

Apology: Ms Hermione Granger

by silencio_sempra

Every utterance of her name... as forbidden as night's Darkest spell...I have no reason, nor excuse...

One: The Letter from No One

Chapter 1 of 15

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One:

March 1998

Dear Hermione:

(In the case that you, Reader, are not Hermione, and are too stupid to glean from the address, let me reiterate: this document is the strictly private property of Ms. Hermione Granger. Surely you have some appropriate respect for her privacy, if not mine? Surely you have something more worthwhile to do than nose about in other people's business? No, I know better you are undoubtedly a fine example of modern British wizardry, having neither scruple nor desire for gainful employment of the mind. I am well aware that scandal and gossip-mongering rank among the highest forms of entertainment in our society, as evidenced by the wild popularity of the *Daily Prophet* and its Rita Skeeter columns. You are doubtless an eager practitioner, and, delighted with your find, you cast a greedy eye upon this treasure, hoping its pages contain an irresistible revelation, a peek into the Snapish soul. Your excitement lies not in intellectual exploration or quest for wisdom; the wondrous intricate truths of Merlin or Socrates, or indeed of Severus Snape, would be lost on the modern Reader. No, you seek merely the temporary and futile escape, from quotidian banality and the ever-yawning disquiet lurking about the fringes of your mind. Your brand of so-called 'reading' involves a gleeful plunge into the murky woes or salacious intimacies of the so-called Other, in the hope that his degradation will result in your uplift. Spurred by such desperate motive, you've no qualm now about ripping out and ravishing my secrets as well.

Thus, a secret missive from Headmaster Snape within your thieving hands offers a multitude of tempting promises to titillate your inferior mind: you expect fabulous tales of indecency, murder, treason; you hope to grasp, within these pages, the beauty of young maids, the depravity of devils and knaves, the mystery of magic itself. You shall soon see how false these promises are, for my missive contains no heroic slaying of demons or epic battles, merely a lone man's meandering, abject misery.

If I could hex you out of reading this, I certainly would. But you seem quite determined after all, if you are reading these words, you have certainly trespassed into the Hogwarts Headmasters' quarters; identified the peculiarity of this heavily-warded epistle; forcibly broken into my family house at Spinner's End and there rifled through all my belongings to locate the keys and passwords to these pages; and found some cleverer person than you to solve the encrypted riddle, specially crafted for Hermione,

that serves as a final guard. I grimly suspect that if you've got this far, I must surely be dead and no remonstrance of mine can prevent you from continuing. So I may as well clarify:

Firstly she is *Hermione* to me. Over the years, I have exercised due diligence to publicly refer to her only as "Miss Granger", or "Gryffindor know-it-all", or other such unsavoury epithets, in accordance with institutional norms or general expectations of my disposition. But none of these capture her, nor indeed my true regard. *Hermione* Such baroque appellation to a mere little girl! Derived from the winged messenger of the Gods, Hermes, immortalized by Shakespeare, it is less a name than a title. A quadrisyllabic convolution, fraught with literary baggage and haughty affectation, it drips with historical portent, tantalizes with intellectual scrutiny. I daresay it suits her. Its rich, full beauty is not of the ordinary brand; its pure tones are indeed scarcely intelligible to the casual listener or the foreign tongue. But upon my tongue, it alights; it lingers, her lilting sparrow-song, even now.

I can only pray she still lives. I cannot hope for her forgiveness; she surely hates me now. In any case, her shabby imitation, memory, is all I now possess. Or rather, it possesses me; for, after all that has happened, I still seek to recapture her comfort in the form of a dream-Hermione. How fiercely the past clings! In the night's deathly hours, as dread or disquiet breaks my solitary sleep, I reach for her; by the moon she appears, the sylvan Diana to my private nocturnal dominion. In these fair wolds, neither democrat nor tyrant reign, nor polite society's censure, but she and I only. She, far-winged angel, frolics safely, shadowed from the stark light of day. I, noble prince, guard her well. Here, distilled to our essentials, I hold her, stroke her ghostly coppery locks, and make pious amends for the pain I sowed in that sordid Otherworld. Here, every utterance of her name, every lingual brushstroke of stillness and motion, recasts her blessed enchantment over me, as quenching as moon's pale fire, as forbidden as night's Darkest spell.

Secondly, let me say to the Ministry minions If history condemns me, let it be for one crime: the taking of Miss Hermione Granger. For of all my alleged crimes, this one only have I truly committed, with all that remains of my depraved soul¹. If by some miracle the war has been won and I am not in fact dead, I imagine the Ministry's mighty puppet-lawyers will contort the letter of every law to hang me and perhaps they should. If you, Reader, are to be my judge, I care not a whit for your sympathy or mercy. You will condemn me, as you likely already have, before you have heard any facts or evidence, for you have been trained from childhood as a good little soldier, to follow the *Daily Prophet's* exhortations and bleat in patriotic fervour against any whiff of traitor or terror that disturbs your comfortable mediocrity. Your exoneration would be but an insult.

No, this confession is to Hermione alone. Along with it, I supply the following recollections, and their corresponding Pensieved memories, to their object herself; she is really their rightful owner in any case. You see, I don't believe I shall see her again, and thus this pitiful letter you have so rudely purloined must explain to her what I should have said long ago, and to make profound apology for my inexcusable conduct when last we met. Perhaps by this act, worthless *post hoc* screed though it be, I may make some atonement to her, in the only manner left to me.

Every tale must have a beginning and an end. You, Reader, likely know already of my end, even if I do not. But I must choose a beginning; I must cast my mind back to a catalytic instant in time, to there first necessary cause of the crime. The trail of clues leads infinitely backwards Had it commenced with the madness brought on by other, more terrible crimes? An adolescent humiliation, a blow sustained in the womb? Was its root the demise of two families, one of proud magical stock, one of defiant, displaced Muggles, centuries long past? Or did the roaring tide of history, the primordial soup, carry within it the elemental seeds of a preordained misdeed?

In truth, I lack a reasonable theory. I shall not attempt, as others do, to excuse my conduct with deterministic whinging about my miserable childhood. Nor was there any precedent to my deliberate pursuit, manipulation, and ambush of young Hermione: my life was notably devoid of sexuality. As a young man, I quickly learned I possessed no talent, and much trepidation, in this area; I obtained a scant, furtive education from books and occasional eavesdropping on more uninhibited classmates. I shall not detail my various ignominious operations as a Death Eater, but suffice to say that, unlike many rash young men, I acquired no appetite for brutality. At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where I held the Potions professorship for nearly twenty years, I considered my other students as nothing but dim-witted children. I am not a paedophile, hebephile, ephebephile, nepiophile, voyeur, or frotteur². I am not even a hedonist or sensualist. I have no reason, nor excuse.

Well, I suppose I must qualify that last statement there is one distinct derivation, though hardly grounded in 'reason'. In truth, I believe Miss Granger's mystical spell commenced to unfold long before her birth with her precursor and fellow goodhearted Gryffindor, Lily Evans. It seems there is a critical window of time in a boy's life that if he receives not the milk of human love and affection, his heart shall wither and grow cold from disuse and fail to thrive. But if he should taste the mysterious elixir of human kindness, his soul shall not forget. Even if the remainder of his childhood be cold and grey, he shall keep the memory of kindness like a dormant spore, till it finds fertile substrate to nourish it. I was so very young when Lily crept through the gates of my sensual perception and showed me that kindness. Lily, whose beauty made the very angels weep; I did not understand her gift to me: her childlike love, my sanctuary, my only faith and *être*. With fatal pride, I drove her from me. With her death, it was as if I had died too; yet we persisted, I in earthly shell and she in my soul, for so long, tucked away and dormant for years in a warm pocket of memory, until her mysterious resurrection within Hermione nearly twenty years later. I believe surely that had not Lily's formative hand deftly moulded my tender youthful heart to her image, I would never have recognized its first recuperative beats at Hermione's enchanted presence in my classroom, nor eventually surrendered to the bloody *hope* that wound its way round me through each of her uncertain gestures. And surely had I not first committed the unspeakable crime that took Lily's life, it would not have been so easy to take Hermione's innocence.

I must digress a bit here, to disabuse the reader of any notion that I speak of the concept of 'love' in jest or irony. I do not refer to bourgeois customs of courtship and marriage or to silken words that veil religion's coarse clutches. Nor do I intend to connote the smug embrace of easy pleasure a gluttonous haze of *fucking*, if you will that you may ascribe to me. No, I mean 'love' unencumbered, in all its ineffable multitudes. I can tell you are now thinking I've gone completely daft in my old age. Perhaps you dare to laugh at my disgraceful weakness, now that my corpse cannot hex you. Or perhaps you think a Death Eater, an executioner, a man who has crawled through the darkest abyss, cannot love? You think love is a thing only hackneyed romance authors or starry-eyed maidens can conceive of; that there can be no love in Darkness or Darkness in love? I commit no such error. You are undoubtedly riddled with ingrained assumptions on the subject, and hold ill-formed opinions about which experiences one must undergo in order to have true knowledge of love, or the circumstances under which one might acquire the authority to authentically write on the matter. It is not my intent to prove my credentials or converse with you on love's many dimensions, as I could care less what you think. I merely wish to state that it is in fact a matter I have given thought to, and I do not write about it lightly.

But my point is this: by the grace of God, or perhaps merely that of Godric Gryffindor, awatch o'er his flock, I took virtually no notice of Miss Granger when she was but a child. For four years she existed in my mind as a sort of larvae, notable only for frequent mastication of entire textbooks and their verbatim regurgitation in my classroom. But, by her fifth, by the time my Dark Mark had blackened and tightened its grip upon my left forearm, she had begun her slow metamorphosis toward the enchanted creature Hermione. In an attempt to impose some structure upon my memory's atemporal tangle of furies and ecstasies, I note the passage of nearly three years since the first unsettling touch of her strange magic upon my soul. To be precise, since August 1995; she was then but fifteen. The setting: the uninspiring number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Order of the Phoenix Headquarters. On the morning I recall, I had just arrived for the final Order meeting before the start of Hogwarts classes. I was scheduled to make a substantial intelligence report, the details of which were quite dire: in short, evidence suggested that the Dark Lord intended to spread his influence throughout Europe within several years. Certainly, his primary focus remained on steady infiltration of the British Ministry of Magic. But, I had recently learnt, he was recruiting heavily from Balkan Europe, a region ravaged by successive magical wars and accompanying economic disruption, and sending spies to the Albanian Ministry³, where he already had personal ties. Moreover, he had begun overtures to potential supporters, including both humans and giants, across Europe and Russia, even as far as the Altai range. This action plausibly indicated even further-reaching ambitions; though in my own view, the Dark Lord remained unsure of how thinly to spread his ill-scant resources. In any case, the Order meeting promised a heated debate on the extent of geographic area the Order ought to target in its own recruitment, and whether aggressive Order counteraction was warranted or riskily premature.

From the downstairs kitchen, voices already murmured, but first I proceeded up the staircase to the Black drawing room, intending to peruse the Black family library in privacy before grim business ensued. Quite to my dismay, I came at once upon Miss Granger, renowned Hogwarts savant, who was doing nothing more provocative than re-shelving books newly digested fodder, perhaps, to spew over my classroom.

Perhaps because I lay habitually cocooned in my own solitude, I tarried a second in registering her identity. I paused at the doorway, took in a lively whirl of robes, incurable hair-mop, versatile girlish fingers curled round a slender wand. Books flew; their material force hit the shelves with a thud; the air filled with the heady aroma of dusty parchment, leather bindings, adhesive glue. Her placement charms were uncomplicated, but nevertheless displayed near-perfect orchestration and needless precision. On closer examination, she appeared to be placing anti-decay charms upon the aging volumes and categorizing them first by subject and then by author

surname classic Granger overachievement and an unreasonable surfeit of magical energy for such a trivial task. What was she doing here anyway? She was too young for Order work, too naïve to be useful.

Her glance skipped to me. She froze, met my hard gaze. Her cheeks flushed, lips parted, breathing slightly elevated from her previous movement. She positively quivered with latent, unsculpted magical potential. Though she was not tangibly changed from the squirmy caterpillar of the previous term, I was suddenly, inexplicably unnerved.

It is absurd to suppose I could identify a discrete moment in which Miss Granger's transformation to my beloved Hermione occurred. Still I struggle to order my life in time: to segregate the before from the after. In the inevitable imposition of reason upon memory, I see in that little magical pause of hers, in her caught breath and slight quaver, the precise discontinuity in time that her spell was cast; I feel the minute, momentary shiver she sent through me that cut me adrift from Lily's memory to gaze instead upon Hermione's enchanted island.

"Good morning, Professor," she chirped timidly, and at once there came upon me an awareness of her subtly nascent femininity, and a strange, unfamiliar urge to respond in kind to her prosaic greeting. I did no such thing, of course; I dispelled the illogical impulse and turned immediately to an altogether more appropriate reaction: vexation at her untoward familiarity (was her intent to spy upon me, I wondered) and at her unwitting reminder that summer was almost at an end and I would soon have to deal with her ilk in the classroom.

In hindsight, I see my purblind struggle: the small, futile thrash of maddened beast, the first pierce of invisible ancient arrow. Had I recognized the signs, I surely would not have succumbed to subsequent woundings; but I had no cause then to suspect my armour's weakness. I felt no longing for feminine company; I welcomed no attentions from her or any other woman. Likewise she, in her youthful innocence, surely intended no felling blow. Why her, such unlikely enchantress? Why me? Was I bound by pure physicality simply my accidental proximity to this child-woman that propelled me to respond in natural fashion? If Miss Lavender Brown's squealing squitter had been foisted upon me, would I have come equally under her spell (I shudder to think)? Or had some timed toggle deep within signalled me to awake slowly, myopically and perceive her existence? Was ours an improbable, irreproducible collision of time and space, a charmed quirk of quarks, a strange spark of charge and spin? Or had the stars, in their infinite jest, set her spell o'er my birth? She seems to me so singular; yet I know her to be quite ordinary. I have watched, for twenty years, Cupid's stricken fools stumble daily through my dungeon; perhaps I am no different, after all. I can beg only humble ignorance before love's silken web, woven from far deeper magic than I have ever conjured or understood.

On that August day, however, I perceived nothing I knew only to fix a stony scowl upon her and curse my distraction as I stalked down to the kitchen.

¹ Strictly speaking, there are two crimes.

² Indeed, before the past year, I was scarcely aware of such varied and minute classifications and am not now even certain of their distinctions. I learnt them only in the shameful apprehension that, despite their complete inapplicability to my conduct, my name shall be branded with these epithets upon your likely publishing of this epistle. Oh, how I loathe my false accusers!

³ British wizards are obnoxiously prone to forgetting about the rest of the world, so I should remind you here that the Albanian Ministry for Magic in fact oversees the entire Balkan peninsula. If you remain confused, I suggest some remedial instruction in geography and history.

Author's Notes:

* 'warm pocket of memory' see Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

* Most thematic elements are Rowlingian or Nabokovian in origin, or in the origins of these origins either by design or by happy collision with Fate. There are references as well as to other works, and I will note any specific references when appropriate.

* My impetus for posting this first chapter is that I need a beta for the rest of my story. I may re-edit this section if needed as well. Please review and let me know if you might be interested in beta-ing!

* All chapter names are direct quotes from Rowling chapters.

Two: Dumbledore's Army

Chapter 2 of 15

... The snare of solitary men everywhere... the death of Scotland's summer...*Combat with Dark Wizards*..

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Thereafter, the advent of classes and concerns of the Order took much of my time. Weighty matters of war mingled with the drudgery of yearly rosters and rubrics. A spate of foul weather and staff meetings disinclined me to venture out of the dungeon. I hardly thought at all of Miss Granger or any other particular student. Little did I feel her arrowlet's patient burrowing through my outer epithelium, biding its time within my flesh. But Fate, merry prankster, well knew it, and devised for me the snare of solitary men everywhere: the accidental encounter a chance collision with the huntress herself.

Or perhaps I unfairly malign Fate, for I have noticed she often plays coy mistress to the whim of one Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts Headmaster. In fact, I have reason to suspect Albus's hand in the whole circumstance, doubtless a scheme of his to plant me firmly under his Gryffindor heel (a harmless diversion, he surely thought; how he misjudged the designs of my perversion!). You see, the Headmaster had scheduled with me a supposedly "very important" discussion of Order business, under the pretext of a casual excursion round the lake. But on the afternoon in question, I found myself unexpectedly free upon his sudden and unexplained cancellation. It seemed once again he could not be bothered to hear my concerns, and felt himself at perfect liberty to impose upon my busy schedule and then vanish at will whenever he fancied some other matter more important. This slight was simply the latest symptom of his complete disregard for the peril I suffered daily on his behalf, not to mention the tedium of teaching, a career I surely could not long have abided had not his long-ago extortion doomed me to perpetual servitude. Though for these reasons I was much displeased at his cancellation, I resolved that his unfathomable caprice ought not to dictate my life, and enticed by the afternoon's break in rain and still-strong fall sun, I determined on impulse to go on alone round the lake before blockheaded pupils and inclement weather drove me indoors for the season's remainder. I had a secluded spot in mind, a stretch of meadow between the forest and shore, far from the madding crowd, and so I set forth in that direction.

Rather than brood upon Albus's thinly veiled snub, I set my mind upon a current knotty dilemma with this year's Potions ingredients: an apparent disease was, at present, decimating my supplies of doxy eggs. Typically after receiving doxy eggs in batches of several hundred or more, I store them in a sealed incubation chamber, which preserves them in stasis until needed in my laboratory. This term, however, my new batches, though flawless upon arrival, exhibited a progressive set of mysterious symptoms: corrosion and embrittlement of the exterior chorion, followed by disintegration of the internal vitelline envelope and lysis of the egg contents. Symptoms had appeared in patches throughout the entire egg mass of every batch, and within several weeks had spread to nearly every egg, resulting in over 90% mortality.

I strode out from under the castle's shadow, down the sloping lawn to lake's edge, past a daub of scotch bonnet and a gaggle of posturing third years, and recalled my most unfortunate conversation of that morning, when I had finally gotten round to visiting the egg supplier's shop. I had hardly begun the explanation of symptoms when the clerk assured me they were quite impossible, and he strongly implied that the problem's origin lay in my laboratory conditions or my faulty observations and not in the clonal stock sold to me.

You can imagine my aggravation at this reply. I reiterated to him my meticulous control of both setting and observation. For example, I had detected no concomitant change in pH; in addition, their incubation chamber had kept a stable temperature and was already well-warded on the unlikely chance that a stray spell or ingredient would affect the chamber environment. I had hypothesized a biotic agent of disease but could detect no contaminant of any sort in the batches, and neither cleansing charms nor quarantine seemed to halt the spread.

He then suggested that perhaps some undetectable creature had arisen spontaneously, *de novo* from the air.

Do you see the incorrigible depths of human stupidity? A hundred years after even the Muggles determined the spontaneous generation of life to be a fallacious theory, wizards still believe in hocus-pocus and refuse to acknowledge facts they ought to have learnt as children in Hogwarts. It was clear that the supply clerk merited not even the standard third-year explanation: that is, of course, while skilled witches and wizards may, through their own agency, Transfigure living beings from the elements, life cannot arise on its own without either a magical agent of will (human or sentient creature) or the normal course of reproduction¹. I vaguely recalled my own third-year class ignoring McGonagall's lecture on the subject (Scotland's worst teacher, we Slytherins called her then), save for a general round of sniggering at the mention of reproduction. And there before me stood the sorry result: lifelong abject ignorance! I had no choice but to depart his contemptible shop immediately, and needless to say the whole incident still irked me hours later. I reminded myself of the necessity of re-ordering eggs, this time from a more accommodating supplier, and one less thick, if possible.

But I was brooding again: I turned instead to more soothing, idle musings upon the empirical facts of the case. I had, in the last weeks, skimmed the relevant literature but could find no research on the observed symptoms. Why had no one apparently encountered this before? Doxy eggs were quite a common Potions ingredient. Was a magical disease agent or vector concealing itself from detection by spellwork? This would not be unheard of, though unique for doxy egg infestations. Was it a 'disease' at all? How was it spreading through all my batches: some sort of aerial dispersal? I recalled that not all the eggs had died. Perhaps I ought to preserve a resistant stock (no, too much hassle, maybe Sprout would do it) but I had thought each batch was comprised of clones? Should they not all have equal susceptibility? And so on. With clinical care, my mind tossed questions into the dry breeze like so many grains. The chaff came loose, the kernels settled and stewed. In time, they would congeal into delectable possibilities, testable hypotheses. And then, I would slice them into their elements until a plausible explanation arose. Or perhaps a thing before my nose would turn out to be entirely another, and I would need to begin all over again. Or I would move on, tempted by another, more intricate puzzle. Oh, how I longed to spend my days thus immersed in the studious comprehension of our magical world, to thresh out its secrets: what astounding complexity, what feast for scientific enquiry! How elegant the universe, bound by rational law yet laden to bursting with mystery!

I enjoyed immensely these meditations, the fruits of my solitude. By this creative exercise of mind, I wandered naturally into detached observation of my immediate surroundings. Upon the cusp of the seasons, I strode. Subtle changes marked the death of Scotland's summer: a translucent tinge to the oak leaves, the sharp dry air, the crickets' final, slowing songs, heralds of a coming, early frost. The earth, having slaked its thirst for rain in past days, was now drying, exuding a rich aroma of warm, moist matter². From the oak branches came several uncertain avian warblings into the bright sun, its lone singer no doubt nostalgic for vernal days.

Behind me, the school bell sounded across the grounds. Four times, it tolled slowly, marking the hour's passage, as if to cry, "Farewell! Farewell!", as, deep within the Clock Tower, the unseen pendulum kept its perpetual sway. At the final ring, I paused and turned round to the sight of Hogwarts School, my home for most of the last 25 years.

For a fraction of an instant, I saw with a sort of double vision: the mighty castle, and laid over it like a ghostly sheen, a barren non-Hogwarts, the illusion of an empty, nameless moor as a Muggle might imagine it. The Muggle wanderer would hear no bell. He would see no ravens' nests brimming with life within their namesake's tower, could hear only their harsh, ill cries in the distance. No soaring cliffs would draw his eye, no hint of the invisible realm before him, merely stones eroded, crumbled to dust and strewn from some long-ago epoch, like forgotten cairns across a wasted hillslope. Beneath his feet lay some scraggly ruderal weeds and, buried unseen in the sand, the enduring stone foundations, untouchable to Muggle machinery, hidden away in the earth's memory. But he would see none of the glory, none of the mighty empire, only that which he expected, the wrack and the refuse. He would turn away and never once wonder what might have been.

But the bleak Muggle landscape held not more than a second in my imagination, for in reality the day was bright and the air full with magic. And now I saw that the lake, still as glass, reflected the castle's turrets and gables and the sky's pure blue. Atop the sheer cliffs the castle towered over the lake. From its base, over the precipice hung a thick ivy tapis, like an ever-green veil tumbling down over the rock face. The ivy strands descended to the water and floated in a tangled mat upon its surface, concealing the jagged rent in the rock face leading within to Hogwarts's cavernous entry cove. At this sight of the school, awash in strength and majesty and light from the west, I could not help but see it afresh, not through Muggle eyes, but as the boy I once was, at his first sight of it:

1971. A gaggle of anxious children stepped off the train for the first time, into a cloying overcast darkness. I betrayed no fear or anticipation, but took careful note of the direction we had come and the road ahead of us. Our self-proclaimed chaperone, who called himself Hagrid, was a fierce-looking hairy creature of very large proportions and bore a suspicious resemblance to pictures of giants I had already seen in books on the Dark Arts. I distrusted his slurred accent and ruddy complexion, as if he were drunk. He didn't smell so great either. I wondered how we could be sure that he was Keeper of the Grounds, as he declared, and not a Dark creature? The other students seemed to believe his claim without question. Lily said he looked like a friendly teddy bear. Uncertain, I nonetheless followed her over to Hagrid but kept well away from him. Giants were very unpredictable, I knew. He blathered on during the walk, extolling the virtues of the Headmaster and the supremacy of his house, Gryffindor, at which point I naturally felt even more certain that Lily and I both belonged in Slytherin.

When our flock arrived at the Great Lake, the giant loaded us four by four onto a fleet of student-sized ships bound together by magical moorings. Lily and I chose a boat on the edge of the fleet, away from Hagrid and the other students. I was smaller than most there, and it seemed unwise to draw his attention to myself as a potential target. In truth, I hadn't thought much of the other students so far either, having had a few unpleasant encounters on the train, and wished to be apart from them as well. But they couldn't all be like those superior would-be Gryffindors, could they? Lily wasn't, after all.

And suddenly we were off, stealing across the night into the unknown. We cut darkly through the glass waters, and I was hardly the only boy gripping the boat's edge, wondering if he were sailing into an ogre's lair. Lily's almond eyes, lit by some unearthly light and the giant's lantern-glow, grew round as the moon and edged with white. She was definitely more frightened than I. We heard bellows from the black Forbidden Forest to the east, and Hagrid spoke with alarming fondness of the beasts within; he warned of monsters called Grendel-o's submersed in the lake's obscured deeps. I had already learnt about Dementors and Inferi; could these be yet worse? I peered over the starboard quarter.

I reminded myself, then, that it wasn't for nothing I knew more magic than any other student here. Thank Merlin for that (one of the funny things my mum said). I could be ready: that way, if he grabbed anyone, I would get him with an *Incendicorpus* (I could do this spell, failsafe, even if I were the one attacked; that hair of his would burn quite well) and jump for it. I squinted to the far shore and thought I could probably reach it before a Grendel-o got me. I was a pretty good swimmer. I whispered the plan to Lily. She said she didn't think she could swim well enough.

"Not my problem," I shrugged, making a sorry attempt at a joke (come now, I wouldn't *really* leave her), but I saw that she was frightened and angry, and she said she was pretty sure a water creature could swim faster than an 11-year-old wizard anyway, so why didn't I go ahead? But Hagrid didn't eat anyone, and no one jumped. At once the clouds parted, and the formless mist in front of us cleared, and the castle silhouette loomed up before us like a monstrous maw itself, all sharp angles and steep slopes, and lit by a thousand trembling flames within its halls. Open-mouthed gargoyles bared their throats over us as we passed underneath and through the ivy veil, where, to my

boyish wonder, we were not dashed to pieces against the rock, but conducted into to the very heart of Hogwarts, a wondrous subterranean harbour where our ships came safely to rest. And, in a burst of relief, there echoed in the softly lit cavern the great clamour of feverish young witches and wizards lugging their cauldrons and oversized suitcases onto the pebbles, which smacked and clattered gaily under their feet. I was home, for the first time.

Twenty-five years later, I very nearly smiled just at the memory of it.

I had now not quite reached the Hogsmeade station dock where the little silent fleet lay. I passed through a brief wooded copse, a spur of the larger forest where, within the dense brush, small rustles betrayed the wanderings of creatures from farther within, the mischievous deeds of faunlets and Panlets. A roof of hardwood branches arched over me, the successively layered vaulting of sun-seeking rivals striving against one another. I followed a footpath that led through a tangle of brush, a bright mixture of prickly hawthorn and rowan-trees bearing full ripe clusters of red berries. But at the point of exit from the shade, I paused, my eye caught by an incongruous spot of colour upon the green sward beyond. Was that a pumpkin? How very odd. One of Hagrid's, I supposed, but unnaturally far from its patch. I sidled up behind the woody brambles and peered round the mesh of vines and through their interstices, senses alert, intent upon the displaced gourd.

A gust of magic came past, brushed the plump fruit into the form of a wriggling field mouse. With a murd squeak, it stilled; its limbs stiffened and closed, pressed together as if bound by cord, or by rodent-length corset. Hmm, a modified *Incarcerous*. I waited, in controlled readiness, for ambush.

A murmur and another sweep of magic, and slowly, the mouse (oh wee timorous beastie, recited a schoolmarmish singsongy voice of memory from my own Muggle schoolboy days) rose into the air, rotated 180 degrees, and hung flailing by the pink thread of its tail.

The *Levicorpus* so, it had finally come back into fashion at Hogwarts. I recalled it all too well. I had once been that mouse limp prey, helplessly exposed. Something cold and taut inside me snapped. I whipped out my wand and in fell swoop leapt from the brush to find none other than Gryffindor's own coppery-locked goddess, wand raised and steady, upon the grassy bank beyond.

Her shriek split my ears. The poor beastie, suddenly a pumpkin once more, lurched and burst. I let out a cry of consternation. Orange innards flew round me.

Miss Granger sat mutely a-tremble, clutching a very large book. My meditation was utterly broken. And I was no longer the awkward, awestruck schoolboy of my reverie, but a suddenly, thoroughly cross disciplinarian.

"Granger! Explain yourself!"

Her lip quivered. She shrank and said nothing.

"You are expected to respond."

She squeaked some sort of nonsense: "Sir, I didn't know you were there I'm sorry "

She didn't look sorry; or rather, she looked sorry only to have been caught by me. "You are alone, are you?" She nodded. "Have you told anyone you are here, experimenting with spells?" She shook her head faintly.

Upon further enquiry, she affirmed the book as her source of spell material. I promptly snatched it from her hand: *Advanced Spells for Duelling: Combat with Dark Wizards and Fell Creatures*.

"Where did you get this text?" I knew that under no circumstance would this year's Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Dolores Umbridge, allow her permission to borrow this book from the library's Restricted Section. Had she filched it? I began to suspect the hatching of a plot of distinctly Gryffindor proportions. What mischief was afoot here? How much did she know about the Order's activities? Were the other usual suspects here as well? I looked round her, half expecting to discover Tweedledee and Tweedledum hiding amongst the brambles.

"I it was a gift, sir You see, we're not really getting enough in class and with the war and all and I've already read all the library's books "

"You seem to think I have time to waste on your blubbing. These spells are not on your O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s, though I suppose I am to blindly believe that you merely wish to increase your encyclopaedic knowledge by mutilating small animals. I will ask you one time: *Why* are you learning these spells?" She was clearly hiding something. I would check my own library when I returned; after all, it would hardly be the first of my possessions Miss Granger had stolen.

She steeled herself, thrust out her chin. "Because Voldemort is back," she whispered.

It took every ounce of my fortitude not to flinch at the name. Defiant little bitch she was toying with me, was she? Was she challenging me to deny his existence, as per the Ministry canon³?

Well, I would not be baited. I hissed, "You prodigious fool. Expulsion, Miss Granger, is the consequence of practicing such forbidden and dangerous magic. And fifty points for the lack of sense to speak that name. I see you believe that rules are to be strictly followed until it suits your own interests to manipulate them. Well what a principled ally you make in the 'war'."

"I'm sorry for breaking the rules, sir," she mumbled, quite unconvincingly; her downcast lashes obscured her expression. "But we're not practicing defensive spells in class anymore, now that we need them more than ever and I'm afraid. We haven't ever had a proper teacher. I'm trying to be safe but I'm going about it all wrong " She halted, perhaps aware she was babbling again, and awaited my usual remonstrance.

In truth, though nettled by her interruption of my excursion, I was of two minds on the matter of spell experimentation and undecided as to the proper course of action. This whole affair stank of Potter's involvement somehow; yet I was disinclined to mention him and bring further ruin upon a perfectly adequate day. Granger clearly deserved punishment, not least for flagrant abuse of my authority. Still did I sense an implied plea for instruction in her words?

Sod it, this situation was impossible Potter's lackey or not, was she not wise to arm herself, while the rest of society hid their empty heads in the sand? The succession of inept Defence Against Dark Arts professors invited disaster; one could not whitewash the Dark Arts, pretend that 'book learning' was adequate, or handle Dark subjects with kid gloves. The Dark Lord was indeed returned, and even if his evil did not persist, he would hardly be the last threat to the wizarding world. Hogwarts pupils required sound judgement skills in the ethics and appropriate use of Dark Magic and defence against it. If students were not trained, in a safe environment, to wrestle with the Dark Arts, more lives would certainly be lost, more youth lost to false auguries of limitless power. Had I but had the training...

The warm autumn sun must certainly have confounded my senses, for I was suddenly inclined to assist her. After all, she was clearly determined to learn defensive spells, regardless of sanction (had I behaved any differently?); I judged her unlikely to be lured by the Dark Arts themselves. Perhaps she could benefit from a bit of guidance. This would certainly be granting her an enormous and undeserved leniency. But, I reasoned, for so many years I had been denied the opportunity to provide adequate Defence training at Hogwarts; here sat a receptive student and a perfect opportunity to take a private jab at Albus and to flout the rapidly tyrannical Dolores Umbridge, who was (to put it generously) making a mockery of the D.A.D.A. professorship. What could it hurt to instruct the girl in a few simple spells? I would inform Dumbledore of her illicit activities later and let him deal with her if he wished.

Against my better judgement, I sat down upon the knoll, not imprudently near to her, averted my eyes from her delicate hands as I returned the book to her. Perhaps, I reasoned, if Potter and Weasley were hiding in the vicinity, the unnatural sight of Professor Snape in repose would shock them into leaving. I adjusted my cloak, for it was a warm day, and reclined a bit, enjoying her obvious discomfort and the mosaic of afternoon light upon the lake. A touch of autumn gold crept into the green-growing rushes fringing the shore. Round my feet and through the meadow, the grass was freshly mown, likely for the final time that fall. Bumblebees foraged among the low stands of clover in unconscious fulfilment of Nature's ancient mandate. Just behind Miss Granger, brambles climbed atop one another, extending from the edge of the wood. The raspberries, a double-bearing strain, were flowering in their second round of the season, while their first fruits still hung in bright drupelets and mingled with the

rowanberries also poking through the tangle. Bees and hoverflies flew up to the blossoms in the hedge, and it seemed, from the whirl of their wings, that the whole tangled coppice hummed sweetly over her. Farther off in the field, a skylark suddenly burst forth in exaltation, rose up into the air and circled, pouring out his soul to the limitless blue, then descended, alighting upon a tussock. The grassy blades bent low beneath his triumphal clasp.

At length, I spoke: "This text would be an excellent choice for an advanced Defence class. I also recommend a personal favourite, *Confronting the Faceless*, which is more general in nature. The spells in these two volumes carry some risk but are not beyond your grasp, and are of immense practical value. For the novice, it is imperative that caution be exercised in experimenting with these spells, especially without a proper teacher. I need not remind you, since you are casting these spells *alone*," (I examined her expression with care but she gave nothing away), "but practicing first on a human being is extremely unwise. The first principle of spell experimentation is the employment of a stepwise progression towards your eventual target. Your initial attempts are very likely to fail or backfire, as in the case of your rodent friend." (I could not help noticing that she, looking a bit shamefaced, was now balancing her arms upon her robed knees, her head upon both, her sharp chin cocked thoughtfully towards my voice.) "There are several other precautions you can take to ensure that risk is minimized. Take the commonly employed *Stupefy*. A good first step is to get a handle on the counter-spell do you know it?"

"No, I don't think so," she said, frowning in thought.

"I shall teach it to you " (How came I to be saying such things? Had the sun addled my brains?) " on the condition that you keep the source of your knowledge strictly confidential."

She marvelled at me. Suddenly embarrassed, I snapped, "Wipe that idiot grin off your face, Granger. You are lucky I am favourably disposed today."

"Oh, thank you, sir! Will you help me practice the *Stupefy* too, please? I I've tried it, but I can't get it right." Her words artlessly tumbled and stumbled over each other, as if they had been trapped and burst out in flushed escape (her habitual pattern of speech, I now know).

I nodded curtly and chanced another encounter of her toothy smile, which, despite my command, had not dissipated in the slightest.

"Um, Professor Snape?"

"Yes?"

"...There's still pumpkin in your hair."

I waved a silent *Scourgify* and replied, "For which you are serving a week of detention with Mr. Filch."

And so commenced the first impromptu lesson, a slow pavane, given and received not in affection nor in lust but, I believe, in a simple desire to teach and learn, a counterpoint stripped of the classroom affectation that had previously coloured all our interactions. My embellished recollection of a richly-toned autumn Arcadia, beyond time itself, surely strays far from truth, for I was never disposed to idle pleasure, nor conscious of its source at the time. Nonetheless, I revive the ambrosial memory of our first meeting as a sort of improbable overture, setting into motion an invisible, indecipherable series of alchemical reactions that turned a child to a Siren, her professor to her prey. As I lectured to her, I seemed nearly to forget myself in brief contentment; the yet unfelt arrow of her spell wriggled into me. Had I recognized its nature, would I have struggled so in the coming years? Would I have rather abandoned the illusion of control, still so potent within me on that day? Might it have altered the outcome?

She listened solemnly, diligently, behaved only as a pupil ought towards a master. She spoke little never divulged from whence the book came or the truth behind her private Defence studies (which became apparent later in the year). But I have long since ceased to care. I taught what I could, and she learnt her lessons well thank Merlin, for I fear their consequences shall soon be rendered in battle. And in return, as might the drowning mariner clutch his battered ship's last plank, so I hold fast to the echo of her first tentative smile.

