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by Potion Mistress

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

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Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 2

As darkness descends can faith hold true? (HG/SS Exchange version)

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As she was used to, she knocked on the door to Severus's rooms and entered without waiting for acknowledgement. Usually he paid her no heed as she made her way through to her own room. This afternoon, though, his sitting room was filled with people. Minerva smiled and motioned her over to the small settee. Aside from Severus, Minerva and Draco, there were several older students, and even two of the Dark Lord's black-robed Faithful in attendance, Pederson and Hartnell.

"Jane, nice of you to join us," Severus drawled, as if clandestine meetings were the norm every day. She took the hint; she was to continue playing her role as the privileged cousin.

He continued addressing those assembled. "On the last excursion outside, I was able to walk for some distance into the forest. The rumour can be confirmed that the centaurs remain, but they've gone silent. They will offer no assistance to us in this conflict."

There were low murmurs at that news. She knew that some had been holding out hope of the centaurs or people from Hogsmeade helping them to escape from the castle.

Most had given up hope on the Ministry still being intact; too much time had passed with no word.

"I think our best chance is to start sending people out in small numbers heading directly for the train station. If there's no transport waiting there, we can follow the tracks southward toward a large Muggle township," Minerva put forth.

"There's no time," Severus countered. "The Dark Lord may not notice absences at first, but most assuredly some of the Faithful would. We have only a brief time in which to have the best chance of success during the golden hour."

"But, why don't we go at night? The Ineri are less likely to see us," Ryan asked. She was reminded again why he had always been marked down for being ill-prepared. She'd not been outside, but even she'd felt the icy malevolence of Dementors in the dark. In the mist, they'd take out everyone effortlessly.

"The twilight hours are the best time frame," Severus responded. "The Ineri hunt by sight and sound, and the Dementors are more active at night. Nautical twilight offers the only cover we have to get as far from here as we can. The most important thing is that we leave in a careful and planned manner."

Several people were nodding in agreement with Snape's logic.

"But, just how far does the mist extend?" she asked.

Draco glared at her in annoyance. "If you'd bothered to attend the meetings, you'd know."

"My cousin has been otherwise occupied," Severus rebuked Draco. "She will be told what she needs to know later."

Draco's contrite "Sorry, Professor," drew smiles and a few muted chuckles, as Draco had intended.

Soon enough the meeting ended, and the four of them, Minerva, Severus, Draco and she were sipping tea. *Civilisations fall, but tea is eternal*, she mused. Minerva looked unsettled, as though she was anxious to say something.

"Jane, dear, don't you have reading to catch up on?" Minerva asked, clearly hoping she'd take the hint to excuse herself.

"I know who she is," Draco replied for her.

"Oh." Minerva looked at Severus, who rolled his eyes.

"It was necessary," was all Severus would say about it.

"I don't have much longer before someone will come looking for me," Minerva remarked. "From what we know now, how soon until we can make an attempt?"

"The decree takes effect in two days so I think that our best chance will be tomorrow evening. Secrets shared among this many people have a tendency to come out," Draco said.

"Tomorrow? Will they be ready?" Minerva questioned.

"They'll have to be. Our Lord's newest whims have made it now or never," Severus replied.

"That *thing* is the most disgusting and vulgar... to force these decrees upon children! He is truly a monster." McGonagall set her cup aside, no longer interested in the wizarding world's panacea.

Jane looked up and caught Severus staring at her, an odd expression on his face. He blinked quickly and looked away. "It won't happen as easily as the Dark Lord believes," Severus remarked to Minerva. "Already, many of the Faithful are beginning to question these orders, even if only to themselves."

"Most cogent idea he's had in weeks." Draco smirked at Severus and then turned to her. "What's your take on it, Granger?"

Beside her Minerva made a sound of disgust and stood. "Some day, Mr Malfoy, you'll be ashamed making light of such a thing. After what happened to that poor Parkinson girl, I'd think you'd want to protect your classmates."

"Ah, but anyone who puts their trust in me ends up dead, didn't Severus tell you that?" Draco's bantering was light, but the pain and bitterness were clear to all.

"Self-pity does not become you, Draco," Severus spoke up. "Nor does attempting to shock people for a reaction. Jane does not yet know about the decrees."

"Hermione." Draco challenged him.

"Hermione Granger is dead, Jane Prince is still very much with us. It would do you well to remember that, and use the appropriate name."

"Oh, yes, Severus. Let us always be 'appropriate'. Tell me, who will *you* choose to appease our Lord?" Draco asked nastily.

