

# Innocence Lost

by Juli\_Min

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Two abandoned people find each other in the middle of a war. (post-HBP; rated for later chapters)

## Prologue

Chapter 1 of 20

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*Disclaimer: All the characters and (magical) places you recognize belong to JK. Rowling. The Plot, however, is mine.*

*It's my first fan fiction story, I normally write original poetry.*

And a huge THANK YOU to my beta Rhiannon (my punctuation is very bad).

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~ Innocence Lost ~

Prologue

Dark clouds hung unmoving in the evening sky, allowing no light to touch the ground. Rain was pouring down in torrents, as if nature wanted to wash all remains of the horrifying events from its surface.

A lone figure clad from head to toe in black stood surveying the field of destruction from his vantage point on a small slope. He stood like a statue – tall and proud, seemingly unaffected by the storm raging on around him. Lightning struck the gnarled trunk of an old willow tree a few feet to his left, the impact shattering the ancient bark. The ensuing fire lit up his face sharpening his features. The beak-like nose, the dark eyes and the black hair that hung limply around his face.

A small figure huddled near the remains of the once beautiful house caught his eye. He hesitated only a moment before he purposefully strode towards it. The body of a young woman came into view. She was lying in the fetal position, clutching a piece of bloodied cloth to her chest. He skidded to a halt.

He knew who she was, knew those wild curls even if they were soiled with mud. He had watched her grow from an annoying child to an independent scholar. Cautiously, so not to startle her, he knelt down by her side. He would have thought her dead if she hadn't been visibly shivering.

"Miss Granger?" His voice was low and smooth. She didn't move, didn't acknowledge his presence at all. Slowly, as one about to pet a frightened animal, he reached out a hand to brush a strand of hair out of her face. She raised her eyes to his with a shuddering breath. He stared at the once animated face that was now lifeless; the light in her eyes had been extinguished and the tracks of desperate tears were all too visible on her hollowed cheeks.

"I hate you," she whispered in a voice so cold it froze the questions on his lips. It was nothing new to him that people loathed him. He had been despised and shunned since his early youth. A loner by nature, his cruel and sarcastic demeanor drove people away and himself in turn into the clutches of a madman. He was a murderer and a thief; he had violated people because he was ordered to.

But to hear her utter these words shook him. Hadn't she always defended him to her dunderheaded friends? Explained his reasons so accurately, as if she alone understood? It must have all changed after Dumbledore's death. The people who were once his allies now hunted him, and the place he had once called home was the one place where he would never be welcomed again.

She sat up, drawing her knees to her chin and flinging her arms around them in a defensive posture. "Why didn't you warn them?" The words rung like a clear bell in his head, waking him out of his inner musings. He hadn't known that there was to be an attack. It was as good as his death sentence. Information like that was usually shared with him... but lately...

His train of thoughts was once again interrupted, this time by her sobs; big tears were rolling out of her half-closed eyes. "I believed in you," she cried "After everything you did... I still believed..." In an uncharacteristic show of compassion, for a man so detached, he brought his arms around the young witch and drew her into his chest. She didn't resist but didn't move closer either. He gathered her as close as he dared and rocked her softly, comforting her as much as himself.

## The Coldness Within

Chapter 2 of 20

*She didn't want to die snivelling at the bastards feet.*

### Chapter One ~ The Coldness Within

The room was small and held the unmistakable signs of neglect and decay. Despite the roaring fire in the hearth, Hermione felt cold. The events of the day had taken their toll on her. Watching the four black-robed figures destroy the house she had grown up in was one thing, hearing her parents' screams of agony another. There was nothing she could have done to save them. And so she had hidden like a coward until the walls began to shake and crumble.

She turned to her side, wincing at the pain that shot through her. "You shouldn't move," came the velvet smooth voice from across the room. "You've got at least two cracked ribs."

Not answering, she took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to comprehend her current situation. Snape had found her and brought her here. Wherever 'here' was. She was hurting and yet felt strangely numb all the same. Why did he bring her to this house? Was she a prisoner? She tried to move into an upright position and winced again.

"If you are going to kill me just get it over with," she said, not looking at her former teacher. "My life is worthless... I... nobody would miss me... Harry and Ron... they love each other... my parents..." The tears threatened to fall again, but she fought to hold them back. She didn't want to die *snivelling* at the bastard's feet. He had betrayed her, betrayed them all.

He stepped in front of her, wand raised. Hermione closed her eyes awaiting the curse that would end a once so promising future. It never came. When she blinked through her lashes, she found herself encased in a globe of mostly green light with a few yellow and orange flecks here and there.