¹ This is leaving aside, of course, the perpetual debate about original abiogenesis, or the first origin of life. It seems safe to say that the shop clerk was not attempting to posit the occurrence of the highly improbable, yet theoretically possible, phenomenon of a rearrangement from inorganic to organic molecules, in a protobiotic step towards assemblages of self-replicating polymers, and eventually, life. No, his dim eye held no spark of mystery and awe at life itself; he was merely stupid. Or perhaps he was a religious Creationist.

² This aroma is in actuality produced by geosmin, a volatile organic compound produced by soil Actinomycetes. The human nose is extremely sensitive to this compound, even at very low atmospheric concentrations.

³ At this time, the Ministry of Magic chose to ignore the obvious signs of the Dark Lord's return, and with its slogans and mantras, they lulled the public into ignorant complacency. Though the subsequent government changed the Ministry's tune on the matter somewhat, it seems that truth is always an unfashionable policy, no matter who is in governance.

Author's Notes:

* 'far from the madding crowd' derives from a number of sources, most notably a book of the same name by Thomas Hardy.

* 'fruits of solitude' - A book by the same title is by William Penn.

* Many thanks to the Bard of Ayrshire for lending me his 'wee timorous beasties' and green-growing rushes.

* Thanks to Countrymouse for editing and assistance.

Three: The Lion and the Serpent

Chapter 3 of 15

"One slip could be fatal"... There was no exit... her mouth as firmly shut as humanly possible... guilty, glowing, proof...
The list of student vices is nearly infinite...

Autumn 1995

I might have avoided the whole subsequent entanglement had I had not been naïve enough to bring the trivial lakeshore incident to Albus's meddling attention at our next weekly meeting. But my mere mention of Granger (properly said with sneer) brought a half-smile to his lips and a grandfatherly chortle: He was glad we'd had a 'chat', I believe his words were. I protested his poor choice of language (too loudly, I think); detailed her spell experimentation and private practice thereof; interpreted (correctly, in hindsight) that she was teaching other students; and carefully omitted any hint of interest or involvement on my own part.

Across his large desk, he frowned, as if deliberating. His fingertips rubbed against each other in slow circles; he then glanced several times at his pocket watch. I wondered if he had even listened to what I said and was instead inwardly planning out his day's schedule. But after several moments, he made the following reply: Since I thought her transgression so serious, perhaps I ought to monitor her behaviour, say, under the ruse of a Potions assistantship.

At first, I thought him facetiously mocking me. But he regarded me so steadily that

"You cannot be serious."

Oh, he was, he assured me.

"Certainly not," I replied. After all, she was not my charge, but McGonagall's; I was quite occupied with Slytherin house and my Order 'duties', as he often so casually referred to them; I had no time for babysitting.

He replied, "Well, you are precisely correct. You have precious little time these days, do you not? That is why I believe a teaching assistantship for Miss Granger would benefit you as well."

At once, I recognized my supreme folly in citing overwork to the wily Headmaster. He raised a hand in warning to quiet my protest and proceeded with some sort of ludicrous argument:

"I've been thinking on this matter for quite a while now in fact, since Tom's return as Voldemort once more." (Why did these Gryffindors insist on naming him always?) "Severus, I'm not blind. It has not gone unnoticed to me that the summer's intelligence operations have sapped much of your time and energy. Certainly it is necessary that, during the school year, you must divide your time between teaching and Order business. But I believe it is becoming of great strategic importance for you to focus less on school requisites and more on espionage. Severus, you cannot afford to become overwhelmed. You know as well as I do that one slip could be fatal."

Clearly he doubted both my abilities and my loyalties. "You are unhappy with my performance thus far?"

"Not at all. You said yourself there is the question of time. There are only 24 hours in a day, and you are spread so thin already. And it will not get any easier over the course of the year, I'm afraid. This is only just the beginning. Surely you cannot expect to teach five years of Potions plus the N.E.W.T. class, run Slytherin house, and ably conduct your Order duties, with no assistance whatsoever?" he said, rushing on before I could speak. "It is not so unusual, as you know you assisted Slughorn, did you not, your seventh year? As for my choice of student, I think it is obvious. It is true that Miss Granger is a bit young for an assistantship but she has got the top marks in the school and she already knows of your involvement in the Order, so you needn't sneak around her. If only she were a few years older, she would be quite a valuable Order member herself. But as it is, despite her youth, she is more than capable taking the work off your shoulders. And if you, in turn, uncover any . . . Gryffindor plots, as you call them, I always appreciate your bringing them to my attention."

I attempted a litany of feeble but vehement objections. She was too young and incapable of independent thought; she was thick as thieves with Potter, regularly violated school rules, thus was inherently untrustworthy with the most menial of tasks; furthermore, I needed no assistance, and besides which, she would never assent

"Ah, but she already has! You see, I asked her just the other day if she might be willing to take part in a task just such as this in complete secrecy, and in service of the Order, of course. There are very few students I would recommend to you, but . . . as you must already know, she is most capable. And she readily agreed, so her willingness is not in question. In my opinion, she respects you a great deal, my boy "

How I loathed his secretive manipulation of my affairs and his continual reference to me as 'boy' as if I were not older than the fathers of some of my students not that he could appreciate this age distinction, as he was clearly going senile enough to even suggest this preposterous idea. Had he forgotten, I asked him, that I had performed as Potions master plus myriad extra 'duties' to his perfect satisfaction for nearly twenty years with no assistant?

"I haven't forgotten. But this year is like no other before it. Severus, I have your safety in mind. It is a harmless means to increase your chance of survival. Think of it as a contingency plan," he said in an unconcerned tone.

"Marking homework has nothing to do with survival."

"Of course not, but your full attention to the war does. You needn't be bothered with trivial marking tasks when your Order position is so much more vital. Severus, listen to me. The wizarding world is changing. Hogwarts is changing. Perhaps a change is in order for you as well . . ."

"And if I refuse?"

But my protest was but another tactical error, with painful consequences. Albus jovially, ever so casually, played his trump card: the invocation of Lily Evans. He reminded me (needlessly) that my devotion to her memory included adherence to his orders, however distasteful they may be, and that this little conversation had convinced him that I was plainly in need of assistant Granger.

I glared at the man to whom I had sold my soul so long ago (and for nothing! He had done nothing to protect Lily!), who now ruled the Order and his staff by affecting omniscience, tossing about cryptic but supposedly wise commentary, and disclosing nothing of value to us lesser mortals. Had his present directive involved a task instrumental to the war effort, it would not have so rankled. Let me be clear on this point: I doubted not the imperative to defeat the Dark Lord, or at least to subdue his malignant influence on wizarding society. Not that I had ever been swayed by such meaningless phrases as 'Satan incarnate', 'immoral', and 'evil' that plastered his name through the first war no, my political objections were wholly pragmatic. From a practical standpoint, the Dark Lord's design for repressive dictatorship was, at best, ill-conceived, and at worst, senselessly brutal and possibly genocidal. Though I cared little for humanity's fate, I wished needless suffering on no one; I had long since learnt that the Dark Lord's self-serving ends in no way justified his means or the excesses of his Death Eaters.

But of course, there were also my personal reasons. No one sought the Dark Lord's death more fervently than I. Indeed, it is no stretch to say that in the vision of his death lay my only certitude and purpose. How many endless nights had I longed for vengeance; how many shuddering breaths had I drawn through the years, as the silent, smouldering hatred for Lily's murderer carried my every step. If I could, I would unmercifully cut him down myself. I would creep towards him ever so quietly, with equal parts silence and cunning, keep him close at hand and unaware until the precise moment of readiness wherein his destruction was assured and then would I strike. How I would relish every moment of his agony! But this was not Albus's plan. It seemed instead, from the half-prophecy I had heard as a young man the fatal, terrible words that both of my masters alike now set so much store by that the Dark Lord's fall would come about only by Potter's hand. This I could accept. I needed no fame or laurels, no empty accolades from the fickle masses that turned hither and thither with the sway of this hour's hero the demagogue's promise. I could accept that such 'honour' must fall to James Potter's worthless whelp, if it meant the Dark Lord's end. For me, his death would be enough. And I could only trust Albus, who knew more than I of the prophecy and of Potter's history, to guide the boy's protection until the day he could exact the final retribution if not for me, than for Lily, for my Lily.

But this concession Albus demanded so casually seemed (and still does) but an arbitrary exercise of his will. Was my submission in all matters so necessary to prove my loyalty? Were not his episodic Legilimetic forays into my wretched mind enough? Was fellow Gryffindor Granger to spy on me for him, as part of some machination of his with Potter? Even after all these years, he clearly had no trust in me and no regard whatever for my interests. But, bound by my word and my past, I could no sooner refuse Albus anything (anything! I had so stupidly promised him) as I could escape the Dark Mark's burn. And there was nought to be gained by accusing the Headmaster or throwing a tantrum, so Servant Severus took care to keep his mouth shut and set his jaw in resignation. In war, even a highly irregular one such as this, one exists perpetually under his captain's command. I had clearly been given my orders and the reminder not to question them. There was no exit, no choice but to submit. I was

trapped, yet again.

Thus I was summarily assigned an overly eager, insufferably chatty 'teaching assistant', as they are called, who scarcely reached my stockroom shelves on tiptoes. Quite aside from my natural bitterness at Albus's lordship over me, I approached this arrangement with a great many reservations. As I mentioned, I had never before deigned to take an assistant, much less one so young. (At that time, possibly due to her slight stature, I mistakenly believed her even younger than her actual years.) Envisioning myself besieged by high-pitched chatter of clothing fashions and childish gossip, I resolved to give her only small, menial tasks, keep our encounters to an absolute minimum and her mouth as firmly shut as humanly possible.

Our first meeting: She appeared in my classroom precisely five minutes early. To forestall future repeats of this behaviour, I insisted that she sit in silence for those minutes while I finished writing out an exam. At last, when I could no longer ignore her fidgety presence, I informed her in no uncertain terms that her 'assistantship' was the Headmaster's idea; in actuality, I had little need of an assistant, and I wished her to bother me as little as possible during our meetings. (Upon her face flashed a quickly repressed petulant frown and visible second thoughts in her eyes. Good.) In fact, I added with unveiled contempt, if she was so intent on aiding the war effort, she would do well to speak little and ought not to reference her assistantship in the classroom or other public spaces. She was not to think herself above her classmates or that she had in any way earned her position. We would meet twice weekly, whereupon she would work quietly for one hour. Her instructions for this and every evening would be located on the blackboard, supplies in their usual spots in the classroom.

She passed the hour extracting Salicid eyes – a delicate procedure as the eyes are quite easily damaged, and one best performed by someone with small hands like hers. After extraction, the eyes must be separated according to their position on the cephalothorax and rinsed in salamander blood in order to strengthen them – more than enough tedium for the hour. I continued to plan out the year's exam schedule in silence at my desk until the hour was up, at which point I dismissed her curtly.

The evening of our second meeting, I made certain to tarry in my office until the point of the hour before arriving at the classroom. When I did, I discovered her slouched in the corridor beside the warded classroom door, frantically scribbling a list of possible extra credit projects she could pursue – since, she said meekly, I had mentioned I had no need of an assistant.

I took her suggestions in hand without a glance and dispatched her silently to her chores. But I did read them – after all, she was not such a bad student, certainly above the abysmal average, despite her irritating classroom antics:

Potential Potions Projects:

- 1) *Antidotes to Veritaserum: pros and cons*
- 2) *The search for skin-healing potions: comparisons of scar-erasing potions*
- 3) *Methods to increase the viscosity of Strengthening Solutions*
- 4) *Magical effects of combining moonstones with diamond dust*

And so on, five or six other suggestions as well. I was hardly about to hand her a N.E.W.T. for her ideas, but she seemed to be making an effort to 'think beyond the book', so to speak. It occurred to me that she might be up for some more advanced literature research, perhaps even some experimentation on the doxy egg problem, which I had not yet had the time to tackle. I set to wondering about that dilemma again and before long, her hour was up, and I dismissed her.

So it continued. Hardly a fortnight had passed before it was irksomely apparent that Dumbledore had been correct. I was lagging in marking homework and even preparing for classes, due in large part to Order meetings and the increasingly frequent Dark Summons. I could no longer waste time on wondering if Miss Granger was planted in my care to report on my actions, or on carefully planning her assignments and instructions, and I at last resorted to vocal explanation of the required tasks. As the mass of laborious tasks seemed always to multiply with every hour I was called away, it was at times even necessary to work simultaneously on laboratory preparations.

To my surprise, I found her to be even more severe at marking homework than I – a common characteristic of those new to teaching, before dismal reality lowers their expectations. I confess it was rather pleasant to hear her outraged commiseration at the typically execrable state of student essays. Naturally her standards met with my approval, and I apportioned increasing quantities of homework to her exacting quill.

These factors, however, necessitated an increase in the length of meetings to two hours. This duration proved sufficient to answer (most of) her questions on curricula or lessons, complete class preparations, and any other necessary transactions, with a bit of spare time left over for marking. I gradually became aware that she took piles of homework with her and marked on her own time, thus freeing up her scheduled hours in the Dungeon for work that needed completion in the lab or under my supervision. I supposed her to be seeking some house points or perhaps positioning herself for preferential treatment in the classroom, and certainly I provided neither of these; if anything, I was more severe with her. But as she made no complaint, I grudgingly admitted a sense of relief as my late-night homework concurrently decreased. (Whinging students never realize how much harder we work than they do.)

Despite the prodigious workload, I found I could prepare more thoroughly for laboratory assignments with an assistant. During our meetings, I devised several additional lessons to the Potions curriculum, some of which were in fact supplied from her written list of project suggestions. (When explaining the new additions to her, I saw no need for explicit acknowledgement of their source, and she quite prudently did not brag.) Some I implemented in class; others were lost among the shuffle of scribbles that now lie dormant in my old Potions archive. They shall go to Slughorn, the current Potions master, who will never read them, or to whomever is unlucky enough to assume the Potions professorship after his tenure. More likely, whoever tidies this office after my death – you, perhaps? – will simply throw them out. In any case, there is no need to detail them here.

I shall, however, endeavour here to remind Hermione of one particular project – her favourite, I believe – in an appeal to her academic inclination. Perhaps it takes a fond scholastic memory to induce her, if she ever finds this letter and my memories, to continue wading through my wretched Pensieve. For instance, does she recall the black dragonfish experiment? The gist is this: Most organisms lack the visual pigments necessary to detect infrared light. The deep-sea dragonfish, however, which is sold in limited quantities for the academic market, produces two very useful chemical compounds, a luciferin and a photosensitiser, that confer the unique ability to internally generate and perceive infrared light in otherwise total darkness. In the laboratory, extraction and replication of the compounds to adequate quantities is followed by a stabilisation charm (to delay their breakdown) and their gradual emulsion in a preservative solvent to produce the active Scintillia Solution, which, as in the fish, both produces infrared light and adjusts the visible spectrum of the user to enhance infrared perception. Why, you may ask? By this mechanism, the potion's recipient gains sight in total darkness as if it were daylight for hours, possibly days if he brews it well. At the same time, his light cannot be perceived by other wizards nor by most other magical creatures¹. His night vision is an enormous advantage over prey and predators alike.

I had brewed this potion on several occasions, but had not yet adapted a protocol for classroom experimentation. I set out a preliminary procedure, which she refined with the assistance of some references from the literature. She then conducted several preliminary tests to work out the methodology. On the final test of it before class, I dimmed the lights for full effect. I set the cauldrons ready. She set to extracting the compounds. She kept dropping the phosphorescent fish, which were slippery, and apologizing profusely as they slid across the floor. In addition to 'red' infrared light, these fish also produce a pale blue-green luminescence, which humans can see quite readily, so that within ten minutes of the extraction's commencement, the room lay brightly splashed with this colour, with little candent spots here and there where the fishy fluid had landed. It was guilty, glowing proof of her sloppiness, but I did not much mind. Under my watch, she proceeded: Extraction of the elements. A delicate transfer. Addition of stabilising surfactants. Simmer and stir and a settling phase. And at last, the potion's creation completed, I drank, then she.

It is typically some minutes before the potion's effects are felt. But soon enough the room clarified, its details sharpened: the glint of glass all round us, flasks and phials and funnels; crucibles, mortars, and pestles, lined along the narrow shelves; creatures large and small, embalmed, on the far wall; aliquots of class reagents; heaps of fish in wait for the students. The same familiar setting, the commonplace classroom items, now emerged free from daylight mundanity, each lone form lit in relief against the others, more authentic somehow when held by soft surrounding darkness. I saw that the pads of all her fingers glowed red in the dark, and a spot where she had brushed her hair from her forehead. She let out some girlish gasps of delight and generally looked exceedingly pleased with herself. When she thought I wasn't looking, like a child

with finger-paints, she stealthily sketched with her finger a little red school of fish making their way across the countertop through a luminous green sea-current. (Their echo persisted for several subsequent nights, these watery colours, as did a trail of little red ridged fingerprints, upon the countertop). I ignored her, and pleased at the potion's success, left her to her enjoyment. Eventually, as nothing more remained to be done, I bade her good evening and retired.

Later that night, I indulged in a long run in the forest, my favourite section of the Hogwarts estate. It was a customary exercise of mine, but one quite enhanced by the faculty of perfect sight. The moon, nearly new and only a sliver high above the forest, hidden by the dark wooded treetops, cast but a feeble light. But I saw, in the spaces of night between branches, Auriga rise through the sky and Capella shine fiercely within, and a glimpse of Perseus's sword high above, before the canopy closed all around me. At the pierce of my eye, the forested secrets lay open and bared now before me. I passed an old Acromantula colony and treasure-hordes, an old rusty gate and crumbled stone cottage of a long-past intrepid or foolhardy settler. I passed countless night-creature eyes gleaming from shadow and stared them down through my own. I slipped through the darkness with only the rush of the wind and the cold and the feel of my strength, as I trod lightly over tree-roots and tendrils that grew up through the cracks in the soil and sought to obscure my passage, as the yielding of moss and rock and shadow before me gave proof of my newfound power. (How fleeting it was! The morning after, I was once again but a lowly schoolmaster.) I have no idea what Miss Granger did, but I am certain she enjoyed the potion's effects as well.

Needless to say, the potion also went over very well in the fifth-year class: Most of them managed to figure out how to brew it, and after they drank, I divided them to two groups, 'blind' and 'sighted' (Potter was carefully selected as 'blind', of course), and killed the light. It was highly amusing to watch Miss Granger stumble round in utter darkness, not so funny to watch Weasley assault her, the pimply brute.

It was due to such experiments that the autumn term seemed tolerable, notwithstanding my gnawing disquiet at the Dark's brewing power and Dolores Umbridge's attempts to seize Hogwarts by the throat. Considering these developments, the term was surprisingly ordinary. The drum-taps of battle still seemed faint and distant, my forthcoming doom still unseen. The students were badly behaved and lazy, as always, but my humour was not unduly sour, no more so than ordinary. At the very least, I found time to think on matters outside of O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s and Quidditch and house points. And I must confess a certain thrill in the air at times, for after all, espionage was far more engaging than lecturing to adolescents, and if I may say so it was obvious to all in the Order that I did it very well. Even if especially if they hated and feared me for it.

I desisted from griping to Albus about Miss Granger's assistantship, for he had never listened very much anyway, and I was unenthusiastic about the prospect of resuming the especially menial tasks I now delegated to her. I reasoned that if he was determined to shackle a student to me, I supposed, it might as well be a clever and reliable one. She was tolerable, at least in small doses.

Her character was not so shallow as I had initially feared. She was serious, studious, and earnest to a fault; she engaged in neither obsequious fawning nor superficial vanities. She seemed immune from the small-minded habits of her contemporaries, such as *Witch Weekly* subscriptions, excessive waste of time on personal grooming, or 'dumbing down' one's speech patterns to impress the troglodyte Quidditch players (thus rendering most teenaged girls virtually unintelligible to their teachers)². Not that she was flawless her cleverness, in particular, was a double-edged sword. Despite her initial subdued manner at the inception of her assistantship, she quickly grew bolder and soon peppered me to no end with enquiries on everything from historical giant wars to Protean charms to any other subject that popped into her indefatigable mind. While I was actually lecturing at her, she stayed respectfully quiet. Indeed, she typically whipped out quill and parchment and copied me word for word, in rapt contemplation (a habit that both flattered and unnerved me, for I suspected she might be searching for a stray comment in order to glean wartime secrets and pass them to Potter). But, it seemed, the moment I turned my back and put her out of my mind, she thought of some trivial matter to pester me about, any excuse to seek attention (Gryffindors!). When this habit of hers first emerged, on impulse I banished her to the library to seek out the information herself. But this strategy quickly backfired, as it tended to compound her questions and did nothing to curb her curiosity. Eventually, her tenacity wore me down and I reluctantly began to discuss her queries with her.

She may have been precociously clever, but her intellect was by no means mature. The most obvious symptom of this was her perpetual search for 'the answer' and her smug self-assurance when she thought she knew it. Though, by the age of sixteen, she was quite skilled at abstract operations and logical reasoning, certainly as compared to the average young witch or wizard, she nevertheless applied these talents inflexibly and within her own tightly bound parameters.

She did not take well to contradiction of her principles and disbelieved or dismissed as irrelevant any results that did not fit her preconceived notions. She could develop sound hypotheses but then fell into rigid adherence to them based on inflexible assumptions. Possibilities and shades of grey unnerved and rattled her, and so she was easily blindsided. For instance, if posed with a challenging question, she would invariably race unthinkingly through a litany of memorized text; the deeper my sceptical frown or critical argument, the greater her anxiety, and so she would pile more words on top of the previous ones, as if more data on the matter could compensate for lack of insight. In short, her implicit trust in textbooks and teachers alike, having no doubt sprung from an educational system designed to create unblinking automata, severely hampered her creativity.

This was not a cognitive deficit, but rather, I believe, an immaturity in her perception of adults and authority figures. To her fifth-year self, right and wrong were immutable and clear. (This was doubtless encouraged by the Gryffindor house culture, where the concept of 'bravery' was cheered and revered without very much discussion about what they might actually be fighting for or why.) Likewise, there were right people (teachers, Potter), whom she would believe and follow into Hell itself if they proclaimed it the correct thing to do (dismissing in the process all common sense as well as Hogwarts rules, as she had already demonstrated on numerous incidents as a younger student), and wrong people (probably Slytherins) whose judgements seemed to carry no weight at all. On several occasions she spoke on the matter of Dark Arts with the same tone of disapproval she had for disobeying one's parents or the letter of the law. She steadfastly refused to admit ever having studied, or ever considering the study of, a textbook not Ministry of Magic-approved (though granted, her reluctance to admit deviance from the Ministry, even in the privacy of my office, may have been prudent given Umbridge's watchful eye over Hogwarts). In any case, it was clear that Miss Granger held anything labelled Dark by the Ministry's myrmidons as thereby off-limits for study, regardless of merit, regardless of a wizard's intent or method, simply in deference to 'their' decree.

Nevertheless, an incipient intellect was beginning to surface. For instance, upon one of her *Standard Book of Spells* recitations, I enquired, with no small amount of scorn, upon what grounds she felt she could trust the book's authority. She proceeded to speculate shyly on the merits and limitations of the book, and it occurred to me that she actually might wish to discuss and argue beyond the scope of pat answers, but simply lacked confidence and a developed methodology for cultivation of healthy scepticism. Could she learn to strip off the layers and years of book learning and classroom rigmarole to expose the creative heart of the endeavour, to seek and find those kernels, however rare, of truth? Her curiosity was certainly prodigious enough to provide her intellectual fodder. And (I realized later in the school year) she was in fact taking her first subversive steps against the Ministry's canonical death grip on 'truth'.

So I do not lay out these critiques to spite her, merely to describe. And this is not the place for me to detail her academic development there is, as for all Hogwarts students, an academic file on record for her, and I have made appropriate comments within it, as have all her other professors. Mine tend more towards honest, unsparing at times, appraisal, and less towards the hyperbolic nonsense of, say, McGonagall. But that is not because Miss Granger lacked promise, for I must grudgingly admit that over the course of the years, despite all incentive from professors who handed her grades on a plate and did nothing to shake her foundations, she did begin to rise from her fears. She did indeed begin to think for herself. And allow me to finally note that by the term 'begin' I mean no disparagement a proper education is, after all, a lifelong process. One never stops seeking mastery of his or her chosen disciplines; to live is to continually discover. She has already achieved more than most wizards ever will. And if she survives the war, she will still be young. She will have much time.

¹ There are several notable exceptions to this rule. In particular, several families of serpents, including basilisks, some species of insects such as fire beetles, and vampire bats, utilize infrared vision quite readily; all employ the sense in order to perceive the 'heat' produced by warm-blooded prey. Animagi may gain this ability if their transformation is to one of the above creatures. Excepting these creatures, the potion is still extremely useful for the vast majority of wizards.

² The boys were no better. The popular ones collected pretty girls like trophies and displayed their masculine worth by jinxing unsuspecting, less popular students. They smuggled in pornography and illegal potions, ingested unknown toxins out of mere curiosity, revelled in the juvenile amusement provided by bodily functions, and generally ignored the basics of personal hygiene. And so on the list of student vices is nearly infinite.

Author's Notes:

* Many thanks to Countrymouse, Hollimel, and Sorceress Sarah for editing and assistance.

* Disclaimer: All errors, inaccuracies, and tired old plot devices are fully and solely the fault of the author.

Four: Through the Trapdoor

Chapter 4 of 15

All of them my bottled treasures... the addition of one small woman... my authority and no compromises...

Autumn/Winter 1995

During the first weeks of Miss Granger's Potions assistantship, meetings were conducted solely in the classroom. Typically, I conversed briefly with her, detailing her instructions and answering any preliminary questions. I assisted her if necessary; she then continued on with marking or preparations in the classroom while I retired to my office. Thus I divided the labour between us. Not infrequently, however, she came a-knocking several times over the course of the evening with further questions, requests for clarification, theories, suggestions, or trivial commentary. On one such evening, as I battled fatigue while reading in my office, a Granger-light rap came, yet again, at the office door. I gritted my teeth and admitted her.

"Sir, I was marking Ernie's essay on the magical uses of ergot, and I realised I didn't take enough points off. He focused on the magical properties, but he didn't report the psychological side effects, and I thought delusions were far too important not to mention "

"Here, just take the whole stack of essays."

"Sorry, I'll try not to bother you again. But while I'm here "

"Yes, while you are here, as you seem to always be, why not Summon a desk and use my office as your own? That way you may pester me to your heart's content."

She feigned complete innocence: "Really? I could work here? That would be so much better "

I heaved a much-aggravated sigh, which she summarily mistook as preliminary assent and an opening to remind me fervently that "other professors had assistants use their offices" (but not me, I attempted to say), and "isn't it annoying to have me knocking all the time" (yes, but it did not follow that she should be present more often), and "it would only be several hours a week, during my already-established hours "

"Granger, do not try my patience."

"But sir, I I think maybe I could do a better job marking if I could use your textbooks in here, and I would bother you about it less that way too, if I could look up the easier answers"

Hmm she was quite likely correct. Her knocking and always coming and going *were* quite disruptive, and her heaps of essays were overwhelming half the office anyway, and besides, such an arrangement would only be temporary and might actually save me some trouble, as it was not at all convenient to transport her work back and forth from office to classroom. Perhaps, I at last conceded to her, I could allow this on a provisional basis under the strict conditions that she enter only during her appointed hours and providing that my door was open; otherwise she must knock to see if I was in there or return later. She was not to go bragging to her Gryffindor friends about this arrangement, or she would suffer my extreme displeasure and immediate revocation of the privilege. And she must attempt to work through her questions herself and trim and refine them before bringing them to me

"I promise I will! I've been lots better about it lately, haven't I?"

"And I don't want you in here unless you're working on Potions . . . And absolutely nobody else in here. Ever. That includes your bloody cat "

"He's a half-Kneazle!"

"I don't care. Nobody." I continued, "I suggest you take these rules to heart, or you will regret ever having set foot in this office."

She sat quietly for a moment, and I thought she had perhaps reconsidered. Then she said, "I understand, sir . . . Do you think I could charm some extra light through the windows? Or make a fire in the fireplace? It's a bit erm, chilly in here."

". . . I suppose so. But you must touch nothing else without my explicit permission." I glanced up at the shelves lined with fragile, painstakingly preserved specimens tidily sorted and labelled, alphabetically arranged (by scientific name and anatomical feature), many rare, some fatal to the touch, all of them my bottled treasures stingers of scorpions, ants, and rays; electric eels; Occamy eggs and specimens; assorted golden chrysalides; luna moth nymphs at various stages of magical potency; dragon skins and membranes; Yunnan silver-carp; a prodigious array of magical serpents, including an albino fer-de-lance; Porlock and unicorn hooves; and, of course, potions, extractions, and ingredients of innumerable variety. Should I move them? Certainly the most precious ones were well-warded, but she was far too clever and curious for her own good. Perhaps I ought to place extra protective wards round my private potions cabinet, whose contents included such precious rarities as unicorn blood, a phial of phoenix tears, samples of venom from Acromantula, Basilisk, Nagini (the Dark Lord's personal serpentess), and sundry others. Needless to say, most items within were quite fatal, some of dubious legality, many Class C non-tradable items, or Dark in source or in potential application. If I allowed her to use my office, would she be tempted to steal if I happened to step out?

She followed my line of sight to the museum pieces, and her keen eyes glittered with discovery. She solemnly promised to follow strict orders and disturb nothing. Then she shyly remarked that she wished to have a closer look "only just to look" at the creatures and potions and oddities on the shelves they were "cool", she said without any apparent mockery in her voice. I'd never had that request before from a student; they were usually anxious to leave the office as quickly as possible; so how I could not but acquiesce to such rare but nonetheless quite understandable curiosity?

The specimens stayed, as did Miss Granger.

* * *

A word on hiring: The addition of one small woman may transform even a spacious office to a wholly alien landscape. Furthermore, if the woman is Hermione Granger, force of Nature, her boundless energy will completely dominate it and leave the other hapless inhabitants with nowhere to hide and longing for a dram of whisky. That first evening, as she claimed her spot in my office, she did indeed "have a look" at my specimen collection, all the while emitting little coos and gasps of wonder, and murmuring questions (always questions!), which I mostly disregarded: "I wonder why it needs eight legs"; "Where does it get all the energy to generate that electricity?"; "How are they preserved? Are they all preserved in the same way?" She immediately set about Transfiguring a desk in the corner and dared, with a sidelong glance in my direction, to

place upon it a bright sprig of daffodil. (I raised an eyebrow, chose to ignore it no matter that it looked utterly ridiculous in the otherwise spare office.) Upon the desk, she set ink and quills and piles of work in various stages of completion; on a shelf behind, she laid her dragon-hide gloves, her schoolbag, and some textbooks.

From that night on, Miss Granger popped into the office like clockwork, twice weekly, at her appointed time. She typically attended first to duties in the classroom while I remained in my office, but nearly always found time to return to her new desk before her allotted hours were over, as if merely to gloat over the privilege.

Reader, you are no doubt envisioning my secret batlike soul, having pined away so long for female companionship, now awakening to Miss Granger's guileless presence and overjoyed to simply surrender to her conquest of my office. If so, you have read too many fairy tales, for this could not be further from the truth. No sooner had I opened my bloody mouth (why did she induce me, even then, to such foibles?) than I rued my capitulation to her whim. I did not take her into confidence, or commence to offering lemon drops or biscuits or other niceties employed by other teachers to encourage a comfortable office atmosphere. I did at first attempt civility, but this quickly became impossible, and soon it was all I could do not to throw hexes at her, for she invented all manner of excuse to pester and annoy me.

She made nosy personal enquiries, inflicted upon my tired ears little gasps and exclamations of "Oh no!" or "There!" as she worked, berated me about the state of clutter in the office (which was perfectly well-organised, just not to her liking) or about the fact that I had not eaten dinner, nervously bounced her leg at all times, and a host of other tactics designed specifically to infuriate me.

She seemed intent to flout my authority with a combination of untoward familiarity and general contrariness. I reminded her often of the rules and proscriptions of working in my office, but while outwardly she obeyed the letter of my commands, she did everything in her power to question their meanings, test their limits, and try my patience. For instance, she presumptuously challenged my orders with the sorts of questions deliberately framed to present, on their surface, a conciliatory veneer while nevertheless belying certain not-so-subtle slights. For example: She didn't understand what was the matter (with my character, she left unspoken)? Or: No, she had no idea where the N.E.W.T. class essays were, perhaps I myself had mislaid them? Or: If her flaws were so awful, would I not rather select another teaching assistant (thus reminding me of the Headmaster's ultimatum, of which she was well aware)?

Furthermore, she monitored my every word and movement for any sign of weakness she might use to her advantage for instance, by peeking slantwise at my desk from time to time, in what she clearly thought an unseen gesture, to spy upon my work, or by couching leading questions within supposed pleasantries to discover where and with whom I had travelled lately. Presumably she intended to run to Potter and the Headmaster with any news of suspicious activity on my part (though certainly I was not stupid enough to provide her any ammunition). It occurred to me that if this were a sly plan of Dumbledore's to bring about the slow, painful death of the Potions master through Granger's driving him mad, it was working exceedingly well.

As I had little choice but to keep her in my employ, I lacked any real means with which to coerce the desired respectful behaviour, and so I had to suffice with mere words, those weapons of the powerless. Though my occasional well-aimed barbs of sarcasm at first sufficed to deter her endless needling, she soon became inured to this strategy; thereafter, short of petty insults, I could not seem to find effective methods to intimidate her into leaving me be. I confess I did employ some trivial aspersions upon her (or, at times, her house, her choice of friends, her general status as teacher's pet) as a means of retaining some authority over a spoilt child. But I came to find reducing her to tears less and less satisfying, not least because her sniffles were accompanied by even more irritating Granger antics for instance, attempting to induce me to guilt by excusing herself and running out of the office, stumbling over herself like a rabbit (or perhaps a cowardly lioness) very perplexing and leaving me *sans* assistant until she got control of herself.

Of course, I ought to have forbidden her from my office and revoked her office privilege. I considered it many times, and I certainly threatened her with it often enough (which only served to induce a sullen, pouty silence filled with dark looks, almost worse than her chatter). But I always managed to find some excuse to postpone her eviction, and so these skirmishes recurred periodically. Though I suggested several times that she was welcome to withdraw herself from the assistantship and answer to the Headmaster, she stubbornly refused, chin invariably raised in defiance, as if her employment were a chess match at which she could not stand to be bested.

"Do you want me to quit?" she asked at one point, after I mentioned she might wish to rethink her agreement of assistantship. "Is your idea to force me to quit? For goodness sake, I don't want to quit, but if you're using some Slytherin method to drive me out just tell me, please sir."

"That's enough. I am not asking you to quit. You are far too useful for menial tasks. But if you cannot handle the rigors . . ."

"I can handle it, but I'd "

"Very well then. As I believe I've made clear, I am not going to treat you like the royalty you clearly think yourself. The real world will not coddle you like they do here, and I will not either. And if your opinion differs, you are more than welcome to leave at any time."

She said with forced calmness, "No. I'm not quitting. I promised Professor Dumbledore I would help you, and I am not going back on my word."

Her reminder of the Headmaster's ultimatum to me, and her insinuation that I was 'going back on my word' simply for suggesting she quit, incensed me further. I snapped, "Then, if you at least respect the *Headmaster*, I suggest you watch your temper and that mouth of yours while you are under my employment. I do not tolerate insolence."

"Yes, sir," she muttered, quite disrespectfully.

* * *

Consider the following additional examples of Miss Granger's inappropriate attitude:

I, at my desk working with visible diligence and concentration. Her instructions upon her desk. She, upon entering the office: "Hi Professor, how was your weekend?"

A lifted eyebrow: ". . . The same as every other weekend."

"Mine was good too" She paused, gauging my response to determine how far she could push me this evening.

I said nothing.

She refused to be deterred. "I practiced producing a Patronus" Again, she waited expectantly for the usual gushing affirmation bestowed on her by teachers, but I supplied none, despite a (very) slight curiosity as to the nature of said Patronus. She rushed on, "I could do it sometimes but it was really difficult. Every time I kept telling myself to think only happy thoughts, I would immediately think about the O.W.L.s and then I'd think of the N.E.W.T.s too and then there went my chance at a Patronus. But I did find out I'm going skiing with my parents over holiday "

"Congratulations, you have now succeeded in providing me more words on your life than I ever wished to hear. Please stop now."

She ignored this direct order, tried a new tack. "I saw you at the Quidditch match. You and Professor McGonagall looked like you were having a lot of fun arguing"

"Mmm, yes, she seems to think Jordan is an unbiased announcer."

"Well, I suppose he favours Gryffindor a bit at times, but you've got to admit he's good . . . Do you watch professional Quidditch too?"

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes?"

"Get to work or get out of my office."

* * *

Later that evening, she apparently had finished her Potions corrections, for she set about to reading a book I had not seen before *alinxes for the Jinxed*.

I could not reign in my suspicion: "More defence study?"

"Professor Umbridge's class is worse than ever."

