken from Arthur Conan Doyle's The Sign of Four. It's a nice touch for Hermione and Severus to be acting as Holmes would given their reading of Muggle literature. Hermione's being ironic in her use of the line. Severus did not invent it; he merely appropriated it. Actually, he has a poster with those words in bold behind his desk in his Alchemy office at St John's College, Cambridge.

The line 'But the ignorant, as you know do not want to see what is outside the cave...' is a reference to Plato's Republic where the ignorant remain in the cave unwilling to venture out into the light. Thus, all they see are shadows and they take these shadows as truths. An enlightened person will venture out of the cave, see what's out there, go back in the cave and teach his/her compatriots that the shadows aren't real and that there are wondrous things outside the cave.

Severus's line of 'But when man is dissatisfied with himself, he returns to the state of war of all against all' is a reference to Thomas Hobbes's state of nature in his Leviathan. In the Leviathan, the state of nature is not a state of plenty. It is a terrible state of war of all against all. Until we learn to give up this warlike state and enter the civil state, we will all be killing each other.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 8

An 8 chapter Christmas murder mystery starring Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. It is post-Hogwarts, post-Voldemort and has political, philosophical, sociological overtones. Vaguely compliant to HBP but not DH. Assumes Dumbledore's death in HBP was staged. *Contents may be disturbing to readers*

Author's note: This story may not please everyone as it is not the usual fluffy Christmas story. The scenes depicted in this story may be offensive and objectionable to some readers for their explicit violence and gore. This story deviates from my usual writing. Emphases are in italics and titles of books &ca are underlined. Some readers may find my characterisation OOC, but I assure you, this is how I see them in the dark distant future. I assume that Dumbledore's death in Book 6 was staged and that's why he's still alive in this story.

Christmas Presents Undisguised

Chapter 8

The Unspeakable Unspeakables raised their hoods over their heads as they silently trudged through the steadily falling snow. The inhabitants and frequenters of this wizarding area of London, one Mortuary by name, darted through the place here and there, scurrying in and out of doorways like shadows a contrast against the purity of the white snow. As the afternoon had turned bitter cold, it was unsurprising to find the people at the city hurrying their footsteps. Mortuary, though the ancient wizarding London's capital, was no different from its sister districts in Alkane, Discedes and Alkane. Unlike the present-day capital of wizarding London proper at Diagon Alley, across the river, Christmas cheer was sorely lacking in the air and spirit. Despite the desolation that seemed to pervade the area, Severus was thankful that there was no frenzied buying and selling so common in the weeks preceding Christmases, nor laughter, nor joyous greetings. If it were not for the fact that they were going to confront a killer, the area would have been somewhat tolerable. As it was, his knowledge weighed heavily on him and kept him quiet.

Hermione too said nothing, content to be in companionable silence with her colleague. She fervently hoped that their surmises were wrong and that their deductions had been miscalculations. However, she was acquainted with Severus's mind and methods long enough to know that his resolutions were almost always accurate and were meant to be taken with all gravity. While she had no doubt that the identity of the Morosia-side murderer would be revealed, she could not help but wonder if Severus had contacted any other agencies for assistance for it seemed nearly impossible that the two of them could manage to survive an encounter with the killer. As they approached the edifice of the Shrine, Hermione looked up at the stone gargoyles and their various expressions of horror. Ironic, she thought, these stone gargoyles with their evil countenances were allowed to remain while the statutes of the Sainted Few were defaced.

Severus only turned back once on entering the compound of the Shrine to see whether his colleague was following him. Noting that she had looked back as if startled by something she had seen or heard, he curled his lips into a faint smirk, and gestured for her to stay close to him.

Strangely enough, the inside of the Shrine was colder than the outside and looking up one could see the criss-cross of the December light playing in through the broken windows and torn doors. The two Unspeakable Unspeakables treaded in the sanctuary carefully as there was a thin film of ice on the stone floor and its assortment of broken tiles and smashed woodwork an occurrence that was most likely due to the snow tumbling down from the gaps in the roof. On hearing the last crunch of Severus's footsteps die away, Hermione too stopped and looked expectantly at him, waiting for the inevitable to happen.

'Do you recall what we spoke on earlier today?' Severus asked aloud, his voice echoing throughout the high vaults

'Which theory are you referring to? The show-executions and the killer, or this church and the murderer?' she responded, her hand tightly wrapped around the wand in her pocket.