"Get out."

Snape's tone left no room for misunderstanding. If Draco valued the ability to breathe, he would leave now.

"Go," McGonagall said, shooing the blond boy from the room. "Jane, please walk with me to the classroom, we can discuss what you've missed." They left Snape in his rooms, sipping tea and looking furious.

She walked slowly through the deserted dungeons alongside her former teacher. Draco skulked somewhere behind them.

"Why was I not told anything?" she demanded, keeping an eye out for possible eavesdroppers.

"Severus thought it best that you be kept ignorant of what's been happening. He knows you have a role to play and didn't want any distractions for you. We all care about keeping you safe from harm," McGonagall explained. Behind them, Draco snorted. "Of course some people take our situation a little more seriously than others," she said testily.

"You know I can hear you, right?" Draco mocked, moving a little closer to the strolling pair.

Ignoring him, she continued. "The Dark Lord's gone mad."

"Stark raving bonkers," Draco chimed in. "His cheese has most definitely slipped off his cracker, not that he was altogether right before."

"That will do, Mr Malfoy," McGonagall reproached.

"Harry," Jane said sadly.

"That is what Severus believes, that the confrontation with Mr Potter drove him insane," Minerva affirmed.

"He even referred to our dearly departed Potter as his 'true heir'," Draco said, laughing.

When did his mocking laughter start to sound like he's crying inside? Jane mused. *He's closer to the truth than he realises. Harry became Voldemort's at the end...*

"He's beyond the reach of all reason and humanity. The things he's done... I think he actually considers himself to be a God now." Minerva sighed.

"What is this decree you mentioned?" Jane asked.

"That's not important right now. If the fates smile upon us, we'll be gone from here before we must consider new options."

"But..."

"It is not going to affect you presently. What we need to concentrate on is the escape scheme. You ask how far the mist extends? As far as can be determined, it starts to thin just past Hogsmeade. There are precious few opportunities for reconnaissance, but Severus and a few other of the Faithful on the escape committee have been volunteering for food excursions."

Snape's sudden display of anger yesterday made perfect sense now, she thought. He had seized the excuse of a missing man in order to go scouting.

"Are there more Inferi outside the mist? And what about the Dementors?"

"What Dementors?" Draco asked, seriously for once.

"What Dementors? How could you not feel them! They're around the walls at night," she replied scornfully. *Apparently, Ryan was not the only dull knife in the cutlery drawer*, she thought.

"Really? I thought Severus was hypothesising."

"No, Mr Malfoy," McGonagall informed him. "Did you not pay attention in your Defence classes? Classic Dementor signs present most nights just after darkfall. The castle will not permit them entrance, but their presence can surely be felt within."

"Great. Just great. So we have to outrun the Inferi, sneak past the Dementors, and hope that the mist's magic suppression hasn't permanently damaged us, all while eluding the strongest wizard of our time, who coincidentally, has gone mad as a hatter, and his fanatical followers. I don't see how we can fail to succeed," Draco said sarcastically.

"We don't have a choice," McGonagall replied. "The alternative is unthinkable. What I can't understand is why the Dark Lord is allowing his own people to be killed outside. It doesn't make any sense."

"I'll make it a point to ask him at tea," Draco snarked.

They'd reached the main floor, and Draco peeled away toward his duty station at the tower. "Come, we still have a few minutes before class begins." Minerva gestured toward the former Transfiguration classroom, which had recently undergone a make-over. Replacing the tasteful tapestries on the walls were hand-lettered signs with reminders about honour, truth, loyalty and duty to their Lord.

"You look very pretty, my dear," McGonagall said once they'd closed the door and taken seats near the massive teacher's desk.

"I...I, uh, thank you, Professor," she stammered. To her further embarrassment, her cheeks heated in a blush remembering the feel of Severus's fingers teasing her skin.

"Other than the Faithful, everyone else is trying to grow their hair out, with the exception of you and me." She smirked.

"Did...did they...?" she couldn't find the words to ask about her teacher's long hair, bound in the usual prim bun.

"Oh, they did, Jane. Several times. I Transfigured it back," McGonagall said with a harsh laugh. "I have enough magic for that, at least."

"Is there anything else I should know about tomorrow?" she asked, ready to change the subject back to the possibility of escape.

"There are about twenty of us now. When it is Severus's turn to instruct the students, he's been assessing who has been resisting the assimilation attempts and whom we can trust. As you know, the Inferi have the most trouble seeing at the gloaming, but it is still bright enough for the Dementors to be sluggish. They avoid the mist until nightfall, when they can move freely. Severus hinted that something else is happening, but we've not had a chance to discuss it. The less said to the group, the better. Need to know is best," she assured, echoing Mad-Eye Moody's sentiments about the Order meetings.