"That's not a library book. It just came out this year."

"I bought it."

I saw at once that she was lying, and this angered me for no discernible reason. I said, "What are you hiding? Is there someone bullying you?"

"You mean, apart from you?"

"It's called discipline, and you seem to be developing an unfortunate immunity to it. And just for that remark here, hand over that book; I've been meaning to look at a copy of this. You may have it back at the end of the hour."

* * *

"Miss Granger, what are you doing?"

"I'm just erm, knitting some . . . hats."

"What did I tell you about only being in here for work purposes?"

"Well, I know, but "

"No buts. Your presence is trying enough when there is actual work to be done. This office is not yours to do with as you see fit."

She took a breath, said brazenly, ". . . Professor Snape, I don't deserve to be insulted, just because I'm a . . ."

"A what?" I challenged.

"A Muggle-born. And a girl. And a Gryffindor. I don't know I don't know why why you feel you must always insult me."

I saw that she was trying all manner of desperate tactics to manipulate me into guilt or into bending to her demands. I said slowly, "First of all, you will address me as Sir or Professor. Secondly, you are well aware that I treat all my students in the same impartial manner."

"That's not true sir Draco "

"Draco is socially adept enough to realise that accusing your employer of bigotry is not a winning strategy. Those are very serious charges you have just levelled against me without a shred of evidence, I might add."

"I didn't mean really, I don't think that, I sorry."

* * *

On another, brighter evening:

"Professor Snape?"

"Mmm?"

"Will you teach me about Dark Detectors?"

"Oh, sometime later perhaps. I'll have to fetch some from my rooms; I don't think I've got any in here."

"Oh, I brought one we could practice with."

"You what? Give that to me. Where did you get this?" She handed it meekly over. I studied it; it wasn't mine.

"Well, I guess it's a good sign that it's not sounding the alarm," she said brightly.

"Is that your aim? You wanted to find out if it could detect me?" I said angrily. "Did Potter put you up to this?"

"No, no "

"You know, whatever your little experiment is, it proves nothing. It's quite simple really to fool these. But . . . if anyone asks, you had better say it went off." I frowned.

"So you *want* everyone to think you're a Dark wizard," she laughed.

"It's safer for everyone that way," I said sternly.

"Mmm-hmm," she said.

I suppose that particular example was not so bad . . .

* * *

Finally, one evening, sick to death of her deceitful flow of chatter and increasingly concerned that she might be tempted towards inappropriate familiarity in more public settings, I forbade her outright from speaking to me at all. Blessed silence held for a time; then suddenly she said, "I don't understand why we can't just have a friendly conversation once in a while."

My temper snapped; I slammed my hand down. "Granger! You are wasting my time!"

I rose from my seat and fixed a silently smouldering eye upon her. What sort of student expected a master to accommodate every demand of hers? What sort of ploy had she concocted with Potter to wriggle her way into my office and out of my rules? I would suffer her schemes to control me no more; she had begged to move into my office and she must understand that meant no less than the full brunt of my authority and no compromises.

"The purpose of your employment is to assist with Potions work, not to fulfil your wish for conversation," I said as coldly as possible. "This is my office, and these are my rules."

"I'm sorry, Professor, I don't mean to upset you "

"Now I believe you have been suitably forewarned that my demands might not be to your liking. I do not care if you dislike your terms of employment, but I ask that you follow them. If you regret your acceptance of these terms, you are free to leave. You are not, however, at liberty to converse with me, as I have attempted to reinforce to you time and time again."

She said in a low voice, "I don't regret it, sir. It's just not what I expected."

"Really? What did you expect? A medal? Induction into the Order?"

She looked down at her desk.

I continued, "So no, if you insist on remaining in this office, we cannot have a friendly conversation, because I haven't the slightest interest in anything you have to say. I am not simply insulting you for fun. Your company is tiresome. Surely after sixteen years you know that by now "

Tears and hand to mouth, hasty exit from the room. Sigh, slight regret.

Author's Note:

A tremendous thank you to Countrymouse and Hollimel for their assistance with this chapter.

Five: Brewing and the Bribe

Chapter 5 of 15

It behoves one to keep an eye on the lunar phases... a critical threshold of readiness... I was merely taking empirical measure...

December 1995

I was at first entirely at a loss to predict or modify Miss Granger's increasingly insupportable behaviour. But I determined that I must devise some solution, for my twice-weekly teetering on the edge of her defiance was causing me more hypertension than any Potions assistance was worth. Sacking her and facing Albus's wrath was starting to seem a less arduous option than her constant trials of my patience.

At last, I stumbled upon an insight. In the magical world, it behoves one to keep a close eye on the lunar phases. By this habitual observation, as well as a few surreptitious scribbles and retrospective calculations, I developed the hypothesis that Miss Granger's naturally volatile temper was amplified by lunar, and presumably menstrual, cycles. I had heard that this could be a source of conflict when working with women, but I'd had little occasion to think much on the matter before, perhaps due to the more advanced age of my female colleagues at Hogwarts, as well as my admitted inexperience in sharing close quarters with young women (or anyone for that matter). A bit of private research into the mysterious female phenomenon convinced me that it would be easy to develop a simple experimental potion to test upon her and perhaps thereby avoid at least the worst of her fiery retorts. But I was wary of raising such a delicate issue to her directly, and her willing participation in a psychotropic experiment seemed unlikely without either good reason or deceptive inducement, so I at first simply filed the knowledge away as a potential future tactic or a last resort.

But on one particularly nasty evening, matters unexpectedly came to a head. Things had progressed reasonably well in the laboratory, but as often occurred, a quarrel arose later on in the office just before Miss Granger was about to leave for the evening. I was in the midst of preparing a report for the Dark Lord, which I kept well away from her oft-roving eyes, and I was in no mood to be interrupted. But at some point she crept up; upon my desk she placed her current assignment, a protocol for a class experiment. A brief scan of this immediately revealed a crucial flaw: she had specified mere scorching, but not complete carbonisation, of the nopales, thus rendering the entire potion (an enhancement to certain forms of divination, and general magical strengthener) ineffective.

"Miss Granger, this is entirely inadequate. I expect better than this from you," I said. Still submerged in my own task, I absentmindedly thrust the parchment back at her.

"But why? What's wrong with it?" Her voice rose grating, challenging. Disrupted from my report, I lifted a narrowed eye to her, but she continued unheeding, "I looked everything up carefully; it can't be wrong. Aren't all the ingredients right? Are you sure it's wrong?"

"Are you questioning me?" I said darkly, my anger expanding. I began to suspect a deliberate error, a ploy to provoke me. Had she by chance seen the report on my desk and determined to distract me from it, in a bout of misplaced heroics against me?

"No, I'm just asking you a question "

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your cheek."

"But "

"Twenty."

She stewed silently.

"If you are as intelligent as all your admirers seem to think, you will figure it out on your own."

Her eyes sparkled with uncontrolled emotion. "You're not even going to tell me what's wrong with it? I worked really hard on this."

"You will recall our agreement. You shall attempt to discover solutions to problems on your own before bothering me about them "

Instead of an appropriately measured response, she burst out, arms akimbo, "Well, I'm sorry I'm not perfect! I'm only a fifth year; you can't expect me to know everything!"

"And why ever not? You act as if you know everything. Do you think yourself entitled "

She cried, "Please just stop, please My head is hurting, and I've got so much homework, and I just need a break; all right, so I made a mistake somewhere, but I I don't think that just because you are a professor you ought to talk to me that way. We don't have to be friendly, I accept that, but please stop insulting me. It's very hurtful. It hurts."

I stared down at her, a bit taken aback. She examined her feet and rubbed her temples. Was she possibly telling the truth and not simply playing a manipulative game? Her words seemed truthful; perhaps her protocol's error had not been fabricated after all. But I could not fathom such upset over such a minor issue. I considered the evidence: headache; outburst; threatening tears, which, despite my habitual sneering at them, were in fact a bit unsettling the underlying issue at hand seemed most likely the physical cause I had theorised. I determined that now presented the best opportunity to take matters into my own hands.

"Sit down. Wait here," I said and left the room.

I shut her from my mind and gathered ingredients from their carefully denominated vessels on the shelves, selected the appropriate cauldron, and set to work. The experimental potion I had in mind was nothing fancy, mostly analgesic: rose hips, anti-inflammatory to smooth muscle; a bit of magic-enhanced gooseberry to combat anaemia; witch hazel nut, especially suited to a child so inclined towards learning, to stimulate cognition and simultaneously (for this is the beauty of hazel nut's magic) to regulate the release of serotonin, among other neurotransmitters, in proportional response to stressors, whether they be hormonal or external. Certainly, I had little idea as to the nature of such stressors in the case of Miss Granger and even less interest in discerning them. But the precision of my knowledge, or lack thereof, mattered not at all to the success of the brew. As I have tried to instil in my students, the truly magical element of most potions lies not in the physical combination, but in the potioneer's intent to unite them in common purpose. By his deftness and skill, he coaxes the brew to its sweetest perfection, bends the elements to his will, allowing their magic to mingle and come to fruition. He primes the potion's constituents to move synchronously, in concert with the drinker's own magic and mood. In this case, the resulting potion would swiftly react upon chemical triggers of stress to quell the resulting pains and anxieties before agitation occurred.

It really was but small effort on my part, and after all, what was an assistant for if not to play the lab rat on occasion? The rose hips were not quite the appropriate cultivar, as my Sprout-derived stock was rather limited, and so they required boiling for longer than normal to split the hardened shrivelled shell of the hip and expose the tender magical seed within. The rest was a straightforward decoction. Briefly: As the seed takes water, it swells until a critical threshold of readiness. It is then removed and steeped in water of the appropriate temperature along with the other herbs. The mixture is cooled to 49 °C, at which point a simple charm is employed whilst stirring clockwise to enhance the hazel nut's receptivity to the recipient, and another charms the brew to alter subtly in strength with the phase of the moon.

I worked alone in my laboratory in darkness illumined by wandlight. A sweet vapour rose from my cauldron, thickened round me, condensed into glossy dew along the countertops. As I worked, unravelling the elements, determining the expected outcome of this mixture of causative properties, my own immersion in the art and science of Potions could be complete. It rather soothed my own temper, afforded me the placidity to ruminate on Miss Granger's sudden appropriation of my previously autonomous office. I began to see a new pattern to our discourse, a cycle of its own. Indeed, each *rencontre* of ours seemed to follow a fairly precise sequence of steps: at the most inopportune moments, invariably when my mood was already particularly splenetic, she evidently felt some unaccountable need to chatter at me, whereupon I, out of sheer frustration, would attempt to discipline her by reprimand or rebuke on the inanity of her drivel. She then never failed to misconstrue my words, paint them in the worst possible light, and use my most innocuous critiques to fuel her unique brand of contrarian eruptions, the nature of which I have already described.

In the precious breath of solitude I now had in the laboratory, my anger dispersed somewhat. I recalled her words of earlier I had been 'insulting' her, she said. I thought on what she might have meant by the term 'insult' and wondered if perhaps my customary corrective tactics were altogether appropriate in her case, for she seemed to take critique very personally. I allowed that I may have been unnecessarily harsh once or twice in recent weeks, for the closed setting of the office seemed to incline me to snap at her more often than otherwise. I saw that my office had come to be smaller and stifling, in part through fault of my own; I had, quite unnaturally, confined myself there of late for more hours than necessary, solely in order to supervise my teaching assistant. At this insight, several plausible remedies suggested themselves: I need not remain in the office the entire duration of meetings; I need not keep my door ajar for extra hours just in case she had a question. Perhaps I ought to insist on working in the classroom sometimes, if only for the less intimate setting, and for the chance to work a bit more with the potions myself. I realised I had been missing it lately.

The potion was ready. I breathed its aroma, tasted it. The prominent rose hips and hazel nut counterpoised quite pleasantly. I thought it ought to calm her tantrums a bit. And yet, I confessed, it was not so strong as to counteract grief by external wrongs to one's person, and at last I concluded it unlikely to diminish Miss Granger's antipathy without some complicity on my own part at the least, perhaps, my curtailing of the bitterest 'insults'. A slight chagrin got the better of me, and I resolved to henceforth cultivate a bit of temperance in the office atmosphere. I would bite my tongue and employ silence as the primary disciplinary instrument if only to ensure that the effects of the potions experiment on Miss Granger were not undone by external factors and to lessen the time I wasted on her theatrics.

When I re-entered, she was still sitting quietly the calm after the tempest! re-writing the protocol. She glanced up nervously at me. I set a cup of the bespoke brew upon her desk and considered the best terms in which to couch the offer, the appropriate words to induce her compliance. But I could not think what to say so I simply said, "Drink this."

She sniffed it, eyed me warily, and gave it a sip. I stared at her uneasily. How could it be that this child who refused even a simple instruction to keep quiet would readily drink an unknown potion on command?

"Hazel nut, rose . . . ?" she asked, concentrating. She must have thought this was a test of some sort.

"Gooseberry. Several other dashes here and there. You ought to be more cautious in accepting strange potions, you know. The sense of smell is hardly failsafe."

"Well, you remind me every week how the Headmaster won't even let you sack me; I'm assuming you're not allowed to poison me either . . . What is it anyway?"

"It is for your headache." (Technically, this was perfectly true.) "Here, I will write out the recipe for you."

After a few moments of scribbling, I extended to her the scrap of parchment. She frowned for a while at it, but continued to drink. So far, so good. At last, she raised her eyes to me and said steadily and in clear accusation, "This is a calming draught."

I had to tread carefully. With unaccustomed effort at neutrality of tone, I said, "It is helping your headache, is it not?"

"Actually it is, yes, but I don't need "

"You will find that the most effective headache remedies involve elements of both relaxation and stimulation. This potion ought to relax the cranial muscles and reduce inflammation, so in that sense it is 'calming', but it is ataractic in nature that is, it will not sedate you. On the contrary, it is a mental stimulant as well and ought to clear your head a bit, especially if you are in pain or ah discomfort."

She looked wary. "Is it better than just taking a Pain-No-More when you've got a headache?" ¹

". . . Yes." (Probably true.) "You see, it is freshly brewed, and by me."

"Oh. Thanks," she said quietly.

I was struck by an inspiration and continued, "In fact, with a few minor adjustments, perhaps a bit of moonstone or lapis, this brew would provide a good base for a number of potions in a certain class specifically the Mensanas, those that aid in mental discipline. A Mensana potion is not the sort of thing that you will see your imbecile classmates imbibing before the O.W.L.s in toxic quantities. It will not make you cleverer, certainly not in the space of a night or two of cramming. But as an aid to the practiced cultivation of the mind, it is invaluable, especially for beginners to the field.

"As you may know, mental magic is a branch of learning that I have been studying for quite some time, and I have found it very useful in my . . . other work." I glanced at her; she was listening intently. Good.

"Learning to quiet your mind, to focus and order it, is a skill that is applicable to all fields of study. It is through rigorous training of the mind that one becomes more adaptable, flexible, prepared for all circumstances. Including Defence Against the Dark Arts, in which you apparently have a new interest, and all the subjects on your O.W.L.s. A calming draught can help in preparation, in beginning to learn mental exercises and drills, so that the use of a potion is ultimately not needed. Think of it as an aid to reflection."

She looked as if she were about to burst.

"You have questions, I suppose," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"Here is what to do. Write them down. Save them. I will lend you some books, and if you haven't got time before holiday to read them, you may keep them over the break. You might wish to try a few exercises. Many can be self-taught and practiced. If you have not found the answers to your questions by the end of your holiday, you may ask them then."

I then casually mentioned that she might wish to further experiment with the brew in my lab contingent upon my supervision, of course, and upon her explicit request for any and all potential ingredients. I added indifferently, "Regarding the protocol the nopales must be completely carbonised, you see."

"Oh, of course. I should have realised."

"It is an understandable mistake . . . Listen, I am aware that end of term exams are approaching. If you require time off from your assistantship, you may take it."

By this time, her brew was gone and she seemed slightly mollified, if still a bit wary of my motives; I surmised that the potion and lecture had taken effect. She said, "No, no, the work doesn't bother me. I mean, it's a lot of work, but it's not unreasonable."

I hesitated: ". . . Despite what you think, my intention is not to torment you or cause you headaches. Evidently, the details of a teaching assistantship are a . . . bit different than I had expected as well."

"Really? What did *you* expect? Sir."

I chose to ignore her impertinence: ". . . You see I have never had a teaching assistant before. I am accustomed to working with students as their Head of house or in the classroom . . . I am unaccustomed to lengthy discussion and commentary from students. But you are not at fault. Your work is not inadequate. So if you . . . are willing to continue this arrangement, your assistance next term would indeed be, ah, helpful. Perhaps we ought to work sometimes in the classroom . . . But you may keep a desk in the office if you like."

She was silent a moment, and I thought she was about to refuse. But she said, "Thanks. Thanks very much. I yes, I would really like to continue. I, erm, I really like Potions and I've learned a lot and I really hope I'm being useful. I'll try not to talk so much; I know you're busy. I'll try not to make so many mistakes . . ."

Her chastened tone much assuaged my unease. I refrained from speaking until I was certain she had finished her speech. I then gave a small indication of agreement, reminding her as well that in no case would she ever be allowed any informalities or pleasantries outside of these office hours, say in the classroom, if she were tempted to employ them; this was for her own safety, I cautioned, and even one violation would result in the immediate termination of her assistantship. In actuality, her safety was in no danger whatsoever after all, her assistantship was not really a secret, and as with all matters related to Potter, I kept all details about her safely Occluded but it would not do to appear too lenient or publicly familiar, lest she try to take advantage, as students frequently do of weaker teachers.

She solemnly promised to abide by these stipulations. I promptly returned to my desk; she left soon after, which was just as well, for I had swallowed more than enough pride for the night.

* * *

I had little time or inclination to conduct further tests on Miss Granger's potion, but she continued to brew it and added a bit of saw palmetto to the mixture, which I thought rather a clever insight on her part. She indicated after several trials that she found the potion "fun to brew" and more effective than commercial headache remedies, but that she had shared some with the Weasley boy and it hadn't helped him as much. (I declined to mention my thoughts on Weasley's surprising lack of menstrual maladies.) I also supplied her with a small *R. arvensis* from Sprout's lab, a hardy Ayrshire variety grown especially for its magical hips' properties, and more appropriate to her age and physiology than the old supplies from the stockroom. She mistook it as an early Christmas gift (not my intention), and presented me in turn with some trivial thing. (My apologies to her; I do not even remember what it was. But it was hardly a token of her esteem or a sentimental gesture on her part after all, she gave all the house-elves gifts as well. At best, it was charity.)²

In any case, the potion's subtle effects made quite a remarkable difference in the months that followed, and oddly enough, improved our acquaintance at all lunar phases. In addition, I kept to my resolve and made some effort to render my critiques a bit less caustic; arguably, this may have contributed to her decreasing quarrelsomeness. I also extended some freedoms to her in order to avoid having to always meet her in the office at inconvenient times. I modified the door wards to allow her to enter at specified hours, so that even if I were not in the office, she could nevertheless keep her work in her desk and pick it up between 5 and 8 pm. (Unbeknownst to her, the wards also alerted me to her presence there, in order that I could avoid her if desired or discern any attempts she might make to enter at an unauthorised time, which she never did. In fact, she seldom entered the office at all, except at prearranged times or during my own office hours; perhaps she feared working alone in the dungeon. Needless to say, my wards retained all ability to repel her at any time if I needed to lock her out. But it never seemed necessary.)

I augmented the office's shelves with some texts from my own study, mostly Potions material, but some Defence texts as well, and a few of the more palatable books on the Dark Arts in the scant hope of sparking her interest. I took care never to admonish her for reading in the office, even when it was unrelated to her Potions assignments. (It is unwise indeed to discourage a child from reading, and she frequently took to doing so after completing her work.) Eventually, I simply accepted her inevitable interludes and running commentary on whatever she was reading. Though she still battered me with questions and more and more, her own thoughts and opinions she often worked quietly at her desk. It occurred to me that she tended towards chatter and provocation when nervous (Gryffindors!), and with a strange sort of pride, I considered the notion that she had learnt to adjust to my presence. Of course, I was loathe to admit that it was anything other than the reprieve from her chatter that I found to be such an unlikely anodyne. I did not see then that these contemplative moments were the subtle manifestations of her magic wending its way through me.

To be sure, she still provoked my ire often enough. Over the course of Miss Granger's assistantship, I was forcibly fed innumerable titbits of minutia regarding her lifestyle: she was always hungry, preferred simple vanilla ice cream, and without fail uttered an inordinate profusion of gratitude to the house-elves who served her; her right knee bounced a frenetic rhythm whenever she was particularly intent upon some knotty problem; and my poor office came to smell like flowery hand cream, for apparently her skin dried and chapped in the wintertime. (Upon reflection, I wonder if this may have been an underhanded ploy of hers to improve the general office aroma, which tended towards cellar-like.) She was an atrocious cook, a skill I believe she attempted in order to commune with the house-elves and "learn what their lives are like", and there was one sorry incident with custards that managed to be both waterlogged and burnt at the same time. (She was quite put out by my lack of commendation; I believe my specific compliment was: "Is that goblin sweat I taste?") When she brought in dental floss, I mentioned that if I ever were to see it in use, her teeth would irreversibly assume equine proportions. (This comment was not well taken either.) She often suffered from chills, obliging her beholden employer to stoke the fire more often than he otherwise would have bothered. And many more details that, it pains me to say, I have forgotten.

But as you shall see, I grew rather fond of the sound of her footfalls approaching up the corridor for our sessions. Indeed, I quite came to rely on her. I credit her with my having gotten through the year without strangling Neville Longbottom³. Certainly I never altered in any way my exacting treatment of her. Our classroom interactions remained as antagonistic as ever. But in the evenings, we brewed fake Veritaserum for Umbridge to force down students' throats, Felix Felicis for the N.E.W.T. level class, Oblivious Unction, and several mild Mensana potions. She came to serve as my resident decipherer of Runes (a subject I had not much studied since my N.E.W.T.s), and with glee she decoded any notes passed between those students clever enough to encrypt them that I had caught in classes. (Not that they ever said anything useful; the more carefully encrypted the letter, the more likely it was to contain some whiny lament of infatuation.) She took over entirely the correction of homework, excepting of course that of her own class; after all, a teacher ought never to trust even a rule-bound student not to slip in extra points to her boyfriends at times. And though I revealed nothing of my darker duties, she mercifully stepped up to restocking or brewing or rescheduling, without a word, those nights I was Summoned and the Dark Lord took from me my resolve and dexterity.

We never spoke of such matters. In fact, it was in the silent moments, while brewing or reading, that I nearly forgot myself and permitted a sliver of normalcy into my absurd

double existence. At times, I even forgot the hour, only to become aware that she had remained past her appointed hours. Who could have imagined that I would find myself in such manner of proximity, so often, to a woman? (No, *child*, I reminded myself.) I began to harbour a sort of curiosity about her, and so, on such evenings, I pretended to peruse journals while instead I watched her. While adhering staunchly to a book or staring into a candle's flickering flame, ostensibly absorbed in some intellectual matter, I in fact conducted surreptitious surveillance of this curious specimen.

My attentions, at least at first, were emphatically non-sexual. I simply observed this frizzy, frazzled creature, this elfin-eared *pupa plebieus* of awkward manners and gauche angles, as if a collage of girl-elements had been thrown together in a heap, not quite yet summing to a coherent whole. I convinced myself that I was merely taking empirical measure of her attributes, in the case that I might one day have need of hypotheses regarding the mysterious female of the species. I was confounded by the notion that she would one day emerge from the haphazard moult of adolescence as a woman, with all the worldly accoutrements and mysterious allure of the fairer sex. Who would this malleable fledgling grow into? What identity, out of the infinity of her possible lives, would she assume? Could Miss Granger become a Minerva McGonagall? A Dolores Umbridge? A . . . Lily Potter? (No a Potter perhaps, but never . . .) Might her intellect bear a small but distinctly Snapish fingerprint? Would her lithe form come to bear the marks and claims of other men?

When examining the particulars of morphologic structure, it was simplest to start with her hands, which were always in motion: A thin crescent scar lay across the third and fourth knuckles of her left hand, some old childhood injury. The right little finger had a smooth, shiny spot on the edge from where it rested on the table while writing and a corresponding callus on her forefinger, which often bore inkstains. From her hands, outward: She was small of frame and seemed healthy, if often tense and somewhat sleep-deprived in the typical manner of students (and, too often, their teachers). Her complexion was fair, her facial features reasonably symmetrical though fairly unremarkable: narrow face, sharp chin, slight upturn to the smallish nose. Her skin was not overly sebaceous, her mouth slender and, more often than not, set in a tight-lipped frown. She appeared not to wear cosmetics or if she did, she applied them in unnoticeable quantities. As she read, her lashes and lids moved to and fro over the pages, her expressions in flux as she scowled or arched her brow or pursed her lips, oblivious to my observations. At times, my attention strayed to a cirrusy wisp of hair that had escaped its tied confinement and begged to be brushed from her cheek, or the vein at her translucent temple, or the way she nibbled innocently on her lower lip, nipping like a small sparrow till she drew blood (this, especially before exams). I listened, as well, to the shift of her weight as she drew a knee up onto her chair, a muffled sneeze or cough, or simply the scratch of her quill in the silence. Once in a while, I imagined that her eyes had also lit upon my bowed head or my outstretched fingers, and I did not lift my eyes to verify, but wondered instead if her gaze lingered and what she might be thinking.

What an unnatural pair we two made! I must be getting old to be reminiscing about such banal scenes of domesticity, of which I am certain she has no memory or ever gave a thought about. And I suppose there is no merit to my reflections on the intricacies of her assistantship, except to provide a context for why I have retained several otherwise dull memories of this period in my Pensieve. And to provide a word of caution to you if you are a schoolmaster: Choose your assistants carefully. If it can at all be helped, try not to fall in love with them either.

¹ The most popular commercial headache remedy, patented by Monty Bank's Miracle Cures.

² I do quite clearly remember the following Christmas, 1996: She bestowed on me quite a lovely set of parchment and Scrivenshaft right-winged raven quills, after I had, in an unguarded moment, mentioned to her the possibility of my taking a 'sabbatical' her seventh year. With the gift, she extracted my reluctant promise to write her; I agreed, only to shut her mouth of course, as I had no intention of writing her from the Dark Lord's side after I had left Hogwarts though Fate had different plans. In return (mere politeness dictated that I could not *not* return the favour, but propriety steered me clearly away from too personal a gift), I fetched for her a copy of an old Muggle tale I had read as a youngster upon Lily's insistence, *Les Misérables*. Out of principle I bought her the unabridged copy, but I do hope she skipped that interminable Waterloo scene.

³ Christ, it's a bloody joke. How degrading that I must defend myself in this manner, lest more murders be attributed to me. I would never harm a student not even Longbottom, though I confess I say this with some reluctance.

Author's Note:

* Thanks to Countrymouse and Hollimel for their very helpful insights and assistance.

Six: The Midnight Duel

Chapter 6 of 15

The echo of Lily... as if I, and not she, had been caught... "to make children scream for death"...

December 1995

Compunctions seem always dispelled by darkness, and such was the case on the eve of this particular memory. On that frosty late night, several days before holiday, I was returning to the castle from a Summons, exhausted from the toils of shielding my mind from the Dark Lord's probes and the strain to detect any meaningful signal from the usual Death Eater noise and petty political sniping. Fatigued as I was, I nonetheless hunted, out of habit, for wayward students breaking curfew or for anything else that might be about. I was well-accustomed to this sort of task, since as the junior faculty member and Albus's personal source of *travaux forcés à perpétuité*, I was often assigned to curfew duty at his behest. The students' behaviour had been unusually bad of late; I had already caught quite a few at odd hours, practicing spells or whispering conspiratorially. As the majority seemed not to be from my house, I could happily deduct the appropriate quantity of points. The hour was late enough upon my return that the students ought to have all retired to bed or at least to the common rooms. Most of the portraits had settled to rest, excepting those of the Ladies Vinifera, who were awake, but very drunk. The narrative frieze of the Goblin Rebellion had called its nightly ceasefire. No scrape of rat's claw nor owl's hoot could be heard; even the house-elves had ceased their scuttling about.

I crept through the deserted first floor corridors, wrapped in travelling cloak. The rancid taste of cheap wine and false flattery still burned within my throat; my left arm felt heavy and sore. I peered through the shadows, my pupils adjusting, as I slid through a black torchless stretch. My boots beat a soundless slow rhythm across the grey flagstones, under the keystones of arches, past the chip of a stone where an axe had fallen centuries ago; a monument to Merlin and another to Arthur; a mural of three rogues under a tree. Through the corridor's centre wound a trail of smoothed stones, worn by centuries of students' boots. Outside, bare old oak boughs, crystallised by winter, tapped an uneven gait upon the castle's frost-ferned windowpanes. A stripe of light stole across the passage from the glass to the foot of the staircase; branched shadows cut jaggedly across it.

But then again no. *Tap, tap* . . . a gliding whisper. This was no branch. Moving as one of the shadows, I slipped round the corner and crouched in wait, just beyond the staircase, in time to spy a thin lone silhouette, now in pause, now furtively creeping down the marble steps, now reaching the bottom. By its lean, slight form, I knew it to be a student. My lips twisted *caught!* In moments, I was upon the culprit

Granger gasped, whirled round to face me. I had not expected her. It was not long after the previously described 'headache' incident, and I was weary of dealing with her and quite looking forward to the holiday respite. None of this meant she was exempt from punishment; in fact, I would rather enjoy it.

"Moonlight stroll?"

She tried, unsuccessfully, to mask a guilty look by straightening her posture. What in hell was she doing was she following me? I looked round and squinted for any trace of Potter's cloak behind her or other telltale signs of the holy Trinity's lesser appendages.

She appeared to be alone. She seemed oddly out of sorts for a school night, wore some sort of fitted athletic attire (the type she later wore for our private sessions), short-cut sleeves, and no school robes. She smelled of dust and fresh perspiration, her hair of *Commiphora*, some Muggle shampoo. I stepped backward.

"Where are you going?"

"I I'm just going to talk to Professor McGonagall, that's all," she said breathlessly. Her chin rose sharply; she looked harried.

"And what is the nature of this little visit? Pray tell. Or is this secret worthy of Gryffindors only?"

In place of an answer, she stubbornly set her mouth. I proceeded, despite my increasing discomfiture with her proximity and state of dress: "My, my, it must be serious if even Granger has no words for it. Consider your position, Miss Granger. You have just cost your house twenty points. Are you gunning for twenty more?"

She said nothing. I said, "If you will not tell me, perhaps a bit of Legilimency would persuade you to divulge your plans."

She stepped backward, her eyes growing round. "That's not allowed on students," she breathed. "That's against school rules."

I hovered over her. "As is breaking curfew."

"Please don't," she said. "I won't do it again, it's only it's about Harry. He he's not feeling well."

So it required a threat of force to make her finally show some respect for authority, did it? And yet she still was not coming clean. "Really? What a pity." I lifted an impatient eyebrow and my wand. "That's all, is it? Poor, poor Potter."

"Wait! It's something isn't right with him. All he does is stare into space, and he has these funny blackout moments, and he looks like he hasn't slept for days. I really think something's wrong with him. Please, please don't tell anyone. I'm sorry for breaking curfew. I only wanted to ask Professor McGonagall to keep an eye on him over the holiday, and I had forgotten before tonight, so I left erm, straight from the library, and I guess it was later than I thought that's all, really "

As her words tumbled out, I searched her demeanour; having become lately accustomed to her expressions, I noted that she did look unusually bothered. My years of experience in Legilimency and Occlumency meant that even when not actively casting the *Legilimens*, I nonetheless retained a shady intuition of truthfulness and falsehood in others' words (rather like the effect of this training on the experience of combat, wherein one may attune to one's attacker and sense an oncoming spell at nearly the moment of release). The ability was neither infallible nor precise; still, here I sensed contradiction some truth to her words, but falsehood as well.

She peered beyond me into the dark, her face in shadow. Then she said, "So the rumours are true. You really do know Legilimency." When I did not reply, she raised her eyes into the moon-stream and whispered, "Are you using it now?"

Surely she asked a simple question, to which I then gave a simple answer. But that is not how I recall it. My Pensieve's facsimile preserves the encounter, so I know that the details are generally factually accurate; the Pensieve's runic inscriptions ensure that a memory's outline remains essentially the same as its first occurrence. Yet there are important distinctions. For instance, when viewed through the lens of a Pensieve, a memory's subconscious observations or overlooked details may emerge and come clear. As in a picture, the viewer may enhance or focus upon a previously unseen element or pattern. This, among other reasons, renders the Pensieve invaluable as memory's accomplice; it aids the discernment of detail, the unearthing of clues from the past.

But it is limited nonetheless. It would be a great danger to rely too heavily on its revelations, for in contrast to most students' first impressions, the Pensieve-kept recollection is not an objective rendering, but an idiosyncratic product of the mind. Indeed, in all instances of memory retrieval, one would do well to remember that the process of memory creation depends heavily on the creator himself. As his mind consolidates a memory, his faculty of reason and sometimes emotion smoothes over rough edges; it fills in the spaces and touches up truth. The mind sieves and filters; distortions may arise. So might a picture reflect the limitations of the camera, or a portrait those of its painter.

Similarly, the viewer himself plays a role; his intent moulds the interpretation of the retrieved memory. The raw meat of the memory is fixed, but the emotion, the meaning, the salient message, must rely on the viewer's discretion and skill. In this way, a memory, as such, cannot be considered complete without the inseparable *act* of recalling to make it so.

Of course, in the case of this memory, the viewer is the same man as the recorder separated from the episode only by the passage of years, the weight of his history, and what he has lost therein. But even unaided, I remember that night very clearly, and so with my Pensieve I experience it afresh, in vivid colour and sensation, an odd azeotrope of memory and desire. My reactions of that night mix uneasily with the knowledge I have today, as I view from the exile of my present:

I recall her face cradled by moonlight, swathed in delusory haze, palely shining with the uncanny vitality of paintings, memories and other such phantoms. The darkness welled round her. Removed from the daylight, she seemed quasi-insubstantial, a vague *trompe l'oeil*, a ghostly reflection of another little girl now so long gone, as if there stood not before me not a pupil, but a dream I had conjured into being. Did I imagine the echo of Lily in her brazen defiance and barbed tongue, in the manner in which her ceaseless curiosity for all subjects magical swallowed all trepidation, even now? Wherein lay this resemblance that so stirred my long-buried memories? The girl seemed at once shrouded in mystery, no ordinary mortal, as if Lily disguised crouched before me. And at once, I felt a desire to know more of her thoughts. Clearly she no longer feared me; how *did* she perceive her glowering Potions professor? As suave superior, brimming with secrets? Or seedy old snake on the verge of senility? Did she see the air of failure, the trace of the long, bitter years?

"No," I said quietly; it was not a lie, exactly. "Were I to penetrate your mind, you would be quite aware."

I had meant no innuendo; of this I am sure. But had I not hastily let the words fall from my tongue? Had there been but the briefest of hints that implied a caress? She suddenly leant towards me, and I saw her shoulders bent, the stitching of the cotton seams atop them; between, two points of bare clavicles where they met at her sternum, a delicate hollow at her throat; below it, a half-glimpsed softness I quickly lifted my scowl to her face. I had never before bothered to look her in the eye, yet now I saw clearly her dilated pupils, her irises no shade of green, as I somehow had thought, but rather the headiest cognac, a light golden-rimmed bronze two vaporous moon-drops, two Selenian tears. In her transparent gaze, I saw my own shadow reflected, arrested in motion in a curious way a winged creature hovering, beating against an invisible crystalline web, as if I, and not she, had been caught.

She whispered, "I'd like to learn sometime."

(Oh, my enchanted huntress, you knew not what you sought!)

I wrenched my eyes from her, moved away.

"You think, perhaps, to best Voldemort at his own game?" I snapped. "Do you wish to cast *thelperius* as well? If it is knowledge you desire, would you learn how it feels to make children scream for death?"

She recoiled in fright. "No, you've got it all wrong," she said. "I didn't mean "

"Come," I barked and turned from her.

Clearly, I was badly out of sorts from the Summons. I led her briskly down the corridor; she trotted along behind me. Soon we arrived at McGonagall's office and I delivered her to her tartan Head of house, who, despite being present in her office, seemed herself rather harassed by the late intrusion, a factor I supposed Granger never bothered to consider. Of course not; she considered Potter and herself the centre of the universe and her teachers mere instruments to manipulate as they saw fit. I willed myself not to glance at the impudent child, but faltered an instant; her wide, fawn eyes trained to me, she breathed, "Thank you." Minerva shot me a quizzical look.

"Minerva, I suggest you keep your Gryffindors in line. I have been lenient tonight, but do not expect it in the future."

