

# Diabolical

by Darkrivertempest

As an up and coming official in the department of Magical Law Enforcement, Hermione Granger has been given a case that will stretch the boundaries of her considerable knowledge. When she realizes that her loved ones are in danger, she'll have to open her mind and rely on others if she and Draco are to survive.

## One

Chapter 1 of 1

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This was a gift for Riptey over at DMHG Halloween on LJ. The prompt was epitaphs from around the world, and I chose "Victim of Jack The Ripper".

**\*Warning: This is not for the squeamish. There are actual case notes from the Ripper case files, so consider this your only warning!\***

Disclaimer: Several lines of dialogue were taken from the movies, "From Hell" and "Rob Zombie's Halloween". Both movies belong to their respective companies. Also, portions of the Catholic Latin Mass for Exorcism have been included. I make no money from any of these.

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"It's not here," Hermione huffed, slamming the tome shut, dust rising to make her sneeze.

"What's not there?" Harry asked, sliding into the chair in front of her.

She looked at her best friend. "The answer."

As he glanced over the title of her chosen book, his eyebrows rose. "I'm almost afraid to know the question."

*Vivisection, Evisceration, and Anatomy* was not her usual reading material.

Reaching down into her satchel, she pulled out a recent copy of *The Daily Prophet* and laid it in front of him. "That's the fifth one in as many months."

*The same hand no doubt committed all five murders. The throats appear to have been cut from left to right; in the last case, owing to the extensive mutilation, it is impossible to say in what direction the fatal cut was made, but arterial blood was found on the wall in splashes close to where the woman's head must have been lying. All the circumstances surrounding the murders lead to forming the opinion that the women must have been lying down when murdered, and in every case the throat was first cut.*

Harry pressed his eyes shut and swallowed the bile rising in his esophagus. "Is-is it Voldemort, again?"

Giving him an exasperated look, she arched a brow. "Harry, you're an Auror. One who's just finished his studies in a particular field that he couldn't tell me about, much to my frustration. I think you'd know if he was alive before I would." She chewed on her bottom lip. "This is... something different."

"I don't know why they didn't give this case to the Aurors to begin with," he groused, folding the paper so he wouldn't have to look at the picture that accompanied the article. "I would've asked for it had I been there."

"You have enough on your plate as it is," she murmured. "Besides, this case will give me the accreditation I've been looking for."

"But... this?" He flipped the paper back open and pointed at the moving picture so gruesome that even a few photographers became ill before rushing off to the side. "This," he hissed, "will give you nightmares. Don't you think you've had enough from the war to last you a lifetime?"

"I have too many," she growled at him. "But I'm not you, Harry. I can't just walk into a room and be The-Boy-That-Lived."

"I would hope not." He smirked somewhat. "I kind of like your girly bits."

Rolling her eyes, she grabbed the paper and shoved it back in her bag. "You know what I mean. I want to be recognized for me; Hermione Granger. Not as one-third of the Golden Trio, not the know-it-all from her Hogwarts years, but me brilliant detective in the Magical Law Enforcement office, responsible for capturing the most depraved killer since Voldemort."

"Tall order, that."

She stopped packing up her things and stared at him. "You don't think I can do it?"

Rising from his seat, Harry laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "I know you can." Fear tinged his gaze. "It's just a matter of whether you should."

Placing her hand over his, she entreated, "What if it was your daughter or wife in that picture? Wouldn't you want justice?"

Once again he gulped, trying to keep the images at bay. "I see your point."

"Good," she breathed in relief. "Now I need to get home. Draco's coming back from his trip and I want to surprise him."

Harry's lips thinned. "Hermione..."

Holding her hand up, she cut him off. "Don't start." Shouldering her bag, she patted his cheek affectionately. "My life, Harry. I don't tell you how to run yours, so I'd appreciate it if you would afford me the same courtesy."

"I just worry is all." He pulled her into a hug. "He's... changed since the war."

"For the better, I hope," she said absentmindedly, searching for her wand.