"Two broken ribs and a concussion. Stay where you are. I'll be right back." That said, Snape left the small living room. Hermione exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. He wasn't going to hurt her. But what would he do instead? Would he take her to Voldemort? Was she to be a bait like Sirius had been? She had already lost her family, her friends had to live. She was expendable.

That thought in mind, she pushed herself from the worn-out couch, letting the cloak he had covered her with fall to the floor. Slowly, as quietly as her injured body would allow, she moved towards the door she guessed let outside. Keeping her eyes trained over her shoulder to see when Snape returned, she tried the handle. It didn't even move. The door was firmly locked. She searched her pockets for her wand but came up short. He must have taken it. He did not want her to leave – she was stuck.

She heard footsteps on the stairs. She had to get away and quickly. Her gaze fell on the sole window – yes, that could be her chance. It opened without problem. Climbing onto the window sill pained her, and she felt dizzy from moving too fast. *'I have to keep moving. I need to get out.'* Like a mantra, the words kept repeating themselves in Hermione's head.

~o~o~o~

Severus Snape left the girl on the couch to gather the potions that would take care of her injuries...*and a sleeping draught,* he thought to himself. *'Kill her, indeed.'* He would never do that. He had, after all, taken her home with him to make sure no one would attack her in her vulnerable state. Hermione Granger needed to live. In spite of what she had said, she was not useless. Potter needed her, and so did he, as much as it pained him to admit it. She was a shining example against the misplaced prejudices of the Dark Lord and his followers.

She was safe in his home. Few people knew its location. Nobody would look for her in this run down area. Muttering a password he opened a cabinet in his bathroom. Dozens of bottles of all sizes stood in perfect order on the shelves. He pulled down two vials of a light blue liquid and one containing a thick red salve. He unscrewed the lid and sniffed. It was a strong bruise salve, very relaxing. Its shelf life however was short and using it past date could have unwanted effects. It smelled neutral.

He closed the cabinet and returned to the staircase that descended into his living area. He froze in the doorway.

~o~o~o~

Hermione was about to jump out of the window when she rebounded off an invisible barrier, and the glass shattered. Shards flew into her face and cut her skin. She tumbled backwards and fell back into the room. In the distance, she vaguely registered Snape's shocked and frightened voice calling her name. But she couldn't react, everything started turning black around her. The last thing she was aware of was the sensation of floating.

# Those Who Need Protection

Chapter 3 of 20

*?Why am I still alive if he has no use of me??*

Chapter Two ~ Those Who Need Protection

"Mum, I'm going for a walk, okay?"

"Yes, Sweetie you do that, but make sure to be back for lunch."

Their last conversation. Her mother had been so happy that her little girl was home for the holidays. She had made Hermione's favourite food, roasted chicken... and now she was...

She shouldn't have left. No, she shouldn't. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, but she refused to open her eyes. She could have tried to Apparate them all away when the Death Eater breached the wards she had set around her parents' house. But she wasn't there. No. She had gone for a walk.

When she had come back, there was an eerie silence surrounding the Grangers' property. She knew something was wrong. Suddenly the door flew open and screaming could be heard. Her heart constricted painfully her father had been screaming as if he were dying. *'And he was.'*

And she had been frozen in place until the cries stopped. And then there was a face at the kitchen window they had seen her. She backed away, still paralysed. In moments, the cloaked figures emerged. She had moved out of sight not daring to leave the premises her parents needed help. Chances were small, but maybe they were still alive.

One of the men pointed his wand at the front door and yelled a hex. Her childhood home began to shake and crumble. As the roof collapsed, the group Apparated away.

Hermione remembered bursting into the building that had always been her safe haven. She called to her parents, but there was no answer. She couldn't get onto the second floor; the stairs had collapsed down, and the walls of the room in which she had been standing were probably the only ones still intact. She ran for her life. Stumbling several times, a bloodied handkerchief in one corner caught her eye.

Ignoring the voice in her head that told her to get out and quickly, she climbed back over pieces of wall and furniture to reach it. She made a grab for it, and in the same moment a falling stone hit her in the head. She ignored the dull ache if she wanted to live, she had to move.

Survival instinct took over the action. Hermione still couldn't tell how she'd gotten out of the ruins. Outside, she had fallen to the ground dizzy and nauseated, the handkerchief clutched in her hand... the blood on it still fresh.

She couldn't bear to think of that, but the images kept coming. It was all her fault. She felt raw and cold.

~o~o~o~

Severus watched the girl intently. After her attempted escape, he knew better than to let her out of his sight. *She could have killed herself. Why in Merlin's name did she do that?* But deep down he knew Hermione Granger had given up on him. The annoying know-it-all who had always believed in the good in people, even him, feared him now.