With this, I fled for the safety of my quarters, unable to shake the dissonance from my thoughts. Reason dictated: her unaccountable actions were neither seductive in motive nor particularly persuasive. Yet I had nearly been swayed to enter her mind for the sheer (and strictly forbidden) pleasure of calling her bluff. What impulse coursed through me to even consider toying with a student in that manner? What sorcery held my senses in such thrall? Were the Dark Lord's Summonses so taxing that I no longer could trust myself even with students? Was my character reverting to the old days of unquelled passions and fears? I gritted my teeth and pulled my cloak tightly around me. My moment of weakness was yet one more reminder of how I must never be tricked into lowering my guard; I must never admit aberration from duty; I must keep my emotions away from myself most of all, for I knew only too well what sordid results came when dangerous passions took hold of my mind.

And the fleeting illusion of Lily's shadow within her what lunacy! To compare the two was in all ways absurd an apple to an oyster; the rarest of friends to a troublesome child; a singular beauty to ordinary, plain; Beatrice to a Harpy; a strong-willed and clever idealist to a this was ridiculous, never mind, enough

I fled down the steps to the dungeon. The staircase's flickering torches cast my shadow against the far wall. One by one, I extinguished their flames. Miss Granger was now nowhere near me, but before me, her image still rose up unbidden. To quiet my turbulent mind, I employed a favourite (and much-practiced, of late) Occlumency exercise, a type of drill with which all students of mental magic become familiar.

Every Occlumens's method is unique. The best I can describe my own is as the imagination, the bringing to my mind's forefront, of an inner fog or vapour. As I descended, it rose up throughout me, dense and rotating, as might the steam from a cauldron or a mist given off by a fen or a bog within a deep wood. My vapour, the great insulator each droplet, each molecule in random motion, impermanent, intangible, filled the tiniest niches with its nebulous shade. Thought-forms, erratic and weaving, flew paths round the edge of the cloud, but could find no landing; no surface existed for thought to adhere. Condensing, dispersing, detaching to un-thoughts, each bond was destroyed scarce upon its creation. This was my armour: this stillness in motion, this absence of all within presence, the movement of water surrounding no centre, erasing all detail and form. Thus I envisioned my immovable mind; one could not penetrate that which one could not find. No temptation would creep into this ever-shifting empty fortress; no tempest would scatter this hazy eclipse. Volition, emotion, time and space, had no sovereignty here; they scattered until there remained only fog. And here, in this shedding, this sublimation from substance, lay escape from the girl, and the Summons, from enslavement to Potter, and the whole sodding war, and the truth of my miserable self and the terrible crimes I had wrought, the terrible memories I held to my side every night. At last, I could let go of these things; my confusion ebbed; my unease subsided; the doors of my perception were cleansed, and in this frame of mind I arrived at my quarters.

I entered my rooms and embarked on the semi-routine application of Firewhisky, Glenn Gould, and the current issue of *Ars Alchemica*, to restore method and order to my wits. After scanning the morrow's lesson plans, refilling the inkwells, haranguing the house-elf, and other such routine tasks, I finally sank into sleep.

Author's Notes:

* Endless thanks to my wonderful beta, Countrymouse, for invaluable help.

* Thank you to John Updike's *Ode to Crystallization* for the phrases 'crystallised by winter' and 'frost-ferns'.

* *Ars Alchemica* is a Potions journal created by fanfiction author Riley. I have borrowed it here because Professor Snape reads it quite often.

The Eye of the Snake

Chapter 7 of 15

A fork in the path . . . some meaning entirely other . . . a state of unutterable confusion . . . a stray rush of cortisol . . .

December 1995

I garnered no sleep at all that night. No sooner had I fallen to dreamlessness than I was awakened by Floo and called to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries on emergency Order business. The subsequent twelve hours were utter chaos, for the inevitable had finally occurred: an attack by the Dark Lord's familiar, Nagini (20-foot-long magical snake the Dark Lord was not known for subtle symbolism), upon an Order of the Phoenix member, Arthur Weasley, a Ministry of Magic employee who had been conducting essential Order duties that night at the Ministry. By the time I arrived at the hospital, he was partially paralysed, white as a ghost, and very near death. The mere fact of his survival was somewhat amazing, as typically Nagini's victims expired within minutes. In hindsight, I ought to have been more attentive to the details of his rescue. As it was, I knew only that the Order had been alerted in time by a sheer stroke of luck, thus saving his life, and I thought no more on it, focusing only on the matter of his survival.

It was a fascinating test case. I am not a Healer, but my unique position in the war, coupled with my expertise in Dark Magic and Potions, made imperative my immediate appearance at St. Mungo's and collaboration in developing an emergency antivenin specially suited to her unique Dark Magic. As I saw when I arrived, the immediate threats to Weasley's life were twofold. First: Potential systemic shock from massive exsanguination, resulting from both the profundity of the physical punctures and the venom's anticoagulatory properties. In other words, the venom itself keeps the wound open and the blood flowing freely; a victim is most likely to die from simple blood loss. He had been discovered and administered his first Blood-Replenishing Potion in time to stave off life-threatening hypovolaemia, but re-administration was necessary every fifteen minutes, and the strain to his vital organs was already taking its toll. Needless to say, this was not a case to be cured with mere comfrey; some very strong potions were called for as quickly as possible.

Second: Muscular paralysis resulting from the venom's secondary neurotoxicity. Weasley, stretched upon his back, exhibited areflexia in all limbs, neck, and facial muscles, so that if one simply glanced at the body, the man might be taken for dead. I was told that before I arrived he had experienced some seizures as well. But the toxin's effects did not appear severe enough to affect the autonomic musculature, the brain, or respiration. An antivenin specific to Elapid snakebite¹ was given, and these symptoms progressively decreased over the course of the morning, but he was carefully watched for a relapse or for an anaphylactic allergic reaction, a common response to antivenins. Unfortunately, the antivenin was not quite specific enough, for it was ineffective at halting the blood loss; a monovalent antidote suited to Nagini's singular magic was required. The brewing and trial and error would take days, if not weeks, of hard labour, and I was disinclined to pass my hard-earned holiday at St. Mungo's with Weasley's wife pestering me for updates at every turn and inexplicably bringing up Potter. But luckily for me, Healer Smethwyck actually knows something about potions, if

not Dark Magic. Once I had supplied a precious sample of venom from my stores, basic information on its properties, and advice on some preliminary procedures (I had previously conducted some basic toxicity tests, using only non-sentient victims, of course), he set to work and assured me his staff was sufficient to take over from there, and I was able to leave.

I exited the St. Mungo's facade, a department storefront, into a rolling tide of Muggle Christmas shoppers. They banged and clamoured upon the footpaths, spilled into the well-oiled street, which, ablaze in holiday lights and cluttered with flatulent buses and automobiles, bore little trace of its original military purpose: to secure Roman conquest of Britain through movement of armies. As with most innovations birthed in war, the via had long since relinquished its primary incarnation to become instead an integral fixture of English Muggle life. In subsequent centuries, prisoners (mostly debtors and drunkards) were marched to the gallows over its cobblestones; later still, bear-baiting, gin, and Pantheon masquerades provided the masses their pleasures along its path. Now radio towers had replaced castle turrets along the skylines; the city's subterranean bowels, full with trains, rumbled through the cement. Through the uniform storefronts lining the street head to toe, Muggles escaped from reality by means of High Street chic and profligate spending and eating. Atop its footpaths, flea-like pedestrians, clearly fancying themselves Very Important, scurried hither and thither, parading their signals of wealth: women with designer dogs and shoes, men with soft hands and plastic trophy wives strutting amidst riot and babble. Some Muggles were taking snapshots of a particularly ugly specimen who stood upon a corner, clad in a large square sandwich board bearing the words: THE END IS NIGH. Another vagrant nearby sat raggedly upon the concrete and stretched his grimy fingers towards passing pockets, hoping to take advantage. Someone knocked into me. Under my breath, I muttered several epithets, the sort I no longer believe are true but which nevertheless come in handy for circumstances of frustration, and fled from the squalor with utmost haste.

Upon returning home in a state of exhaustion, I was immediately accosted by a school post owl, which dropped the following letter, among others, into my hands:

Professor Snape,

Thank you for allowing me to see Professor McGonagall after curfew. I've been thinking about what you said, and I need to clarify a bit. I've been reading some of your books on mental magic, and it seems like a really useful area of skills to develop. You implied that Legilimency is a Dark Art, but in these books it doesn't seem to necessarily use Dark Magic as long as the appropriate rules are followed. I'm particularly interested to know why students are not taught Occlumency. It seems like it might be an important field of study, especially nowadays.

You looked really tired tonight. I hope you are okay. Have you really had to do those awful things you told me about? I know all your responsibilities must be very difficult. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help.

If I don't see you before, Happy Christmas!

Regards,

Hermione

What insolence! What arch audacity! Miss Granger's irremediable persistence in vying for favour defied understanding. The perfect penmanship irked me nearly as much as the thinly veiled request, the latest in her perpetual harrying sieges into my privacy. Why had I lent her those damnable mental magic books? I ought to have known she would needle me about them. So she fancied the war a sort of role-playing game, herself and Potter its heroes, making their mark on the world! So she imagined I tortured children for fun! She must have been picturing a brutal, bloody Death Eater revel last night (as if anything so exciting made up my meetings, which were typically, if anything, more tedious than Hogwarts staff functions, if slightly riskier). So she wished me now to confide secrets to her! Or perhaps this latest provocation was simply an exercise in getting the last word, her favourite pastime.

Such naïveté! If she had had any inkling of what Occlumency entailed, she never would have requested to learn it, least of all from me. I burned her letter (as I did all non-essential correspondence), and merely to ensure she would indeed not get the last word, composed a brief reply as follows:

I meant my words as well. I will be teaching neither subject to you or any other student. Do not bother me about this again.

Upon sending it off with Slytherin seal upon it, I managed to expel her from my thoughts for most of the evening before I caught myself gazing out skyward, over the darkening grounds, searching for a Hogwarts post owl (she had no owl of her own, I knew) which might have in its beak another whiny entreaty of hers. This was not wholly implausible; the girl never took no for an answer, and she had already proven her delight in pestering me. I found myself unwittingly pondering what sort of repartee she would conceive of. Perhaps she would enquire where I had learnt Occlumency (none of her bloody business) or suggest that we design a class in the subject (really, did she think I had infinite time?). Or might her tight scrawl read: "Professor, you quite misunderstand me. You see, really I'd like some private lessons with *you*. You're the most important member of the Order, after all. Your skills are far superior to those others, especially that scrofulous Black. Besides, is it so wrong to want to learn what Occlumency feels like? What you must go through every day I can only imagine! But of course you would be a most excellent teacher. I can imagine each stroke of your sharpened steel mind, the finger-light touch of your thoughts as you search round the edge of my "

I hastily shut the curtains. Merlin's beard, I really had taken leave of my senses. Had I lost all reason, all sense of propriety in the last twenty-four hours? She was thinking no such thing. Term was ending; the girl had likely already left Hogwarts, was surely already decking the halls and fa-la-la-ing and other such holiday tripe. The rebuttal I had sent must have intimidated her properly, as I had intended; otherwise, under no circumstances would I respond if she wrote me again. Feeling utterly drained and disgusted, I firmly banished the girl from my overtired mind.

But I was unable to rest from the weight of the Dark Lord's demands. Despite my fatigue, I was kept from sleep by a nagging, all-too-familiar dread of what ghoulish dreams might come. Determining postponement a more productive option than a Dreamless Sleep Potion, I laid my wand upon the secretaire and set to composing an overdue reply to a wealthy Hogwarts benefactor, a former Slytherin whose continued patronage depended upon regular updates from the Head of house. I stamped the house crest at the top and wrote out the formal address. But I was in no mood to pen pleasantries and could find no fitting words to put across the pretence that everything was perfectly jolly in Slytherin house and that Hogwarts was in no danger at all of a split down the middle. My mind wandered back to the events of the day, and I became uneasy. Weasley should not have survived. How had the Order managed to find him so quickly? The Dark Lord had somehow been foiled from the Ministry's Department of Mysteries, but not for long: What fateful words, what unknown futures would he uncover when he at last got his hands on the prophecy's other half? And Albus had been absent from Hogwarts of late; where was he? Why did he always seem to be avoiding me?

Thus I stared at the scroll till my eyelids grew heavy and my thoughts fuzzy, and my wand beside the letter seemed to merge with the parchment's soft whiteness and double, and triple, and transfigure into rows of writing, tight little knottings of ink, as if armies of tiny black insects or fairies, Doxys perhaps, ran marching and clustering over the parchment. At last, I could no longer fight weariness, and I rested against the desk and surrendered to sleep.

My sleep was not easy. I waded restlessly through troubled unconsciousness; Albus's face floated before me, then the Dark Lord's. Then there surfaced before me a dream quite unlike the monstrous visions to which I was accustomed. I did not typically dream of the students, much less of women (save for Lily), but beginning that night, this would change. Though its particulars were not inherently memorable as such, I include them here only as my first, and by far most peculiar, dream of Miss Granger. I recall it thus:

I stood alone upon a road in the midst of a kingdom by the sea. Apparently I was a soldier, as evidenced by my impractical uniformed attire, an antiquated costume with too many buttons. I knew, with the strange intuition one possesses in dreams, that I had marched many miles in search of some crucial strategic intelligence, the still incomplete knowledge my commander required to destroy the enemy's forces. At a gust of chill wind from behind me, I cast a glance backward to whence the road came: a stony and snow-covered hilltop. Gaunt gnarls of leafless trees, scattered atop, made a bare, scraggly scrawl against the broken horizon. Dust and sand blew from exposed patches of talus and rubble. I turned with a shiver.

Ahead of me the country improved. From my present hillside elevation, the land descended through a sunny plain, a quilt of stubbled fields and woodlands whose oaks still retained autumn leaves, to a seaside promontory. At the tip stood a great gleaming city, filled with Muggle skyscrapers surrounded by populous, prosperous sprawl. The

cobbled road led straight through its gates, hid for awhile between the tall buildings, then emerged and wound round the coastline into the distance. The sea beyond marked the edge of this unnamed land through which I must travel.

I began to walk and soon reached the city walls. A motley herd of travellers, merchants, and city denizens had fallen in along the way, so that by the time I entered the city proper, a crowded line had formed along the main road. I marched amidst anonymous others, myriad wizards and Muggles and magical creatures of various societal strata, a curious mixture of the two worlds that has no place in waking life, at least not in any part of the world that follows the Statutes of Secrecy. Muggles shuffled through, clutching their instruments, crude mechanical substitutes for magic; automobiles sputtered and telephones warbled. More civilized wizards, for all that they were quieter, smelled just as bad, though any human was better at least than the giants and goblins who also lumbered along. Abraxans and Thestrals drew wizarding carriages past bicycles and rusty Peugeots.

I wished nothing to do with any of them. They in turn seemed to have no consciousness of me; I was to them but another stranger. Each kept to himself, eyes fixed upon his feet, turned inward to unknown purposes, looking up only to snarl or move away from those classes of creatures most different from him. Where this rabble were headed, I had not a clue, but squealing and squeezing against one another, they swept me through the city's narrow central artery.

Flanking both sides of the road stood glass-windowed houses of commerce and trade; they towered like walls of a canyon, their shadows obscuring the side streets. Other layers, now dwarfed, still peeked from beneath and between the skyscrapers: shingles and brownstones, cathedrals with spires and shining stained glass, those of history's creations that had not been demolished by war or by progress. Statues of bygone heroes, conquerors or lords of such and such, sporting moustaches, metal weaponry, and other barbarous relics, stood arrested in motion. Over the indifferent masses they gazed self-importantly, stonily reigning in pomp, still striving to assert their immortal relevance.

From the choked, reeking passageway, the teeming current of creatures disgorged into a square filled with shops. Here chaos reigned: gold and Galleons changed hands; wheels spun and screeched; deals sealed by barter and handshake; moneyed gentlemen strolled and turned up their noses; wild-eyed prophets, buskers, and whores hawked their wares on corners; self-proclaimed 'Potions masters' sold Quintessence of Quince and Unagian Unguent to alleviate pains or desires; tramps stumbled about; briny fishmongers squawked and stank of herring; net-weavers drew up their skeins; and in the hum and buzz of the crowd, there also marched beasts yoked to wagons, greengrocers, watchmakers, carpet sellers, fortune tellers, and a thousand other utterly forgettable faces. The frenzy fed on itself.

In the shadows lurked scavengers; daws pecked at heaps of wet rubbish; bluebottles buzzed. Though the skies were clear above, plumes of smoke curdled on the horizon, rising from factories and mills on the city's margins the sort of forgotten, swept-aside boroughs with sewage-filled rivers and filthy writing on walls, where heroes are scarce, where men go to labour or loaf by day and off to forgetful oblivion by night at the pubs, and women tend bruises alone, where children enter a world with slim chances while mothers count pennies and sit up late at night after work to sew patches by hand on their children's old Muggle rags.

I left it behind, exited the city across a bridge suspended over an estuary; skimmers and terns wheeled below me. On the purlieu of town, past neat ordered rows of cottages, the countryside opened before me. I passed settlements and farms filled with haycocks and lambs. From time to time, I came upon this or that trodden crossing or little threads of paths breaking off to the side, but I ignored them and wondered not at the houses or to where led the insignificant trails. I remained steady to my purpose, for I well knew my captain's order: I must keep to the afferent road, bound for the centre of the kingdom. Only there, in the unknown interior, would there be hope of finding the answers I sought.

The road led atop sea cliffs that clung to the land's edge. Below and ahead of me into the distance, the chalky rock faces slowly eroded, exposing their stratified layers, the new atop old through the ages. Along the high-water mark clung dead layers of flotsam and driftwood, salvages tossed by Fate's fury long ago. On the ocean beyond, the tides rose and fell in a rhythmic chantey, pulsed over dark depths below. A light wind swept the sea's surface; frothy caps emerged and dissolved. Upon the horizon, a war fleet sailed in formation; great ships flew banners and spinnakers; smaller vessels drew their seines by the shore.

Time trotted on. As I marched, it seemed that although the day lengthened, the sun round and full in the sky's bright centre, the season turned backwards, for the autumn air became a warm summer haze. I passed through a succession of small hamlets, each presided over by a little church and its yard. In clusters stood nameless marble tombs, their faces dissolved by hundreds of rainy seasons. The surrounding land was divided into parcels and patches of green and gold, clover and sun-ripened wheat fields. The road worsened, wound umbilically across wilder heathed cliffs, through abandoned fields littered with rusted scythes and ploughs. The hamlets grew sparser. I passed a series of long-dead remains: great stone foundations of abbeys, crumbled in on themselves, cast shadows across the now-deserted footpath; a circle of cromlechs, each engraved with rings and coils and four-legged creatures, stood stoically, left in the wake of mysterious architects whose secrets had long since drifted beyond death's veil, while summer veronicas crept and crawled over them like veins; a grassy site lay scattered with burial mounds, swollen like full earthen bellies; along the path beyond, the odd shard of clayware poked up from the ground.

By and by, the sun sank through the sky; the heather lining the path condensed, turned to hedges that thickened and grew. Their thorns hemmed and shuttered the lane on either side and overhead until violet dusk was nought but a sliver above me, and the kingdom lay hidden save the footpath before me that ran like a seam through its midst. No trace of Muggle or wizard-made material remained. Dense shadowy leaves of beeches and oaks waved above; beasts bellowed from beyond; hedge-roots crawled up through the dust. I walked in near-blindness. Now and then, I made out the whistle and wing-beats of a bat or a moth overhead.

I pressed on in this darkness for an unknown quantity of time with only a vague sense of time passing, the sort of dreamtime existence where years pass in moments. Aloft, the stars in their heavenly motions were a jumble of seasons: Ophiucus wheeled through the sky; Capricornus merged briefly with Virgo, then Leo; Aries hovered over all. Farther beyond, more distant dark suns dwelt unseen in their places. Mars and Jupiter wandered their courses as well, and even swift Mercury and old Saturn were unusually bright to the naked eye. How many times they turned in their restless revolutions, I could not say; but over and over, the celestial bodies fixedly danced their elliptical rounds in endless, timeless procession.

Or it may have been in the mere twitch of an eye that night passed into morning. Dawn's rosy fingers reached out through the sky; the stars retreated before the sun's mighty advance. Presently I came to a fork in the path. Both directions were obscured from my view. In one gathered a thick formless mist, grey and impenetrable to the eye. In the other stood a gateway, closed but unlatched, embowered in a tangle of vine-thorns that clawed their way out from the hedge. They twined round the gate's bars in helical fashion, inside and outside each other. The metal beneath was wrought of an unalloyed, silvery element; in the new eastern light it shone like Goblin-wrought silver, but with a watery translucence that I could not identify, some singular magic. I stood on the threshold. To advance or to retreat? I could not see beyond; was my mission to enter? Was my answer within?

The gate sprang open at my touch. I entered unhindered by obstacles, but cautiously, feeling the weight of my duty. The brush opened up. Mist cleared to reveal an overgrown orchard, a wild untended explosion of life. A savage profusion of daisies and primroses sprang up through the dew, swathing my boots and rushing unchecked in riotous colour down a gentle slope to the smooth humming sea a half acre or so to the south. The other directions were of uncertain dimensions, each side bound by a dense rosaceous brush. The flutish strains of a thrush meandered through the canopy; from the earth came the fecund aroma of humus and lushness and myriad nameless species of flora and fauna. It seemed an improbable, timeless enclave of simplicity that had all but vanished from the waking life, an intimate, insular space of my own, beyond any kingdom, my private locus amoenus. The weight of my journey began to lift from me.

At the garden's green centre, not fifty paces away, a copse of small trees in various stages of flower and fruit studded the earth. Beneath the largest, I spied a figure, a maiden, who sat in its shade, her face partially obscured by a largish book she held up to her nose.

"Lily?" I called and hastened towards her, as I had done in many a dream.

She looked up and I paused. To my consternation, she was not Lily at all, but some warped incarnation thereof, an impostress of vague, unclear features. She nevertheless seemed somehow familiar. I saw indistinctly, squinted to make out her features. What was this creature? Where was Lily? I looked cautiously round, then progressed, step by step.

As you no doubt have guessed, the girl was Miss Granger, a fact that I registered soon enough. As she came into focus, I cursed my luckless fate she followed me even in dreams now! She was bent over a book and frowning in thought, but she must have seen me enter the garden, for as I reached her location, she looked up to me, smiled, and twittered a greeting, as if she had expected me here all along.

I waved a bumblebee away from my face and appraised this dream-Granger, perched fairy-tale style within her pile, nearly a tower, of books. She sat in the midst of a patch of newly sprung grass at the foot of a tree, some overgrown species of Malus, it seemed. Pages of parchment fanned round her; a basket of fruit sat at her side. I still barely knew the girl in waking life; perhaps that was why in this dream she seemed no less an object than the textbooks themselves.

She may not have belonged in my dream, but she seemed to belong to this garden as one of its myriad creatures. And speaking of creatures, she was not entirely alone by the tree, for none other than a serpent curled lazily about her feet, tangled around her such that I could not discern which end was which or even where girl's tresses ended and reptile began. (Reason intruded here slightly, a sleep-tinged awareness: This dream was all wrong; Miss Granger was no Slytherin. Or was she? I could not quite remember reality's details.) The serpent appeared to be sleeping. The girl ignored it, as if it were simply a natural part of existence.

I looked to the ample tree behind her. Its limbs leaned protectively over her, casting shade in a patchwork of light and dark against the lawn. New buds shot forth from its boughs; young leaflets emerged and stretched out to the sun. In every direction spread irregular branches, long dendritic fingers, vaulting intersections, crossings, offshoots at acute angles, diverging pathways dividing and subdividing as they arced overhead. All anchored to the axis of the trunk, which stood straight and strong like a bridge from the sky to the earth, beneath which its roots and the roots of the roots, the invisible underground network, twisted and turned in dense tunnels, and emerged now and then as hard knobs in the unshorn high grass.

It was clear that this tree was the heart of the garden. I could not determine whether it grew there by design or by chance. Though reason insisted it must be an ordinary tree, a known species and cultivar of certain circumference, area, and width, a mere assemblage of atoms and energy, conquerable by chemist's microscope or carpenter's nail, its majesty nonetheless held me in thrall. It seemed to my world-weary eyes immeasurable, boundless, its trunk the beginning of innumerable paths, its ramifications endless, its possibilities infinite.

But what drew my curious eye most of all were its unusual fruits, some rare sort of apple or pome. Softly rounded, whole, gentle in form, they caught the sun's light this way and that, now fiery, now golden in hue. Into the salt-air they exhaled their sweet breath. Dispersed throughout the canopy, they hung heavy, so many and fair, as numerous as a vast kingdom's subjects. Like jewels arrayed within a crown or clues laid out in a puzzling pattern, I sensed in their placement an order embedded, a pattern I could nearly distinguish; at some crucial moment, an eloquent solution might resolve before my eyes. Their mystery so struck me that I quite wished to linger a while before returning to my solitary march. I had grown weary of travelling alone, after all. Perhaps I ought to speak to the girl, discover what she knew of this place, so obviously steeped in ancient and powerful magic.

Not knowing quite how to begin, I lectured to her in the customary schoolmaster's monologue, enumerating the properties of something or other; she took notes, much the same as in real life. At first, she was merely a silent observer. But as always, she could not keep her mouth shut and presently embarked upon a series of questions, which I answered accordingly. Her queries (on Occlumency, on Defence, on everything under the sun), though deceptively simple at first, became increasingly complex in nature. I answered her accurately, of course, but I had the feeling that she was hearing more than the sum of my words, parsing their subtext for some meaning entirely other, known only to her. She seemed to have some unspoken purpose that I could not quite discern. It dawned on me then, in the midst of this strange interaction, that her questions were no longer so childish, her actions not the sub-rational instincts of an insentient creature, but those of an independent agent with a mind of her own. Might she herself be wondering why I was here? Might she be able to guide me to the knowledge I needed? Perhaps an unbidden gleam of hope took root in my mind perhaps we unknowingly sought the same intelligence. If I could discover her motives, I thought, perhaps she could help me. I might not have to go on alone. Or was she trying to trick me? Either way, I aimed to find out.

Presently she frowned, as if working out a question in her head; then she set her face in decision. She rummaged around in the basket beside her, plucked out an apple, much like the ones from the tree, and studied the thing contemplatively. I stood above her, keeping my distance, but strained my eye to examine it further: such a strange sort of fruit, not at all like an ordinary apple, but a most uncommonly inviting treasure. I determined that the mysterious tree must be the source. She did not lift it to eat, but cradled it patiently in her lap, as if it were a precious wonder all her own, a secret, forbidden to any intruder.

Slightly dazed, I resumed my attempt at a lecture, but my words seemed more and more futile and feeble. Unspoken questions crowded my mind: Could it be that she knew something? What was she thinking? As I lectured, my eye came to rest, time and again, upon her small hands, the cup of her palm, and nested within her gentle embrace in innocent, clandestine repose, the fair apple's blush. I beheld it, transfixed. What was this intimate promise it silently held? What yearning was this that came over me? The war seemed so far away from here, the girl and her apple so near to my grasp. If I could only see to its interior! I imagined a wisdom more priceless than rubies or pearls from the sea; I saw from beneath its fresh skin a hint of long-concealed secrets awaiting me, ripe for discovery, as though I (or we?) were on the brink of solving a riddle. (And did I only imagine that she turned it towards me in a tentative offering?) Was it so wrong to envy the secrets that surely passed through it, this living bond between her and the garden? I did not understand it, but I felt ever stronger this new and strange longing to share its possession, as if my life had been purposed not for war but for this unforeseen moment, as if my fate itself rested in her hands. All things seemed possible. Surely if only I were granted one taste of this fairest of fruits, the secrets of this place of the girl perhaps even those of this kingdom might lay bare before me.

She leapt up; we stood eye to eye. The serpent sank gently to the ground, twitched slightly. She was practically twitching as well, swotty hand in the air stretching skyward; in the other, the apple-fruit beckoned. I advanced towards her stepwise, half expecting her to run. But she stood her ground firmly before me.

She was struggling to speak. "I know the answer! I know what the lesson means!" she cried, but I hushed her. I would have none of her tricks or her uncertain words, for words were deceitful, polluted with falseness. I would have only the fruit and its unfiltered truth. I, a mere soldier, had so long been denied understanding, but now how close I was to finally attaining the unattainable! Here was my chance to know fully, completely, to at last master the mystery of things.

I recklessly reached out my hand. Plucking it from her fingers (she must have resisted, but I do not recall), I brought it to my lips, tasted sweet flesh

There was a moment in which everything stood still. I knew that a horrible sense of wrongness and dread descended upon me. Beyond that, I knew nothing for certain, for all that had seemed on the verge of clarity seemed to have tipped, upon one act of transgression, to a state of unutterable confusion. I now recall only impressions, emotions, as the order of things fell apart piece by piece. Events moved not in the linear progression that this narrative must follow, but unevenly, sporadically, without logic or reason. I shall attempt to relate in some fashion:

Like a beast newly exposed to the light, I blinked. I closed my eyes, opened them. At once I became conscious of my flesh, for to my horror I was now entirely naked. (You know this sort of dream, where one moment you are sure you are clothed, and the next, your companion in this case, my student, dear God! is staring at you first with incomprehension, then with wonder, and finally with fear.) In only my indecent skin, I was shaking with mortal chill and unease, my protective layers vanished, my dignity stripped. Still worse, I was suddenly, miserably aware that Miss Granger stood naked as well (though incarnadine features were mercifully abstracted, I swear it). The sweet taste in my mouth turned bitter with shame even as the words left my mouth: "What have you done, stupid girl?" But on her face there was anger and pain, and I was plainly the cause.

I stepped backwards, away from her. And at this sudden, instinctive motion of mine, the serpent, whose presence I had completely forgotten, stirred, unwound from her feet, and splayed between her and myself. It began to writhe in erratic, unpredictable waves, like a fault spread across the divided earth, a rupture. It lifted its head, swung its dead eye first to her, then to me. From its throat came a discordant, hollow hiss, a foetid stink of decay.

I started and moved to retreat. I looked in desperation to the vast tree above. The sun seemed to blind from behind it. I saw only unreachable branches, the dizzy multitude of fruits that hid, not revealed, the fragments, insensate gross matter unmoored from all meaning. They swam before me in a crude mixture of disparate elements. Each yet retained a transient, frail beauty, cruel reminder of its coming demise, the destruction carried within each mortal seed: From the moment of harvest, each fruit would slowly lose its scent and beauty; each would shrivel to dust. I could see no design in their placement now; there was only an endless, permuted procession of secrets and lies, truths and falsehoods inextricably jumbled together. The mystery of the garden remained. Only irresolvable chaos reigned.

Then real fear came upon me, a paralysing, nameless terror. I had failed; I had gained nothing; worse still, I had broken the implicit vow of a teacher to do no harm to a student. The unfortunate Miss Granger no longer seemed a deceitful trickster; now struggling to cross the serpentine barrier, she seemed small and fragile and so very distant. I felt shame, as if I were a child just as she was a child. It was I who could not be trusted; had I not proved this, time and again? I felt despair at the thought that she loathed me, and I knew then that I was alone.

"Wait, you've got it all wrong! Trust me!" she cried. "This isn't the end; you can choose!" But it was she who was wrong. I had no choice but to leave; this place was not mine, never had been, and could never be. I said nothing but turned from her silently and made to depart.

The dream at this point had begun to dissolve, with the rushing disorientation that accompanies one's thoughts upon the verge of waking. But all was not quite finished. From behind me came a scream and an even more terrible sound: the serpent's traitorous hiss of my name. I whirled round to face its merciless eye set upon me. It reared and struck

I awoke with the burning of venom thick in my veins, the taste of salt and iron on my tongue, my heart pounding out each tortured beat, life itself dimming, draining from me with each pulse of my blood. I grasped for Lily's hand, but there was no one I was dying alone. My soul cried out in raw mortal fear. Like a coward, I shivered in my own cold sweat.

But I was slumped still over my writing-desk. My mouth was not full with blood, but with heaving breath. My wand had leapt reassuringly to my hand, and the page beneath me was still white, the Slytherin serpent perched at the top of the letterhead as always. I rubbed the residual chill on my forearm, traced the indelible scar. It was only a dream, a fictive creation sprung from a silly Muggle myth I had learnt as a child and the episodes of the previous days and months, these events warped and refashioned by an overexercised mind, a stray rush of cortisol perhaps, a series of random misfirings, or a glitch in the nightly consolidation of memories, the process of encoding the previous day's events for storage. And of course I was no stranger to nightmares.

What rot had cluttered my brain mysteries and hidden truths and gardens! A practical man of my age had no business with such notions, or with the pseudo-subject of dream interpretation, a form of superstition roughly akin to mental masturbation in which only frauds like Trelawney believe. (Honestly, an octopus could make more clairvoyant predictions than she.) And a man in my position ought not to dwell on his likely mortality, nor on his female students, so I quickly put the dream from my mind, rose from my desk, and returned to the real world of Hogwarts.

¹The initial antivenins prescribed to Weasley were polyvalent preparations, general to a variety of haemotoxic venoms, with limited success. Upon my arrival, I explained to the Healers, who had never even heard of Nagini and thus had no idea what sort of venom they dealt with, that her venom shares similarities with non-magical Elapid snakes, from whose family she is derived. Yet as a Dark creature, she also represents an extension of the Dark Lord's murderous intent, endowing her with uniquely brutal capacity for violence. For example, while non-magical snake venom varies in potency based on various factors including temperature, the animal's age and physiological status, Nagini's toxicity varies depending on the potency of the Dark Lord's hatred and intent to kill. In short, I believe Weasley survived due only to a half-hearted attempt at wounding on the Dark Lord's part.

Author's Note:

* Many thanks as always to the keen eye of Countrymouse.

* My sincere apologies to anyone with a moustache.

Eight: Will and Won't

Chapter 8 of 15

Events would play themselves out to their logical conclusion . . . How fondly you submit to deception! . . . inviolably private possessions . . .

Winter/Spring 1996

So commenced the Christmas holidays. After the trying first days, I firmly resolved to have the benefit of the usual quiet stay at Hogwarts, my annual reprieve from the trials of term: the sniffs of disdain in the staff room; the sniggering whispers of students; the pervasive Gryffindor glorification; the compulsory Great Hall dining and the ritualised, purposeless greetings therein; the requisite well-mannered platitudes designed to keep empty affairs in working order; the streams of bland social intercourse from the mouths of students and teachers alike.

I received no reply from Miss Granger and so I believed her properly humbled. Some days later, this misconception was remedied in a most unfortunate manner upon my receipt of a summons to Albus's office.

I made my way to the seventh floor, where I grumbled the current password "Ignotus" to the gargoyle sentry, then ascended the smooth circle steps to the Headmaster's tower, prepared my face with impassive expression, and entered. Fawkes the phoenix squawked irritably at me¹.

I seated myself across the desk from Albus in a very uncomfortable straight-backed wooden chair and moved out of the way of my feet a magical weathervane (set to London; raining there, not that one needed a weathervane to tell that). The day's *Daily Prophet*, proud promulgator of puerile slop, lay upon the desktop; plastered across

the front page were the words:

"QUIGLEY IS GAY!

Future of Ballycastle Bats at stake?"

Beside it lay a pile of old blunted quills; a bunch of knotty skeins of string in various states of unraveling; his bezel-rimmed old pocket-watch, numbered by planets; and a half-created crossword puzzle.

He greeted me above the baritone din of his menagerie of magical devices, the 'whizzing gizmos', as he often referred to them: the dissonant ticks of a pendulum, the low hum of a miniature pulsar, the whirl of a continual motion merry-go-round, the vibration from a pile of glowing Remembralls. Behind him, a pile of Galleons had been thrown carelessly onto a shelf, soon to be lost under a stack of books and a sand hourglass, a time-turner, a hollow goat horn, and an assortment of other 'oddments' that I knew to be trinkets and keepsakes from memorable students. The Sorting Hat, reeking as always of Gryffindor bias, perched smugly atop this assemblage. His Pensieve was removed from its usual place; it now sat next to a kettle on the floor aside the desk.

I had assumed the meeting's subject to be the Dark Lord's potential motives for an attack on the Ministry and the use of Nagini as a weapon. But as Albus began to speak, I soon found the situation much worse than I had suspected. The gist was this: On the night of the attack on Arthur Weasley at the Ministry, Mr. Potter, still at Hogwarts, had experienced some sort of simultaneous dream of the event and had awoken and run straight to warn Dumbledore, whereupon the Order was alerted and Arthur's life saved in the nick of time.

My first reaction to this incredible tale was anger: "Why did you not tell me of this sooner? You have been avoiding me."

"You would have known immediately if you did not insist on shunning Grimmauld Place," said Dumbledore. "There is quite the Christmas celebration going on there now."

"Sod Christmas." I glared balefully, as would any underpaid, unappreciated employee.

"I'm sure there are several who would be quite pleased to see you there, including Arthur himself. After all, the antidote saved his life."

"You seem to think Potter saved his life," I said, mentally discarding his suggestion.

"Yes, that too."