'When we came here last, Dr Granger, we conceptualised a theory that the murders had something to do with the statues in this Shrine,' he continued, gesturing towards the carved and chiselled images of the Sainted Few. 'Look at these once magnificent works of art though they were once glorious effigies, they now bear the disfiguring marks of the axe, mace and what-have-you. These effigies, like your victims, were made to suffer. They could have been obliterated or blown up with a simple spell, but our man wouldn't have that.'

Severus strolled leisurely past the other statues noting the damage that had been wrought on each of them before finally arriving at the image of St Lucy. Although she had been attacked most savagely, her lips were still kind and the plate on which she carried her eyes was alone untouched. The eyes were still visible and seemed to defiantly stare a challenge at the aggressor who dared to mutilate her body and deface her countenance. The killer, who clearly used each of the effigies as target practice to hone his skill, must have been appalled by St Lucy's eyes forever resting on her plate, following him all around the Shrine, silently watching his every move. 'Our beloved wizarding Saint of Foresight, the Muggle patron saint of blindness, was a lady as fair as she was wise. Though she saw, she did not really see; and when she did see, she was rudely punished for it, as these staring globes from her plate evince. More to the point, Dr Granger, this statute holds the key to the final proof of our theory.'

'I recall that we were arguing on coincidences when we first came to the Shrine,' admitted Hermione shyly, valiantly suppressing the colour that rose to her cheeks. 'I had pointed out that it could be coincidence that the murders and the Saints' Days corresponded. After you so dramatically disabused me of my view, I considered the matter in all seriousness. The interview with Dumbledore left me dissatisfied and I mulled over the matter. You were right to say that Feast Days did not necessarily reflect holy days and I took that into consideration in my calculations. It put my coincidence theory out-of-sync when I saw that several important feast and holy days passed without any killings. St Callistus was clear on October 14th, St Martin was clear on November 11th and St Nicholas's day on December 6th was strangely quiet. Then, as our conversation earlier today showed, there is a connection between this Shrine and the murders. St Lucy is depicted here and today is her day. All the other murders were all done on the feast days of the Saints depicted here.'

'Precisely there were only murders on the feast-days of the Sainted Few represented here, the centre of the spider's web.'

Catching the note of self-reproach in his voice, Hermione kindly said, 'We did not know what to think when we first came here. We saw the connection between the murders and this Shrine, without seeing the true nature of the killer's psyche. It was not your fault, Professor Snape. It was an unavoidable occurrence. Dumbledore demanded an updated report and wanted a name. We gave him one. We even warned him that we were not absolutely sure. We did what we could.'

'Which wasn't enough!' he hissed through his teeth, balling his hands into angry fists. 'We, no, *I*, jumped to the wrong conclusion, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and that demented old man ended up issuing a *carte blanche* to whoever found a mad Death Eater on the loose. An innocent wizard, eager to repent and forget his past but unable to do so, surrendered himself, appealing to the system to exercise justice and drop the accusation. My thoughts and speculations led to Antonin being tortured in Azkaban. It's my fault and I shan't forgive myself for it not for a very long time.'

'Hush now,' whispered Hermione gently, her heart lurching suddenly at his angry knotted brows and the pain and regret in his eyes. 'It was not your fault. I am as much to blame as you are. We agreed on the suspect, we made the same line of enquiries and so forth. It is not fair to shoulder the blame yourself. Just think rationally, as I know you frequently do if you could have done it all over again, you would do exactly the same thing. The ancient thinkers knew that too, why else did you think Machiavelli's motto was, "It is better to act and repent than not to act and regret"? Do not regret anything!'

He scowled at her, roughly grabbing her hand with a great show of a certain undefined emotion before turning away from her softly imploring eyes. 'Look at it this way if Dolohov had not surrendered himself, we would not have known he was innocent, we would not have arrived at our final conclusion. We would not be here waiting for our spider in the middle of his web. We were not that far off in our original surmises, you realise?'

'How so?' he demanded wearily, his eyes momentarily hollow.

'We thought we were looking for a fanatical Death Eater, an insane one. But as it turns out, we are still looking for an unassuming person with a tenuous Death Eater link whom no one suspects. No one suspected him because he is civil servant and a former member of the Order of the Phoenix.'

Severus laughed thinly. 'There's nothing quite like an unassuming civil servant, especially one so well established with Potter and the old goat.'

'One thing still puzzles me though,' added Hermione thoughtfully. 'What reason would a former Order of the Phoenix member have to commit such heinous atrocities?'

'Could it be,' spat a cold voice in angry emotion, 'because he keenly felt the injustices done to him by the Order were far worse than the injustices done unto him by the Death Eaters who captured and tortured him, put him through intensive re-education and induced him to destroy all the traditions he once held dear?'