He looked over at her little form in his childhood bed. The bandage covering her eyes had to be changed soon. The glass shards had come close to taking her eyesight. She would recover, at least physically.

He had spent the last two hours in a chair next to her bed contemplating his life as much as hers. After killing Dumbledore, he had had no choice but to flee. The Order was on the hunt for him now. He was second on their list.

The Dark Lord had not been too pleased with him either. *"It was the boy's task, Severus. Your place should have been at Potter's side. You lost me my spy. The punishment he had expected, however, was not coming. No Cruciatus. No other curse. Now, he wished for that instead of what he had gotten. He was apparently left to fend for himself, simply abandoned by Voldemort."*

The raid on the Grangers made that clear, although there had been subtle signs before. When the Death Eaters were summoned, he was not addressed at all. Normally the Dark Lord would keep him behind to give him instructions or to talk about his plans. Not anymore. *'Why am I still alive if he has no use of me?'*

He would find out eventually, wouldn't he? There was more important business now. Hermione Granger, for one.

~o~o~o~

Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley sat facing each other at the old oak desk in the sitting area of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place playing a game of chess, as they had done every day since Hermione had gone to visit her parents. Now that Hogwarts was closed, the Weasleys and Harry had set up permanent residence at Headquarters. The late afternoon sun shone through the dusty windows, and they could hear the clattering of plates from the kitchen where Mrs. Weasley prepared dinner.

"You have any idea when 'Mione is due back?" Ron asked, before moving his knight in position.

"No, but she'll have to wait for someone from the Order to pick her up. There have been a lot of strange happenings these last few months," Harry replied, moving a pawn forward, giving Ron the chance to defeat his king.

Ron moved in for the kill, and with a resigned expression, he put Harry's king down. "You okay, mate?"

"What?" Harry's earnest green eyes focused on the redhead again.

"Well, this is the second game in a row you've given over like that. Your scar hurting or something?"

"No, it hasn't for more than a year now. It's... these letters that have been coming in... if we just knew who sent them."

"Oh, give over Harry. There haven't been any for at least two months now."

"Whoever it was, was an insider. They knew about the attacks after all, remember? I still can't believe they didn't investigate that. The Creeveys were damned lucky to escape; I can't believe Moody didn't send Aurors to protect them," Harry huffed.

Before Harry had time to relate his suspicions to Ron for the umpteenth time, Molly Weasley announced that dinner would be ready soon and had the two boys set the table.

~o~o~o~

She was crying again, and he stood by helpless. Severus Snape was good at many things, but comforting a distressed woman was not one of them.

Since he had removed the bandage an hour ago, she had been weeping. First from the pain that the healing of her eyes caused. Then because of her fear of him, her loss... everything at once. Hermione's eyes were red, she was exhausted and her head hurt.

She heard Snape sigh and turned her head to see him rubbing the bridge of his nose. He looked different somehow old, a shadow of the man he once was. His robes, which had always been immaculate, were torn in several places and needed to be washed.

She hesitated before she took a deep breath and spoke, "Professor?"

Snape raised his eyes to hers. "I'm no Professor anymore," he snarled.

What had she been thinking? Hermione's mind admonished her. Feeling sorry for the git. He would always remain the same. She turned away again burying her face in the pillow she was holding to her chest.

There was another sigh, but this time she ignored it. She didn't seem to be in immediate danger, after all. Maybe he took pity on her, it would be stupid to annoy him; he might change his mind about not harming her.

~o~o~o~

Hermione Granger had fallen asleep. *'Finally,'* Severus thought, collapsing backwards into the overstuffed chair in front of the fire. A glass of whiskey was in his hand, the bottle in the other.

She had not spoken a single word after 'Professor.' He tried asking her about what happened, but she would only shake her head before bursting into tears again. So he tried a different approach, telling her he hadn't known, hadn't been informed, but she had just stared into the distance.

He had brought her food; she hadn't touched it, nor did she drink what he offered. She drank from the tap in the small bathroom instead.

Snape cursed himself for his harsh reply. Yes, he wasn't a professor anymore, so what. It wasn't her fault. She reached out to him, and he let the anger about his own stupidity get in the way. *'Brilliant, old man. Just bloody brilliant.'*

At least he would be rid of her in a few days. That thought, however, gave him pause. He couldn't just push her out the front door, that would endanger her; nor could he bring her to London. If any of her associates saw him, he would spend the rest of his life in Azkaban.