She looked down at her hands, examining her nails in minute detail. *So this is how Harry felt... shut away from all the decisions and fighting for any scrap of information. No wonder he was angry that summer.... Either Snape thinks he owns me because he saved my life or he thinks I'm incapable of helping with the escape committee. Either way, this treatment will stop. We need to have a talk tonight.*

"What is it?" McGonagall asked, concern for her evident in her tone.

"Oh, um..." She looked up to meet the understanding gaze of her former Head of House. "I was just thinking about how strange it is to think about leaving. Everything's blended together: get up, work, prayers, and sleep, for weeks. I can see how some people can get caught up in that, but surely they'd want to go if they could."

"Some are too afraid that there's nothing left outside of Hogwarts or are convinced that rescue will come soon. Others have been... altered in their thinking by the Dark Lord," McGonagall admitted sadly. "It becomes a hard choice to live with the devil or face the very real prospect of being killed outside. Trust is not an easy choice. I put my life in the hands of a powerful man once before, a man who did not always make morally just decisions, for reasons known only to him. And now, I've done so again, in Severus. I have to trust that, no matter how it all ended, Albus had the true measure of that man. If not, I fear for us all, Jane."

McGonagall rose stiffly from her chair, the strain of bearing so much responsibility for the lives of her students clearly weighing heavily upon her thin shoulders. Jane felt sorry for her and understood the dilemma of using Albus's trust in Severus as assurance that he'd do the right thing for them all. *How do you entrust everyone's lives to the man who killed Albus Dumbledore?*

"There's another thing that's been puzzling me. Why can only some of us cast spells? There's a Slytherin first-year in the kitchens who can use simple magic without a wand, yet I can't even light a candle," she complained to McGonagall.

"I'm not certain why only some people retain enough ability to use magic," she replied thoughtfully. "Severus believes that once we are free of the mist, we might regain our full abilities in time. Even if we end up little better than Squibs, we'll still be free of this place. You'd better go now, class will begin shortly."

"One quick question, first: what about Professor Sprout? She's coming with us tomorrow, right?" Jane asked.

"I'm not certain," McGonagall said quietly. "The kitchen staff is kept isolated from the rest of us; you probably see more of her than any of us could. I doubt she is aware of the plans because she's not on Severus's 'safe list'."

"But I'm certain she's still all right!" Jane exclaimed. Glancing toward the doorway, she lowered her voice and continued. "She's been using the first-year helpers to pass along what she overhears when we serve meals in the hall."

"I'm glad to know she remains in good spirits, but it is up to Sever..." was all McGonagall could say before the door was pushed open, and white-robed students entered the room for their daily lessons.

Quietly, Jane left the room trying not to look at any of the students entering. It would be hard enough not staring at each person she came across today, wondering if they were part of the escape plan or if they were owned by the Dark Lord. Making a quick decision, she ascended to the third floor and took the stairs to the kitchen to find Pomona Sprout. There was no way her former Herbology professor had been turned, no way. She just had to prove it.

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We need to talk. That thought reverberated in her mind the rest of the afternoon. *Severus, we really need to talk...*

She found herself hesitating outside the door to their rooms, wondering if he was still in a bad mood after Draco got under his skin earlier. *Only one way to know for certain.* She turned the handle and pushed the heavy door inward, stepping through into the darkened sitting area. He wasn't there. She relaxed, entering his bedroom, moving toward her own small room.

"Don't you ever knock?" His voice was rough with sleep. She spun around, barely able to discern his shape in the shadows.

Time to beard the dragon in his lair, she thought, steeling herself for the long overdue conversation. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were asleep," she apologised, crossing over to the bed, and perching on the edge. She still couldn't make out his face in the dimness.

"Brazen little thing you've become," was his comment. She sensed an edge of humour in his tone. "You're back early. I thought Minerva would have kept you occupied with preparations."

"Not that much left to do, actually. Draco's more useful than I am."

"I'll be sure to mention that." She could picture his lips twisted in amusement. "That doesn't answer why you're here in my bed," he said softly, still cloaked in shadow.

"On your bed, and I gather that our discussion is best kept away from the more common areas of the castle," she shot back, with just a hint of cheek. "I assume I have you to thank for this miraculous regrowth?" she asked with a laugh, freeing her hair from the bit of twine.