The two Unspeakable Unspeakables exchanged grim looks and heavy sighs their spider had finally arrived. Hermione and Severus turned slowly to face the owner of the voice, the Chief Custodian of Azkaban, Neville Longbottom, who was sauntering towards them from the passage to the sacristy. Hermione arched a brow in perturbed interest when she saw that he seemed ready to do battle with his wand withdrawn in one hand and the long slender knife used in the disembowelments during the show-executions in the other. Recalling that she had also asked for Davey Gudgeon to accompany Neville, she looked about her to determine whether the well-built old man was in attendance. A cursory glance around, however, did not yield the presence of the longest serving jailer of Azkaban.

'Mr Longbottom,' drawled Severus with forced casualness. 'Could it be because he is a dangerous and unstable fellow?'

Neville pursed his lips into an ugly smile. 'No, it is more likely that he was abandoned by those whom he thought were his comrades. You have to make allowances when you consider he was made to destroy effigies on his capture by the Voldemort administration. The time he spent there was most informative.'

'The next logical step would be to move from the despoiling of holy wizarding sanctuaries to defacing the sainted few and from thence to the defiling their holy days,' Severus said dismissively.

'What better way to do so than with real flesh and blood as the ancient rituals demanded!' laughed Neville hysterically. 'If you look at it objectively, you would know that combining the reasons for hatred with the rituals from the old days was a fitting tribute to the traditional ways.'

Hermione licked her dry lips in trepidation. How were they going to remedy the situation they were presently in? Neville was clearly unhinged and it did not look like any Aurors were about to charge in and arrest him. The best solution was to keep him talking and in so doing, hope that he would drop his guard and listen to her reason. With this thought in mind, Hermione gingerly asked, 'Did the jailers then teach you what it was like and what it meant, Neville? If you had but considered the reasons the Order couldn't go after you, you would have saved yourself much grief.'

'Gods, Hermione!' laughed Neville with a faint trace of his boyish self in his eyes. 'You sound exactly like Professor Snape. You've been around him for too long I suspect. I can easily remedy that by killing one of you.'

'With your wand?' mocked Severus provocatively, grimly reflecting that Dumbledore, Potter and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would be shocked on learning the identity of the perpetrator. 'You did not deem it fit to use it in your other blood and flesh rituals.'

'How like you to be judgemental!' Neville spat violently. 'You know nothing of the ancient ways in which our ancestors paid homage to the Sainted Few. It demanded blood and flesh. Spells do not inspire as much fear as doing things the Muggle way.'

'Neville,' begged Hermione. 'I need you to stay calm. We can all discuss this like civilised people.'

He laughed nervously. 'Civilised, Hermione? That greasy bastard has never managed to keep a civil tongue in his head! Why do you think Dumbledore tolerates his impudence as an Unspeakable Unspeakable?'

'That is beside the point!' Hermione stressed, her hand trembling slightly as she made a step forward toward her friend. 'You have killed a great many people, Neville. I advise you to give yourself up.'

'Give up! Do you know what I went through?' scoffed the Chief Custodian of Azkaban. 'Everyone I sacrificed deserved what they received! They were all linked some way or the other to that dysfunctional unit of the Order. I went along with the Order of the Phoenix, believing that it was a way of avenging my parents' conditions. Dumbledore allowed me into your exalted ranks and what was I used as? A reconnaissance scout! I had no active role in the planning of the attacks or plotting strategies. All I ever was to the Order was poor bumbling clumsy Neville Longbottom! My opinions were never sought and never wanted! I did not mind that I could tolerate that minor injustice. That as nothing compared to the suffering I endured! When the Order, especially Shackbolt, suggested that I allow myself to be captured by the Death Eaters, everyone agreed to the plan. I would be rescued, Marietta Edgecombe said. All I had to do as to distract them and obtain information. Colin Creevey even said that I was ideal for the position because no one would suspect me of being a decoy. The Death Eaters looked on me as a failure even among wizards! But that wasn't how they viewed me when I was captured. That was how the Order viewed me! That was why I was exploited by the Order! And I was stupid enough to allow myself to be used! Even when I followed orders and allowed myself to be captured, was I rescued? No! Dean Thomas and Terry Boot were waiting in the shadows when I was caught and they did not bother to raise the alarm and send the others after me. Oh no, I was to get the Death Eaters to talk, to tell me Voldemort's latest plans. Later when Aurors and the small division of the Order came, the Death Eaters were attacked, but no attempt was made to retrieve me by any of them not Zacharias Smith, not Tonks, not Susan Bones, not the Patil twins, not Sarah Fawcett or Cuthbert Mockridge. Why? Was I so unimportant to the Order that I could be sacrificed? Even Gran did not lift a finger to help me. She could have moved heaven and earth to remove me from Death Eater clutches, but she didn't. What do you expect from a domineering old woman who wouldn't see anyone else's view but her own! I had to kill her when she found out I was the murderer. She was visiting some down and out schoolfellow of hers and saw me at it... I should have known the old termagant has eyes like a hawk She wanted to turn me in to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and I told her that I would take her out to dinner first. Foolish old dame! I particularly enjoyed pulling her apart, both Gran and Tonks when they both touched too close to my truth. After all the years of living in Gran's shadow and that of the Order and all you other heroes with your fancy promotions and successes, I would come into my own. You will all one day learn that I am not to be laughed at or disregarded!'