And, now he thought about it, she was safer here than anywhere else. The Death Eaters thought her dead. Whatever people believed, Voldemort didn't bother with Muggles; they were of no consequence to him. But a Muggleborn, who was possibly one of the strongest witches alive, that was another story all together. If they believed her to be dead, she was safe.

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*Just a little poem that I like to share with you, it somehow fits. It's of all the poems I've written until now my favourite.*

### **Darkness**

In the darkness

From deep within

Hides a shadow

Just like a sin,

My heart's desire

My life long dream,

Peace among us,

A human being.

## **Coping With Loss**

*Chapter 4 of 20*

*"Is she dead?" A blunt question, asked without preliminaries.*

### **Chapter Three Coping with Loss**

Night had fallen in the run-down area of London where two boys sat at the window, awaiting the arrival of their best friend. Any moment now she would be escorted back by Kingsley Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin.

It was an unusually clear night, unobscured by the thick mist that clung to Great Britain since the Dementors had started breeding. The few intact streetlamps illuminated the empty street below.

Two hours had passed since they first took the seats nearest to the window, occasionally looking outside. The friendly banter about the reason their normally-so-punctual

friend was late her book bag finally bursting because of the thousands of books she tried to cram in it had died down some time ago. All that remained was an uneasy feeling of foreboding.

~o~o~o~

The old grandfather clock struck midnight, waking the dark-haired man out of his uneasy sleep. The whiskey bottle was lying in his lap; the glass had fallen to the floor, spilling the last of the liquid. Severus Snape stood up; his legs and back protested, but he had learned to ignore pain. With a swish of his wand, the remains of his late evening indulgence cleared themselves away. Alcohol helped him sleep, kept the nightmares at bay. Occlumency could only help to a point. He was able to repress certain images, memories of revels and night time raids, he couldn't, however, stop the image that kept plaguing him Dumbledore's kind blue eyes pleading with him.

Dumbledore had been the only one who understood him. The old headmaster had not only always believed in his loyalty, he had also treated the young teacher with gentleness, something that had been foreign to Severus. And he wished almost every night that he had never made that vow.

Mentally shaking himself, he made his way up the stairs burying all thoughts of his deceased mentor in the deep recesses of his brain. If he dwelled too long on things like that, he would lose his focus. He needed to be on high alert now that he had the girl to look after. One moment of inattention could cost her life and possibly the war.

The picture that met his eyes as he pushed open the door to his former bedroom made his breath catch. Hermione had obviously made herself comfortable when she became aware that Severus had left the room. She had changed out of her clothes and was wearing one of the nightshirts she had found in the closet. Her wild mane spilled over the pillows. The sheets were tangled around her legs, and Severus could see the back of one thigh and hip. He stared at the exposed expanse of flesh.

His chest constricted painfully. Emotions he had thought himself incapable of were all growing at a rapid speed. Longing, protectiveness, desire, admiration... all bubbled to the surface. One look at the young woman in his bed like that had broken the ice that had covered the lake of his feelings for two decades. For one so unused to feeling something other than annoyance or contempt, the experience was frightening.

Severus stumbled back out of the room and collapsed against the closed door. He had to get himself under control, needed to clear his head. Getting his broom out of the kitchen, he left the house in a rush.

~o~o~o~

A loud screeching woke the two boys out of their slumber. Mrs. Black was yelling profanities, but was soon silenced by a whispered spell. Harry and Ron looked at each other in silent understanding. Wrapped in the ever-useful Invisibility cloak, they made their way out of the room and down the stair, stopping every time the old floorboards creaked and moaned.

They could hear hushed voices and then something that sounded like sobbing before the people disappeared into the kitchen. The boys crept to the closed door, pressing their ears against the wood. The people on the other side were apparently trying to keep their voices down and listening to Shackbolt's report. Occasionally they could hear Mrs. Weasley's strained voice interrupting.

Dread overcame the boys. "We don't know if anything happened to her," Ron tried to reassure his friend, who had sunken to the floor. "Hermione knows more spells than anyone."

But if he was honest with himself, he was as afraid as Harry was. Even someone as powerful as their Hermione would not stand a chance against fully trained Death Eaters. "Come on; let's get back upstairs. There's nothing we can do now."

Harry didn't move; he remained on the floor his head buried in his hands. Suddenly the door was pushed open, and a ginger cat with a squashed face emerged. "Crookshanks!" Ron exclaimed loudly, not caring if he woke the whole house. Surely that meant that their friend was okay, why would her familiar be here otherwise? Only seconds after Ron's relieved shout, a grim looking Remus Lupin walked up to Harry.