Reaching up, Harry withdrew the long shaft from her haphazard bun and presented it to her. "Just watch yourself. Promise?"

Taking the wand, she slipped it up her sleeve and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, and I will."

As Harry watched her leave the Muggle Public Library she tended to frequent, his worry would not abate, and so he left the building, planning to do a little investigation of his own.

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"You've been careless."

The sullen man with dark circles under his eyes glared at the older gentleman. "No, I haven't."

A newspaper was flung in his face. "Yes, you have!" The dark man sitting next to the hearth seethed with frustration and anger. "That last one was so badly mutilated they couldn't identify her."

"That was the point."

Severus Snape tilted his head and studied the young man. Perhaps he was growing lax in his research, for a mistake of this magnitude would've never slipped past him before. "How did you come to be here in the first place?"

A feral smile grew on what was once a beautiful face. "That hag Necromancer conjured me into a mirror. He must've looked into it in passing, I assume." He closed his eyes and inhaled. "He should've realized that anything in that woman's possession would've produced something... unnatural. The freedom during these last five months has been amazing."

"Had I known of your presence, I would have ended you sooner." It was true, and yet not. Snape had gathered as much information as possible regarding the *creature* that sat before him, enough so that the ancient ritual would send it back from where it came, but he'd hesitated, and now he realized that would cost him dearly.

Maniacal laughter filled the chamber. "Clever disguise, is it not?" The man licked his lips sensually. "But I'm stuck in here now."

"Where is he?" Snape ground out, ready to throttle the being sitting across from him.

"Oh, he's in here," the other answered, tapping his right temple with two fingers. "Watching what I do, providing me with memories so that I may insinuate myself further into his life."

Severus now knew that *thing* would never stop, but like a single shaft of light in murky waters, a thought occurred to the older wizard. "She'll stop you."

A mutinous expression filled his glare. "Like hell she will." He leaned forward and hissed, "She loves the poor fool and thanks me every time I fuck her filthy hole."

"She's not called the brightest witch of her age for nothing, I assure you," Snape informed, shaking his head. "You'll leave clues as to who you *really* are, and she won't hesitate to destroy you." He looked to his own hands. "Unlike me."

"Yes, I often wondered about that." He examined the other man closely. "You love this boy."

"He is all that I have left; I would do anything for him," Snape confirmed.

Rising from his seat, the younger, hollow man made his way towards the older wizard and crouched low to look into his wary eyes. "I wonder, then, how you will feel when he becomes your Angel of Death?"

"What?"

No warning was given, no sleight of hand observed, before Severus Snape had to grasp his throat in a vain attempt to stem the copious flow of blood exiting from a jagged

tear in his neck. The last thing he saw was a malevolent smile full of wickedness and a pair of vacant gray eyes, staring down at him.

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"Luna, I need your help with something."

The sprite-like blonde looked up from her book and smiled. "Harry Potter, it's good to see you again."

He returned her smile, but it was shadowed. "Likewise."

"You look like you've swallowed a Pygmy Puff," she observed, putting her book to the side.

"I feel like it," he mused solemnly. "I-I just wondered if you could tell me about... some things," he hedged, waving his hands around to indicate her mystical shop and all its trappings.

She grinned knowingly. "You're here because of Hermione, aren't you?"

His lips twitched. "How did you know?"

"She doesn't take my work seriously," she stated, matter-of-factly. "It's not *scientific* enough for her. Too many vague possibilities, no tangible proof." She shrugged her shoulders. "You only come to see me if it's in the realm of the unexplainable and she hasn't found the answer yet."

Harry hung his head in shame. "I'm a colossal git, I know..."

"It's okay, Harry, really," she assured him. Emerging from behind the counter, she pulled him into a curtained area and indicated for him to sit down on a ladder-backed chair. "Now, what have you two stumbled upon that she refuses to acknowledge?"

Where did he start? "You know she's been seeing Draco Malfoy, right?"

"For a while now." She watched his face contort. "You don't like it."