"You say the boy saw the attack in a dream?" I said incredulously, able to make neither head nor tail of this turn of events. I recalled something of the strange dream I had of a snake, which I have previously described; but due to its irrelevance and the disquieting nature of Granger's involvement in it, I elected to remain silent on that subject. I kept it well-occluded, far beneath many protective layers of memory, bundled it tightly in some long-buried Lily-dream (a thoroughly chaste one, of course; that was the safest location), and guarded my eyes from his steel-pointed gaze.

A chime tinkled behind him. "Not exactly," he said, inclining his head, shifting his wand from one steady but varicose hand to the other. "And you ought not to be so quick to judge dreams so harshly. They may serve a purpose. For instance, they may goad us to act. Or to reconsider . . ."

I looked up, too sharply. Had he glimpsed something of my untoward subconscious? No, it was merely his usual sermonising; he continued on about Potter, not even looking at me, but contemplating his wand, which he idly tapped against the desk, directing its point away from my person as was proper etiquette. No, it was not exactly a dream, he continued, but a heightened, altered state that arose when Potter was in a vulnerable state such as sleep, in which could surface a strange sort of mental connection between Lord V... and Potter, one that transcended space and time, a mysterious bond he had long suspected and now considered all but certain.

Much unsettled, I said, "Headmaster . . . you are certainly much more experienced than I in the ways of magic. But I have never heard of such a connection as you describe. With all due respect it seems quite impossible. You are suggesting a manner of magic that violates the most fundamental restrictions of theory. I there must be a more reasonable explanation. Perhaps Potter is lying . . ."

At this, the Headmaster stood and paced to the window, pausing between a lunascope and a double-faced turn-of-the-century clock. Facing away from me, he said, "Harry is not lying. I am quite certain that Harry has been sharing Tom Riddle's thoughts and emotions at times. I know, on the face of it, it seems highly unusual. But as you already know, neither of them are usual wizards."

Potter, not a usual wizard! I muttered, "As *you* already know, I believe Potter is as abysmally average as wizards go."

He ignored me: "I believe the connection is becoming stronger and more dangerous."

"But have you any theory as to its nature? How could this have come about?"

"I have several hypotheses. It may have resulted from the extraordinary rebounding of the killing curse so many years ago. But as to the details well, I've some speculations, but they are not yet ready to be tested or shared with even my most trusted advisor." He looked at me meaningfully, as if I were to believe myself that man (and I almost believed how stupid I was!). "That is why you will have to trust me to proceed in the best way possible," he said.

". . . I do," I said, bitter because it was true. For all that I loathed being kept in the dark, I knew that without Albus's far-seeing direction, all would be lost. After all, he was the greatest wizard of his age, the only wizard (save the Dark Lord himself) powerful and willful enough to openly defy the Ministry and even the Wizengamot. He alone among men seemed able to wield his authority with restraint and finesse; one had only to note his noble declining of the position of Minister for Magic, instead choosing to preside over Hogwarts. Over the years, he had kept the school oriented to the Founders' traditions and prevented its degeneration into a factory for Ministry apologists, had kept their political fingers out of the curriculum and out of the teachers' affairs. It was not a perfect institution, not perfectly insulated from the corruptions of the greater society, but it was the closest thing we had in wizarding Britain. Only here could the poorest of magical children find refuge and rise through its ranks based on merit²; only at Hogwarts was learnedness sought, at least in theory. Albus's foresight in preserving the academy's independence now allowed him the autonomy to coordinate from the Headmaster's tower the movement of each Order cell and operation without the Ministry's meddling. He would collate the data each member collected, arrange all the players; with his supervision events would play themselves out to their logical conclusion. He would do what no lesser wizard could, navigate the course of the war and guide Hogwarts to safe harbour, the Order to victory and the Dark Lord to death.

He turned around, and he seemed tired and worn. Blue wrinkled bags hung under his eyes; his creases had worried and deepened to fissures. I suddenly realised that he was aging a great deal. Certainly he was no less powerful than ever, and of course he had always been old to my eyes twenty years' passage was nothing to him but some barely perceptible change had come over him, a weariness that belonged to an old man, not an ancient wizard.

"That is good to know," he said benignly, "because we will need to do some investigations into this matter. And as you are aware, the most robust experiments employ a double-blind method: that is, in which both experimenter and subject remain unaware of the true nature of the experiment. Of course, this arrangement is especially crucial in your position, to protect both you and the Order from Tom's finding out."

"What sort of investigations?" I had the presentiment of a trap.

He hesitated. "I would like you to conduct private lessons with Harry in Occlumency this coming term."

My anger returned in a flash. Occlumency! This could be no coincidence, after Granger's bold proposition and unusual post-refusal silence of the previous week.

"Did *Miss Granger* supply this notion to you, by chance?" I spat.

Hiding behind the fierce glitter of his half-moon spectacles, he pled innocence: "The circumstances themselves suggest that training Harry in Occlumency would be a very wise course of action."

"He is underage. Are you not concerned for his tender mind?"

"We haven't got much of a choice, I'm afraid. We must discover more about the nature of this mental connection. And he *must*, for his own safety and that of all Order members, shut down any opening the Dark Lord might have into his memories or feelings. It is for this reason that I am counting on your expertise to help Harry master the necessary techniques."

I sat in bitter, dubious silence until he added, "I suppose I did mention Occlumency to Miss Granger in passing the other day. I believe she approves of the idea."

"Merlin's bloody balls, what has Granger's approval got to do with anything?" I had let out the words before I could control myself.

Albus gave me a stern look, and I suddenly wondered if the shame creeping over me was how the girl felt at my own dark glowers after one of her combative outbursts. But that was different; she was a child and I her professor, whereas Albus was being completely opaque and unreasonable.

He said, "I confess I am hoping she will convince Harry to apply himself to his Occlumency studies with you. He may need the prodding. In fact, it might be useful to have her attend your lessons as well. I'm sure she would be delighted to learn, and she is well-grounded and close enough to the age of consent that I have no concerns. It would certainly help Harry to have her there. She could well be the perfect messenger between you and Harry."

"Why don't I give the whole school private lessons? I haven't nearly enough tasks; of course I wish nothing more than to fill my evenings tutoring students in arcane subjects."

"Oh, Severus. Yes, you may certainly teach them both." He clucked approvingly. "And by the way, happy birthday. It is approaching, correct? I shall insist that you come up for a whisky and a birthday sing-along with the old masters."³

Several of the portraits chuckled and broke into song.

There was nothing happy about my birth, and he knew it. And he knew, as he so casually dismissed me, that I sat seething under my skin, yet he twinkled and nodded and hummed a little tune under his breath. Why must I, and not Albus himself, suffer these lessons with Potter? Had not the boy and his ilk caused me enough pains already? Was Potter not his favourite, his all-important acolyte? Granger's surveillance of my office was evidently insufficient; was Potter also to infiltrate the Slytherin lair, to determine my true loyalties for the untrusting master? Why, why? Always instructions with no explanation, as he sought my submission to more and more onerous tasks!

Golden boy Potter and his prophecy! The once and future Saviour of the wizarding world, the boy who had lived (and if only he had not! Had he only been struck first, perhaps then she might still be alive), the idol the populace needed: rich, upper-caste, privileged, practically pure-blood (and so easy it had been to forget that Lily was Muggle-born), foolhardy (a trait seen as bravery by his quivering brethren), mediocre at everything save Quidditch, thus thoroughly and safely the paragon of British wizardry. So safe that his bleating herd of devotees (you, hypocrite Reader!) need never question or doubt who serves Good and who Evil. You joyfully march as the rank and file; taking refuge in numbers and noise, bearing your Potter-standard and slavish morality, you wait to be saved by your hero or your god. You refined monsters cling to your substanceless slogans. Honour! Courage! Hope! and your faith in your sameness, in the Otherness of the enemy.

Potter! It is fools like him that have kept our society stagnating within the *ancien régime* and its medieval mindset for a thousand years, kept the good fat-fed citizens immersed in intellectual turpitude, any semblance of intelligent debate gagged in favour of soothsaying. How fondly you submit to deception! No, Azkaban has never held a political prisoner; centaurs and giants belong on reserves for their very own good; the Ministry's noble ends surely justify soul-hungry Dementors, casual Obliviation of curious Muggles and critical dissidents alike, bribes and boot-licking; and of course the Dark Lord could not possibly have returned.

But as Albus commanded, I knew my place; I was to obey. This was simply the next heavy step of my unending restitution, the punishment for my failure to be the man he thought I should be. I could never forget that I too had been a self-blinkered follower of lies; for had I not once sought honour and favour with my master by blindly bringing to him the prophecy, sealing my own fate in the process? And so at last I bowed my pitiful head.

"But no other students," I said tightly, as the old knot of shame turned in my gut. It was demeaning enough to instruct Potter without an audience too.

"That is your choice, Severus," he said solemnly.

* * *

My normally ill-humoured mood turned even blacker that winter. The Dark Lord never uttered a word about the Ministry attack or on Potter's potential involvement, but several supposedly offhanded questions he put to me on the possibilities of cross-distance mind control suggested several ominous circumstances: one, that a thought-link between him and Potter did exist, and he had learnt of it and was beginning to explore how he might exploit its properties; and two, that one could never presume the Dark Lord to impart any insight or plan of his. He remained as distrustful as ever.

Meanwhile, his ranks swelled with escaped Azkaban prisoners and Dementors, thus aggravating the risky exercise of my own occupation and commencing the systematic re-instilling of fear into the wizarding populace, most of whom had never even learnt how to produce a proper Patronus or hadn't practiced for decades. In response, the impotent Ministry, though helpless to halt this advance, wrapped its censorial tendrils ever tighter round Hogwarts and the press in a desperate attempt to convince the public otherwise. The likes of Fudge and Umbridge simply could not bear the idea of relinquishing power or even the illusion thereof. But the Dark was fast rising; it was only a matter of time before the Ministry's loosening clamp on the truth came undone.

Granger's assistantship continued in the manner I have previously described. As punishment for inflicting the torture of Occlumency lessons with Potter upon me, she scrubbed cauldrons until her dainty fingers bled ("Completely unfair," she howled, but submitted) and until she ceased her shrill denials of culpability. After that, she did not mention Potter again for a time, though she continued to needle me about mental magic. Yes, the germ of an idea had been planted into her mind, and once it had rooted she would not let it go. I did my best to ignore her.

My spirits were not lifted in the least by the invidious labour of instructing Gryffindor's own witless wonderboy. Though I do not wish to belabour Potter's story any more than absolutely necessary, if I could, I would leave him out entirely. I must at least make mention of the lessons for their tangential relation to my tale. Those sickening forays into Potter's hovel of a mind yielded few pleasures and much pain, for though I assiduously avoided even a glance at that scar or those eyes, there were some facts I could not escape. I saw that he did indeed harbour a mysterious and deeply frightening awareness at times of the Dark Lord's thoughts and memories, though I was unable to determine if the phenomenon worked both ways. I saw Weasley's blood pooled on the floor, saw the deep, dark interior of the Ministry, the unseen prophecy hidden in its bowels. And I saw Lily standing, incorporeal, beside the lifeless body of Cedric Diggory and the reborn Dark Lord; waving through the Mirror of Erised (oh, the pain and disgust at this all-too-familiar memory warped by Potter's wretched mind to contain him and his father); and in the primeval haze of an infant's impressions, her fragile, girlish form, crumpled and still, at the foot of a crib.

It was too much. In an effort to deflect the impact of these memories upon me, I distracted myself by idly chasing his memories of Miss Granger. I hoped I might find something to hold over her head or at least gain a bit of bargaining power, but at first I could barely locate anything pertinent to her at all, as I kept getting waylaid by Potter's disordered emotions, which flailed about his thick cranium like a rogue Firebolt. The boy had not a modicum of self-control. He blundered through life by blind feeling about, vague intuition, animal instinct, and reliance on Granger's feats of higher knowledge. He kept bringing me back to such juvenile obsessions as kissing Miss Chang in the Room of Requirement, winning against Slytherin at Quidditch (by cheating, I might add), and adoration of various inadequate father figures. His memories of Granger seemed to consist chiefly of her doing his homework and their past misadventures. I saw her child-self lying in the hospital wing, covered in thick black cat hair, the result of a botched Polyjuice experiment (the little thief!); saw a certain incident, of which I had been previously unaware, several years back involving the mangy Sirius Black and a time-turner, impressively and completely illegally orchestrated by the girl (so that was how those wretched, wrongdoing children had freed him!); saw her bound and tied underwater, trapped beneath the Great Lake, in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. I saw nothing in the nature of fancy for the girl on his part; instead

he seemed completely baffled by her, disdained her books and her lack of Quidditch fanaticism. I gathered that instead she must fancy him, taken in by his puffed, reckless charges, the mark of the 'Hero' on his bony forehead, and his status; a hero-worship sort of infatuation would certainly explain why they spent so much time together.

What irony that the boy allegedly so much like Lily bore such little resemblance to her, less even than did Granger! Potter's egregious conduct made Granger seem positively angelic. As a small consolation, I at least confirmed that the boy's vitriol toward me was nearly as great as mine for him, and to my slight gratification, it was couched in a hefty dose of fear. But his cowardice did not translate to obedience, and I lost my final shred of patience just before the Easter holidays, when Potter violated both school rules and wizarding law by stealing into my Pensieve and viewing several of my most intimate memories. Any other student would have been expelled for such indecent, illegal behaviour; but no, never Potter, who possessed a law unto himself and could do no wrong, though he lacked even the most basic respect for inviolably private possessions like memories. I should have hexed the little shit straight to St. Mungo's, given him the thrashing he deserved, and I would have had it not been for the better side of his parentage. I ought to have more properly punished Granger as well for her many misdeeds. Because of her, my most private memories were no doubt being passed all over Hogwarts; perhaps she was laughing the loudest. Damn them both! I was a weak enough man without my students knowing it too.

To make matters worse, the cauldron-scrubbing exercise had apparently not been as successful as I had hoped, for she came to confront me about the matter just as the Easter holidays were starting. I predicted the nature of her visit and only reluctantly admitted her into my office, dimming the light to unnerve her.

"Erm, Professor, I need to talk to you. May I ask you a question?"

The little candle-flame on my desk wrenched and twisted in time to her words.

"You may not." But I hesitated then, and she took her opening.

"You're not meeting with Harry anymore, are you?"

"Mr. Potter refuses to learn."

"What if we both took it? Me and Harry both? Maybe that would help; I could help him "

"You're jealous of your boyfriend's special treatment, are you?"

She spluttered a denial.

"I spend more than enough time babysitting you children already."

"I'm not "

"You assume I would willingly spend more hours with you than those absolutely required?"

She protested hotly that she was not interested in spending time with me either; she was merely trying to do her part for the war effort and for Harry and Dumbledore, unlike some people she knew who were letting their personal feelings get in the way and acting decidedly *childish* about the whole matter at which point in her tirade, I promptly cut her off, threw her out of my office, and told her not to return.

* * *

Albus (who was taking a temporary 'respite', as he said, from Headmastership) made little comment on the heap of tripe I had gleaned from Potter's mind. Oddly, neither did he protest my flat refusal to further entertain either Potter or Granger. He merely gave a pointed look and a guilt-inducing sigh: "Well, if you are certain you have tried to the best of your abilities, we shall just have to see if it is enough . . . Harry will just have to learn by some other means."

"He is lamentably incapable of shutting his mind. He'll never learn anything on his own."

"Well, no one really learns anything on his own, you know. And both of you must learn to collaborate. That is why I had hoped your feelings might change."

"They have not."

". . . Then perhaps I have made a mistake. I thought it had been long enough now . . . but I suppose some wounds may run too deep for healing," he said, and he was right.

So I smugly returned to my solitary existence. The Monday of Easter holiday was blessedly quiet; I was able to work with no interruptions or whiny requests, and I was quite sure I never wanted to see another student again, especially Gryffindors. Tuesday was dull. By the arrival of Thursday, our other appointed meeting day, the silence was becoming unbearable. The office seemed strange and unnatural. Each time I glanced at the clock, the hour moved yet more slowly. My mind wandered dreadfully. I imagined Granger slouched in the old Grimmauld library, thumbing through dust-covered, outdated texts and feeling unsatisfied, returning to Hogwarts, carefully etching guilty perfection into the essay on Daffy's elixir I had assigned over break, finally flinging open the door to my office (this, physically impossible as it was heavily warded) and apologising in a state of abject contrition. Then I remembered Potter, with whom she had no doubt commiserated about how horrid I was, and now I imagined the two of them enjoying their private moments at Grimmauld Place, plotting and snogging, sniggering at old Snivelly's memories and scheming for more entertainment at his expense. Any penitence of hers would be a ploy to guilt me into folding, and once I fell into her hands, what other tricks might she have up her sleeve?

But her creeping influence and my weakness prevailed. And so, after a week of pacing about, accomplishing nothing, and stewing over Miss Granger's aspersions upon my person, I found myself back at the head of my classroom watching her as she fidgeted between Potter and Weasley, refusing to meet my eye and looking pouty, and I was forced to inwardly admit, with no small amount of self-disgust, that my choler was in part due to her absence, and that if it continued, I might rather miss her company (if not her sleights to my character). How disgraceful was I to have allowed myself to grow dependent on another's presence and that of a student, a child! How quickly had I turned to a *Severus domesticus*! I considered the unexpected conundrum before me: How was I going to induce her to return to the dungeon without having to make an apology myself (which would hardly be appropriate since, you must admit, her conduct was completely out of line)? I must instead invent some sort of didactic pretext to lure her back. I finally decided to disregard my misgivings and simply offer her what she had asked for.

The fifth-year Potions class was packing up as I cleared my throat and began. "Granger, I'd like a word with you," I said blandly. A general chorus of "ooh" arose from the students, like a baying pack of hounds. (And she had the gall to call me immature!) I waited until well after the last stragglers had left us alone, until I had quelled a slight trace of self-consciousness from my mind and until she began to squirm uneasily.

"I believe you owe me something," I said finally.

". . . I do?" she said uncertainly.

"Yes . . ." She waited. "An apology," I said pointedly.

She coloured. "Oh."

I snapped, "You know, I ought to assign you detention for the rest of the year for that remark of yours the other day. I could have had Potter expelled, but I didn't. I suggest you take that into consideration before you insult your professors again."

"Why, what did Harry do?" she said and frowned, and I realised at once that I had misspoke, that she didn't know. Potter hadn't told her. Interesting.

"Mr. Potter " (How to put this?) " began to rifle through my personal possessions when I had to step out to address an emergency. I caught him just before he had done

himself real harm." (Perfectly true, in a way.)

"Really? Oh, Harry . . . I didn't know, and well, maybe I spoke out of turn"

It was not quite the groveling I was hoping for, but I supposed I could accept it. I affected a well-honed pedagogical air, aimed at a distant point on the ceiling: "Despite your abominable behaviour of last week, I have reconsidered your request for Occlumency lessons. *Not* Potter. Only for yourself.

"I have done this for two reasons: One, *if* you manage to learn anything, you may be able to advise Potter on his 'dreams'. I have got nowhere with him. But Professor Dumbledore believes you might be of help to him. Perhaps you can teach him some study habits.

"And two: As Potter's close confidante you are potentially at risk yourself of Legilimetic attack, thus putting the Order at risk. A trained Dark Legilimens and there are several could easily decide to employ this strategy at some point. I suggest Occlumency lessons in place of your Potions meetings, twice weekly, until your O.W.L.s. That will give you about a month, enough for the basics if you apply yourself properly."

She appeared to be carefully weighing the proposal.

"With you?" she said.

"Yes," I hissed and fussed with my quill.

Presently her brow furrowed; she burst out shrilly, "But the O.W.L.s "

I had anticipated this objection, of course, and said, "It would not be an extra time commitment than that which you have already given, and laborious homework is not required. It is anyhow not a subject that can be learnt through books. I will assign you some mental exercises to prepare for our sessions some you have already run across in your readings on mental magic but these can be undertaken in conjunction with your daily routine, and besides ought to help you prepare for your O.W.L.s. I'm sure you are overly prepared anyway." She still looked uncertain. "This training is of far greater importance. For the *Order*." I added, "Or is it that you feel yourself too *mature* for lessons with me?"

She coloured slightly and said, "Okay, I'd like to."

"Very well. I shall expect you tomorrow evening at your usual time. And if you would please be discreet about the nature of our lessons especially from certain 'pink' people that might be nosing about."

She grinned conspiratorially and affirmed her collusion; then she hung about, doubtless hoping for some other concession. "That will be all, Miss Granger," I said sternly, and she left in a hurry.

¹ Animals and I generally do not get on very well. That is why I now to leave their affairs to Hagrid, who, not coincidentally, is not so fond of me either.

² At least until one graduated.

³ I was in fact subjected to this.

Author's Notes:

* Tremendous thanks to Countrymouse and Hollimel for their insights and fact-checking.

* A special thank you to Charles Baudelaire for his 'hypocrite readers' and 'refined monsters' (translated from the French by various learned people, not me).

* Professor Dumbledore of course repeated his view that "some wounds run too deep for healing" to Mr. Potter later in the year. It is a direct quote from OOTP.

* I wish to acknowledge Lariopé's fic *Second Life* for the use of the metaphor of double-blind experiments. It fits the situation too well for me to resist using it here, but she (and others, I'm sure) thought of it long before I did.

Nine: Occlumency

Chapter 9 of 15

. . . the slightest qualm of conscience . . . "Thoughts can be powerful weapons" . . . How strange to see my Double . . .

Spring 1996

The next evening, Miss Granger returned to my dungeon for her first Occlumency lesson. I was well-prepared: cerebrum scrubbed of emotion, mental shields firmly erected. Still wary after the debacle with Potter, I left the Pensieve safely in my heavily-warded quarters, having removed to it any trace of my own sensitive memories. As with all of my meetings with her, the office door remained open to avoid even the possibility of unseemly suspicions on the part of any eavesdroppers. After all, one can never assume he is not being overheard. (At times, even the very walls of Hogwarts seemed to be listening.)

I would like to take a moment to impress upon the reader just how serious is the responsibility of teaching Occlumency, much more so than Potions. Its instruction must be approached with the utmost caution and care. Professorial conduct is of the greatest importance regarding such a delicate encounter between teacher and student, and self-command of both parties is essential. Due to the potential for abuse, its teaching is generally restricted to particularly gifted students or exceptional circumstances, under which purview the threat of the Dark Lord certainly applied. Even when warranted, strict laws pertain to the use of Legilimency, even for instructional purposes, and the direst of penalties accompany its misuse, as set in the International Statutes and the Pupil Protection Act of 1732 (which also handed down to us such enlightened policies as the forbiddance of whipping with anything larger than Merlin's wand and an end to the hanging of students by their thumbs in the dungeon). First, informed consent¹ is essential at any and every given moment of instruction. Normally, the corollary to this states that the pupil must be older than the legal age of consent (though apparently in Dumbledore's mind this rule applied neither to Potter nor members of his fan club). Confidentiality of any and all information shared during sessions is a second requisite, including judgements regarding students' strengths and weaknesses, emotions, reactions, and even, if necessary, confidentiality of the lessons

themselves. Third, rigorous standards for teacher training and selection are codified by law, albeit seldom applied.

I hadn't any reason for the slightest qualm of conscience. I was a highly qualified teacher, experienced in the rules of conduct regarding Occlumency instruction, and Granger, I grudgingly allowed, would likely qualify as a gifted student even without the necessity of wartime instruction. Nevertheless, due to the historic admonitions and my recent debacle with Potter, I was naturally apprehensive about the actual process of instructing Miss Granger in Occlumency. Firstly, I had never before taken a female Occlumency student and feared an accidental blunder upon some feminine detail or intimate memory. In addition, I was not keen on discovering what was sure to be aversion towards me on her part, and I resolved to avoid any memories associated with her assistantship, Potions, or myself. But she would know none of this: I assumed an expression of profound disinterest as she entered the room and sat in the chair across from my desk, more timidly than usual.

"Erm, before we start, I thought you should know " She paused and seemed to be deliberating. I waited for the remainder of her sentence, mildly curious despite myself. " I've broken some Hogwarts rules. You know, a few. Over the years."

"Are you by chance referring to a certain brewing of Polyjuice Potion?"

She gasped. "You know about that?"

"Obviously."

"But but you didn't punish us."

"Not yet," I said with a saturnine smile. She shrank a little into her robe. I continued, "Is that all? Or are there are other dark deeds in your past?"

". . . Maybe."

"Well then, we'll just have to see what they are, won't we?"

She, perched stiffly upon her chair, looked terrified. Lord only knew what Potter had told her.

"Miss Granger," I said, moved (very slightly) to pity. Perhaps some preliminary words were in order, an introduction to pique her intellect and distract her a bit. "You forget that I've already seen all your misconduct in Potter's mind. You are not going to be expelled. Now I shall give you a bit of background first. You may take notes if you wish."

She seemed more at ease as she retrieved quill and parchment.

I began with the question: "What is Occlumency?"

"Occlumency is the protection of the mind from Legilimency, which is the retrieval of one's emotions and memories by another witch or wizard." I raised an eyebrow at her. "Sir," she added hastily.

"I take it you have been reading up on Occlumency?"

"I've been trying, sir, but I haven't found much more than a few paragraphs "

"That is because Occlumency is not a subject that can be taught through words. It must be experienced. You are wasting your time in the library."

She looked uncomfortable. "That's what it said in the book too," she said.

With my most withering look, I continued: "As you have undoubtedly read, Legilimency and Occlumency are very much related two sides of the coin, as they say. A skilled Legilimens can indeed retrieve memories and their associated emotions from the mind of another. In fact, Legilimency is most often an interrogation technique, used to extract a certain memory or set of memories say, those of your interactions with Potter or Order members. In rarer cases, Legilimency could be used for control by implanting thoughts or memories. In any case, you see that Occlumency can be very useful for your protection and also to prevent strategic information from being relayed to the enemy."

She was trying not to raise her hand; it was creeping past her chin. "Sir is Legilimency always a Dark Art?"

"If the parties have agreed on equal terms to the exercise, such as a teacher and student of Occlumency, then no. In this case it is no different than practicing jinxes and counter-jinxes in class. However, it is hardly ever used in this manner except in the classroom. In the real world, Legilimency is nearly always employed for forceful interrogation, coercion, and control. Thoughts can be very powerful weapons indeed.

"My own opinion is that Legilimency often, but not always, is employed as a Dark Art, since it normally involves a person being forced to divulge information against her will and without her consent. For this reason, I would classify the study of Occlumency not only in the realm of mental magic but as a branch of Defence Against the Dark Arts.

"To understand the techniques an Occlumens employs, we must begin by examining what happens upon the casting of the Legilimens. When an attacker first enters an untrained mind, he is confronted with various memories and emotions that the spell has retrieved to the surface of consciousness. Because human memory tends toward the visual, the Legilimens often sees images. For this reason and lack of better descriptive language, we tend to casually refer to a Legilimens's experience as 'seeing'. But the content he gathers could well be auditory or derived from other senses as the mind has recorded it.

"These surface impressions are his point of entry into the network of related memories that together encompass well, the entire mind, the self. The Legilimens chooses which paths of linked memories he wishes to follow that is, unless certain ones are hidden or blocked through Occlumency.

"Now the nature of the bonds between memories is very important to how Occlumency works. Memories may be linked by cognitive themes perhaps a subject like Potions or a specific person, place, or time. So as an Occlumens, you may anticipate which themes will be of interest to your adversary and be prepared to isolate and Occlude the relevant memories.

"Memories are also related through their associated emotions. Typically, the stronger the emotion, the stronger the attached set of memories and the more accessible they are to the Legilimens. This is because the physical traces of emotions a rush of adrenaline with fear, for example are strong signals; they draw a Legilimens's attention, lead him to memories. He will be searching for these signals; he may even try to provoke you into revealing your feelings. Thus it is crucial that you clear your mind of emotion during Occlumency."

"Sir will you see exactly what I'm thinking and feeling?"

"No. Legilimency is not mind-reading, as your boyfriend refers to it."

"He's "

"This is a misleading term based on an erroneous understanding of the concept. The Legilimens cannot 'see' the process of your cognition. He cannot, except in a very vague sense or in the rarest of circumstances, know what you are thinking or have thought in the past. He gathers the sensory data through the spell. But the interpretation the meaning he ascribes to the content this is entirely his own. His conclusions are heavily influenced by which memories he chooses to follow or which the Occlumens allows him access to. Even when he studies a particular memory in detail, he remains always limited by his own observational skills, his prior knowledge, his assumptions."

"So you're saying even if I'm not Occluding, the Legilimens might not interpret correctly?"

"If you are assuming that the Occlumens's 'interpretation' of her own memory is the 'correct' one, yes, that is what I'm saying. But it is never safe to rely on that possibility. It is equally possible that the Legilimens could have insights into the memory that had never occurred to its owner.

"Take for a moment the crude analogy we just discussed of reading a book. The words may be always the same, but an understanding of the text depends heavily on the reader. He may be an expert, or he may lack an adequate vocabulary or context to understand a word of it. He may misread and think the author is saying one thing when really it is quite another, or he may see things the author never thought of. Or you may think of it this way: If you are an arithmancer, the invading Legilimens may retrieve your equations but have no understanding of their meaning. Or he may create a new theory all his own. In any case, he always imposes his particular viewpoint."

"Is that why Harry doesn't understand his visions completely or why You-Know- "

"Granger! I told you we would not discuss that."

"Sorry."

I handed her a simple syllabus, modified from the one given Potter (at which he had not even glanced and which he had then left behind in the office): "You will learn first to resist by straight blocking, preventing my access to as much of your mind as possible, in whatever manner you can. This is relatively straightforward but very exhausting. You will then move to more refined, energy-conserving techniques. You will practice selective blocking, hiding memories, and if you progress adequately you may eventually learn to offer misleading memories or emotions to the Legilimens to deflect his attack without his awareness that you are doing so.

"We will start with simple resistance. Are you ready to begin?"

"Wait! I'm not ready yet; I've, erm, I've still got questions. Can a Legilimens track any emotion?"

"In theory, yes. It depends on his skill. Any good Legilimens will plan in advance to anticipate which surface memories or feelings may lead to his objective so that he may begin to track them as swiftly as possible upon entry. Fear, anger, pain, anxiety, any emotions that correspond to a fight-or-flight physical response, produce strong and easily detectable chemical effects and are easiest to track. They are also the most relevant to a real-world situation in which you might face a Dark adversary.

"But in theory, a Legilimens could seek other emotional traces. Physical pleasure is relatively easy to detect, more diffuse feelings such as contentment less so. Albus the Headmaster, that is is very good at tracking these, ah . . . more lighthearted sentiments. You needn't worry about him, of course. And the Dark Lord, though a very powerful Legilimens, is not particularly skilled at or interested in any feelings other than negative ones. Positive emotions are . . . somewhat foreign to him. Nevertheless, you ought to attempt to suppress all emotion, regardless of its nature².

"Now. Are you ready?"

Her thin little face looked frightened again. "Miss Granger though your learning Occlumency may be useful, it is not required. You are not obliged to be here. And it is not torture, despite what you may have heard. You will not be hurt. And you may stop at any time."

She sat a bit straighter. ". . . Okay. I'm ready."

"I have no desire to dally round your brain. Clear your mind of emotion. When you feel the Legilimens, you are to resist with as much force as possible. You may wish to bring to mind a point of focus to help you resist. Practitioners often choose an image, a sound or sensation for instance, a locked room, a body of water, a colour, a cloud, something within which to hide your memories and emotions."

She nodded faintly. Upon the count of three, I cast the Legilimens and thrust gently into her mind.

The experience of Legilimency is indescribable. I shall attempt here a rough approximation of what followed:

The office vanished, and I found myself in the midst of an immense library. I recognised it at once as a mental invention of hers, an idealised form upon which she was focusing. Modeled after Hogwarts's library, hers far surpassed it: Ribbed vaulting arched across the high ceilings and drew the eye upward to towering shelves, each lined by books as numerous as leaves in a grove, that stretched in a multi-layered labyrinth so vast it seemed without beginning or end. Long shafts of sunlight filtered in through clerestory east-facing windows to the room's nave-like centre and illumined two desks, their surfaces grained and knotted and scratched by years of hard work. The surrounding catalogued aisles lay in shadow. I smelled antiquity, onionskin, sacred knowledge, heard the bewitching, beckoning hush of rare texts in the crannies and nooks.

I ought to have known she would choose the bloody library as her focus. Actually, it was not a bad move on her part. Her strategy was sound if transparent: The dense folds of memory packed into pages would be more difficult to penetrate, and though the library's construction was imperfect, its not-quite-impervious surface marred by flickers of recent memories a day-by-day pre-O.W.L.s schedule of study, a curl of smoke issuing from Hagrid's hut and by jolts of nervous energy, her mental focus was impressive. I had been wrong: She clearly had gleaned something from the texts besides definitions and had practiced some techniques before her arrival.

Curious, I glanced at some of the spines on the shelves, the repositories of her academic memories in all their prodigious detail. They were organised by subject. Arithmancy and Runes loomed large; she appeared to have read *Hogwarts: A History* in its entirety at least twice (how dull). I lingered for longer than necessary at the Potions shelf, which contained pages and pages on Polyjuice. As I went, I could not help but note the distinctly pleasurable dopaminergic surges that accompanied her memories of reading and puzzle-solving. I saw too, with pleasant surprise, that she was nearly as familiar with the Restricted Section as I had been at her age, though sadly she had hardly ventured into the Dark Arts themselves. But she had a decent amount of Defence reading under her belt.

From that particular bookshelf, a filamentous thought-thread spun outward to a cluster of related episodes: an army of adolescents practicing spells in the Room of Requirement, dozens of would-be heroes sneaking up to its seventh floor location at all hours. (So! Another scheme of Potter's. She had indeed been deceiving me all along, using my counsel on Defence for this illicit end and me none the wiser. To think, I had nearly been tempted to believe she had a genuine interest in the subject.) I filed away observations in case future leverage was called for: the flickering torches, replicas of those in my dungeon; a parchment pinned to the wall filled with dozens of signatures; the conspicuous absence of Slytherin students; a familiar collection of Defence texts; a Foe-glass; a Sneakoscope.

At this early stage in the exercise, Miss Granger was in all likelihood viewing the same succession of memories as I. She had felt the spell's touch, the fullness of entry, but I could tell that she was not yet aware of my presence; she could not yet locate the Legilimens's path through her memory. Her confusion was mounting; the untutored strands of her magic groped blindly about. With careful deliberateness, I set an incorporeal, invisible palm against the bare, exposed wall, and with the delicacy of a feather gave a firm little push. A ripple like water ran through it, its smoothness broken.

Suddenly, transported by some quirk of association, I was in my own classroom. At its head sat Snape at his desk or rather, a false-Snape, the Snape of her memory. What terrible luck I had! I, the Legilimens, balked and made to leave, for I had meant to avoid precisely this encounter. But then there came over me the slight tug of curiosity, not easily justified yet difficult to resist. I risked a brief glance at his desk. How strange to see my Double through the medium of her mind, with such a deceptive air of reality! He was surrounded by a tattered brood of papers and books, the shelves behind him clad with cracked leather bindings. Head bent, he worked steadily, calmly, his hands long and slender and pale, his left forearm delicately covered, his quill scratching methodically. He was not quite the caricature, the ugly old bat, of Potter's memories; rather, it was as if I encountered an enantiomer of myself, as does a man used only to viewing his mirror-reflection who is suddenly faced with his portrait, a slightly altered version that makes him uncertain which image is better or worse or which is a truer representation.

Her tension and fear of punishment pressed tightly against me; memory-fragments thronged guiltily round: Potter's advice on Occlumency: "You try it some time Snape trying to get inside your head it's not a bundle of laughs, you know!" She, now descending the stairs from the Room of Requirement, now crouched in a dark first-floor corridor; a shadow-Snape spoke to her softly. "I'd like to learn sometime," she whispered, defiance and curiosity and shame mingling mudily within her. My office, dark and silent, all edges and angles, and the locked Potions cabinet within, forbidden, forbidding, to which she crept closer and closer, now disarming its wards with a surge of pride, her fingers now darting in to grab her forbidden prize. Now out to the grounds, where over the Quidditch pitch a girlchild-Granger, a mere sprig, waved a painstakingly Charmed set of red and gold banners. She, minutes later, in the stands very near to where memory-Snape stood, watched him anxiously. He was much too preoccupied

with scowling and muttering at the imposter Quirrell to notice the slim shadow creeping up behind him, whispering well-chosen words, setting flame to his favourite robes (She! Deceitful elf! She knew that spell as a first year?), then proudly, furtively scurrying away as he cursed into empty thin air.