"Hermione?" Harry's one word question was met by a shake of Remus' head. He reached down and drew the boy to his feet, then motioned for Ron to follow them into the kitchen. Arthur Weasley conjured to chairs for them to take while Molly stood abruptly and left the room in tears. No one needed to say anything, the sadness and helplessness in the room was tangible.

"Is she dead?" A blunt question, asked without preliminaries.

"We don't know for sure," Remus answered, trying to gauge the young wizard's reactions. "We went to pick her up..."

"She is dead, boy," Alastor Moody interrupted. "They had better know the truth. This is war. You're doing them a disservice, if you give them hope like that."

"You know very well that we didn't find a body," Shackbolt injected hotly. "She may still live for all we know."

"Don't be ridiculous; the house was in ruins. Even if You-Know-Who's scum didn't kill her, the tons of concrete she was buried under surely did," Moody snarled. "The faster they learn to accept the truth the better."

"But..." Ron tried to speak through the lump in his throat, "didn't you send people to look for her. What if she was injured but got away, she could have Apparated... or..."

"The were no traces of the girl, and I will not send out valuable forces to search for someone who is dead." That said the self-appointed new leader of the Order of the Phoenix stood and excused himself, leaving behind five desolate men, two of whom had started crying silently.

~o~o~o~

It was a beautiful, star-strewn night, a soft breeze caressed his face. Severus Snape took a deep breath, clearing his mind. The rough surface of his emotional lake slowly became still; a little ripple would disturb the water every time he thought of the girl, hopefully deep asleep and safe.

He had flown onto the roof of an old vacated office building overlooking the city of Newcastle. It had been his refuge since he was a child. Whenever his father had started lashing out at him, he would come here. Thoughts of his father made the familiar anger rise in him. He hated the man with a vengeance although Tobias Snape was long dead. And yet, Severus Snape had in many areas of his life become like his despised father. He was just as sour and treated people with the same lofty cruelty. Even with the similarities between them, there was one thing Severus would never do violate a woman.

True, he had killed and tortured, but he had never raped, hexed or beaten a woman. It had earned him many punishments, but he couldn't and wouldn't do it. His mother's pleas and her soulless eyes haunted him as much as Dumbledore's did. He saw her in every victim... He would never strike a woman, never.

Taking a last look at the sleeping city, he mounted his broom. The sun was already rising, painting the sky a pale pink. He needed to return to Hermione. If the young bushy-haired woman could forgive him one day, he would put his past to rest.

~o~o~o~

The atmosphere at headquarters was loaded with sadness and despair. After Hermione's supposed death, another problem had arisen.

"Nothing. He won't speak to anyone, not even Ron or Ginny," Molly informed her husband, two oldest sons and the assembled order members, Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks and Minerva McGonagall. Since the night of Hermione's disappearance, Harry had locked himself in the attic. He refused to talk, refused company and had consequently not been seen by anyone for the last week. The only sign of life was the disappearance of the food that was placed in front of his closed door every evening.

The two youngest Weasleys felt as if they had lost two friends. Ginny had spent two nights in front of Harry's closed door, pleading and begging. He didn't acknowledge her. Ron was crying himself to sleep almost every night. He had hoped he and Hermione would get closer living together in one house. In his time with Lavender, he had realized that Hermione was the one he wanted, had wanted for a long time. Now it was all too late. He missed her.

"Mum," Bill ventured, "what if Hermione is still alive? Maybe we should search for her, check the neighbourhood, Muggle hospitals and hotels."

"Kingsley and I already did," Lupin answered. "He contacted some Muggle, who questioned the neighbours. No one saw anything."

"Okay then, I'll go check the hospitals. Charlie, you coming?" Bill stood waiting for his younger brother. Together they left; after all doing something, however useless, was better than sitting around idly.

## Emotions in Turmoil

Chapter 5 of 20

*If not for Snape, everything would have gone differently.*

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### Chapter Four – Emotions in Turmoil

It had been four weeks since Hermione's disappearance – four weeks of hell. Harry Potter felt as if he was missing a limb. He had lost another member of his adopted family to the madness of Voldemort. Was it ever going to stop?

He rolled over in his makeshift bed in the attic. The darkness and gloom in the room mirrored his insides. Losing Hermione hurt too much, and as long as there was a tiny bit of hope left, he would believe her to be alive. Although, death was probably preferable to the treatment she would have to endure if the Death Eaters held her captive.

The worst, however, was the guilt Harry felt. Everybody who came too close to him got hurt or died – his parents, Sirius, Dumbledore, Cedric... Hermione. There was only one thing he could do to prevent further casualties – he had to isolate himself. And the only way to do it, without getting himself into danger, was to lock himself away. His emotions were too strong to distance himself from his friends if he had to see them every day. He fleetingly wished he could have the same control as Snape.