Rubbing the back of his neck, he sighed heavily. "It's not that I don't like him. I mean, after the war, he came to work at the Ministry with the Aurors, helping us identify dark objects and such."

"But..." she prompted when he stared at his shoes for about five minutes.

"We did this raid, back in May," he whispered, recalling that night. "It was Bella's old haunt, and we found some things, but we didn't know exactly what they were."

"What did you..."

"I won't tell you what I saw, Luna," he interrupted. "Let's just say I'm still trying to forget it."

"Well, Bellatrix was a known Necromancer, Harry." She gave him a sympathetic look. "I can guess her accoutrements were probably scattered about."

He nodded. "Draco knew that she'd been trying to contact various spirits, so he stayed behind to clean it up, saying he knew better than anyone what to touch and what *not* to."

"You believe he stumbled upon something unknown." It was a statement, not a question.

"I think he inadvertently conjured something, because when he came back, Luna..." He paused, trying to gather himself. "There was *nothing* in his eyes, just absolute emptiness."

A chill ran up Luna's back and she never ignored her instincts. "Inside every one of us exists a dark side. Most people rise above it, but some are consumed by it, until there is nothing left but pure evil." She pulled her knees up to her chest, resting her chin atop. "His eyes will deceive you, destroy you, and take your soul from you. Those eyes don't see what you and I see. Behind those eyes one finds only blackness the absence of light."

"No offense, but you're scaring the hell out of me." He crossed his arms in a self-protective gesture. "What's happened to him?"

Closing her eyes, her lips trembled. "He brought something forth."

"What, exactly?"

"It needed a host to survive."

"*What?*" Harry thundered, fed up with her cryptic ramblings.

"A long-dead monster, one that never paid for his crimes," she cried, tears edging her lashes. "A dark soul from a dark time in Muggle society."

"Draco's conjured a Muggle spirit?"

Getting to her feet, Luna stood at the window, watching the people pass by in the late autumn afternoon. "It's been done before, though it's rare." She looked at him from over her shoulder. "Seamus tried to channel Merlin once and got Nero instead."

"*That* explains the fire in the Great Hall," Harry snorted. "So how did this happen to Draco? I mean, he told me he knew what he was doing."

"Bellatrix used to imbue inanimate objects with dark spiritual energy," she offered. "It's very possible Draco picked up something inconsequential like a piece of parchment, or accidentally brushed against a tablecloth, and the force had an outlet through him."

"How do you know?"

She curled into herself somewhat. "When I was in the Malfoy dungeon, I was her favourite test subject." Absentmindedly, she stroked her odd earring. "She cursed one of my radish earrings so that when she forced me to put it back on, I couldn't stop pacing."

"Oh, Luna," he sighed sympathetically. "Is that why you looked so thin?"

"One of the reasons." Impulsively, she grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "But then you three came and I knew everything would be okay."

He returned the gesture, then let go. "So something has latched onto Draco who or what is it?"

Luna wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "Whoever it is doesn't even know its own name."

"Huh?"

She picked up the figurine of a duck. "What is this?"

Arching a brow, Harry frowned. "A duck..."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's been called that for hundreds of years?"

"Yes, but does the duck understand that you've named him *aduck*?" At his blank expression, she continued. "The *duck* may think of himself as... an *atlatori*, but we will never know because we don't speak its language and therefore will always call him a duck."

His eyes were about to cross. "That makes no sense."

"This *thing* Draco has attracted there's no name for it, except in its own twisted mind," she explained patiently. "It recognizes no authority, it kills without conscience, it moves among us because it chooses not to dwell within the hell of the abyss. Just because you call him Draco doesn't mean that's who he is."

Wiping his face, Harry turned ashen. "Does he realize what's happened to him?"

Laying a hand on his shoulder, Luna gave him a worried look. "Do you recall what happened with Seamus?"

"They had to tie him down, if I remember."

"Yes, but do you remember what Snape did?" she prompted.

Frowning in concentration, Harry tried to recollect the events of that night. "Snape told everyone to leave the room and then McGonagall said he pulled out..."