At this point, a thick pressure enclosed me; she was, weakly but steadily, attempting a barrier. The stands wavered and dimmed; I was swept back to the library as she refocused her mind. Good she was starting to learn. I dodged her, swept back through the stacks till my eye caught a half-hidden shelf with the labels 'Blood, Purity' and a glimpse of old memories cobbled together, laced with anxiety: Her first ride to Hogwarts, every compartment of the Express already filled with chattering friends, nowhere to sit. An elf rights petition with one name at the top. The high voice of a second-year Malfoy, a word hurled at her: "Mudblood!" Its echo again and again in her mind, gaining strength, gaining power, as she pored over spellbooks late into the night, as she lifted her chin in the hall past a group of Slytherin pure-bloods³ (she would show them who could do magic, wouldn't she?), as she gripped her new Gryffindor prefect's badge tight, as she squirmed in her seat in my classroom, desperate to prove herself with every stretch of her little hand in the air, higher and higher

"Emotions, Miss Granger. Calm yourself," I said aloud. Her anxiety did not fade (in fact, it increased), but she managed a block, more solid than the previous. The classroom vanished and the library facade reappeared, but darker now, the shade more opaque, the high shelves now like dense interior walls of the memory-maze. I hid in the furrows between them, slipped like a shadow from shelf to shelf, circuit to circuit, retracing at synaptic speed the scenes from her history: A clandestine round of Butterbeer in the Gryffindor common room. The Weasley Burrow: warm supper, a firelit hearth surrounded by the family that had taken her in as one of their own. A girl's bedroom filled with treasured, creased volumes of Muggle fairy tales, stories that she knew by heart, told in the deep authoritative voice of her father, stories full of make-believe magic that she had long since ceased to believe in. A wood-paneled study, yet more books, these practical and reliably factual, handsomely bound and prominently displayed, and a glimpse of a man behind a paper and tea. The same man with his hand in her mother's, a goggling proto-Granger in tow, as they strolled with a dense herd of Muggles through a neon-lit New York square on their way to the theatre. The magical letter from Hogwarts, carefully folded and saved, as we all had done, in its envelope labeled in Albus's flowery script: Ms. Hermione Granger. As I went, her defences, at first slow and weak, became surer and faster as she arrested my movements through her mind, returning me to the library, vanishing the memories and their related emotions and links. At last, I broke off. The whole exercise took maybe ten seconds at most.

I breathed in relief; the exercise had not been nearly as painful or taxing as I had feared. She had a much cooler head than Potter and had comported herself appropriately. I had maintained composure as well and, despite the incidental stumbles over my doppelganger, had managed to exercise proper pedagogic restraint and effectively skirt certain areas of an adolescent girl's mind into which a professor had no business prying. She had displayed some rudimentary skill at blocking and an apparent appreciation for learning the techniques, if not the art, of evasion. Perhaps, I thought, these sessions would not be so wholly unpleasant.

I observed that a light perspiration had broken out on her forehead; her breathing had quickened. She still sat in her chair; the desk stood safely between us. She said in a small voice, "How did I do? I tried to block you; did it work at all?"

I felt content enough to toy with her a bit: "Miss Granger, you set me on fire."

She, pausing, trembling: "I do?"

"You *did*. Or do you not remember that little incident from your first year on the Quidditch pitch? You thought I was rigging the game, did you? I'd no idea you hated me so much."

She flushed, clearly having been unaware of my perusal of that particular memory (a common beginner mistake; one must attune to every surfacing memory, however brief), and squeaked, to my amusement, "No, I don't hate you at all! I didn't then either; I-I was only a first-year, and and I know I was wrong; now I know it was Quirrell trying to tip the match, but It was Harry; he convinced me you were out to jinx him "

"Do not put it past me," I said with mock sternness, but I was not as upset as I might have been at her childish arson, for I was now enjoying her obvious shame and remorse at the act and her look of contrition.

"Am I in trouble?" she said mournfully.

I gave a long smirk as she squirmed. "I think for now it might be best to keep your little secrets between us," I said finally, and whether she breathed in relief or in dread I did not know.

On the second attempt, I trod along the acrid trail of her fears. Down, down I descended, to deep within Hogwarts's dank heart. I felt the raw edge of her panic as a Devil's Snare tightened round Weasley and Potter; snake-tendrils rubbed into her flesh as her mind raced through spells. Weasley, unmoving, inert, on an enameled chess-chequered floor. The crushing numbness inside her as she left him behind. Then up, up to the library and a moment of fatal, petrifying certainty as she saw in her mirror the eye of the basilisk, the terrible serpent-king, turned upon her, as she clutched with wild, terrified excitement the final clue scribbled on parchment that she must deliver to Weasley and Potter: PIPES. The chain of a Time-Turner cold round her neck as Potter whispered, "Sirius can escape . . ." "Nobody's supposed to change time," she quavered, half-expecting the universe to collapse any second. A black thundercloud over the Quidditch pitch, a chill wind, a crowd's choking gasp as Potter fell limp from his Nimbus. A wood filled with screams and a grisly green light as the Dark Mark rose above through the sky. Another sky, bright above Hogwarts's turrets, the ground far, far below her as she struggled in vain to control a galloping broomstick. The winnow of wind through bristles. All motion and blur. Weasley's shrill laughter was throwing her off balance; all the boys were laughing and pointing. (Yes, I too knew this feeling.) And in absurdly rich detail, steeped in palpable shame, the recurrent vision of every one of her O.W.L.s marked "T". "You are a failure," I had written in red on her Potions exam. Her fear swelled and ebbed as she fought to submerge it, as through each cortical passage, each limbic strand of her memory-web, I stole, steered a sinuous course, revolved round and backtracked, till I finally felt her resistance, gentle but firm, rise against me, till sight was extinguished to darkness and I could no longer advance.

This pattern we repeated and practiced until she had learnt to position her strength, to form and re-form it ahead of the Legilimens's line of attack and to stop him before he could reach any memory. She worked hard and by lesson's end had progressed in a not unsatisfactory manner. And afterwards, I carefully preserved in my Pensieve her memories, or rather, my memory of her memories, a bit fuzzy but still complete, in the event they were needed to further her lessons, of course.

¹ Which Potter had indeed given, despite all his whinging.

² In truth, I doubted the Dark Lord would ever bat an eye at her, but it did no harm to mention the possibility as an extra incentive for study.

³ Her memory on this point was inaccurate. Two of the group were of half-blood descent, and another dreaded his peers' discovery that he was adopted; his Muggle-born birth parents had only too gladly abandoned the little boy whose tantrums invariably coincided with the spontaneous combustion of furniture. As Slytherin Head of house, I of course was required to have full knowledge of the heritage of all house members.

Author's Notes:

* There are one or two quotes from OOTP echoed here ("Resist with as much force as possible." "You try it some time...") and also from POA ("Sirius can escape" and "Nobody's supposed to change time").

* Please check out Millie Joan's excellent fic *Camerado* for a more in-depth treatment of Occlumency; I'm indebted to her and others' previous insights.

* Thank you to Countrymouse and Hollimel for editing and assistance.

Ten: Seen and Unforeseen

Chapter 10 of 15

A co-adaptation between predator and prey . . . suddenly she could think of nothing to say . . . as my own blood expanded . . .

Spring 1996

"The next stage of Occlumency advances from direct blocking of all memories, such as you have been practicing, to indirect concealment. This will involve hiding certain memories of your choosing while leaving others open to the Legilimens."

My audience of one sat frantically scribbling the particulars. Her first several Occlumency lessons had focused on improving and refining the rudimentary blocking technique. Miss Granger was now ready to progress.

"Indirect techniques are central to more advanced Occlumency. If done correctly, they can distract or mislead the Legilimens away from his target. But you must pay careful attention to where the Legilimens is focusing within your mind, to discern his target and select the right memories to hide and those to release. You must try to anticipate, even before the encounter, what your adversary will do. That way you can take the advantage, right from the moment the spell is cast, to hide the memories he wants."

"You have already begun to practice anticipating the Legilimens as he moves. I think you have a sense of where my enquiries are going during these sessions, do you not?"

"I think so. I'm starting to see what paths you are taking sometimes . . . I know I'm not very fast."

"Well, you've just got to keep practicing, haven't you?"

"You'll still be aware that I'm Occluding, right? I mean, do you always know when I'm using Occlumency?"

"As you have been using the full block, yes. Indirect concealment is much subtler. In this strategy, you do not directly engage your combatant, but preemptively hide your memories before the need for straight blocking even arises. With some practice, this should become 'silent' enough that the Legilimens remains unaware of any concealment at all. This is the heart of the Occlumens's strategy: He must constantly act to deceive his adversary."

"Or her."

"Or her," I admitted.

She then enquired about the methods of memory concealment, to which I responded thusly:

"There are a number of ways. Firstly, you must shut down the connections between the memory in question to other memories or feelings. This will make it possible for you to block the memory without your action being detected from other parts of your mind. A more subtle, but difficult, method is to disguise the specific memory you wish to conceal within other, mundane memories. You've got a decent start at that with your library: a good place to hide things, a familiar, believable setting based on reality."

"I'm confused," she said presently. "I've been trying to clear my mind of emotions, but don't I need to let some emotions through so the Legilimens won't be suspicious that I might be Occluding?"

It was not a bad question. I thought a moment, then said: "Miss Granger, why do you never ask such questions in class?"

She tensed. "You never ask us for questions. You only ask us for answers." I scowled. She spoke with her eyes on the floor. "And even if I did, then everyone would know that I didn't understand everything."

So. There it was: She was terrified her peers would see her for what she really was. Where was the Gryffindor bravery now? I felt the start of a triumphant sneer but a glance at her naked expression stalled it. She had taken a risk in revealing this much; if I mocked her now, I was unlikely to get any truthful answers from her in the future. (Especially now that she could Occlude.)

I said indifferently, "You give far too much credit to your peers' opinions."

". . . Regarding your question: Yes, revealing a bit of emotion is necessary in silent Occlumency. But in this you must be very cautious. Emotions become difficult to control if not suppressed to the greatest extent possible. It might be a good tactic to reveal some emotion *if and only if* you are confident you have severed any ties to compromising memories. Your best bet is to reveal a bit of what you are feeling at the moment, which, if you happen to find yourself in a Death Eater interrogation, will likely be fear and will be difficult to suppress entirely anyway. In this circumstance, you would want to isolate your immediate feelings from any memories of Potter, the Order, or of me for that matter; perhaps concentrate only on your fear for yourself or some other plausible explanation for your feelings."

"The same goes for memories. If you hide *all* memories of Potter, for example, it will be obvious you are Occluding. You must conceal just enough, but not too much. You see, by what you choose to reveal you create a sort of fictional story for the Legilimens to read; with this you lead him down a false trail and away from any sensitive memories. And remember: The best fiction always holds within its falsehood an element of truth."

"Is that how you do it?" she said hesitantly.

I paused a moment. "Yes. That is how I do it." An expression of awe had come over her, and I thought, with a touch of self-congratulation, that this sort of teaching was nearly enjoyable when one had such an eager student, even if her eagerness was only to show off to Potter.

I have mentioned that I had never had a female Occlumency student. Neither had I taught a student so young. While every experience between Legilimens and Occlumens is unique, Miss Granger's lessons were singularly instructive to me at least, if not to her. Her youth was undeniably apparent. I had always considered the prerational stage of life called childhood best forgotten, characterised chiefly by mental deficiency, filthy habits, and the small, cruel tyrannies of parents. Yet now I saw hers looming so fresh and bright and so strangely lacking in guilt or pain: the unquestioning joys and fears of a child; the unsifted, unexperienced thoughts; the determining, defining events that had left their mark and led to the present Miss Granger I knew. At the same time, I could see the beginnings of her personal character, an emergent sketch still uncertain but growing, beginning to overwrite the trace of the child within her. Her mental terrain was altering, uplifted and folded by the intensity of adolescence; the child-existence, fleeting from moment to moment, was giving way to longer-viewed memories. Patches of mature thought had sprung round the outcrops of childish selfishness still indecently exposed. There was so much yet unformed. She, with the mental plasticity of the young, was still forming her self, or at least still struggling to identify it. She had not yet sealed off those unchanging parts of her self that existed for mature adults in more solidified form; she had not yet ceased to question and doubt who she was. I could not help but envy a bit this labile state, for my own form had long ago been fixed, my character hardened. She, at least, still had potential for growth and change,

perhaps even for greatness someday.

How concrete, how focused she still was in her thinking! She indeed harboured an excessive regard for factual truths, the sort that one finds in arithmancers and children, coupled with an equally excessive reverence for her friends. Of course, she was petty and manipulative, as all children are, but the girl was no Slytherin; that was for sure. She seemed to suffer from a particularly virulent form of congenital idealism, a doe-eyed naïveté and pertinacious trust in human goodness. I was so taken aback by her simple, unfounded convictions about 'rights' and 'justice' that at several points, I allowed myself some tangential commentary about the poor policies that arose from such nonsense. But she stubbornly ignored me and continued tilting at windmills, and I saw that one cannot teach moderation of view to a mind still so untempered and unready to learn. One cannot simply explain away her foolish ideas in logical fashion, for she does not really understand; words cannot give her knowledge of the world that she does not yet have. Some things come only with age.

In spite of her youth, she improved considerably over the subsequent sessions. Her talent for logic and memorisation and her well-ordered mind served her well in learning Occlumency. What a relief to instruct one such as her, especially after such a fruitless experience with the boy, whose lessons had either been gritty, physical combat or else akin to dragging a dead, dumb weight like a boulder behind me. Miss Granger, in contrast, once over her initial anxiety, seemed unconcerned about the actual invasiveness of Legilimency, but simply intent on learning the skills. She experimented with various tactics: drawing me away from sensitive areas by projecting various distracting memories as decoys, telling lies and Occluding any contradictory memories, training for nonverbal and surprise attacks. She clearly wanted to excel and would do anything to have me recognise even her smallest achievements: After every question, every session of practice, she waited hopefully in case I would say, "Good point" or "That was very well done." I gave her no such satisfaction, of course.

For the reasons previously mentioned, I continued to avoid any explicit memories of me. I knew that if I dug any deeper, I would find that she saw me as all students did as only a loathsome, spiteful, thoroughly unattractive man. I did, however, examine many of her past year's conversations with Potter, which contained substantial discussion of the Dark Lord and the Order, but surprisingly scant mention of me. What little Snape-related conversation I uncovered involved her berating Potter for neglecting his Occlumency exercises or reminding him that I was in fact an Order member and not evil incarnate. She seemed hardly to have spoken at all of the time she spent in the dungeon, and I wondered if she had simply taken my request for discretion to heart or if she might be ashamed by working for me. In any case, I was forced to draw the conclusion that whatever her motives for taking a Potions assistantship, espionage was evidently not one of them.

As the lessons progressed, we settled, in a sort of co-adaptation between predator and prey, into the respective roles of Legilimens and student Occlumens. The movements became familiar, habitual¹. I was getting to know the scheme of where she kept things in her mind, rather like learning as a child the network of footpaths through neighborhood alleys or the layout of a Muggle automobile. It was a very odd sort of familiarity to have with a girl. In fact, the whole experience was so novel that I could not help but marvel a bit at this gelatinous tangle of ganglia and glia that somehow gave rise to the consciousness known as Miss Granger. At what point had the inchoate fluxes of nature and experience coalesced into this whole human being? What frame, what design had wrought into coherence the haphazard bricolage of *prima materia*, the perceptions and memories, thoughts fluttering about like so many birds in an aviary? What depths had I still not uncovered? What untried domain awaited within her? How vast was the scope of even one mind, as mysterious a maze as man ever trod; how complex a study was this most unaccountable of machinery, most sensitive of instruments, most unpredictable and delicate of weapons! (And had Lily's mind been anything like hers? I could not help but wonder.)

In any event, the lessons were progressing so satisfactorily that I even considered making an offer to continue them into the next year. This line of thought, however, ended most abruptly upon the next evening's class, the details of which I am obliged to describe:

"So." I cleared my throat as she settled into her chair. "How are the stillness exercises coming?"

"I think I'm making some progress; I've got the Lentoirespiro down pretty well, though I'm not sure I could do it if I were really afraid. I tried to talk to Harry again, but he won't listen to me at all. Every time I ask, he lies and says he's practicing clearing his mind and that he'll resume lessons soon. I can't even bring you up without him stalking out of the room. He's being completely unreasonable."

I ignored this aside and to avoid further discussion of Potter set immediately to instruction. The exercise began in a routine fashion as she proffered various mundane memories for my perusal. But that evening I was feeling impatient. She was becoming too confident; she needed a challenge. On impulse, I decided to try a particular manoeuvre that I had not yet attempted, in which the Legilimens summons an emotion or memory of his own and transmits it to his opponent in an effort to disrupt her focus.

After several attempts² I achieved my aim: Into the midst of the memory now surfacing in which she was practicing Transfiguring a spider (one of my Salticids, as it were) into a pair of opera glasses I struck: a thrust of cold, sharp disfavour, the scathing sort a professor reserves for his dullest pupil. It hit its mark: The memory cracked open; her incipient pride of accomplishment wilted. She attempted to mount a recovery, set a straight general block and began to reconstruct her library-fortress. But her confidence was shaken; I had already gained a foothold inside. I ducked into an inconspicuous corner, thus evading detection, then advanced ever so softly through a dark flanking aisle, through one trivial memory of the girl inspecting a beetle in a jar, past another of drinking (and not only Butterbeer) with Potter and Rita Skeeter in the Three Broomsticks. Now I crept through the pub's hidden recesses and out through the door. But I found myself not in Hogsmeade's main street but upon the shore of the Great Lake, where she stood, dripping wet, garments clinging to her like drooping wings, next to an equally sopping Viktor Krum, the Quidditch player, of all people. Head half-turned towards him, she was focusing intently on the soft words and the temptation of a holiday abroad: "You must come and see the paintings in my castle . . ." And now they were sitting in alarming proximity in the Hogwarts rose garden (wait there was no such thing. And yet it looked familiar.) and suddenly she could think of nothing to say, but only the dark strands of hair that fell over his nose, the flux of his stare from her eyes to her chest (you know, he resembled me more than a bit; I could almost imagine that she was almost imagining), and his

The memory was interrupted by the ugly seborrhic face of the Weasley boy, shouting, "Fraternisation with the enemy!" a jumble of confused, contradictory feelings detached from all language or logic, and the appearance of another unexpected celebrity: Gilderoy Lockhart, strutting round the Hogwarts Great Hall with a gaudy white smile for the benefit of his new Duelling Club. The smile froze to a grimace as he assumed combat position opposite a smug memory-Snape for a 'mock' duel. She was holding her breath, then shrieking as he fell, leaping up with a rush of surprise and embarrassment. (So she'd taken a fancy to the celebrity charlatan, had she? Everybody loves a hero, especially one with hundred-Galleon hair.)

This was new and curious territory indeed. Interesting that Potter seemed to elicit none of these . . . reactions . . . from her. She wasn't still dating Krum, was she? I wondered if I could return to her memory of him; it might merit further investigation, given his closeness to Karkaroff³. Creeping from the Great Hall, retracing a memory-branch that unravelled out through this unknown interior region, I stole past a dormitory mirror that sneered, "Dear, you are hardly his type;" past a lavatory where she hid, covered her ponderous teeth with her hands, and wept; through a vessel-like passage that tightened and narrowed, even as my own blood expanded with the thrill of combat, and seemed to pulse with its own secret current that carried me along, drawing me nearer and nearer to that ineffable centre where she would be defenceless and then there it was, mere steps ahead of me; I had found the garden again, though I saw now it was no natural garden at all, merely a mimicry conjured for some Hogwarts event in her past, a Dumbledorean effort at a suitably romantic atmosphere. It was now just before me, through a half-parted gate: A new, springlike balm in the open night air, defying by magic the flurries of snow overhead, seeped over a thicket of roses. Fairy lights winked on and off through the foliage. Though I could not see her, I felt her presence, as if she were waiting, concealed, her breath within every leaflet's hushed respiration, the bat of her lashes in each furtive moth-flutter, and within each inflorescence just beyond reach, each velvet petal glistening, unfolding

I had underestimated her mental fortitude; she expelled me violently in one twitchy contraction. I fell against the desk. She had sprung like a deer from her seat. Dear God, what was I doing? I had slipped, let her get the better of me somehow. Why in Merlin's good name was *this* the temptation I could not seem to resist? One conclusion was clear: These sessions must end immediately.

She had turned a furious shade of pink, in perfect awareness of the delicate terrain I had been heading for. She returned to her seat, struggling to relax her breathing in the manner I had taught.

Ignoring a fugitive feeling of shame and an odd touch of disappointment, I marshaled my thoughts: "You failed, Miss Granger. Your defences are weak."

A wavering tremolo said, "I didn't know you were going to get s-so personal. Anyway, I did stop you."

"The *personal* is fair game for the Dark Lord. He will not respect your propriety."

"I tried . . . I couldn't find you, I got confused. You did something different."

"That is enough. You are dismissed." I added uncomfortably, "And stay away from Krum. He is . . . an unwise choice of company."

Tense silence. I avoided her eyes and she mine.

"Shall I come at the same time next week?" she said.

"No. Your Occlumency lessons are finished. O.W.L.s are approaching now and I haven't the time to waste on your mind."

Her eyes filled; she quickly looked down to hide them. Immediately I regretted my words, and just as quickly I felt my own weakness at being now so easily manipulated by her tears. Nonetheless, I relented: "You see, it would be more useful . . . if you would . . . assist me in marking final exams. You may pick them up next week at our regular meeting hour."

Her expression gradually cleared. She agreed and waited expectantly, dutifully, for more.

"That will be all, Miss Granger. You may leave," I said softly, before I could do more damage.

¹ This is an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of one-on-one teaching, as the parties fall into a comfortable counterpoint that ultimately hinders advancement.

² I am not a particularly skilled Legilimens, having mostly employed it in a classroom environment. My students do not need to know this.

³ A former Death Eater who then headed Krum's school.

Author's Notes:

* "Fraternisation with the enemy" is a direct quote from GOF.

* Thank you to T.H. White for some language and his insights on the nature of youth.

* A 'wide, untried domain awaited' is language stolen from Walt Whitman.

Eleven: The Second War Begins

Chapter 11 of 15

. . . What mind would not bend, even break? . . . nothing but a safely abstracted composite . . . *Arm yourselves now* . . .

Reader, I know you don't give a shit about a middle-aged man's prurient musings. The real reason you are still reading is to find out if I really murdered Albus Dumbledore. Well, of course I murdered him. Don't be so shocked, gentle Reader. Had you hoped my soul would be cured by years of remorse and the teaching of innocent children? Had you thought I would learn some sort of code of honour from the noble Knights of the Phoenix or that I would emerge reformed and refined from the impeccably moral alembic of Miss Granger's mind? Hardly. This is not a morality play in which the hero triumphs with his newfound principles or his transcendental consolations; here there are no pat simple-minded lessons to take home at the end. I killed him with full knowledge of my actions.

Or perhaps you are one of those readers who seek not a tale of moral instruction but rather one of delight. Perhaps you are aroused by the prospect of violence and starting to drool at the prospect of forthcoming deathly details. You want drama, wand-waving, flashy bangs, special effects, the usual devices of a story. But this is neither a Muggle motion picture nor a Skeeter tell-all, and I shall give you no such pleasure.

In any case, the sum of my actions and not any subsequent words shall speak for themselves. I am certain that nothing I could say would change your interpretation anyway; you have already drawn your own portrait of me, sentenced me in your mind as a terrorist (or a war criminal, Nazi, brute, brigand, barbarian, or whatever term is fashionable at the moment). But for Hermione's understanding I must chronicle several details from the summer of 1996:

O.W.L.s came and went, as did the fiasco I had been seeking to avoid, in which Potter's brave delirium resulted in the sacrifice of his godfather, Sirius Black, and nearly all of his friends as well. Miss Granger's recovery alone required my brewing with no assistance, mind you of ten different potions, which I was obliged to deliver myself to the Hogwarts hospital wing.

The wing itself was quiet; several members of Potter's militia slept in its recovery beds. The telltale unruly *rouleaux* were spread over the third pillow on the room's eastern side. After some hesitation I approached her sleeping form and set the potions upon the nightstand adjacent, moving aside the morning's paper and its flaccid headline:

"HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED RETURNS"

She lay on her side, turned away from me and covered by a white hospital sheet. The regular rise and fall of her shoulders suggested deep sleep. I wondered if she might still be in pain or with fever, but I could not see her face. She would never know if I leaned over just to examine

"Tsssk," whispered Madam Pomfrey, the school matron. (How had she crept up on me?) "You mustn't wake her. She had a very hard time falling asleep."

I retreated stiffly to the doorway and gestured toward the potions on the bedstand. She bustled over to pick them up.

"Severus, really, thank you. This is most generous . . . You needn't have gone through the trouble; I could have ordered them in the usual manner," said Pomfrey, continuing quickly: "But I'm sure you're right we would not want to take chances with inferior brews."

"I must explain the exact dosage to her. Each one is very precise."

"Oh no, you know I never allow students to dose themselves. I'll be handling the entire schedule. And I *am* quite familiar with these potions; I've been doing this a few

years."

I felt a scowl begin to form. She added, "You're welcome to come back and visit when she's awake. If you'd like, I can let you know "

"That won't be necessary," I said and turned to go before any further insinuations could be made.

Soon afterwards, I received a note from Miss Granger, announcing as if I did not already know that she was still in the hospital wing and impossibly bored. I still have the letter, which also included much fretting about O.W.L. results and her failure to keep Potter out of danger, as well as some nonsense about rethinking the merits of Divination now that she knew of the Department of Mysteries' Hall of Prophecy.

I could hardly respond to such a letter. Post was a particularly dangerous form of communication these days. More and more post-owls were intercepted by Death Eaters and the Ministry alike. Written correspondence could easily be used by either faction as evidence of disloyalty¹. I could take no chances, even on intra-Hogwarts post. I replied:

Do not write me. Please destroy my previous letter and any other written correspondence. I assure you I have already destroyed yours.

I did not hear from her again, a fact upon which I had little occasion to dwell given the demands of my occupation, which had multiplied now that the Ministry had effected the magical transfiguration from a universe in which the Dark Lord was "no longer amongst us" to one in which he was now powerful enough to control the Ministry's Dementors. This remarkable feat was soon followed by a change in government (to one equally reactionary and of only slightly less dubious merit) and the conjuring out of thin air a Ministry Plan of counterattack, complete with publicity jingles on the wireless and a Name "Operation Strong Wand" that revealed more than I cared to know about the particular insecurities of our new Minister for Magic. This act of political theatre seemed to achieve its immediate aim: to calm the panic-struck citizenry, which would have preferred to continue its ignorant slumber and was now desperate to embrace the collective fiction that something was being done about "The Situation" (as it came to be referred in popular parlance)². Dodgy sorts were plucked off the streets and sent to Azkaban with great show. Aurors conducted 'random' searches in public. (I was myself ignominiously groped on three different occasions.) Wizards appeased their wives with the purchase of Honest Willy's Wonder Wands and Weasleys' Shield Hats. In any case, it seemed to be mostly Muggles and political sorts who were threatened; so long as only one or two disappeared here and there, events could be rationalised, complacency maintained, thinking avoided. Things settled into a brittle, oppressive peace.

As it was, the Ministry's actions, or lack thereof, had no bearing on the Dark Lord's rise to power. Instead the tide of the war, Albus's fate and my own, came to turn on nothing more than a small golden ring.

I did not know, nor do I now, if the fatal curse the ring dealt to Albus Dumbledore was his reckless mistake or simply part of his plan. That night, I found him unconscious, near death; it was a miracle I did not lose him then. When he finally came to and asked for his prognosis, I could only hazard a guess that he might still have a year of life left. I tried to extract from him more details on the curse and the ring, but he would say only that he had donned the ring in error, that he had been somehow tempted to do so.

When he turned the conversation to one of my Slytherin students, Draco Malfoy, I understood even less. I thought it incomprehensible that Albus could speak so, as if he were not dying and we were merely continuing a previous conversation. In fact, we were, for only the previous night we had discussed at length Malfoy's knotty predicament. You see, in a moment of desperation the boy had recently pledged before the Dark Lord his commitment to murder the Headmaster an essentially impossible task that would likely cost him his life when he failed³. When Albus offered the casual opinion that his own death would make things much easier for Malfoy, I was still in a fog, struggling to navigate what exactly was happening and what his words were implying, when his next order came:

"You must kill me."

The words took a long time to reach me; they came slowly at me as if through a tunnel. My own voice deserted me. For an unknown quantity of time, I sat stricken. The air condensed till I felt I could not breathe. Vision thickened with pulse; behind the eye pressed a hard, burning weight, beneath the ribs a sickly dull ache. On his desk lay the mysterious ring I had never seen it before and the sword of Gryffindor. Behind it loomed the split, blackened fingernails, charred knobs and knuckles, the pulseless remains of what had once been tissue and blood. The smell of molten tallow and burnt flesh hung in the air; I shut my nostrils, a reflexive response conditioned by years of experience. From behind me came a horrible irregular clicking sound, like a mad clock's second hand gone awry. Nothing, nothing made sense.

I heard my own voice say, "Would you like me to do it now? Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"

He smiled as if I were joking, as if death were but a trifling matter. In the lightest of tones, he presented his argument that the boy must be saved from the impossible choice he now faced and slowly reason began to dawn on me: Albus had plotted out this entire conversation beforehand. He had already made up his mind: I was to take Draco's place as his murderer. If the boy was to live, there could be no other choice.

Perhaps he mistook my silence for disobedience, for I felt then his probe upon my mind, and I had no will left to Occlude. I was hearing anew in my mind those other terrible words from so long ago. ("She chose death," he had said, and a mort-cry had sounded within me as all hope was ripped from my life.) I was seeing the long chain of past and future events that bound me to this, the progression from the moment I had spoken aloud the prophecy's words to their necessary, foregone conclusion: Albus's death by my hand and the subsequent fall of Hogwarts and the Ministry. I would be known finally as a Death Eater, a traitor. I would be alone.

Finally, I nodded.

"Thank you, Severus . . . I am sorry to tell you like this. I did not realise you would be so upset."

"You thought I'd be tickled."

"Really there is no cause for sadness "

"Sadness?"

"I have practically outlived my usefulness here, after all. When the hour arrives, I shall be ready. And then you shall be free of me and all the tiresome chores I have been imposing on you." The ill-bred bird screeched on its perch; a piece of splintered bone fell from its grasp to the floor. There was a hollow clatter. "You too, Fawkes. You shall both make your own way. Have you not been longing for freedom of late?"

I knelt beside him to examine the limb. The portraits continued to watch us in absolute silence. "Why did you put on that ring?" I repeated, but he changed the subject again.

"Severus, I must ask you a question. I want you to answer me truthfully." His eyes were upon me. Sweat beaded his nose. His still-veined hand was on my arm. I waited miserably.

"What would you give to see her again?"

Sharp and quick to the sternum, the words stung. He had spoken no name, but I knew he meant Lily.

"What does it matter? It is impossible."

"But if it were offered somehow . . ."

"You know I would give anything," my constricted voice said.

He seemed to wither a bit. I tried to say more, but words would not come; they curdled and caught in my throat. I waited, found a hard edge to my thoughts, tried again: "Must we discuss this now? As much I enjoy your little heart-to-hearts, I've a murder to plan."

He leaned back and blinked at the domed ceiling. "Remember, your first priority is Draco. He needs you. Your duty is now not only to Lily Potter's son, but to all the students of Hogwarts."

"I am aware of my duties. I have given you my word; leave my reasons alone."

He closed his eyes, murmuring to himself unintelligibly: "I once thought we were so different, you and I. What did I know? I was a fool; I was wrong; we are too much alike." And with this he fell into sleep and abandoned me to my thoughts.

* * *

Let no one claim that I did not try to forestall Albus Dumbledore's death. In those first hours and days after his injury, I thought of nothing else. I imagined that the curse's power might still be thwarted somehow, or at least held at bay for a time, but I needed more details on the ring, which Albus inexplicably refused to supply. I hunted for relevant textual reference to ringlore, but there were thousands of myths and unverifiable histories of cursed rings, and my efforts were quickly overwhelmed by the mire of data. In desperate frustration, I even carried him off to St Mungo's, but most of the so-called Healers hardly knew a thing about Dark curses and could not even muster a conjecture. Even Smethwyck was of no help. (You see, this is what happens when students are trained to ignore the Dark Arts.) It was a shame Karkaroff was dead by this time.

Through it all, I had the distinct impression that the old wizard was humouring me, biding his time till I let him alone and he could resume his own secretive doings in peace. By the time word reached me of Narcissa Malfoy's plan to beg my help for her son, the curse I had attempted to trap in the Headmaster's hand had already begun to escape. I knew (how I longed to forget!) that it was only a matter of time. So it came to the midsummer date on which I found myself at my old home in Spinner's End, looking into a mother's weeping eyes and pledging an Unbreakable Vow to commit murder in place of her son.

Still I searched for an answer, anything that might obviate the crime of *ultima ratio*, even now that saving the Headmaster's life would require forfeiting my own. If only I had been a more powerful wizard, had studied more on cursed objects, or been able to force my way into Albus's mind and obtain the curse's details, I might have discovered the means to save his life. Why could he not tell me more? What was the temptation he had alluded to? On this question, he claimed he must have spoken in error, that he hardly remembered a thing from that night. His secrecy was itself a clue: It suggested the cursed ring was somehow related to the Dark Lord. But how? Why had he broken it with the sword? Had the Dark Lord rigged some sort of trap for him? It was as if he had set before me a sort of half-hidden cipher that I was forbidden to crack.

I myself was cracking instead. You might think that a man with such precarious existence under two masters, who now held on his shoulders the charge to assassinate the wizarding world's most beloved figure, would have much weightier matters in mind than a woman. But through the uncertain mixture of secrets and lies came the thoughts of Miss Granger, faint and whispering. They settled and stuck like green seeds upon the ground. I tried to brush them off, tried to remain dispassionate and pressed firmly to the cold stone of duty. But what mind could stand against such agitations as I faced? What mind would not bend, even break?

By day at least, this dilemma could be kept safely at bay. By day, Severus Snape drank toasts to the Dark Lord and casually made Unbreakable Vows. He could bear the foreknowledge of his coming trials, the lingering smell of scorched flesh and the sound of the mortal knob turning. But at night, battered and weakened, besieged from so many directions, I could not master my thoughts; my disloyal mind refused to obey my command. Indeed, the more I tried to bury Miss Granger beneath the convoluted stratagems of war, the more they came to resemble her, as if all were entangled in the same illogical mystery. I found myself idly recalling her Occlumency lessons, retracing the relief of her memories for some sort of insight. How much did she know of the prophecy, of my past? Had Potter told her of Lily by now? What was her connection to Krum? The questions swarmed through me.

Perhaps I was finally feeling the belated symptoms of long-suffered privations; perhaps it was due to the echoes of death all around me, or simply the beginning of madness. But at last I could no longer deny her pernicious effect on my flesh. In the previous months, the ritual invocation of Lily at the right moments, or at times the imagining of some nameless, faceless object, had satisfied me that all physical fantasies had stayed safely distant from my student. But now her image pursued me, waking me, taunting me with a merciless vengeance, and I finally succumbed to what I was certain constituted nothing but a temporary affliction.

I do not contest that such pollutive thoughts regarding a student were risky and ethically questionable at best. But I ask the reader to grant me this one special exception during a time of great need for refuge from the hard weight of servitude. Even a loathsome, despicable man is not made of stone, you know, and it was not as if the behaviour itself were abnormal. It was only under the cover of darkness, in the most private and solitary (though admittedly regular) manner, that I availed myself of this intimate comfort. Besides, what wizard has not indulged in mental play with the forbidden, the untouchable? Could not my private actions be likened to the popular pastime of indulgence in smutty⁴ picture books, a practice so common that I am certain even you, righteous Reader, have partaken of it once in a while?

In my line of work one could hardly afford the luxury of a tender conscience. And, I told myself, it was hardly Miss Granger *herself* that so caught my involuntary fancy, not her person, with her naive hauteur and her Muggle pedigree; it was merely an image, a corporeal echo of Lily's eternal existence within me, a somatic artefact of too many hours spent with the girl. Nothing but a safely abstracted composite, a perfectly serviceable object for harmless, mechanical flight of fancy.

So the summer stole away in hours of futile fixation upon Dark curses, enigmatic rings, and concupiscent reflection. Unable to find suitable outlet for action, my restless malaise was punctuated only by the grim satisfaction of setting onerous tasks for my house-elf² and the slight buoy of anticipation that Miss Granger would soon once again be sitting in my classroom. In fact, for once I was not dreading the students' return. As a Pyrrhic consolation, Albus had finally allowed me the Defence Against the Dark Arts post for this year, reckoning, I suppose, that my forthcoming fugitive flight would be sufficient to satisfy the conditions of the curse on the position and that any incidental risk would hardly matter to a Death Eater spy. (How very kind of him.) At the least, in the time I had left I could do my best to instil in my students some proper respect for the Dark Arts perhaps even to Granger. Thus with my course set clearly before me, I set to preparing and waiting.

¹ Even you, Reader, may be considered subversive simply for reading this.