Thoughts of him brought forth the anger he had suppressed since coming to headquarters. It felt good to have somebody to blame. If not for Snape, Hermione would have been at Hogwarts – safe and alive. If not for him, Dumbledore would be there to help Harry find the Horcruxes and destroy Voldemort. If not for Snape, Sirius would still be there... If not for Snape, Voldemort would never have heard the prophecy. If not for Snape, everything would have gone differently.

Harry's rage materialized in form of a powerful wind, like a little tornado, with him at the centre. The air crackled with magic, and a dark red light filled the small chamber. The young wizard's eyes were ablaze with an ethereal green fire.

And in one corner, a forgotten object, carelessly thrown into a card box, started rattling.

~o~o~o~

Hermione Granger sat in front of the hearth in Snape's living quarters, reading one book after another. Snape had a brilliant selection of tomes; most were all extremely rare. Keeping her mind occupied helped her with her grief. She still cried a lot, but she felt strangely secure in her former teacher's home.

When she had woken up the day after the attack on her parents' house, Snape had apologized for his rudeness and explained the current situation to her. She had argued, of course, that she wanted to go back to her friends. Now that the physical pain was gone; she could think much more clearly. Ron, she knew, would cope somehow; he would cry and mourn, but he had his family. Harry was another story; he would retreat into his shell and blame himself for her death.

Snape – or Severus, as she was to call him now – had, surprisingly, reacted very understandingly. Nevertheless, he refused her request. In the end it was not so much his arguments as the fact that he conceded that he wanted her to be safe at all costs that made Hermione accept her circumstances.

In the weeks that had followed, the normally sarcastic man was nothing but polite to her. He would ask her food preferences and allowed her free access to his library. The only thing that unnerved her was that he wouldn't stay in a room with her longer than necessary. He didn't converse with her, didn't even argue when she claimed a thesis in one of his books was rubbish. The young woman felt lonely. She had tried more than once to get a rise out of her lone companion without success.

Convinced that something had to be wrong with him, she decided that she would solve the mystery that was Severus Snape. Hermione had always loved a good puzzle.

~o~o~o~

The former Potions Master of Hogwarts was slowly going mad, or though it felt to him. The insomnia that had plagued him in his early Death Eater days was back. Not even his favourite whiskey helped much. The sleeping draughts he kept in his bathroom all had one uncomfortable thing in common – they gave him nightmares. *Dreamless Sleep* would have been a solution, but unfortunately he had administered the last dose to Hermione on the day he took her in. Now that he was no longer employed at Hogwarts, he was short of vital ingredients. Dumbledore had allowed Severus unlimited access to the school's stores, therefore he had never bothered to restock his personal lab. He needed to use what he still had sparingly, as he couldn't show his face in any apothecary without getting arrested.

And so he was awake most nights. He had also developed an unusual habit, more like an obsession really. Every night he sat next to Hermione's bed and watched her sleep, delighting in the fact that she would, at some point, rid herself of the covers, exposing herself. Most nights, the long grey shirt she wore would cover her up sufficiently, but sometimes it would ride up to her hips. It had happened three times in the last four weeks.

Severus relished these stolen glimpses; it was the closest he would ever get to Hermione. Although he had never touched her, he always felt like a dirty pervert the following day. He couldn't look her in the eyes, afraid that she might see the desire there; after all, he could see it every time he saw himself in the bathroom mirror. If she found out what he longed for, she would run and get herself into danger. As much as it pained him, he had to stay away from her as much as possible. He had sworn to himself to protect her from the darkness. That meant he couldn't act on the feelings that had grown from a small seedling of protectiveness to a powerful plant of longing and something even deeper.

~o~o~o~

Dark tendrils of smoke began rising out of the box, drawing Harry's gaze. In seconds, all the power in the room formed a bright red cloud over it, absorbing the darkness it emitted.

The young dark-haired wizard watched with rapt attention how the cloud became smaller but denser, before it exploded, ejecting a massive wave of power and red light. Harry sank to his knees, his glasses broken and askew. He felt drained and tired. He searched his pockets for his wand, it wasn't there. He remembered pulling it out in his earlier rage, searching for something to destroy. His hands rummaged around on the floor; instead of his wand, however, he grasped something rounded and heavy.

After having located his wand and repaired his glasses, he took a closer look at the curious object. It was a heavy golden locket, the snap clasp broken. Harry opened it carefully – it was empty but for a dark red spot on the material. He turned it over; there were strange markings on it – a snake surrounded by runes he couldn't read. Neither he nor Ron had ever taken the subject, only Hermione had.