"Hmmm, I see no difference," he teased.

She huffed, pretending to be offended. "I suppose it was an accidental by-product from last night."

"It's how I see you, Hermione." His voice was roughened honey, sending a frisson of pleasure down her spine. He hadn't called her by that name since many long ago nights at Grimmauld Place. For some reason she could not pin down, it made her sad.

She changed the subject. "I spoke with Professor Sprout."

"About?" he drawled lazily.

"Treacle tart recipes..." She heard him snort. "And the special Portkey to France I had."

He sat up, his face emerging from the darkness as a pale white oval.

"Your *what*?"

"It was really just an old barrette. I let it fall from my pocket this afternoon, and confessed that it was something given to me by my parents, just in case."

"Why on Earth would you... have you lost your mind?" All traces of amusement left him as he lunged forward to grab her arm. She could smell alcohol on his breath.

"I had to know, Severus. I had to know if she'd been turned to the Darkness," she answered seriously.

"Oh, my Lord... of all the stupid..." His words trailed off into strained silence.

A few moments later, out of the quiet came, "And?"

"She passed. She handed it back and begged me to take the children who worked in the kitchen and Great Hall with me."

He let out a sigh of relief. "What did you tell her?"

"I said that I'd think about it. Living with a Slytherin seems to have rubbed off on me. Please don't be angry."

He released her arm, but remained sitting up in the bed. There was another long pause before he replied. "Just when I think I know you, another surprise comes to knock me on my arse. What am I going to do with you, 'Jane Prince'?"

His voice wasn't angry, more resigned to Fate's whim of moving them into the same orbit. She wondered how much he'd had to drink after that spat with Draco.

"That brings me to my next question," she ventured nervously, shifting position slightly to face him.

"Do I want to know?" he mused rhetorically.

"Minerva said there was more you needed to go over before we leave the castle. Did you see any people out there, maybe in Hogsmeade?" she asked, hope evident in her voice.

"Many people," he affirmed grimly. "All long dead and looking for fresh meat."

"Ugh. How well can the Inferi track us in the mist?"

"They hunt by sound and scent. Beyond the edge of the mist, they can see quite well, I found."

She didn't want to know how he knew that. "Is it hopeless, then?" she asked quietly, ready to give in to her feelings of despair.

He did not answer, but his hand returned, brushing a lock of hair from her eyes.

"If you don't believe we'll get out of this, why are you...ow!" A sharp pain made her grab his hand. "Stop, it's caught on your ring!"

"Then stop moving," he snapped. He slowly and painstakingly detangled the strands from the ring's sharp prongs. A glint of silver brought her eyes to his hand.

"I've never seen you wear one before," she remarked, leaning in a bit closer to view the detail. "It's beautiful," she said, noting the elegantly braided metal and green stone held in place by four silver prongs, one of which was bent and twisted outward. *No wonder my hair got caught up in that* she thought.

"A gift from our Lord," he said with a grimace. "I wear it when I am summoned to his presence."

"He summoned you today?" she asked, alarmed.

"Only briefly," he assured. "Our plans are still on schedule for tomorrow afternoon."

"That's good. I'd hate to think we're inconveniencing the Dark Lord," she said sarcastically, now understanding the reason Severus had been drinking. "He should really clear his social calendar with the escape committee if he..." She stopped mid sentence as an image flashed through her mind unbidden, and she felt again the red hot pain of the Death Eater's ring cutting her mouth during the battle for Hogwarts. A cut that could very well have been made by a bent prong.

"Severus, does he give rings to every member of the Faithful?"

"No, this was given to me after the... after I left the school. Why?" he asked, nonplussed.

After you killed Dumbledore she mentally supplied the words he would not speak aloud.

"It was you," she breathed. "When we went back in my memories to the battle, I couldn't find you. You're the one who pushed me down during the crossfire." She waited for him to deny it. He didn't.

"It was necessary," he muttered, misunderstanding her epiphany. "I was knocked out by one of the hexes. I needed to view the confrontation from your memories. I know it was... stressful."

"Did any of it help?" she asked, curious, putting aside the realisation for the moment that Snape had been shadowing her that summer's day, saving her life.

"More than you could know," he replied, his lips twisting into a cruel smile usually reserved for Gryffindors and clumsy Hufflepuffs.

Exasperated, she drew back from him, scooting to the very edge of the mattress. "Stop treating me like a child. Either talk to me as an equal or don't bother talking at all," she fumed.

"Or you'll hold your breath?"

Oh, how she hated that mocking tone that he used so well.

