

me awake on most nights, so I asked Professor McGonagall and Remus to place wards around my parents' home in an attempt to make it safer for them.

After knowing that my parents were more secure in a well-protected house with Professor McGonagall as their Secret-Keeper, I moved to the Burrow for Bill and Fleur's wedding. Ron had been expecting me anxiously for a month, or that was what he'd told me when I'd arrived. It was so awkward when we met again; I'd spent a great deal of our sixth year fancying him and trying to find a way to make him notice me. Then, he'd started snogging Lavender in an attempt to get payback, according to what Ginny had told me, about something that had happened years before. That made me reconsider my feelings for him because he'd hurt me so much that I know that things will never be as I thought they were between us. He has been trying, I know it, but it's just that I can't see myself with him anymore...not after the way he treated me with no logical reason and after the way he discarded me to start dating Lavender just because he was jealous. Besides, we're in the middle of a war; there's little room for romance in these circumstances, especially after what happened to me.

We left Godric's Hollow to go back to the house Harry loathed, number twelve, Grimmauld Place, the house that held so many bad memories for all of us. We went back for a single reason. I remembered that locket we found there when Harry described the Horcrux to us. It was there when we cleaned the house prior to our fifth year, such a small detail, but it didn't escape from my attention because it was me who wanted to open it. But we arrived too late. Mundungus Fletcher had stolen it...along with other objects that once belonged to the Black family. It took us two months to locate Mundungus, and after Harry coerced him to reveal the whereabouts of the things he'd stolen, we traced the locket down in Slovakia. The information we gathered led us to an almost deserted manor in Bratislava.

"Are you sure it's here, Harry?" Ron looked pale, his blue eyes reflecting the fear he was trying to hide from us.

"Almost. This place fits the description that warlock gave us. Come on, let's go inside and finish with this."

We followed Harry inside the manor, forcing the door open with a couple of ward breaking spells. Obviously, the witch or wizard who warded the manor wasn't very skilled with protective magic. I was silent for a change, for I was feeling as scared as I knew Harry and Ron must have felt. We had gone too far to leave because we were frightened. No matter how powerful people say we are when working together, we're still teenagers and feel fear. We started searching every room in the manor, being careful not to attract attention to ourselves, looking quietly for the locket with dim lights that didn't betray our presence.

Harry and Ron were looking in the drawers of a massive cabinet located in the living room when I moved to the library. Even in that moment, I couldn't stop myself from admiring the contents of the room. How I wished to pull some books down for myself. I got out of my reverie to start perusing through the library furniture when it happened. A loud crack sounded in the living room, and a series of hexes were heard. I ran back there to find Harry and Ron fighting with four Death Eaters. Three of them were attacking them with dangerous hexes, some of which I have never heard whilst the other one was only blocking the curses thrown his way. Odd behaviour in a Death Eater, but it wasn't the moment to analyse the reasons for the actions of the enemy. Taking advantage of the fact that they hadn't spotted me yet, I advanced silently with my wand at the ready.

"*Expelliarmus!*" My Disarming Spell worked and in a very forceful way. One of the Death Eaters flew through the air until he hit the wall. The man crumpled onto the floor where he laid motionless.

The Death Eater who was only using blocking spells turned to face me, his wand directed at me. He didn't have to speak, casting non-verbal spells effortlessly. Well, two could play at that game. I am fairly good in non-verbal spells myself, so I decided to use that to my advantage, trying first with a Blasting Curse that missed the man only by inches. He kept on trying to disarm me, barely failing every time he cast.

It lasted some minutes, and I had fallen several times in my attempt to escape from the Death Eater. In one of those falls, I cut my head, feeling the blood running down my temple. Ron was unconscious on the floor after being attacked by one of the Death Eaters. Harry was effectively binding one of them whilst the other one was recovering from an Impediment Curse. That left Harry and me fighting one-on-one with the remaining two Death Eaters.

I needed to do something quickly if I wanted to end the fight and help Harry and Ron. I brought together all my courage to face the man before me, gathering power that I didn't know I possessed. I shouted, "*Diffindo!*"

My strong Severing Charm missed his wand, which I was trying to break, and hit his mask instead, amazing me with the fact that I could conjure such a powerful charm that could slice a metallic item. My heart missed a few beats when the features of Severus Snape, former Potions master of Hogwarts, were revealed. He looked at me with trepidation in his eyes, almost pleading with me not to do something foolish.