Hermione.

The sadness and guilt were back with a vengeance. Harry dropped the locket uncaringly onto the only table in the chamber, before crawling into his bed and pulling the covers over his head.

~o~o~o~

The soft pop of Apparition went unheard in the abandoned street some three miles south of Newcastle. The figure of a man appeared, casting glances in all directions. Satisfied that he was not being followed, he made his way along the bank of the dirty river and up the street to the very last house. He carried himself like a warrior, though his stiff posture and ever-moving eyes betrayed his discomfort.

He stopped in front of the only inhabited house on Spinner's End, his white blond hair glowing icy blue in the starlight. He didn't relish being here. How people could live in such squalor was beyond him. Cautiously he approached the door, knocked once, twice and a third time before taking a step back.

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A/N: I know my chapters are not very long, but I try to update as soon as I can. That should count for something.

The picture at the top of the page is an illustration I drew. It's actually a lot bigger (I uploaded it to Illusions).

## A Rare Finding

Chapter 6 of 20

*He had been sleeping next to her...*

### Chapter Five A Rare Finding

*"Harry, dear? Would you go and help Hermione clear out the drawers over there?" Mrs. Weasley asked in an authoritative voice that brooked no argument.*

*"Sure. Where shall we put that stuff?" Harry asked, looking around the attic. It was the only area left to clean. In the last week at Grimmauld Place, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had been made to help free the old Black residence of all kinds of magical vermin and thick layers of dust. Mrs. Weasley pointed to a cardboard box under the window before turning back to de-doxying the heavy dark blue curtains.*

*As he moved to join Hermione, Harry had to admit that he had imagined his being at headquarters differently. His best friend started coughing uncontrollably and excused herself to get something to drink. Harry approached the old armoire and opened the top most drawer empty. The one under the first held a selection of parchment. He rifled through the yellowed page;, most contained long lists of names with a sum of money scribbled behind in an almost childish hand. When Hermione returned, they decided to get rid of the lot. Under the pile of papers, they found a heavy locket which wouldn't open.*

~o~o~o~

The insistent pounding got louder with each passing minute. Not opening his eyes, Severus tried to roll over in bed only to collide with something soft and warm; it smelled faintly of peach. He adjusted his position, flinging an arm over it. He had had such a wonderful dream and was determined to get back to it. The hammering wouldn't stop and the warm lump he clutched to his chest started squirming. Soon an elbow made contact with his ribs bringing him at last back to consciousness.

"Severus," a sleep-rough voice mumbled. "I think there is someone at the door." As if in confirmation, there came three rapid knocks then silence.

"Oh, shit!" Severus exclaimed. He must have fallen asleep while watching her. 'How did I wind up in her bed?' He shook his head; it was of no importance for the moment. Stumbling out of the small room, he tossed a short, "Go back to sleep," over his shoulder and closed the door.

No way could Hermione sleep now. Her senses were on high alert, and her brain worked furiously, coming up with likely scenarios that could occur when Severus opened the front door. Had somebody discovered her whereabouts? Order Members? Death Eaters? She shivered and reached for her wand, just in case. If it weren't for the seriousness of the situation, she would have been angry about the disturbance. She had slept better than in weeks with Severus holding her.

Wait a minute! Severus Snape had been holding her. He had been sleeping next to her *inher* bed. Had he done so every night? Was that the reason he wanted her to stay? Hermione struggled to process this new information. It wasn't right... He was a grown man. Ron was the one she wanted, he was her age, and she had been attracted to him for a while now. 'Since fourth year,' her inner voice supplied helpfully. And yet, it had felt good to be held by her former teacher: *No, no! I shouldn't be thinking that. It's wrong, so wrong.* She would confront him and demand an explanation. It wouldn't do to get too attached to someone whose loyalty was so unclear.

~o~o~o~

Bill and Charlie Weasley arrived at the old St Bartholomew's Hospital in London just before nightfall. For three days they had been checking hotels, hospitals, and even shelters for the homeless in and around London, without result. No one had seen the young, brown-haired witch. The two brothers were exhausted from Apparating around the whole day twice already they had navigated themselves into precarious situations, namely the back yard of a shady little pub where two men had just drawn their knives; and the roof of a private clinic where a helicopter was about to land.

It was those close calls that made them reluctant to continue their fruitless search. Bart's was the last hospital on their long list. If Hermione wasn't here, they decided, they

would return to headquarters.

They entered the old building through the visitor's entrance, noticing the striking differences to the other places they had been in the last few days. It was like walking into an old museum or art gallery. Two stunning murals were painted on the walls of the enormous staircase Bill and Charlie were ascending. It took them quite a while to find the actual hospital wards.