She stared at him in silence, a determined look on her face caught in the candlelight.

"Very well, *Miss Granger*," he eventually said.

"And you can lose the 'Miss Granger', *Severus*, I think we know each other better than that," she said forcefully, emphasising his first name.

"Very brazen, indeed," he murmured, reclining once more onto the pillows, his arms casually folded behind his head, fingers interlaced. He didn't bother to pull up the bed linen that had fallen to his waist. She could just make out the dark wiry hair of his armpits and the sparse dusting of soft black hair against pale skin across his chest, surrounding the darker patches of areolae. Under one nipple, a shiny line of scar tissue was visible in the candlelight. It looked like the sort of scar a knife's blade would leave, she imagined. His face was obscured once more in the shadow of the bed canopy.

"You asked if there was hope," he began, speaking slowly.

She nodded, watching the shadows play across his skin as the tendrils of light from the candles wavered and flickered in the drafts.

"In a word: yes. I believe that with the proper precautions, most of us can leave this place and find sanctuary."

"How?" she asked, still mesmerised by the movement of light and shadow as his voice caressed the darkness.

"I have looked into the minds of those who will accompany us. None has been corrupted by the Dark Lord, at least not successfully. He made a mistake in underestimating Minerva McGonagall."

She could hear a note of pleasure in that pronouncement.

"She is able to use magic," Hermione interrupted his musings. "She changed my face without a wand and Transfigured her own hair."

"Several times," he agreed. "The Dark Lord was most put out by her failure to remain 'humbled'. I believe there is an affinity with the mist for those of us who have used Dark magic." One pale hand rose from the shadows at the sound of her gasp, to forestall her exclamation. "It is not my tale to tell, Hermione, but suffice it to say, Minerva wasn't always the strait-laced matron you see today. During the first war, the lines between Dark and Light magic were blurred considerably, for all of us." He motioned toward the dresser, and a bottle of spirits rose into the air and flew gracefully to the bed. "My glass is on the side table, would you mind?" he asked.

She reached over to the bedside table and handed him the glass tumbler. The bottle tipped itself and poured amber liquid before returning to the dresser top.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" she asked, noting his slowed, careful speech.

"Don't nag. After today, I've not had nearly enough to drink." He sat up for a moment, taking a long drink from the glass before settling back down on the pillows.

"Nevertheless, if we leave as a group at the point between daylight and darkness, with those of us who can still use magic to repel the Dementors, we have a chance to reach the outskirts of the mist. Once free of it, I believe everyone's abilities will slowly regenerate over time," he continued, as if no interruption had taken place.

"Fine, so we're either on the train or walking the tracks to points South. Then what? A large group of strangely-dressed people will be hard to miss. What's to keep him from sending creatures or the Faithful to hunt us down?" she questioned.

"Use your head, Hermione," he responded not unkindly. "If he still retained full control over the Dementors and Inferi, do you think we'd still be holed up in this castle facing eventual starvation?"

"The sermons say that he is testing his Chosen Ones, insane bastard that he is," she grouched, bringing a snort of amusement from Snape.

"Two weeks ago I was past Hogsmeade, walking along the paths in the forest," he continued. "I heard the sound of an aeroplane overhead. The Muggles are still holding out against the Dark Lord. If we can find a township or a means of long range transportation, we can travel far from the influence of the Dark Lord. Then we'd need to make a new set of decisions based upon what we learn. Is that enough information to prove I take you seriously?"

"More than enough, thank you," she responded.

"It is very important that when this happens tomorrow, you must stay between me and Minerva, with Draco. We can protect the two of you with the Patronus spell, if necessary."

"What about everyone else?"

"They must keep up with us, and hopefully we can make it through the held territory before dark fall. There is one last thing I learnt from our remembrance, something that we must make known to the resistance. Potter succeeded in his task." He sent his glass to the side table without a word, and reached out to take her hand in his.

"What are you talking about? He...he was taken over completely, I saw it in his eyes!" she exclaimed.

Severus's hand continued to hold hers, fingertips stroking her skin, the silver ring cold against the heat of his touch. "I needed to know why the Dark Lord has lost control of the Inferi and Dementors, why we were ensconced in this castle instead of continuing to fight."

"You mean, he's trapped in here right along with us?" she asked incredulously.

"I saw the energies merge as Potter entrapped the Dark Lord. The part of him, the eternal part that controls the dark minions...Potter ripped it away and, I believe, left him mortal."

"He can be killed now," she said, barely above a whisper.

"I think he can be killed now," Severus agreed.

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