² Let us not fool ourselves: it wasn't really the entire citizenry that was panicking, was it? How do you suppose the Dark Lord rose so quickly to power? It was hardly on his personal charm. The Ministry apologists preferred to believe that Normal, Nice People did not follow Dark Lords. But as Potter's fandom expanded, so too did his enemies' base. Death Eater support seethed below the politically correct public speeches and the haberdasheries sold in the papers. One could never capture a sense of the times simply by examining the *Prophet*. No, if we wish a more complete, truthful picture of public sentiment, we must turn to writings of a more tenebrous hue. Take the following leaflet in wide circulation at this time, spread by anonymous mass owl-dropping campaigns: (The origin and date of writing are unknown, but it was virtually identical to one I recall from the 70s.)

The Secret Truth About Muggle-borns the Ministry Doesn't Want You to Hear

Myth: *Muggle-borns have the same magical abilities as pure-bloods.*

Fact: *Schools have brainwashed wizards from birth to believe this myth. But studies by Dr. Eugene B. Sangreal prove beyond any doubt that Muggle-born magic is degenerate. "The portion of the brain responsible for magic is shrunken and shriveled in Muggle-borns," he concludes after an examination of 66 Muggle-born heads from around the world. "It is physically impossible for them to do magic equal to pure-bloods." When Muggle-borns interbreed with pure-bloods, the wizarding bloodstream is polluted and the magical race deteriorates.*

Muggles and Muggle-borns do not have the magical ability to responsibly govern. We have seen the catastrophic results time and time again. For their own protection, they must not be allowed to amass too much power.

Myth: *Muggle-borns are content with their place in wizarding society.*

Fact: *Muggle-borns will never be content with their place until they have wiped out pure-bloods and done away with the Statute of Secrecy. Muggles breed like rabbits. They and their Muggle-born spawn threaten to overrun us by sheer numbers. Albus Dumbledore, Muggle supremacist, writes in the Muggle Memoranda, "Pure-bloods are only an insignificant minority. The Muggle population is so much larger, and by extension their combined happiness or suffering so much greater than wizards, that their welfare must take precedence." Muggle-borns now hold sway over the Ministry, the banks, and the Wizengamot. Do not be fooled by their lies. Would you give up your wand to the Muggles? Arm yourselves now! The wizarding world is in peril!*

Myth: *The wizarding world can change without revolution.*

Fact: *The Ministry of Magic is rotting from inside out. It is too far entrenched to be undone by incremental change. Complete, swift regime change is the only option. Fortunately, there is an alternative. The Death Eaters are wizardkind's new creators. They are creating a new political order from the ground up, and active resistance is a necessary phase. The Ministry poisons the minds of wizards and witches into thinking that Death Eaters are evil. But Death Eater tactics are no more violent than those of Albus Dumbledore. He and his Muggle cult of terrorists, the Order of the Phoenix, are now secretly killing Muggles for the sole purpose of blaming Death Eaters. They justify this action by insisting that the sacrifice of a few is necessary for the good of the rest.*

If you are appalled, know this: You do not stand alone. Blood consciousness is rising again in the wizarding world. In a world where only the strongest survive, we must not be afraid to use our power. You can help support the cause by distributing copies of this leaflet and word of underground meet-ups, and by supporting non-Muggle-affiliated businesses and organisations. Together, united for purity, we can root out corruption and restore the foundation of the wizarding world: the pure-blood family.

³ Miss Granger is by now well aware of the circumstance; I need not explain all the details here.

⁴ I should not even use this word. Smuts are perfectly respectable members of the magical community and extremely useful in vanishing-ink potions.

⁵ For example, as she could pop in and out of Hogwarts so much more easily than I, I assigned her sentry duty at Spinner's End, where she dutifully kept watch over Wormtail, the filthy creature whom the Dark Lord had 'gifted' me as a 'personal assistant' and who seemed always to be rifling through my belongings. Needless to say, he was miserably failing to uncover any evidence that could be used against me and sadly was forced to quit after a series of unfortunate and mysterious ailments that could only be blamed on the dusty environs of a Muggle home.

Author's Notes:

* "You must kill me" and "Would you like..." are direct quotes from *Deathly Hallows*. "He Who Must Not Be Named Returns" is a real headline from OOTP.

* Thanks as always to Countrymouse for her excellent help.

Twelve: Snape Victorious

Chapter 12 of 15

Possibilities limited only by one's imagination – and the will to use it . . .

Warning for the next several chapters: General creepy!Snape.

September 1996

The autumnal start to a school year lends a funny reversal of roles to the season. While sunlight withers and nature winds down to dormancy, the castle undergoes a springlike renewal. For the students, autumn brings the delights of homecoming and progression to a new year. For teachers, it carries the hope usually quickly dashed that the infusion of fresh blood into the student body might yield some reward, that the coming year might be different from the last. The first and only year I taught Defence, of course, would indeed be unique in the history of Hogwarts.

My first class of the first day of school was that of the third years, followed by the sixth-year N.E.W.T. students. I was inside the Defence classroom, putting the finishing touches on the specially prepared first N.E.W.T. lecture, when I heard their voices outside in the corridor. Upon my opening the door, the buzz subsided at once. The queue filed in and took their seats; the hush deepened as their eyes adjusted and they took in the newly Snape-transformed space.

White shirts newly starched, uniforms pressed, there they sat: Malfoy with mask of confidence in place (he had, apparently deliberately, applied an obscene quantity of oil to his hair); Crabbe, whose family tree had ensured him a place in my class; Goyle, whose voice was cracking horribly, thankfully rendering him more silent than usual; the unremarkable Li; dull, blockish Brocklehurst; the Patil girls whom I could not tell apart; Thomas, looking doubtful; Finnigan, half-awake; Macmillan with a new Muggle goatee. There was Longbottom with his usual odour of fear; Weasley, ever in need of a fumitory; Potter with his swollen-headed sneer; and there, in between them, all a-quiver with earnestness, chewing innocently on her quill, was my lovely little witch. Her robes were the same, but she seemed a shade darker than I recalled. She had let down her hair, as it was no longer required to be tied back for Potions work. (Oh, what I had been missing!) I followed her gaze from wall to wall, each of which was graced by a detailed, full-motion exhibit of a Dark Art in practice. At the display of a Dementor's Kiss, her lips parted in an 'O'; at the witch writhing under the Cruciatus, they pressed into a tight puckered line. She lowered her eyes to her desk and kept them there for a long minute.

And then, finally, finally, she inclined her face upward, and from across the room her bright eyes were resting on mine as she pulled out her textbook

"I have not asked you to take out your books," I said and she flushed.

I pitched my voice low and whispered to her of the Dark Arts. How well I recalled my own bittersweet journey as a student! Here was the frontier of magic, where the possibilities were limited only by one's imagination and the will to use it. Here, the one subject that encompassed all others she had previously known; it transcended all categories, defied all definition. How could she fail to be enthralled? Could she grasp from my words even a mote of the mystery? Could she sense the seduction, the alluring promise of power? Could she someday come to understand why so many had fallen?

None of my other students did, certainly. Potter was wearing a horrified expression. Macmillan was twiddling his wand. Malfoy was preening his freshly Brylcreemed head, pretending his recent experience put him above such a lecture. The other Slytherins refused to recognise the obvious that the untimely ends on the walls would likely be

theirs if they took the Dark Mark. None showed any inkling of awe for the delicate balance between Dark and Light, the beginningless, endless interplay without which magic could not be complete. But Miss Granger sat still, as if captive, subtly radiant in her awed reflection, her fawn eyes growing round as the moon and shining with unconcealed fascination. As I spoke, I felt the low rumble of my own voice, and I imagined the little catches of her breath as she listened to it, and little by little the room went contracting until she and I were the only ones left in a secret space bound by my words.

I continued the lecture with much more excitement than previously anticipated. I could hardly wait to watch her knocking Potter and Weasley on their arses for the rest of the year. That is, if I lasted that long.

* * *

I had just returned to the office sometime after class (which, despite its promising start, had ended somewhat sourly with Potter's insolent behaviour) when the telltale tap came at the door. Impeccable timing, that girl. I allowed her in with a wave of the wand and a well-observed, embarrassingly schoolboyish eagerness to hear the familiar refrain:

"Hi Professor." She was wearing one of her contagious smiles, and it was an effort not to return it.

"Good morning, Miss Granger."

"How was your summer?"

"Fine." (Actually, Miss Granger, I am conspiring to assassinate the Headmaster and take my fated place as the Dark Lord's sinistral hand. Speaking of which, I thought of you every night, right around midnight. And in the morning too sometimes.)

"It's nice to be back. I really enjoyed your lecture this morning."

She stood shyly. She shifted from one heel to another. In the moment that passed between her words and mine, the sway of her soft sweated flank, the gentle expansion of her chest with her breath, the thousand tiny gestures that I remembered, that I *knew*, so desire stirred within me and grew. What exactly did she want, I asked coolly.

"Sir, I was wondering if you needed an assistant again like last year"

"You could hardly be that useful in Defence," I said without thinking.

Her face fell as my hindbrain took over and hissed: *Snape, you fool!* She stammered, "I know but I thought well, I hoped I could learn, and . . ." She continued to babble some weak justification as I considered the lovely golden apple she tendered before me. (She, of course, was perfectly unaware of the ulterior implications of her petition.)

I bit: "Hmm . . . let me see. It *will* be quite a chore to bring seven class-years up to speed on material they've never learned; perhaps you could be of use there. I suppose there is quite a lot of grading; it won't be all in-class practicals. And well, I still do a bit of brewing on the side . . . I suppose, ah " (Bollocks, was I stammering?) "Are you quite sure you've got enough time? It would be no less work than last year."

"Yes, sir," she said with great solemnity. I could hardly fathom her voluntary return. Could it be that she did have an interest in Defence? (And had I not seen in her memories a sort of . . . special concern . . . she had for Defence teachers?) Or had Albus put her up to this again?

"Well. Very well. I suppose it's settled then. I shall have to bring you up to speed on the subject material since you've never even seen a proper syllabus. I am still attempting to determine what has and has not been taught over the years; I imagine most students will be needing remedial work "

"I can help you with that; I've got all my notes from the past years." She was standing very close to my desk. The scent of pressed starch and Muggle shampoo reached my sensitive nose, and I felt a flush creep damningly across my cheeks and a shame at my unproportioned thoughts; after all, she was not even yet seventeen. (I had looked up her birth date.) I hastily realigned some papers.

With some further fumbling about, I recomposed myself and gave her a stack of reading material and a command "Sit" thus preventing her exit from the room. She fell artlessly into her chair (which looked much nicer with her in it) and set immediately to reading.

I was attempting the same, all the while wondering if the dungeon had become rather too musty over the summer, when presently she said, "Since I'm here, I've got a question I hope you can answer." There was a curious inflection to her voice.

"Mmm?"

"Do you know who Fenrir Greyback is?"

I met her eyes thoughtfully. "Now, why might you want to know that?"

"I heard his name somewhere, and I thought you might know who he was."

She must have overheard a mention by Remus Lupin, an Order member (and general milquetoast) who was conducting surveillance on Greyback and his followers. "As a matter of fact, I do," I said. Greyback, as I explained, was a werewolf with a penchant for children, driven not only by blood lust, but also by rage at his helplessness to it. Since he could not prevent his monthly fate, he embraced it as his only source of power, even claimed violence as his God-given right, his natural due.

I added, "He prefers girls, especially overly talkative Gryffindors "

"Oh, shut up." She broke into a smile.

"I am not entirely joking," I said, trailing off at a certain memory too gruesome to relate. Her smile died when I fixed darkly upon her. "You are too naive to understand the dangers I am talking about," I said sternly, and she scowled. "He is not someone you want to meet."

* * *

"Miss Granger, which subjects are you taking this term?" I asked in a bored tone of voice as she worked at her desk. Over the first several days of classes, I had been trying by surreptitious means to discern her schedule, but my own was too hectic to allow any success. I finally decided to simply ask her, as she would never be the wiser to my motives anyway.

She lit up. (How she loved any excuse to answer a question! And how fond I was growing of posing questions in class that only she knew the answers to; how delightful to watch her writhe in frustration with her hand in the air while I studiously ignored her and berated all the other witless pupils) Oh, I was becoming distracted and missing her answer:

". . . and Herbology, Charms, and Arithmancy. I just couldn't give any of them up."

When she wasn't looking, I promptly scribbled the following:

H sched: Mon/Wed/Fri:

1 Runes

2 me

3 free

4 Arithmancy

Lunch

5 free?

6 Potions

Tues/Thurs:

1 Herbology

3 Charms, I think

4 free

5 Tfig

6 Potions

Any faculty of reason I once possessed had by now suffered a decisive defeat to desire. I knew I was crossing a definitive ethical line, but in my weakening state, I could not bring myself to turn her away. Instead, I conjured all manner of rationalisations: She had come to me, after all, had she not? I could not help it that she was always offering to be helpful. And there was nothing wrong with being fond of a student, was there? Dumbledore had his favoured disciple; he planned secret meetings with Potter; why could I not do the same? Was I not still a teacher? Did I not have the prerogative to take an assistant for whatever reason I chose, even simply because I so wished? I did not need Dumbledore's approval for every action of mine.

The ostensible motive for noting her schedule was to select an appropriate hour for meetings. With the N.E.W.T.-level workload, she was busy most evenings till late, and I was hard pressed myself to find time¹. In the interest of staking a firm claim on her schedule, I casually mentioned that some private Defence instruction, perhaps early Saturday mornings, would be most helpful to further her assistantship. As expected, she could not resist the lure and readily consented.

"What is it exactly that we'll be working on?" she asked eagerly.

"Thus far, you've learnt how to go through the motions for a collection of spells. But where Hogwarts education has failed is in conveying to you the essence of Defence."

"And in your opinion, sir what is that?"

"Your question itself reveals your complete ignorance. Defence Against the Dark Arts cannot be summed up in mere words. You cannot get by with a protocol and set of ingredients, the way some of you manage to pass Potions. There is no Arithmantic formula."²

She regarded me warily. "You're not intending to teach me Dark Magic, are you?"

"Silly girl. Magic has no colour."

"You know what I mean."

"I do not. Magic is a natural force. You ought to know by now that any sort of magic can be used for benefit or for harm, depending on the intent of the wizard or witch. Listen, how will you choose the proper defence without knowing the nature of the Dark Art? How could you ever create an antidote without a thorough understanding of the poison?"

"But it's one thing to know about the Dark Arts, quite another to practice them."

"The class material will . . . unfortunately . . . contain nothing you might consider objectionable content. I am at present only permitted to teach those spells arbitrarily deemed defensive in nature." I added with a supercilious smirk, "However, for you I might be willing to make an exception. If you ask very nicely."

"Don't count on it."

"That is your choice. But . . . I must encourage you to carefully consider my offer," I said, more solemnly now. "The times have changed. You ought to have all possible magical tools at your disposal, not only Ministry-approved ones."

She still wore a frown as she said, "I don't know. I'll think about it . . . Will we be working on Occlumency?"

"No." I did not look directly at her, but she seemed relieved. "The Headmaster has informed me that he himself will be working with Potter, so there is no need for us to resume lessons."

"So Harry's got Occlumency with Professor Dumbledore?"

"I assume so."

"Is that all? I mean, won't he be learning other Defence skills as well?" she said eagerly.

"I don't know. The Headmaster does not choose to include me in knowledge of all his plans." I added with a stray note of bitterness, "His double-blind safeguard."

She seemed not to notice: "I imagine he's going to teach Harry advanced Defence spells too, don't you think? Maybe now he won't be so far ahead of me. We could even invite him "

"Certainly not. You ought to be grateful; I am doing you an immense favour, undertaking the trouble of this remedial work after your inadequate performance on the Defence O.W.L."

"Oh. So it's remedial study then?" she said with visible dismay. But I was not contrite; how dare she bring up Potter and his special sessions?

"Yes, and I can guess exactly what happened at your O.W.L. You were so focused on getting an O and pleasing the examiner that you lost focus and did not defend yourself adequately."

". . . What if I don't improve? Will you will I have to leave the N.E.W.T. class? I'm not up to your standards." Her lip quivered dangerously.

(If she only knew!) I relented: "Don't be ridiculous. You will improve."

She was silent a moment. Then she said, "Professor Snape?"

"Yes?"

"When you are working for the Order, are you ever afraid?"

I hesitated, then said simply, "Of course."

She said smally, "I was afraid at the Department of Mysteries."

"Of course you were. That is only natural."

She burst out, "I was so stupid; I knew it was stupid and dangerous and I still didn't stop Harry."

"Indeed it was stupid of you. Troll-brained, even."

Her pinched face tightened. "I could have stopped him and Sirius "

Ah, she was so young. I weakened and said, "It was your first battle, was it not?"

"Yes, sir."

". . . From what I heard, you were in a very difficult situation. It is not easy to think quickly when under attack. That is one of the essential Defence skills that you and I will be working on."

She brightened as I had hoped. "You heard about the battle? From whom?"

"I believe *you know who*." Her eyes expanded like those of a frightened animal. She did not know what to make of me, did she? I smiled.

¹ During our scheduling discussions, I at one point became so desperate as to even suggest the use of a Time-Turner, as I thought Albus might still remain in possession of one or two. The idea was mutually discarded as too risky to be warranted.

² I suppose I am giving short shrift here to the subject of Arithmancy, perhaps because my talents are somewhat lacking in this area. Miss Granger will quite likely be my superior in the field by the time she passes her N.E.W.T.s. I admit that she also outperforms me in Runes, History, and writing in general; in Transfiguration and Charms, we are perhaps equals, she possessing (slightly) greater talent and I the greater experience.

Author's Notes:

* Thank you so much to beta Countrymouse.

* "I have not asked you..." is a direct quote from HBP.

Thirteen: The Half-Blood Prince

Chapter 13 of 15

. . . a delicate negotiation . . . a silent, urgent pavane of contrary motion . . . some other man, one courtier, more chivalrous than I . . . One never knows what will catch a student's fancy . . .

Autumn 1996

In the beginning, we held sessions out of doors. Mutual agreement deemed the grassy bank on the far side of the lake an appropriate space, and so when the weather was favourable we met there early Saturday mornings. Lest the sight of us arouse any suspicions in stray passersby, each morning before she arrived I took the precautionary measure of casting a Muffliato and Repelliarmus round the environs¹.

Our first duel was a minor disaster: She was so nervous that she blasted a hole in the hawthorn hedge behind me and set a large brush fire of exceedingly stubborn nature, which took us several minutes to extinguish. Though her control improved over subsequent sessions, her confidence continued to lag, hindering her responses in combat and rendering her temper especially volatile.

"Harry can protect himself without even thinking about it," she sulked on one such occasion, catching her breath and tenderly rubbing a bare calf muscle where I had struck her (very gently) through a gap in her shield. Her muscles were trembling with effort; her chest rose and fell. "And I'll never be able to match you."

"Then be thankful I am on your side. You will never have to," I replied, lowering my wand and adding, "Potter will never match me, either, I'll have you know."

"You and Harry!" she huffed. "What is it with you two? Everything is a fight between you. It's like you're determined to prove who's got the bigger wand."

"I beg your pardon," I said acidly, hastily pocketing said wand, which had drawn her eye. *You* are the one suffering from the unhealthy and futile obsession to prove yourself better than everyone. I can only surmise from your crass reference that it stems from your feelings of . . . inadequacy . . . as a witch."

"Oh honestly, now you're just "

"Will you be starting a club for the cause? We'll call it . . . "

"You're just making Hey!"

I had silently Summoned her own wand. "We'll call it Wandless Hermione's Angry Army. For short, WHAA."

She Summoned it back. "You're making fun of me, but it's your own house that maintains I shouldn't even be at Hogwarts, let alone talking with you."

"Everyone knows that is rhetoric."

"Tell that to Draco," she said brittly.

"Forget Draco. Your only concern is to learn to defend yourself."

I studied her profile, trying to read her expression. After several moments she looked up at me, her brow knitted in suspicion. "You've never used those horrid words then?"

This gave me pause. "Which words?" I said uneasily.

"You know . . . filthy . . . impure . . . Mudblood."

"I do not use those words," I said stiffly.

She regarded me dubiously. I wondered if Potter had finally told her of the memory he had seen in my Pensieve.

"In fact," I said, fairly certain I ought not to be revealing this, "I am not a pure-blood."

"You-you're not?"

"No, I'm not," I said, amused by her expression of surprise. "My father was a Muggle."

"But you're a-a Slytherin!" I was sure she had been about to say something else.

"Well spotted. Perhaps it is time for you to re-examine your own prejudices."

She coloured and folded her arms under her breasts, stammering, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean Do people know?"

"It is not a secret," I said testily. "I am not ashamed of it. But under the circumstances neither is it widely advertised."

"I won't tell anyone," she said quickly. I regarded her steadily. She continued, "Thanks for telling me . . . I'm sorry for yelling at you. I've just got a lot on my mind lately."

I followed her gaze out across the lake. A raucous flock of rooks high up in a birch had suddenly risen in flight. They circled the shore in a loose shape, black edges turning to silver in the sunlight, and departed westward, disappearing across the thin white cloud-rags stretched across the sky.

I wondered at her lack of confidence in Defence, how it seemed to be gnawing at her. Perhaps I ought to tread more carefully with her, I thought; students her age are impressionable; they think their talents or flaws define their existence. One word from a teacher could make or break them. If I were to carelessly say to Miss Granger, "You haven't any talent for Defence", she might give it up entirely. And it would not really be true either. Indeed, in times like this, one word from a teacher could win or lose a war, I thought.

"Miss Granger," I said in my least reprehensible voice. "You are doing well. Don't give up." It was an inane thing to say, but I had never imagined that choosing the appropriate words could be so difficult.

* * *

It was true; she was learning. Under my sedulous tutelage, she steadily progressed in (if not quite mastered) the subtle craft of combat. She learnt to discipline her movements, to shift the centre of power towards her, to act unpredictably and in response to the moment. She practiced, over and over, how to quickly size up her surroundings, to put the sun behind her and blind her enemy, how to strip away her costly hesitations and turn the slightest movement to her advantage. By midterm, she was well versed in nonverbal spells and was starting to respond to multiple simultaneous attacks. She could ably resist the Confundus and cast it². Of course, such material was child's play to her teacher, mere dalliance, but he was not at all bored, for such was Miss Granger's burgeoning magic that even a simple duel with her became a delicate negotiation, a silent urgent pavane of contrary motion, of advance and evasion. You see, in these moments, I could nearly forget, make believe that it was some other man, one courtier, more chivalrous than I, in control of each lesson. Was it happiness he felt? No, merely the simulacrum thereof, a temporary flight to a fragile, illusory island of *oubli*. He had not the weight of history upon him, nor the unstoppable vector of Fate rushing toward him. He measured time only in steps: Assume positions. Engage. Advance. Strike. Parry. Retreat. Repeat. With each iteration, the troubled wizarding world seemed farther away, and the green wood seemed to draw in round teacher and student like a protective cloak, secluding them in knowing conspiracy.

To the teacher's surprise, he found he learnt too: the patience to wait, to hold back the fatal manoeuvre and enjoy the diversion of watching her work. How new it all was to her! He learnt to distinguish her idiosyncrasies from the typical student behaviours in the classroom, such as her overreliance on biconcave shields and her proclivity for the Deprimo. He schooled himself to cleverly stall for time, proffering little morsels of knowledge near the end of the lesson, knowing her questions would come and postpone the moment of parting. Incidentally, he also became much better at dousing those stubborn fires of hers.

After each session, there occurred another duel: between this strange fellow and myself. He attempted to argue that the training of Miss Granger could be viewed as a noble act, as a necessary correction to an obvious oversight of Dumbledore's. To the Headmaster, Miss Granger was just another student; only Potter was worth his concern. But Potter's were not the only actions that mattered in this war, after all; his life probably depended on her. Her role could well be essential to the Dark Lord's defeat. And why should Potter be the sole recipient of such favours, as if his life were the only one worth saving? Defence was clearly her weakest subject and, I feared, the one of which she would most likely need immediate use. Since I could not cage her in my quarters (hmm . . . pity), I could at least prepare her for the inevitable.

He lost. I was no bleeding-heart altruist. My hidden purpose, as you must certainly have guessed, was entirely selfish: Our sessions afforded me the unique opportunity to stealthily watch her lithe movements without the distractions of the other students. I shall not tire you with too many details of the various positions that her fair proportions assumed, quite naturally, in the course of study, but suffice to say that by clever curricula, I devised an exponential variety of combinations and permutations to savour at my leisure, with Pensieve-aid, in the privacy of my quarters. In these moments, she was no longer Miss Granger, but the blithe spirit Hermione, appearing in all manner of anaphoric variations: Hermione stretched to full profile; Hermione flexed like a green sprig in wind; Hermione in taut athletic garb (oh happy linen!); Hermione's supple limbs, now in a fierce blur of motion, now in readied stillness; Hermione Incarceroused by web of spider silk, Snape's prey (he did not bite); Hermione poised, feet triumphantly parted in victory, above my 'immobilized' prone form, her wand tenderly aimed at my neck's happy nape. (Interpret that how you like.) And so on.

I was all too aware of the dishonourable nature of my thoughts. But, I reasoned, on the relative scale of sins committed by Severus Snape, it was minor: a mere second-circle offense, a small venial sin to distract my mind from the coming mortal one. And it is not as if my vice were particularly original. I am hardly the first *vieillard encore vert* to rhapsodise, in bad tumid prose, on his lust for the unattainable. And I will remind the reader that there is no ban on selective preservation of certain delectable memories, if honestly obtained. Let us neither pretend that I am the only wizard to have done so.

Reader, I never gave action to my thoughts. I never touched her. I taught her the theory and practice of combat, as ought any good Defence teacher. I did not canoodle, ogle or fondle. I remained as impassive, as magisterial as an ancient hemlock in the Forbidden Forest; she, innocent sylvan creature, never suspected that she might be the object of scrutiny. (Or should I say subject?) At all times, proper decorum was duly observed; the distance between us remained carefully measured and controlled, the unspoken boundary physical contact or even proximity implicitly understood by both parties. On her part, I am sure this was due to a natural repugnance. On my part, it was no noble chivalry (no matter what my other half said), but simply a self-preserving desire to avoid the horror that would surely mar her fine features were I to show any hint of unprofessorial thoughts.

Only once during our lessons was this tacit rule nearly broken, on our final outdoor session, and the transgression was hers, not mine. The morning was young, an ordinary

autumn day, and we had not yet begun practice on the day's theme: anticipation of enemy movements. I was engaged in some prefatory remarks, discreetly keeping watch as she stretched in preparation:

"You see, you must learn to estimate your adversary. Find where he is weak. If he tries to trap you, misdirect him. Lead him along till you expose his blind spots. It is not enough to know the spells; you must know your enemy's mind. You must take it. Once you learn this, you will control the magical victory "

Something hit me just below the ear.

"What the ?" I gritted my teeth as a burning warmth spread through my neck. "What was that? Was that a Stinging Hex?" I glared at her.

"What? No, look, a bee stung you!"

The offending creature was buzzing away, and with an instinctive flick of my wand, it fell to the grass.

"Are you okay?" She ran toward me. "Ooh, you're really red," she squealed and reached out

"Don't." I pulled away, and she hastily drew back her fingers. I cast the thing over and proceeded to examine it. It was not a bee at all but an exceedingly ugly red insect of iridescent wings and bulging dead eyes. Its outer shell was cracked; the antennae still twitched.

She picked it up by its wings and frowned in thought, scanning the bank. "Oh," she said. "Oh! I know what it is! Look, there's a whole swarm of them over there." She was pointing to a pulsing black cloud under the hawthorn, and I became aware of the low toneless drone of thousands of wing-beats.

"What are they?"

"You don't know?"

"If I did, would I be asking you?" I said crabbedly, my tongue feeling numb. "Well? What is your theory, Encyclopaedia Granger?"

"They've got to be Myrmidons! We learned about them in Hagrid's class last year. According to *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, they emerge in big colonies, but only once every sixteen years. You don't remember when they hatched last time?"

". . . I was too busy at the time to notice."

We moved closer. Under the hawthorn, a great pile of earth had been thrown up; antlike creatures writhed over the mound like a carpet and thickened the air above in a dark, rotating swarm. "They're social insects," she continued, warming now to her subject. "So they're all siblings. No one really knows how they communicate, probably magic through the antennae. The winged ones will be soldiers; their only job is to defend the colony against other nests, so most of them die. The other ones spend their time building underground networks and taking care of the queen's eggs and young until the next emergence comes round."

"Sounds dull. Nearly as bad as teaching at Hogwarts, I'd say."

"Oh come on, you can't really mean that?"

She was bent over beside me, studying the crumpled creature in her hand, its shell crushed, its bright-veined, membranous wings folded gently round it. Her burnt-copper hair fell over her face, and I was at once struck by the feeling that time had come loose from the its moorings and regressed to my own student days; I saw Lily with a half-open flower in her palm; Lily explaining the steps to a new potion, scribbling them in my younger self's book

"I suppose it has its moments," I said.

One never knows what will catch a student's fancy. She looked up to the spinning cloud, glints of green and gold flashing through it like a thousand tiny Snitches in sunlight, and her dark eyes sparkled bright with the wonder of discovery. "Wow," she said softly, barely audible over the warlike hum around us. "I didn't know they were so beautiful."

I snorted and said, "Well, we had better find another spot for today. They're spreading all over the bank."

"They'll be all over outside, I'll bet," she said, laying the dead soldier gently on the ground. The hordes paid no mind to their fallen comrade. "Hagrid said they get really aggressive over territory. Whole races get killed in the colony battles . . . You really ought to go to the hospital wing; it looks like you might be allergic."

"No, we'll finish the lesson. I just have to think where I lent the classroom to McGonagall this morning."

"Somewhere in the Forest? There won't be any Myrmidons in there," she said. "We could say hi to Fluffy," she added, stifling a giggle.

"Damn that dog! I still have that scar," I muttered.

She searched the ground studiously. "How about the Room of Requirement? That's a good space for Defence Against the Dark Arts . . . You know about that room, right?"

"Of course. Everyone does."

We had begun the walk back to the castle when she said without preamble, "Professor Snape? Does You-Know-Who know about me? I mean that I've been assisting you?"

"No, not that I am aware of. But he would think nothing of it. He is well-acquainted with how Hogwarts functions; you need not be concerned."

"But what about you? What if the wrong people find out you're training me in Defence?"

"There's always memory modification." She looked aghast. I added, not quite truthfully, "It's a joke."

"Seriously, sir, what if a-a suspicious student reported our our meetings to You-Know-Who? Wouldn't it make your job as an Occlumens that much harder?"

Her suspicion of me was so manifest that I hesitated. Had she divined the indecent stratagem of our sessions? "It might," I said at last. "It is true that the less dissonance between my actions and the thoughts I project to ah, him the easier it is to practice Occlumency. But . . . there are . . . nevertheless . . . good reasons to train you." She waited politely till at last I said carefully, "The war is closer to Hogwarts than you think."

She seemed pale and drawn. Had I said too much? Was the weight of her own burden finally beginning to dawn on her? How young she was for such responsibility!

"You've got to keep so many secrets," she said.

"That is my job. War is deceit."

"We mustn't be seen together in public, I don't think."

I answered scornfully, "No, what humiliation! To be seen with a Slytherin that would be Unforgivable, wouldn't it?"

"That's not it at all! I don't want to put you in more danger," she rushed on. She had picked up a twig and was worrying it between her fingers as she trotted to keep up with me.

I was somewhat mollified. "It is a small matter compared to the rest of my work."

"I can't imagine how difficult it must be. You've got to be so careful, haven't you?"

"Of course." She had clearly been reflecting on the matter, and I could not help the spot of pride that surged within me.

"Sir?"

"Yes?" I said, not untenderly, feeling a little erotic shiver.

"What is it that you project to Lord I mean, to him? I mean, I remember what you taught me; I've been practicing, but how *δπου* do it? How do you form a projection?"

My brief pleasure withered. At length, I answered, feeling the chill of the unspoken name, "Well it is not so very difficult to think of what to project. You have learnt something of that. What is difficult is to maintain one's image at all times and with solid consistency." I paused. "I suppose the best way to describe it, crudely, is that I must convince him that my sole aim is to serve him . . . and that everyone else is expendable." I hoped my tone was dispassionate. The castle loomed before us now; I pictured the Dark Lord sweeping through it, invading the minds of the students, rounding up the Muggle-borns, taking whatever liberties he wished, and I knew I must prepare her for anything.

As we neared the castle, she whispered, as if he himself were listening, "So no matter what always you've got to pretend like you don't care about anything? Or anyone?"

"That's correct." I faced well away from her. "Luckily, that is not difficult."

¹ These personal protections stood in addition to the other suffocating Hogwarts security measures newly in place, many of which I myself had arranged round the estate's border. They included a thicket of invisible Razorvine, a Caterwauling Charm, and a Cave Inimicum, a spell that particularly caught Miss Granger's fascination. The spells may have seemed impressive, I suppose, but everyone knew such scarecrows were part of the Ministry's farce. Anyone truly determined could easily find a way through.

² As I explained to Miss Granger, the real threat to anyone close to Potter was not the Confundus, but the Imperius, the counterspell to which is rather similar to that of the Confundus. Since I could not employ the former in training (much as a part of me might have otherwise wished to), resisting the Confundus was thus a crucial goal of her training. As for her ability to resist the other likely threat, a Legilimantic attack, I had to make do with her assurances that she was practicing on her own. I instructed her to Occlude at all times any sensitive memories, and to the best of my knowledge she did so. It was far too risky to test her, given my compromised state of mind.

* Thanks so much to Countrymouse for her editing and insight.

* The Muggle version of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* does not actually contain the entry on Myrmidons.

Fourteen: Hallowe'en

Chapter 14 of 15

Oh yes, I watched her . . . nestled in those secret hollows that the Dark Lord could not touch . . . waiting for the clock to stop, the hand to fall . . .

Warning: Creepy!Snape

Autumn 1996

After that day, Miss Granger insisted that we conduct sessions only in the Room of Requirement. Though she claimed fear for my safety, I knew I had frightened her with my careless mention of the Dark Lord, and she was now attempting to avoid being seen in my company. At first, I opposed the move on logistical grounds: The fickle door to the room would appear in the wall only at her asking, so I could make no preparations prior to each lesson, and more than once I found myself waiting for her in the corridor as if I were the student, pacing back and forth impatiently while Barnabus the Barmy chanted off-key, "One, two, three, one, two, three!" Nevertheless, the change in location proved advantageous, for we found that the room's setting varied exactly according to the needs of each lesson: Broomsticks appeared for a much-needed flying practice; for a session on silent movement, the floor filled with twigs and dry leaves. One day we duelled through a labyrinth of rooms not unlike the Ministry of Magic, the next a wintry forest or a Muggle city street; other times the room simply functioned as a microcosm of Hogwarts, mimicking its various locales. Once we entered to find a great raging fire, the heat and fumes of which taxed even my abilities. The room even conjured its own creatures, from Blood-Sucking Bugbears to Venomous Tentacula to disturbingly realistic replicas of Dementors.

The latter resulted from an unfortunate error of judgement on my part. After days of Miss Granger's persistent importuning, I had grudgingly agreed to allow her to practice her Patronus, but when the faux-Dementors first appeared in the room, she balked and could produce only a brief silvery mist, and since conjuring one of my own was out of the question, I was forced to watch her suffer as one image descended on her for the Kiss

When it vanished, she was kneeling and shaking, fighting to keep tears from her eyes. The effect had been real enough that even I was unnerved.

"I don't understand why I'm so bad at casting a Patronus," she cried. "Can't you show me? How do you do it? What do you think of?"

"That is none of your concern," I snapped.

She looked up, wide-eyed. "You have you have got a Patronus, haven't you?"

"Did you not hear me?" I said in a dangerous voice.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, climbing to her feet. "I don't mean to pry." But the question remained behind her eyes, and after an awkward, half-focused attempt at continuing the lesson, I brought it to an uncomfortable end. The last thing I needed was for her overactive mind to work out too much of my history.

"What time is it anyway? There's a match today," I said, squinting at the out-of-focus clock on the far wall. (I had forgotten my pocket watch.)

"You mean you can't see the clock?" She was watching me curiously.

"Just read me the time."

"I don't know; that clock's been stuck on 12:03 for weeks . . . Have you had your eyes checked? You might need glasses."

"My vision is perfectly fine." Her words prickled. ". . . As a *Muggle-born*, you are perhaps unaware that as a witch or a wizard one's faculties do not noticeably decline until later in life."

"I know that. Don't get your wand in a knot; it's not a shameful thing to need glasses. Lots of people are near-sighted; it's not just older, older people. Harry needs glasses," she added uncharitably.

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

She grinned as the door appeared like a seam in the wall. "If you still don't even know what Harry looks like, you definitely are in need of corrective lenses."

"The better to keep an eye on you three stooges, I suppose," I sneered. She shot me a dirty look as I added with a smirk, ". . . Curly."

* * *

We never returned to the bank by the wood, but I knew she still went there to practice alone. I caught her one morning, in fact. Having seen her depart from the castle, I followed, unseen, some minutes later, via a circuitous route. Soon I came to the dark wood of hawthorn and rowan. Proceeding carefully under its cover, I crept up to peer through the narrow chink of a brush-gap to the green island beyond, where Miss Granger was rehearsing the forms I had taught her.