"This?" she asked, holding up an onyx rosary, the cross dangling between them. "He gave it to me when I studied with the Conventual Franciscans."

"I just finished that course for Auror training," Harry said, amazed that he, Luna, and, of all people, Severus Snape learned from the same masters of arcane magic. It explained why Snape always wore the severe black frocks, knowing that the monks wore much the same fashion.

Unbeknownst to each other, all three had studied the esoteric rituals of the priests for separate purposes, though Harry refused to pry and ask why Luna had studied them. Through their training, they'd learned faith always preceded science; it fixed its boundaries and prescribed its traditions. The seven liberal arts the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy were the sacred categorizing of God's universe and the channelling of knowledge, which was always directed toward theology, the 'Queen of the Sciences'.

Immediately, aspects of that night began to make sense to him regarding Snape's behaviour, and he counted Seamus lucky that the dour Potions Master was at hand to relieve him of Nero's spirit. "Seamus nearly died; Nero wanted to stay so badly."

She nodded. "The longer a spirit resides within another's body, the harder it is to draw them out. Seamus was fortunate; he'd only been possessed for a day."

Quickly doing the math, Harry's eyes widened. "Malfoy's been possessed for at least five months." By that point, almost all colour had drained from his face. "Hermione!"

"She hasn't come to harm, has she?"

Harry grabbed Luna's shoulders in a brutal grip. "She's investigating those Knockturn Alley prostitute murders. Every time one happens, Draco's mysteriously out of town."

Both Harry and Luna pieced the puzzle together at the same moment. "Go get Snape, and I'll Floo to Hermione's flat," she instructed, keeping a tight grip on her rosary. "Hurry!"

He pressed his lips to hers in a hurried kiss and dashed out the door, leaving behind a flustered and very worried witch.

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"Draco? Is that you?" Hermione called out from the kitchen in their shared flat.

Shutting the door quietly, Draco made his way to where she was and leaned against the frame, studying her. "Allo, lovie."

*Get away from her, you sadistic bastard!*

Turning at the sound of his voice, she frowned somewhat at his address. "Lovie?" She looked him up and down, curious about his rumpled state. "Did you sleep in your robes?"

He assessed his clothing. "I was in such a hurry to see you, dearest." Smiling, he held out his arms. "Come, give us a squeeze."

*Run, Hermione, run! See what he is; this isn't me!*

"Shut your blitherin' trap!" he snarled out of nowhere, catching Hermione off guard before she could put her arms around his neck.

Slowly, she backed away. "I didn't say anything."

*You're losing your grip, arsehole, and she'll see right through you.*

Sticking a finger in his ear, he wiggled it around. "Sorry, thought I was hearin' voices, sweetness."

She frowned with a moue of disgust. "Sweetness? Draco, are you drunk?"

*I never call her those things.*

"Only drunk on my love for you," he cooed, reaching for Draco's partner.

Placing her hand on his chest, she shoved him back far enough to avoid his grasp. "Okay, now I *know* you're drunk."

"Haven't had a thing to drink, dear heart," he purred, lasciviously licking his lips, his eyes following her as she made her way to the den.

*Merlin, Granger! You're smarter than this! Figure it out!*

"She won't until it's too late, pretty-boy."

Although Hermione heard his words, she didn't react, knowing something was terribly wrong, especially since his speech sounded dead common and nothing like Draco's. Instead, she moved about the room, pretending to be searching for a book she'd mislaid, while trying to think of what to do. A tapping at the window distracted her, but she

also noticed Draco's retreat to the kitchen.

A long-eared owl clawed at the glass, demanding entrance, so Hermione opened the French doors to allow it inside. Untying the parchment attached to its leg, she fed it a treat and it was soon gone. Breaking the Hogwarts seal, she read the missive in shock.