"P-- Professor Snape..."

That instant in which his eyes were locked with mine gave enough time to the man I'd disarmed, who was still on the floor forgotten, to raise his wand pointing it to me whilst starting the curse...

"*Avada--*"

I closed my eyes, knowing I was going to die, but I didn't hear the end of the curse. Instead, I felt a hand grabbing my arm and pulling me against a strong body, Disapparating with me.

When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in the manor, and I doubted seriously that I was still in Bratislava. We were in a dim room, moonlight barely entering through the grimy windows. He was staring with piercing eyes that were fixed on me, studying me, waiting for my reaction. I wanted to get away from him, knowing the dangerous man he was, but I also wanted to get something from him, a payback for the lives he had destroyed.

Anger got the best of me, and I finally reacted, trying to attack him, wielding my wand and aiming it at him. I needed to get something back from him in attempt to repair all of the pain he had caused, but he was faster than me and disarmed me, sending me to fall unceremoniously onto a couch. I still don't know what possessed me, but I ran towards him, willing to hurt him with my own hands in absence of my wand. I was so foolish to attempt doing that. He's a man, a strong man, and I had no chance against him. He grabbed my arms, crossing them over my chest and holding me tightly. I screamed and tried to kick him, but he bound me in the same way he'd bound Remus years before in the Shrieking Shack.

"Now, Miss Granger, you will calm down, and you will listen to me. You have nothing to fear from me."

"I will not listen to you! You're a murderer, and you killed Professor Dumbledore. Did you tell him the same? You fooled him until you betrayed and murdered him. I bet you have been following us, looking for a chance to get Harry and bring him to Voldemort. What are you going to do with me? Will you take me as booty for him?"

"Enough! You are giving me no other choice than to silence you." He raised his wand and pointed it at me. I felt fear, knowing that he was capable of killing me right there if he so chose.

"*Silencio.*" My lips moved, but no sound came from them, making him smirk. "Much better. I didn't bring you here to listen to your wailing or your accusations. Now, you will listen to what I have to say, but first, let me inspect the cut on your head."

I flinched away from his outstretched hand. I didn't want him near to me, much less touching me. It was true that I had a nasty cut on my head. The blood was covering part of my forehead and drying in my hair, but I couldn't bear his presence.

"Silly girl, I will only heal your wound. I will not harm you in any way."

I wanted to scream that he had already harmed me and that pain was the only thing that he could cause. Being bound, I had no choice. He reached my head with his hand, muttering a wandless healing spell. I felt no more pain, and his hand felt soothing with his touch conveying his power. It relaxed me, and the need to run away from him vanished.

He must have sensed me relaxing when he moved away from me, for he started talking to me using his quiet, silky voice. "Miss Granger, I brought you here with two purposes. The first one, as you can easily imagine, is to save your life. I would have never let someone harm you, let alone kill you."

Sure, you killed Dumbledore, and now, you want to play the nice guy telling me that you will never let someone harm me. As if you care for me, sneaky selfish git.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I care for your well-being. And please, watch your language. Or have you lost your manners after spending so much time with Potter and Weasley?"

My eyes widened when I heard that. How did he know what I'd thought?

"I know it because I can hear your thoughts. You are so distressed that I can easily enter your mind, defeating your defences. Now that it is clear that I do care for your well-being, let's move to the second reason that I brought you here. Coincidentally, it has everything to do with your concerns about me."

He conjured a chair and sat close to the couch on which I was lying. He sighed deeply, and for the first time, I looked at him...I mean, really looked at the man, not at the professor, the Potions master, or the Death Eater. I saw something in his eyes...something that seemed to scare him and entrance me.

"I cannot deny I killed Albus Dumbledore, but no one knows *why* I did it. I killed him because he asked me to do it."

What? Professor Dumbledore would have never asked that from you; it's insane. He would have never left Harry alone to face Voldemort.

"It sounds insane, but many things were at stake. Draco's future is one example. There are things that are so important that they're worth dying to achieve them. The salvation of a young soul and the saving of the entire Wizarding community are two of them. Albus knew he was dying; the harm in his right arm was spreading rapidly to the rest of his body. That's why he prepared Potter, giving him information to do what he must, and he *must* do it. He must be strong. Miss Granger, I already had to perform the most hideous task that has ever been asked of me. My life is far from salvageable, and my soul is beyond redemption. There are things that have to be done in order to achieve a greater good. I only have one last reason to carry on. That's to see the Dark Lord vanquished, and for that, I need your help. In fact, we need each other's help."