'That is all very well, Neville. But it does not change the fact that you are to be arrested for these wanton and senseless murders,' Hermione reasoned.

'I don't think so,' Neville laughed hollowly.

'We can't arrest Mr Longbottom without his faithful aide-de-camp, Gudgeon, Dr Granger,' purred Severus warily.

'But Gudgeon isn't here!' she protested.

'No, he is,' he cautioned, 'Hold your ground. Thought you were clever, weren't you, Mr Longbottom? The woman who was found today, whom you killed this morning, Hannah Abbott, was flung three and a half metres over the mud-flat either by a man of great physical strength, which you lack, or by *two men*.'

'Figured it out, didn't ye?' cackled a voice to the investigators' rear. Despite the unpleasant situation, Hermione wondered how an old man of his well-built proportions could walk up behind them so quietly. Though he was but a short distance away from them, he already had his wand and dagger withdrawn as warning signs.

'Are you two so united in hatred that you formed a club for murderers?' ridiculed Severus. 'How quaint! The effects of damaged minds never cease to amuse me.'

'Not as amused as we will be when we damage your persons!' rejoined Neville bitterly. 'Gudgeon, it's time!'

The scene that followed seemed to occur all at once. The two killers from the bowels of Azkaban charged forward from the left and right, Neville moving warily towards the Unspeakable Unspeakables and Gudgeon with certain desperation in his eyes. Hermione had only managed to cast a quick protective spell on herself when Gudgeon charged at her. As she braced herself for the mild tremor of a spell on her, she was startled to see Severus coolly shooting a modified Cruciatus at Gudgeon, which whizzed past her ear and crashed directly on the gaoler's chest. The impact from the spell caused Gudgeon to reel backwards, stunned, wounded and severely trembling. Gudgeon, she noticed, could only look at the wound on his chest, and clutch at it in utter disbelief.

Neville, circling them like a cat, was likewise stunned by the display of Severus's power and moved to cast a spell to immobilise the investigators. However, his attempt was neatly arrested by Hermione who called out '*Expelliarmus*' and soon brought his wand into her possession. The slender disembowelling knife was all he had now and seeing that it rested on his shoulders to silence the two Unspeakable Unspeakables, he gave a brief cry of frustration and charged at Severus, who deftly threw him back, knocking him into the outstretched arms of St Peter. Hermione, on the other hand, seeing that Severus had the situation with Neville in perfect control, went over to examine the fallen Gudgeon who was by then bleeding. He rose staggeringly and sought to reach for her throat but stumbled over her foot. That did not stop him and he rose again with a feral cry, lunging forward with his bare hands. Seeing that there was no way she could contain him until he was rendered unconscious. Hermione promptly pointed her wand at the rafts above Gudgeon and muttered a spell that sent brick, mortar, wood and stone tumbling down over his ears, effectively pushing him down to the ground with a loud crash. Judging from the gasps, moans and gargling sounds drifting over from the pile of roof fragments over Gudgeon, Hermione rightly supposed that her enterprise in rendering him insentient was successful.

As soon as Neville saw that he was left without his trusted assistant, he knew that the game was almost over. Deciding that flight was the best course of action, he savagely dived at Severus, catching him off guard and pushing him back before fleeing the scene. Severus, though momentarily stunned, gestured for Hermione to follow Neville and soon followed behind her. They hurried along a dark passage, which led to the graveyard of the Shrine, and they both noticed evening was already upon them, so low was the sun in the sky. Despite the dying light, Neville's footprints were still visible to the Unspeakable Unspeakables. With a finger across his lips, Severus cautioned Hermione against any sudden moves, for in the shadows of the numerous tombstones, crypts and sarcophagi, Neville might be lurking, waiting to pounce on them.