*Miss Granger,*

*It is with a heavy heart that I must inform you that Professor Severus Snape has passed away. This information has not been released to the Ministry or any press circulations and I would appreciate if this matter were to remain shuttered from public scrutiny.*

*The manner of his death would concern a person in your line of work, so I ask that you take on the investigation personally and with great expediency, as a favour to your former head of house. Feel free to use my Floo; it is open at this very moment for you.*

*With deepest regret,*

*Minerva McGonagall*

*Headmistress - Hogwarts*

*Hermione! Watch out!*

Blinding pain exploded at the back of her skull, thrusting Hermione forward to the floor, a pair of black shoes swimming in her vision.

"Draco?" she mumbled feebly, trying to wrap her tongue around his name.

The shoes moved away and were replaced by a beloved face lying flush on the floor, smiling at her. "Oh, lovie, did you fall?"

Tears filled her eyes. "Who are you?" She knew for certain *that* wasn't Draco.

He made a tutting noise. "Now, that would be tellin', wouldn't it?"

*You sick twisted fuck! Leave her alone! Oh, Gods...*

The *thing*, wearing Draco's face, shifted his eyes as if seeing someone over her shoulder. "Ah, I would've, lad, but you forced my hand when you went to that greasy bat, Snape."

*He knew how to get rid of you, how to send you back to Hell where you belong!*

"Well, he won't be doin' *that* anytime soon, now... will he?"

"You killed Snape," Hermione breathed in horror as she tried rolling onto her side.

She remained half on her side, unable to complete the roll, so he moved her until she lay on her back and straddled her waist, pinning her arms beneath his knees. "You know, he told me you'd figure it out." His smile was lethal as spittle dripped from his lips. "Clever, pretty lass." He stroked the side of her face and picked up a curl, bringing it to his nose and inhaling. "Ahh, so ripe for the pluckin'."

*Get your hands off her!*

"Keep that gob workin', boy, and they won't even find her teeth," he threatened the voice screaming in his head.

Hermione whimpered as she fought with her mind and emotions to reconcile with the idea that *themonster* above her was not her loved one. "What have you done with Draco?"

The look-a-like's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and his body arched as if he'd been zapped by a stray hex. "Buggerin' prick wants his body back," he gritted out between clenched teeth. His frame sagged and he panted heavily. "But he can't have it."

Another jolt threw Draco's body off Hermione's and she scrambled away towards the fireplace as fast as she could. "What's happening?" she sobbed, unsure what to do.

"Ahhhhrrrrgh!" it screamed, curling into a foetal position, clutching the hair at its temples. "No! I won't go. You're mine!"

*You won't harm her. I love her, do you hear?*

"Willin' to die for it, whelp?" the fiend seethed as it drew an object from within its robes.

"Draco!" Hermione screamed, spying the carving knife she'd been using in the kitchen. She made to run towards her lover, but the being held the blade up and grinned maliciously.

"Ah-ah-ahhh," he sing-songed. "Any closer and he'll be a head shorter." Laughing at his own joke, he pressed the tip to his jugular just as there was a whooshing noise.

"Hermione?"

Whipping around, she found Luna standing in the grate, holding a... rosary? "Stay back, Luna! It's not..."

"Draco," the other young woman finished for her, sizing up the man who kneeled on the floor in front of them, the lethal blade cutting into the soft skin just under his jaw. "I know, it's..."

"Say it," the blond man taunted, turning the knife to point it at the brunette witch, "...and she'll look like a badly cut paper-doll before I slit her fussy spot tongue."

"You know who he is?" Hermione whispered, her gaze darting between the two.

Another whooshing sound and Harry popped into her grate, covered in soot and clutching something that looked splattered with blood. "Snape figured it out," Harry told her. "Isn't that right... *Jack*?"

An inhuman growl filled the air. "That's not even my real name."

"It'll do." Harry handed Hermione a Muggle file folder. "It's all right there." He watched as Luna manouvred her way over behind Draco.

Keeping an eye on Draco, Hermione quickly flipped through ghastly photos of the Whitechapel murders from over a hundred years ago, gasping when she got to the end. "Jack the Ripper?"