Noiselessly, patiently, I studied her progression under the sun's changing angle. Was it the arrangement of the branches that framed her, some trick of nature, or merely my shameful condition that sharpened my senses? In the bright early light, she was neither pink nor pale, and her perpetually anxious expression seemed a shade lighter. She had attempted to pin up her hair, but feathery gold-tipped tendrils (was that the merest intimation of red?) still snaked round her shoulders. In her neat sparrow-claws she held her wand ready before her, her bare, outstretched limb a taut, precise line against the lawn.

Murmuring the names of the forms as she went, she proceeded with a sequential series of steps, tracing a wide anti-clockwise circle in the grass. She moved with the careless flexibility of the young as her unaccustomed muscles committed each movement to memory. As she neared the shore, her distorted reflection burned upon the water behind her, softly wavering, turning her ill-gathered hair-mop to a gold anadem, her fingers to hovering pale pinions. The world had gone silent, save her soft sounds and the drone of a stray bumblebee, or Myrmidon perhaps, snatching its last few minutes of life before the first frost.

I could not look away. I stood as if struck; I felt then the weight of the arrow shaft within me, ardis buried neatly into its target, and the release of its delicate poison, its mingling with my own base matter. I heard the beat of my hideous heart, and I sighed, with the hopeless resignation of the celibate, at my irremediable descent into lechery.

There we remained, perceiver and perceived, in this strange sort of stasis, for quite some time, till the morning had lengthened and the sun shone high overhead. She came to rest, thin shadow contracted behind her, mane come messily undone, the light dew of exertion distilled into a smooth sheen upon her forehead. Finally, with a sigh of her own, she entered the thicket where I hid under shadow, passing right by me, completely unconscious that I too was there.

Oh yes, I watched her, and not only while she was training. I saw her fleet-footed trots to the library; her daily march through the corridors, prefect badge prominently displayed; her gauche gaffes at those infernal Slug Club reunions. I caught with my unhallowed eye her late-night forays to the kitchens for an ice cream, her one-sided chats with the house-elves, her trips to the lavatory at certain hours, and by such observations I grew gradually attuned to her daily routes and rhythms. Each memory-fragment Snapshots, I dubbed them, was carefully placed in my Pensieve at night; in the margins of her class schedule there accumulated little annotations, such as: *Of knits in Gr common room and Avoids L. Brown*. I noted her carriage, her gait, her mercurial moods. I trailed her to the library for her daily ritual of study, where she followed a predictable pattern, settling down at her preferred table and spreading various books and parchments around her. She could sit there for hours, lost in thought, fingers fluttering, head gently inclined over her parchment or bowed in reverence over her texts, her lips murmuring as if in prayer. At mealtimes, I carefully lifted my eyes to her over the morning *Prophet* as she spread her jam in innocent ceremony, or over evening dessert while the ceiling stars winked conspiratorially at me. If she happened to catch my eyes upon her, I hastily fixed upon the celestial ceiling or simply pretended to scowl at the adjacent Potter, who usually flung back at me a self-important sneer just as James would have done, or at Weasley minor as he picked bits of beef Wellington out of his teeth.

It was impossible to avoid watching Potter and Weasley as well; they were nearly inseparable from her. In D.A.D.A., they flanked her, protruding like ugly bookends. In the halls, I invariably came upon the three of them whispering and bickering like a Runespoor's heads. Even so, their fellowship was unmistakable. I observed, with the wry chagrin of the outsider, that her incessant needling was a form of possessiveness, a symptom of regard. She seemed closer to Potter than ever before. Was it with amorous intent that she brushed powdered cantharid carapace from his robes or fussed over his Quidditch injuries? Once or twice, I even saw the two engaged in heated debate over a textbook, and I wondered if he were trying to impress her as well. But I could not determine the nature of her attentions, for even urchin Weasley was subjected to her daily harangues. Indeed, she often berated the mustelid simpleton to an even greater degree, and I was reduced to contemplating even *him* as a potential rival: a laughable notion, as I could have trounced the testicles off him without a lift of my little finger. (If only a duel could really win a woman, like in the fantasy books.)

If he even had any testicles. I could hardly believe how little he and Potter seemed to notice her. They never spoke even a word of admiration at her clear progress in Defence, at the new fluidity to her step; they continued to plagiarise her essays and take for granted her brilliance. And how could they remain so oblivious to the disarming click of her heels as she approached, or the nascent gait of a woman that she awkwardly affected upon entering a room? How could they fail to feel the adolescent frisson, the pinprick of delight? I could hardly believe that the whole class had not drawn in their breaths along with their master when she moved in her seat, wiggling in clumsy coquetry, to adjust some disordered article of clothing beneath her robes or when she wet her finger upon her lips to turn a page with and no one even looked up.

Oh, how I relished keeping a secret that was mine alone! It was with smug satisfaction and hardly a twinge of fear that I Occluded Miss Granger from the Dark Lord. It was too easy, in fact: So neatly did she fit in the spaces behind my Lily-memories, clothed in book-scent, inlaid in those secret hollows that the Dark Lord could not touch, that I kept her there, safe and secluded, as Unplottable as the Room of Requirement itself. I did not pause to wonder, until it was too late, why those spaces were there to begin with, why my master might remain so oblivious to such immediately detectable desire. I did not see that Miss Granger's enchantment was working through me as surely and insidiously as the curse to Albus's hand.

My meetings with the Headmaster were nothing but wrenching. His Legilimantic sense was so keenly attuned to matters of well, sensibility, shall we say, that in spite of my most ingenious efforts at Occlumency, I was sure he would winkle out something of my mortifying secret. Just imagine the absurd position I found myself in: the traitorous prince weekly facing the throne, seated under his monarch's unwinkingly curious gaze, labouring to lid his treacherous, simmering thoughts. I could see the look of utter revulsion spreading across his features were he ever to guess. At times, I was certain he had suspected something amiss, but he never mentioned a thing.

Indeed, I was sure he was avoiding me. This was not entirely unwelcome on my part, for I could hardly bear the sight of him: his stiff carriage hiding the spreading pain, his robes concealing the dead limb, his befuddled smiles hiding the fear he must have felt at the encroaching end and the unknown beyond. For the end was indeed advancing upon him, irresistibly, on its unpredictable schedule. I guessed he might have until spring, Draco Malfoy's feeble attempts on his life notwithstanding. Albus had kindly assured me that an appropriate moment to commit murder would somehow present itself, thus ensuring that I spent every moment on knife's edge, watching and waiting for the clock to stop, for the hand to fall. Would he give me some sort of a sign? Would I do it in madness, in despair, in furious anguish? Would I do it at all?

At one point, I feared he would die before I even had the chance to decide. It happened to be the night of the annual Hallowe'en feast (which, for the record, I have always despised). The evening had begun with typical Hogwarts pomp. The whole school had gathered in the Great Hall, which was specially bedizened for the occasion: wreaths of witches' broom draped over the entrance; curtains of spiderweb over the windows; a fleet of gold-burning tapers floated through the air; wall brackets burned with blue flames. Several stuffed trolls and a Petrified Bolge¹ loomed in one corner; in another stood a dool tree adorned with dozens of Mandrakes strung up by their roots. The

painted lords and ladies of Hogwarts, dressed in their finest, had all migrated into the hall's tapestries for the occasion while the ghosts roamed about, sniffing the baked pumpkin and sighing tragically.

Albus himself was decked out in full flaming regalia: dress robes of rich royal velvet trimmed with gold. His wand arm was tucked carefully away in its folds. He had been absent from Hogwarts all day, but had returned just in time to introduce the feast: "Tonight we have the honour of an aerial performance specially choreographed by Professor Filius Flitwick and his Charming third-year class." He gestured with his good hand to a group of fidgety third years near the entrance. "Professor McGonagall has kindly supplied the musical accompaniment. And so without further ado, I present to you " His eye twinkled theatrically. " a very special 'Vol de Nuit.'"

The clock struck seven, and a horde of flying creatures rushed in through a crack in the ceiling. The avian corps led first, a detachment of snowy owls that swept over the hall like a billowing white sail. Close behind came the chiropteral contingent; thousands of bats dropped together like a black writhing cyclone through the owl wings and gyred over the tables, their airy double membranes lifting like dark leaves in the wind. Sharp shrieks of delight erupted from the students. The younger ones, ignorant of the basics of echolocation, threw up their hands to avoid being hit. The third-year conductors waved their wands in unsynchronised fashion. Presently, above the whisper of wing-beats an altogether pleasant, familiar sound to my sensitive ears came a percussive rumour from outside, and a few seconds later a set of self-playing drums marched through the hall's entrance, followed a bevy of out-of-tune bagpipes. McGonagall wore a self-satisfied smirk, which I tried my best to ignore. The performance was otherwise unremarkable, excepting a slight wand malfunction by Miss Antimony Babel that managed to decapitate the Bolge and spatter blood all over the portrait of the Woefully-Countenanced Knight.

Through it all, of course, I was watching Miss Granger. She sat with the usual company at the Gryffindor table, tucking in to her snapdragon soup. The first time she glanced up at the High Table, my heart lurched in my chest, for I thought she was looking at me. But I soon realised she was in fact stealing worried glances at Albus, who, now that I noticed, did seem rather pale in the face. As he raised his goblet of nettle wine, I saw that his fingers were shaking with a barely perceptible palsy. By the time Miss Granger had finished her peduncle pie, Albus had emptied the goblet and was beginning to sway slightly on his throne. Not poison, surely? No, the wine had come from my own tuns, and every other staff member had partaken as well. I sniffed my own (mostly full) goblet just in case. Where had he been that had put him in such a state? I knew he had recently met with his precious protégé for one of their exclusive, à huis clos discussions. How much would I wager that Potter knew all about Albus's excursions? What secret knowledge was Albus imparting to his worthy disciple?

The Boy Who Lived was currently seated across from Granger, doggedly fixed upon the Slytherin table, where Draco Malfoy's place sat conspicuously empty. (Malfoy was avoiding me nearly as much as was Albus.) Potter suspected something, of course; his eyes were narrowed, his jaw set. A feather floated over his face, and he waved it lazily away in a gesture that somehow, oddly reminded me of the Dark Lord

I sensed, more than saw, a movement to my side: Albus had risen as if to stand. Faces automatically turned toward him as he gave a tetanic lurch and fell backward, throwing his arms up before him.

The pipes died with a dolorous whine. I leapt to my feet and took half a pace forward, as did every other professor.

In a moment in the twinkling of an eye it was over. From the floor, he held up his hand to halt my advance, aiming at me a wry, pained smile. He slowly righted himself, his lined face grey as one raised from the dead, the limp limb hanging from his sleeve like a crooked black wing. Gradually, as his ashen expression cleared and gained colour, he shrugged his sleeves back into place and looked sheepishly round at the hall full of hushed, upturned faces. "Dear me," he chuckled. "I seem to have overindulged a bit."

The third years stood in thick silence with their wands at their sides. The bats and birds had scattered at the sudden release from their magical leash, the drums vanished and pipes deflated. "No matter," said Albus. With typical panache, he struck up a full orchestra and a Straussian waltz, and for the rest of the evening set merrily to the surreptitious task of causing all the knights' moustaches to curl and uncurl in time to the music.

Treason or mutiny, which would it be? His words washed about my mind:*You must kill me . . . Then you shall be free* If I were to refuse, Draco would surely die too. And Death would come for Albus all the same. It would take his long-livered fingers, his crooked old oak limbs; it would creep through the spun-wool beard and mossy cheeks, up the forehead scored with creases to the silver-white tresses, erasing, erasing the greatest wizard of the age into nought but thin air.

I stared into the cold pie on my plate, the certainty of Albus's fate, and my own, sinking through me like some heavy thing through deep water. Damn it all! What empty nonsense he spoke! He knew as well as I that no death would free me but my own.

¹ Minerva and I had found this one wandering out of the Forest too close to the school and suitably prepared it for a more benign role at the feast. For those unfamiliar with this giant-like beast, its chief weapon is the overdeveloped nail on its thick middle finger, which it wields like a rapier.

Author's Note:

* Many thanks as always to Countrymouse for her editing and suggestions.

Fifteen: The Unbreakable Vow

Chapter 15 of 15

Treading into dangerous waters. . . Your lovely dress is in the way" . . . a useless vestigial reflex . . .

December 1996

I despise the holidays. As a rule I would never deign to attend a Christmas party save on direct order from Dumbledore. (He was not above this unique form of torture.) This year, however, Horace Slughorn's annual revel held the tantalising prospect of observing Miss Granger in more exciting attire than the shapeless school uniform. Given this exceptional circumstance, I made an uncharacteristic show of courtesy in accepting his invitation.

I had discovered her plan to attend the affair several days prior, as a result of an unfortunate incident involving several illegal potions that I had confiscated from a giddy gaggle of empty-headed girls in the hallways. I had idly set the contraband upon the extra desk, where they were quickly forgotten until that evening when Miss Granger entered for one of our final meetings before the end of term. Greeting me in the typical fashion, she sat down to her work, but I still failed to register the nature of my gaffe till some minutes later when I heard a sudden gasp...

She was sniffing an opened phial and turning a fiery shade. "Is this for me?"

I leapt up too hastily and snatched from her the offending flasks, inadvertently brushing her fingers and upsetting a candle in the process. Hot tallow spread over her desk.

"Of course not. Have you lost your senses? Sniffing an unidentified substance I ought to serve you detention; you know better than that."

"It's a love potion," she breathed.

"There is *no such thing*," I hissed.

By this time I had fled to the other side of the room. It was terribly obvious: Her foolish inhalation of the offending vapours had had a calefacient effect. A warm pink had inflamed her cheeks, her pupils grown wide . . . Sweet Circe, my folly!

I felt I must explain: "Your classmates were carting these round in the hallways, and I took them away. The holidays have made you children all muddle-headed, smuggling in things like this."

"Well, it wasn't me! They're meant for Harry. Professor Slughorn's party all the girls want to go with him... I mean, I don't, of course; he's like my brother. Are you going?"

"I do not attend Christmas parties."

She fell silent and set to cleaning her desk while I undertook the proper labelling and shelving of the illegal substances (which were to be archived along with a Lappish lungfish I had confiscated from Miss Prurock). In the bottle labelled Pollywog Powder, there was in fact the Amaranth Ale; in the InstaFog phial, the Daemiana; unlabelled bottles held the Damsel's Delight and the Salomé No.9.

This endeavour failing to adequately distract me, I sat and shuffled through the post, picking up what appeared to be a Christmas card upon my desk. Could it be . . . ?

Seasons Greetings, Mr Snape, from the Apothecary!

Stocking up for next term? Making a list and checking it twice? Our elves are hard at work to make your Christmas wishes come true! Our new line of athanors will leave your friends burning with envy. Extra discounts on Lady Blavatsky's Vanishing cream while supplies last. We've got the solution to all your Potions needs, naughty or nice!

Sincerely wishing you a Happy Christmas,

Gordon Smallweed

(Where did I know him from? Ah yes, I remembered him now: Hufflepuff, A student, family of particularly low degree. I read the last bit:)

Postscript: It has come to our attention that your last transaction, on the twenty-sixth of September 1995, involved a cancellation of one order of five hundred doxy eggs. Regarding the recent changes in egg viability, we at the Apothecary are committed to product improvement and we have consulted Britain's foremost expert on fairy evolution, Dr Ebenezer MacFusty. I have included his illuminating response: "Due to a latent fault in the bloodline, a deleterious trait has emerged in the global supply strain, whereby the self-protective venom normally produced by adult doxies develops precociously in the eggs and destroys them."

Dr MacFusty assures us that this is a natural process. A periodic purge of this sort may be necessary for the life of the colony to go on. We at the Apothecary are in search of new strains and feel certain a solution is right around the corner. In the meantime, why not try instead the closely related imp eggs...

Preposterous prattle. As if one could simply substitute the one thing for the other! I tossed it in the fire; this was Slughorn's problem now.

My subsequent efforts at concentration were equally fruitless. I shuffled a quire of manuscripts and tried to look anywhere but at Miss Granger's desk, where she sat buried in *Quintessence: A Quest*. A slash of colour in the corner caught my eye: There had entered a stray canary no doubt a remnant of student Transfiguration revision sessions. It had managed to make its deviant way down to the dungeons, and it now darted from stone nook to shelf along the office wall, scattering little fountains of dust as it went. In and out of the shadows it glinted, a garish luteous yellow. The door lay wide open, but the poor bird could not seem to locate it.

A descending dust-cloud brought a whiff of birch to me: The Salomé No.9 must have been improperly bottled, I thought and hurried back to the shelf to replace its seal.

"Damn those Weasley boys; they are making a fortune off these," I muttered, not without envy a skilled and ambitious potioneer could earn rather a lot of money if he weren't indentured to Hogwarts.

She made a funny, muffled noise and I looked up. To my astonishment, she was crying. Hastily averting my eyes, I returned to my desk while she attempted to stifle the sound. I had not caused her tears in over a year. What could I have done to offend her? Was this an odd side effect to the Damsel's Delight? Did she require a Draught of Peace?

I was quite at a loss. At last, I said stiffly, "Are you hurt?" The words sounded sharp in my throat.

Her eyes shied away. "It's nothing."

"Liar. Tell me."

She sniffled an apology and something about a row with Weasley.

I stared. "Weasley?" Surely she didn't fancy one of them, did she? How remarkably out of character that would be.

She mumbled something about Miss Brown. "Do you think it's because she's a pure-blood?"

Pure-bloods again! "Do I think *what*, exactly?"

"I mean . . . why he's so into her."

"What makes you think I know anything about Weasley's sexual preferences?" I said irritably. "Perhaps you ought to discuss this with him and not me."

"I-I can't. I know I should, I know, but I just can't do it. I guess I could write him a letter..."

"Can he even read?"

She glared at me. "...but that would be cowardly."

"I see." I didn't.

". . . What do *you* think of Lavender Brown?"

She was treading into dangerous waters indeed. I said evasively, "She smiles too much."

She continued woefully to herself, "Everyone knows the jokes about Muggle-born women. Martians and mushrooms and all that. Even wizards from open-minded families .

. . It's the wizarding culture. They've been conditioned to prefer other pure-bloods, haven't they?"

"Never underestimate the appeal of heterosis," I muttered.

"What?"

"Never mind."

She was trying to discreetly wipe her nose on her sleeve. I cleared my throat and added, "I'm certain it's nothing to do with blood. The Weasleys are universally known for their . . . tolerance."

Her little bow mouth turned downwards in anger. "No, it's not blood at all, is it? Wizards want beautiful witches that will put out, is that it?"

That was surely much closer to the truth, and I unwisely told her so. "Big help you are," she snapped and turned away. Several minutes later, she was still sniffing and gazing disconsolately at the wall when the desperate canary, in a mad thrust for freedom, flew over her head and out the door.

I ought to have bade her cease such detestable boo-hooing and take her adolescent problems elsewhere, but something a stray surge of oxytocin perhaps stayed my tongue. Ignoring a tentative ache against my ribcage, I lent her a handkerchief, decided I must attend the Slughorn soirée, and thanked Merlin my Slytherins did not often require this sort of awkward consolation.

"Please please don't tell anyone," she implored from across the desk. Her long lashes were matted; in her blurred eyes there was real pain. I noticed her blouse was missing a button.

I said gravely, "I am the soul of discretion."

* * *

A horrible visceral throbbing from the Wireless greeted my reluctant entrance to Slughorn's office. A sizable crowd already glutted the humid room, which had been Engorged beyond recognition and reeked of hashish. A quick scan revealed that Miss Granger had not yet arrived and that the old Potions master had spared no expense: Spun-glass baubles bobbed on spruces. Gold and green ribbons of tinsel waved along the walls. Long damasked tables, stuffed with a prodigality of dishes and drink, were lit by elf-candles. Suspended aloft was a fairy-filled specular sphere the size of Rubeus Hagrid's head, spinning and spewing red flecks of light every which way.

The attendant elves¹ had been ordered, on pain of permanent clothes, to don for the evening red or green stocking caps tipped with golden bells, and they now flowed like a grumbling, tinkling current underfoot, serving the hors d'oeuvres. A platter of langue du chat went by, as did another of Elysian Eclairs (courtesy of Ambrosius Flume), some high-protein Flobberworm fritters (one of Humphrey Belcher's new products), and a tureen full of something that looked like toadspawn.

No one seemed suspicious of my presence, possibly because I had made it very clear to Horace that my attendance would be of a purely proctorial nature. "Naturally," Slughorn had cheerily replied without further ado. Albus had been a bit more reserved in his judgement.

"Horace tells me you'll be attending his Christmas party," he commented after a staff meeting.

"I hardly have a choice if I am to find out what Draco is up to."

He raised an enquiring eyebrow. "I doubt he will make the invitation list."

My camouflage was prepared. "No. But consider his recent attempt with the cursed necklace. He may see large gatherings as opportunities. The students . . . will be vulnerable there."

He looked unconvinced. I continued resentfully, "Or is the Hogwarts student body no longer as important as when you extracted my promise to protect them?"

Albus said softly, "I was merely hoping you were going for fun."

'Fun' would hardly describe the pandemonious mess I now beheld. Most of the adult guests were wandering haphazardly about, undoubtedly waiting for Potter to arrive. They were the usual lot of Slughorn collectibles: There was Skandalus Morke, upper-crust Slytherin patron, in his gabardine suit; Jo Wheatley, chief cereologist of the annual International Gardening Competition, dancing with Pierce Vale, Certified D.M.G.; the vampire Sanguini and his leech, Worple; Dahlia Fowles, owner of Pribbles and Prabbles, deep in conversation with Vivian Darkbloom, the popular 'witch-lii' novelist; Belcher making quite a stir by sporting his other new product, Thestral-skin breeches. (Thank Merlin for small consolations: They were visible to me.) Several I did not recognise: a man with a waxed moustache and a mutch who was drinking like an Abraxan, a strutting old witch with a wattle and a mask of peacock feathers. I was the only Death Eater present.

Nor were the children of Death Eaters invited, it seemed: Malfoy, Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle were unsurprisingly absent. Slughorn's selection of students instead comprised most of Hogwarts's best bootlickers, who were now taking advantage of the open bar and well into the early stages of inebriation: Misses Weasley and Windermere were falling all over themselves bobbing for 'poisoned' apples; Mr Hodge and Miss Coverly were making their unsteady way to the mistletoe; a far too enthusiastic round of blind man's bluff was taking place in the corner.

The collector himself, hiding his paunch under a lustrine smoking jacket, was as always puffing and blowing in the thick of it all, flourishing a tumbler and jiggling round several well-tweezed young witches who were mouthing along as the Wireless blared:

"For my sweetie, a wand of lignum vitae . . ."

I slid to the wall, vowing to tear his molluscan throat out if he ever leered that way at Miss Granger. (He had always had an eye for the beautiful girl, not to mention a fondness for awarding her all the credit even if it was obvious that at least half of her insights had come directly from me.) As I edged round the periphery for more complete reconnaissance, crude shards of conversation and lyric intruded:

"...My dear Gala, let me introduce you to Papirus, my Ghost writer..."

"...wood of life, good enough for Merlin's wife..."

"...incurable Mugglephilia! Have you seen his scar? He loves showing it off..."

"...He's missing a few Knuts, I think..."

"...Don't fret, dear; they're very common. I've got some wart remover in my purse..."

"...I've been in the business for twenty years, and let me tell you, I know it when I see it..."

"...Other witches may settle for softer goods, but give me a nice, strong wood..."

"...Severus!" Slughorn was beetling his way toward me. "There you are! You're looking sharp tonight. Dressed again as a lump of coal, I see!" He gave a hearty, self-congratulatory laugh, jowls and velvet hat-tassels shaking. "I can tell you haven't yet partaken of my garden of earthly delights. Come, have a tipple . . . You haven't seen Harry, have you? He's the star of the show tonight. You don't know how many girls have been trying to wheedle love potions out of me..."

"You know, you really should not be throwing that word around. The students are becoming confused."

"Oho! Yes, the students! Of course they are. At that age, lust and love are practically synonymous. They don't realise that some things are impossible to imitate. In fact, I seem to remember..."

But I was no longer listening. Hermione had entered the room.

I could not have prevented the involuntary rush of blood that overtook me at that moment, for it was indeed Hermione not Miss Granger, mere teaching assistant, but a full-fledged young witch of perilous beauty. Who was this creature? Her dress some vaporous, nearly transparent thing (I had never seen so much of her skin) and what had she done to her hair? There remained not a trace of frizz in the curls that now framed her face, those perfect, sinuous locks falling atop her bare shoulders.

Less impressive was her choice of escort seventh-year Cormac McLaggen, a boorish brute of mediocre talent who was by no means any improvement over a Weasley. He was trying to take her by the arm, but she seemed to be paying him little attention. Her glance darted round the room, and she gave a girlish wave to several other students before she saw me. Did I imagine, for the briefest second, a sparkle in her eye upon meeting mine, before her purulent date dragged her behind Major Tweedy and Colonel Starbottle?

"Excuse me," I mumbled and slipped off through the crowd after her receding form. Alas, I was afforded only a brief caudal view before McLaggen secreted her away round the corner behind a livid bit of shrubbery and a cloud of green smoke from the Warlocks' Creaothceann Restoration Campaign.

I took up station behind the beverages table for a wider angle, fixing my eye, sullen and stealthy, on the shrub and the potential threats to Miss Granger as they moved round the bloated room: Slughorn, Darkbloom, Sanguini².

It seemed as if hours passed. The Wireless racket was replaced by live plinking and twanging from the Shropshire Mandolin Ensemble, though it was nearly impossible to pick out a tune from the increasingly cacophonous buzz of the crowd. Potter made his grand entrance, followed by his goggling, overly painted entourage. An impromptu game of 'Which Witch to Switch' erupted with boisterous cheers and died just as quickly as one of the witches in question cast a well-aimed *Impetigo*. Mr Eldritch and Mr Fleming lingered too long within earshot, debating which concoction was strongest, pointing out witches, and recounting hyperbolic tales of sexual prowess, complete with erroneous anatomical details and highly improbable measurements.

"Are you still seeing her?" said the gullible, envious Fleming.

"Nah, mate, she kept saying that women want proper dates . . ." They moved away as Sybill Trelawney stumbled up.

"The brined roe is delightful. Have you tried it?" she said, turning her bottle-eyeglasses towards me and pushing a foul-smelling dish in my direction. I politely declined, but she was undeterred. "Severus, have you given any thought to my prophecy of the other night?" she said, referring to a one-sided conversation over last week's dinner that I only half-remembered. Something about an old fairy tale. "The night is coming."

"I'd say it's here already." I tried to inch away and wondered if she were sloshed enough not to notice a discreetly cast *Silencio*.

"There will be a door, but you will not have the key. And . . . a trap. Yes, there will be a trap. You will set it yourself."

I examined the assemblage of social lubricants on the table before me: Madame Rosmerta's oak-matured metheglin, Pure Alma cider for the weak of stomach, elf-made wine for more discriminating palates, Old Ogden's for the traditionally-minded, essence of arillus for those who liked to play dangerously, and several obscenely-coloured fruit cordials. Hoping to numb the sudden pain in my ears, I reached for familiar solace: the old *aqua vitae*, water of life. Giving the bottle a habitual sniff for toxic substances (excepting the ethanol, of course), I procured a clean glass from Slughorn's house-elf (Sniggly, her name was, wasn't it?) and poured several decent-sized fingers.

Several sips later, I was starting to despair. Where was Miss Granger? Had she not yet managed to give that lout the slip? And what was she doing with him anyway? The evidence of their incompatibility was overwhelming: His mind was far her inferior; he had the refinement of a Blast-Ended Skrewt, no ambitions whatsoever aside from Quidditch, and little interest in hers, it seemed. Was it purely physical? I suddenly recalled that the mistletoe was located precisely in the corner where they were hidden.

"Have you seen Harry Potter?" said Sybill mistily. "I must tell him about the wandmaker."

Oh, why had I even bothered to come? What did I think to gain? It was all talk of Potter or the usual drunken drivel. I was only putting myself even more at her mercy. What pathetic obsession! Enough of this useless passion! Better that I had stayed in the dungeon with the other dead creatures.

"He's over there," I grumbled.

I was mulling an excuse to slip away and return to my cave when at last my reward surfaced: a rosily flustered Miss Granger pelting away from a distinctly disgruntled McLaggen. Dress flowing, mane flying, she darted through the crowd like fugitive prey and disappeared, only to emerge seconds later with Potter and Lovegood in tow. They wound their way through the clotted mass of teeming bodies straight towards me.

She stopped at the table before me. Scooping herself an inappropriately large chaliceful of mead, she flung her hand up towards the ceiling and huffed, "Is that all boys care about? Cormac hasn't asked me one single question about myself, no, I've just..." She turned and I could not catch the remainder until she suddenly cried, "...oh no, here he comes!"

In an instant, she had thrown herself into my secluded corner and, falling right into me, gasped, "Oi! Professor! Can I hide with you back here?"

"I suppose so," I murmured blandly, quite pleased at this fortuitous turn of luck. "Warn me if Trelawney approaches," I added, taking a fiery swig.

She forced a nervous laugh. I noticed that she had hastily stepped backward, as if she feared physical contact. Was I so repulsive? Had I neglected some detail of personal hygiene? Or did she suspect my true motive? Perhaps I should not have tidied my hair. She was being suspiciously quiet. Where was her usual 'Babbling Beverage' chatter? Could she not say something? Anything?

A horrible thought occurred to me: She might be waiting for me to speak. Was she waiting for me to ask her something about herself, as she had hinted to Potter she wanted? I rejected this course of action immediately, as it would only prove I'd been snooping. But should I not say something? I could hardly mention how lovely she looked. Deriding her Neanderthal of a date seemed in poor taste. Mentioning the shipment of double-ended efts that had finally come in would only remind her of how old and dull I was.

Seconds ticked by. Was there not some protocol for these sorts of encounters? My hands hung unnaturally at my sides; what did one normally do with them at moments like this? She held her brimming cup at her side, and I had the irrational urge to test it for poison. What if Potter had slipped her something? Could that explain her sudden shyness? (One of those shoddy Weasley brews may not have much effect, but a well-brewed Amortentia perhaps with just an extra touch of Ashwinder eggs... Could he have stolen from my stores? One trembled merely to imagine what such a potion could do!) Setting my own empty goblet aside in despair, I stood in stiff silence, feeling as if a Snitch were stuck in my throat, all too aware of her bare shoulders at my side.

The room was getting uncomfortably warm. The rough edge of my collar chafed at my neck; sweat clung to my groin. Fairies whizzed unpredictably past us, fluttering madly up to the ceiling like time-lapsed constellations. McLaggen stalked by in complete ignorance of Miss Granger's presence beside me. Others surged round our cramped space, pushing her closer to me until at one point, mere inches separated me from her small but exquisitely fine breasts, the details of which I could nearly discern through the gauze of her dress. Sly side-glances brought me further, heretofore hidden, details: the curve of an instep, the gentle sacral arch, the delicate sternal sulcus.

She was now sipping her mead very quickly. How she must despise being trapped back here with the old chaperone Snape the slimeball, Snape the overgrown bat instead of with her band of heroes. She was starting to look a bit dejected; was she preparing to flee once again? Wiping a paralysed palm on the fabric of my thigh, I knew

I must speak, deliver some sort of properly teacheresque compliment before I went mad. Young witches appreciated compliments, did they not? Perhaps one or two could be strategically employed. Something that might encourage her to linger a bit longer...

Think! What could Snape possibly say to a beautiful witch? I must take the right tone . . . Miss Granger, your lovely dress is very much in the way . . . I could easily use it to tie your wrists . . . Miss Granger, how do you feel about fellatio? Fancy a vigorous fuck on the dungeon floor?

"Are you all right?" she said.

"I am fine," I snarled, crossing my hands over my shameful lap.

She gave a sudden start, and I followed her stare from across the room MacLaggen had spotted her. In a moment, she had turned towards me, and her words tumbled out: "Would you like to dance?"

There was a breathless pause as my heart wobbled traitorously. Every sense in me leapt to obey. But I harboured no illusions. With careful scorn, I said, "Do my ears deceive me? A dance with Queen Granger? How utterly . . . charitable of you. Tell me, if I call your little bluff, and you are forced to dance with the greasy git, who shall bear the greater shame? Miss Granger or her boyfriend? And by the way, have you just taken a Hair-Raising Potion?"

Her dark eyes had lit up. As I attempted to collect my scattered wits, she listed towards me, and the sudden *souffle* of her scent hinted at barely imaginable pleasures. She said softly, "You're dodging the question, Professor..."

...but before she could grant me the thrill of my name in her mouth, Slughorn's great adipose arm came snaking into our lovely little hidey-hole and snatched me away. Oh, the indignity! All of a sudden, the sweaty appendage was around my shoulder and a hot sour breath on my chin, and I found myself exposed to a gathered group of motley spectators whom I do not even recall in the discordant whirl of events that followed:

Firstly, my ardour chilled as rapidly as if I had been plunged into the Great Lake just outside (a fate that would have been much preferable to a Slughorn embrace, which can only be likened to being hit by a side of beef). Following this, his series of alarming comments in praise of Potter's performance in Potions obliged me to turn my attention to the boy, who was clearly up to something suspicious and had thoroughly duped the Potions master in the process. Even if Granger the only Outstanding in Potions last year was feeding him every instruction, even if Lily's spirit had suddenly awoken in him, he could not possibly acquire the level of genius claimed by Slughorn. Certainly not with the old man's Procrustean pedagogy and that rusty old textbook. Better than me, even, he had claimed.

Perhaps I could have avoided future calamity had I the chance to properly deal with Potter, but at that complicated moment, the arrival of Draco Malfoy threw all into chaos.

Filch was dragging him in by the ear. The music ground to a halt; the dancers stilled. Dimly aware of whispers going through the crowd "the Mark", "his father", "Azkaban" and Potter watching me like a Hippogriff, I felt the blood drain from my face, the hairs on my forearm rise in the useless vestigial reflex. Draco had been in an upstairs corridor, Filch had said. Had my time run out? Was the hour come round at last? Or had another student been harmed? Miss Granger's face came swimming up through my mind. I had a variety of antidotes on my person, of course, but the new initiate would no doubt be experimenting with only the Darkest sort of magic. What would it be this time?

Struggling to erase the fear from my expression, I swiftly ushered the boy out of the party and into a nearby classroom, and there ended any hope of speaking to Miss Granger again.

Draco was a mess. Gone was the petulant air of the privileged, clever child; in its place was a gaunt, desperate young man who had lost any trust he might have once had in his Head of house. There was liquor on his breath, days-old lacquer in his hair. He would tell me nothing, and he shrank from me, retreating into the remains of his pride and bellowing like a cornered beast in terror. I was forced to resort to Legilimency (expressly pre-authorised by the Headmaster), but he blocked even that. (Bella's tricks. His mad banshee of an aunt, an able Legilimens herself, had clearly been tutoring the boy.) I could glean only that his plan, whatever it was, seemed not to be ready yet.

Even as I breathed in relief, I found a part of myself reflecting on what emotions the boy must be Occluding. (This digressive train of thought, when I ought to have been solely focussing on the mission at hand, came upon me for no particular reason that I can recall, other than perhaps the accursed habit I had developed of studying certain students.) Surely he was terrified for his parents, as they would be tortured and killed if he failed and most likely if he succeeded as well and he was undoubtedly suspicious of my offer to help him, as I'd had no apparent motive for taking the Vow and putting my own life at risk.

It was not that I identified with the boy; Draco was as far from my younger self as his father had been. But I was struck by the parallel nature of our positions. He was to commit murder to serve his master, and I to serve mine. And he shared something else with the boy I had been: the illusion of control. Had I not also once thought I could climb the ladder to power? Had I not also risen swiftly, only to realise, too late, that the way up was also the way down?

I could gain no traction whatever with him. He turned and ran from me, down the dark dungeon corridor, hurtling away from the echoes of mandolin players and unbearable laughter, past the garlands and mistletoe and the Slughorn family crest, towards that unknown future when I would lift his Dark burden onto my own weary shoulders. His footfalls dwindled in the darkness. I felt very old.

So I crept solemnly back to that preposterous party to catch a last glimpse of Hermione, but she had disappeared, along with MacLaggen. This revelation only adding to my choler, I spent a very ill-disposed night stalking round the castle, imagining her in his arms, grimly hoping and dreading I would catch them in some corner. But she was nowhere to be found.

* * *

¹ My own house-elf was absent, being forbidden from alcohol and occupied that evening in the brewing of a powerful rat poison.

² Vampires, too, have a taste for the young, and I have recently learnt that they hold a strange attraction for witches as well. Why anyone would think it erotic to be bit on the neck is beyond me.

Author's Notes:

* Hermione says some lines here that are direct quotes from HBP.

* Tonnes of thanks to my beta Countrymouse, for help and bearing with me during a long absence.