However, as they followed his trail of footprints, they saw that poor Neville Longbottom, the Chief Custodian of the prison of Azkaban was no longer capable of pouncing on anyone. He was lying prostrate in the shadow of a large ornate tomb, which was grossly desecrated and broken up. A large stain grew and slowly spread in the pristine snow around his head as a steady trickle of blood sprung forth from a battered fraction of his skull. A large moving shadow emerged from behind the tomb and the Unspeakable Unspeakables saw that the figure slowly rose to its full height, dropped a large fragment of a tombstone and slung a heavy sack forward. The figure grinned on seeing them and tossed the heavy sack containing his day's pickings over his shoulders.

'I got him,' said the dirty figure of Mundungus Fletcher giving a warm salute.

'About time you came,' said Severus without emotion, pulling a memory from his forehead and storing it in a bottle.

'Your intervention was most timely,' Hermione added quickly. 'Thank you, 'Dung, we couldn't have done it without you.'

'So, it was young Nev Longbottom and that gaoler fellow of his who was walloped by the Whomping Willow, eh? Never thought it could be him,' said Mundungus, kicking the body.

'They never are anything remarkable,' owned Severus, pocketing his wand. 'Do you think you can manage or do you need a cart to carry him?'

'Don't bother,' said Hermione before either man could answer and transfigured a nearby rock into a cart.

'Good,' snorted Mundungus with a wink at the Arithmancer. 'I'll take him to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement office. Hopefully, young Ron Weasley will be pleased to see me.'

'Just to be safe, bind him up and make sure you get Dumbledore in attendance.' Severus handed Mundungus two letters and the bottle. 'Give one to Dumbledore and the other to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Commissioner. It will fully explain everything. If the letters fail to convince them, the memory in the bottle should knock some sense into them.'

After dumping the body of the unfortunate Neville Longbottom into the cart, Mundungus readily took the letters. 'You're sure I'll get the reward?' he asked, his eyes avariciously glinting.

'It's all yours, you rogue all 1000 galleons,' Severus insisted. 'Dr Granger and I are officers of the British Wizarding Criminal Prosecution Ministry, apprehending the killer is

good enough for us. Now, go!

Hermione, nonplussed by the exchange, whispered to Severus. 'Are you sure about this, giving him that much money? Mundungus is a scoundrel!'

Though Severus said nothing, he was silently considering Hermione's words. Watching Mundungus tie the lifeless limbs of Neville before securing him the cart, a thought dawned on him and he smirked knowingly. 'I know.'

Hermione watched Mundungus push the cart past the gravestones and out the gate. 'You do realise you would have saved us a great deal of trouble if you had only the foresight to call Ron and the Aurors down. That would have saved Dumbledore and Harry their 1000 galleons.'

'Do you really think so?' Severus questioned with a sardonic smirk. 'It is better this way, I think. It is our revenge.'

'How so?' she asked, taking his proffered arm with alacrity. 'I know you and I get to leave the service of the Unspeakable Unspeakables. But beyond that?'

'Oh, you're leaving too?' He arched a brow in faint interest. 'Then the revenge would be even sweeter. Come, Hermione, let us follow friend Mundungus and watch Dumbledore's face when he gives him the 1000 galleons.'

She laughed and as he patted her hand matter-of-factly, he continued. 'As soon as that is done, let me take you to dinner where I want to run a proposal by you.'

'Oh?'

'I've been thinking that perhaps we should write a paper together something about the interdisciplinary fields of Arithmantic and Alchemical theories. What say you?' he quizzed, the faintest fear that she would reject him flitting before his eyes.

As if she could understand the words that he had left unsaid, she smiled at him. 'Of course, I would. I've been meaning to ask you the same. Merry Christmas, Professor Snape.'

'I believe it will be, Dr Granger. Now, what do you say to eating with your hands?'

On hearing his droll suggestion, Hermione glared at him in repugnance. However, the arched brow and light curling of his lips assured her that it was a joke. So she laughed aloud, thinking that it would be a merry Christmas after all.

~Finis~

Footnotes:

The title of this tale is a pun. 'Presents' is a double entendre. It means (1) gifts and (2) shows. If you take its latter meaning and dissect it, you will realise that I mean it as a masque or pageant (in the 17th century understanding of the term). Think about it. I'll leave you to figure out it fits with the story.

Acknowledgements

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The indulgence of my readers in remaining steadfast to this story has overwhelmed me. All your reviews and comments are very much appreciated. I hope that you have enjoyed this little short novel. It was a challenge to write and a challenge to edit. However, if you like it and can understand it, I am thankful.

I am, yours &ca,

Lady Strange