"Nosey bastards, all of you!" the entity roared and once more, began pushing the knife into Draco's throat, but Luna grabbed his wrist before he could penetrate deep enough to hit the jugular.

"I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every power of the enemy, every spectre from hell, and all your fell companions; in the name of the Lord," Luna chanted as she fingered the worn beads on the necklace, the recitation of the rite weakening Jack physically and spiritually. "Unclean thing, depart this servant."

"No!" he howled. Unable to retain his grip on the blade, it clattered to the floor. "Your rituals are empty oaths you no longer understand or live by!"

Standing above the writhing figure, Harry kicked the knife away, knelt down next to the struggling man and pinned his shoulders to the floor while Luna continued the ritual. "Remember, Luna, you must say the words with true intent."

She nodded in agreement, understanding that this concerned the Muggle God, not some spell in the Wizarding world. "You don't belong here; you were vanquished long ago." She laid the crucifix upon Draco's forehead. "Tremble in fear, you begetter of death, you robber of life, you corrupter of justice, you root of all evil and vice."

Hermione's sobs broke Luna's concentration, which Jack took advantage of to spit in her face. "You're not fit to judge the mighty art I have created!" Bucking his hips, he threw the petite blonde to the side, breaking free of Harry's grip before quickly straddling the girl. "They'll never find your cunny," he hissed, licking her left cheek.

But Luna continued, even though she was truly frightened, staring into the abyss of his gaze. "You've created nothing but chaos and destruction, foul soul."

Sinister laughter echoed throughout the room, frightening Hermione. Grabbing Luna's rosary, Harry placed it back on the blond man's forehead, causing the body to seize up and fall limp, nearly crushing Luna until she pushed him off.

"What are you doing to Draco, Harry?" Hermione whimpered, not daring to come closer, lest she interfere.

Keeping his gaze on the blond man, the brunet explained. "Severus figured out that *Jack* here possessed Draco, making him commit all those murders you've been investigating." He stared hard into the empty gray eyes. "He knew the only way to get rid of the dark spirit was an arcane ritual. Exorcism."

At this, Jack focused on the bespectacled man. "Snape won't be enjoying the pleasures of the flesh in the afterlife, I can assure you of that," it sniggered.

Without thought, Harry backhanded him. "You butchered him!" he yelled. "Where is Draco?"

Working Draco's jaw, Jack smiled and licked the blood off his lips, raising his eyebrows. "I'm afraid he used all his strength trying to save that precious twat there." He leered at Hermione. "His pain is delicious."

"Depart, then, transgressor," Harry continued, ignoring Hermione's retching on the other side of the room. "Depart, seducer, full of lies and cunning, foe of virtue, persecutor of the innocent. Give place, abominable creature, give way, you monster, give way to the Lord, in whom you found none of your works."

Veins protruded around Draco's temples and neck as his body buckled beneath the torturous words chanted. He thrashed about, trying to dislodge Harry's firm grip on his forehead, all to no avail.

"Draco, I know you're in there," Luna said, searching for any spark of life within the young man's pale depths. "Follow the sound of Harry's voice and overthrow the intruder."

"Get... Hermione... out of... here," a feeble voice rasped as Draco's face turned a darker shade of red.

Glancing at Hermione, Harry watched her shake her head and slowly approach, only to kneel by Draco and caress his face. "I love you, Draco," she whispered. "I won't leave you."

Unable to move, he shifted his gaze to the curly-haired woman. "Want... to spare... you." His eyes rolled back in his head once more, his body becoming rigid with the internal struggle between himself and Jack.

"The longer you delay, the heavier your punishment shall be," Harry intoned, grateful to see some part of Malfoy fighting against the monster inside him. "For it is not men you are condemning, but rather He who rules the living and the dead, who is coming to judge both the living and the dead and the world by fire."

An unearthly sound filled the air as Jack hissed, "The great master speaks to me. He is the balance where my deeds are weighed and judged, not you."