I looked into his eyes, and what I saw surprised me. I saw honesty. I saw the truth *Help each other? How?*

"You are looking for Voldemort's Horcruxes, and I happen to have important information about them. I will help you in every way that I can, telling you what I know and guiding you." He sighed heavily, concern shadowing his expression. "I wanted this to be different, that when I finally reached you, I would still be in a position that would have allowed me to assist you in a better way. I guess by now you have already realised that it is impossible for me to return to the Dark Lord after saving your life."

But if you can't get back, how are you planning to help us?

"Miss Granger, don't forget I am a spy. I will find a way to gather information. Besides, I owe this to Albus. He didn't just ask me to kill him; he also asked me to protect Potter, to do everything in my reach to help him fulfil his task, and I will do it, even if it means to give my own life."

Saving my life will cost you that, won't it? You told me that there were things that had to be done in order to achieve a greater good. If that is so, then why did you save me? Wouldn't my death be preferable than blowing your cover?

"Never! I told you that I would never let anything harm you. Albus' death had a purpose, but yours would have been useless. You need to live to carry on with this war. There's no way that Potter will survive if you're not by his side. He needs you to guide him and to keep on being the voice of his good sense, if he has any left at all. He even needs Weasley if he wants to succeed; the three of you together are a powerful force because you all complement each other. Besides, you deserve to be happy and to be everything I..."

He turned away from me in that moment, hiding himself from me, not wanting me to look into his eyes. I thought that he'd not delve more in that subject, but he did.

"I recognised you in that first moment I saw you in my class. You had always been an annoying girl, but beyond that, I saw the spirit you possess. You are strong, loyal, brave, and clever... You are everything I wanted to be. You must be everything I couldn't be."

He turned again to look at me, his eyes full of many emotions: regret, sadness, melancholy, and something that I couldn't place in that moment. It was something that has taken me months to decipher.

"Finite Incantatem."

The binds vanished, and I felt my voice coming back. In that moment, I understood that he was showing me that he had faith in me and was also asking me to trust him in return. When I put together everything he told me, I had to admit that it made sense. It was overwhelming when I realised the sacrifice both men had made; both offered their lives to a cause in which they believed. Professor Dumbledore had already given his, and Snape was only waiting for his moment to do the same. He'd likely do it in a more painful way. I cried. It was too much for me, and I broke down. He went to me then and held me tightly. It seemed as if he were someone else. I'd never seen him act in such a way. He soothed me and told me that everything would be fine, that he would protect us.

That happened four months ago. Harry and Ron never knew what happened or the identity of the Death Eater that kidnapped me for a couple of days. We have already found the locket and Hufflepuff's cup. Severus...I can't call him Professor or Snape after everything that has happened between us...gave me the information we needed to find the two Horcruxes. He is working on gathering information about the remaining Horcruxes, and we correspond with each other every time we know it's safe. There are times when I don't hear from him for weeks, and I fear for his safety. He has to hide now from the light and from the dark, but I know that he's always there, watching us and protecting us. I won't leave him alone. I will do everything in my power to help him when this is over. I won't let him die as a martyr. He deserves to live, too, and I now feel the same fierce feeling he has for me about my safety and my future. Maybe I feel even more.

I know my life has changed again, but this time, I know that we will be fine. I'm not so scared anymore. I know that there's someone I have begun to love at the end of this path, and I won't give him up...

Lorraine's Notes: This is a response to the contest Face Off featured in Severus-Hermione group at Deviant Art (<http://severus-hermione.deviantart.com/>). The rules are only to write a one-shot 1000 words or more of Snape and Hermione battling/having a confrontation with each other. Snape has to be a Death Eater, and Hermione has to be on 'the right side'.

I borrowed this idea from a plot bunny I had been saving for a long while and that I almost discarded when HBP was released. Maybe I will give it a try later.

Many thanks go to my wonderful beta, Southern_Witch_69. She, as usual, saved this fic from my dreadful grammar. Thanks also go to CocoaChristy for giving this a once over!