"I adjure you, profligate dragon, unclean spirit, spectre from hell, instigator of sacrileges, model of vileness, promoter of heresies, inventor of every obscenity, to return whence you came." Harry looked at Luna, nodded, and both solemnly said, "Amen."

"No," Jack whispered as Draco's body became limp.

The atmosphere suddenly filled with a dark, heavy thickness and Harry, Hermione, and Luna struggled to breathe. High-pitched wailing sliced through the stillness, sounding to them as if a thousand voices screamed in agony, piercing their minds like glass.

The aftermath of silence was deafening.

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Autumn leaves scattered about the cemetery, the wind whipping them into frenzied circles, only to land on the shoes of those gathered for a memorial service. The ceremony was brief but heartfelt, a multitude of friends and colleagues drawn together around a black marble monument that had several veins of white streaking through it. One by one, they each paid their respects, tossing various flowers upon the freshly disturbed earth.

Four remained after the others dispersed; a lone woman bent low to trace the words upon the marker, three others standing behind her to offer support.

*The bravest man ever known*

*His transgressions forgiven*

*Reluctant peace finally found*

*May he rest within the angels' bosom*

*Severus Tobias Snape*

*Victim of Jack the Ripper*

"Thank you," Hermione sobbed quietly as she laid a bouquet of lilies near the headstone.

Coming to stand beside her, Draco placed his hand gently upon her mop of frizzy curls. "I don't know if I can forgive myself."

"Don't you dare, Draco Malfoy," she nearly growled, standing to give him a hard look. "He died trying to save you. Don't you dare waste his gift on being mired in guilt for

the rest of your life!"

"She's right, mate," Harry agreed, joining them. "You've been cleared of all charges, including his death." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Honestly, if I hadn't gone to Hogwarts to consult Snape on what to do, I don't think you'd be standing here. I'm just lucky I found the information he'd acquired regarding your erm condition."

Draco's expression was bleak. "I-I may ask one of you to *Oblivate* me at some point." He closed his eyes as if in pain. "I feel quite filthy."

"It's only been five days since he's been gone," Luna assured him. "There's bound to be psychic and emotional residue for some time."

Tears filled Draco's eyes. "That's what I'm afraid of." He pulled Hermione into a crushing embrace. "I was so terrified of what he was going to do to you."

She ran her hands up and down his back in a soothing manner. "It's okay, Draco, truly. We'll get through this together." Nuzzling his neck, she pressed a soft kiss to the scar that had been the result of Jack's desperation.

Withdrawing from her, Draco pulled a smooth pebble from within his cloak and laid it atop Severus' headstone.

"Why did you do that?" Harry asked, curious.

Glancing at Hermione's small smile, he explained, "Severus and I were studying an ancient Muggle religious text during one of my years at university, and we came across a custom that honoured the dead with a 'piece of themselves'.

"When I picked up this stone outside of his office, it sent a message to me." He stared at the words on his beloved godfather's cairn. "I can still feel him around, still touch and be touched by him. I can still feel the impact that he's made on my life. His life, love, teachings, values, and morals still make an impression on me." Caressing the pebble, he smiled somewhat. "When I put the stone down, it reminds me I can no longer take him with me physically, I can only take him with me in my heart, my mind, or the actions I do because he taught me to do them. Just as the stone made an impression on my hands, his life also made an impression on me that continues."

"He would be very proud of you, Draco," Luna assured him, patting his shoulder, tears fringing her lashes.

Unable to say more, he nodded silently and took Hermione's hand, tugging her gently into his arms.

With heavy hearts, the four made their way from the graveyard on a chilly October afternoon, all of them trying to focus on their future paths. As they exited the cemetery, the clang of the heavy iron gate resounded in the damp, misty air, causing a flock of crows to take flight.

Observing them leave, a dark shadow with eerie red eyes followed their movements, reclining against the headstone as it flicked the precious pebble from the top of the monument.

"One day, men will look back and say I gave birth to the twentieth century," it promised with a wicked grin.

It watched... and waited.

It still does.