The nurse behind the information desk regarded the two men with boredom, her voice sounding cold and professional as she asked them to state their business. Not even glancing at the picture Charlie held out to her, she rifled through her files before shaking her head and turning to the doctor that had just arrived.

That was it, three days of search nothing found.

"Malfoy? Yes, he had physiotherapy this morning. Strange symptoms he had, severe nerve damage but normal brain functions."

Having overheard the conversation, the two Weasleys eyed each other in silent understanding. They may not have found Hermione, but Malfoy could probably give them some answers.

~o~o~o~

*Harry tumbled through dark nothingness. As the world slowly righted itself, he stared into the eyes of an immensely fat lady who wore an elaborated ginger wig and pink robes. She looked right through him, her gaze wandering between a small jewelled mirror and the ornate clock on her mantle piece. A little house-elf was by her side, complimenting her on her looks. When the doorbell rang, the woman urged the elf to bring her guest into the cramped antique-shop-like room.*

*When the little creature returned, she was followed by a young man dressed in a black suit his hair was extremely dark, reflecting hardly any light, his cheeks were hollowed, and he would have been called handsome if not for the hard reddish eyes.*

*He treated the older witch like a suitor would a lovely young girl. A lot of talk followed, though to Harry it seemed like somebody had pressed the fast-forward button on a remote control. His head swirled trying to keep up with what was being said.*

*And then, Harry watched in rapt attention how the young man lifted a heavy golden locket out of a box inlaid with smooth crimson velvet. "Slytherin's mark," he said quietly.*

~o~o~o~

Severus was in a foul mood, and whoever stood in front of his door would be lucky to escape his wrath. For the first time in weeks, he had slept true he hadn't intended to sleep in Hermione's bed, but she didn't seem to have minded much. He was more than eager to return to her, but first he had to deal with the suicidal person that had started pounding on his door again.

Yanking the door open, he was astonished to see his old friend Lucius Malfoy. "What do you want?"

"I rather not speak about... business while standing in this god-forsaken street," was the unemotional response of the elder Malfoy. Severus stepped back to let the other man pass through to his living area, where the blond immediately went to Severus personal stores to pour himself a brandy.

"I ask again, what do you want here?" Snape questioned in a tight, impatient voice. "It is well past midnight, and I had retired for the night."

Malfoy regarded the other man with interest. To almost everyone, Snape would appear to be his usual snarky self, but Lucius had known the man for a long time. Something was wrong. If he didn't know better, he would say that Snape was more than a little nervous about his visit.

"Well, you realize that this is not just a social call. I know you to be a creature of habit and so wouldn't have disturbed you at this hour if it wasn't important," Malfoy answered in a cool and neutral tone, trying to hide the fact that he was very uncomfortable around the other man. Snape was a strong Legilimens and would easily be able to see that he was on the Dark Lord's *use him and kill him* list. Lucius wasn't looking forward to the *festivities*, as their master referred to the disposal of traitors or allies who knew too much, like Snape.

"What does he want?" Snape had a bad feeling about the whole situation. Malfoy was usually calm and collected, but not so now. He was playing with the fastenings of his robes and avoided the dark man's eyes. There were two possible explanations for the strange behaviour. Malfoy could have come to ask him to help him or, and Severus internally shuddered to think about it, was here to give him his last chance. Something he needed to do in order to stay alive. Knowing his master, it would be along the lines of kill or be killed.

Five weeks ago, Severus would have taken the draught he kept hidden in an inside of his robes since he had become a spy it was a potent poison that would kill him in seconds. More than once, he had uncapped it, even brought it to his lips. Something had always held him back.

Thoughts of the young witch in his bed, in his arms, stopped his hands from reaching into the pocket. The reason was not fear of death. He couldn't leave Hermione alone. The house would be searched, as was custom after the death of any associates of the Dark Lord. If they found her here... bile was rose up in his throat. Whatever Lucius wanted him to do, he would go along with it. "Well, what is it that you need, Lucius?"

"Our master has made an interesting discovery. Tell me, Severus, what do you know about the *Adficio Affectus*?"

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A/N: My beta Rhiannon has done a bit of research for me, and found a name for the potion that will play a big part in the story. Its purposes will be explained, but not just now.

## Dark Magic

*Chapter 7 of 20*

*Adficio Affectus*



Harry shot upright in his bed. Still sleep-drunk, he scrambled through the attic in the direction of the small table beside the window. The locket! He had thrown it there, he was sure of it. He banged his knee against the sharp corner and swore loudly. There was nothing for it, he needed some light.

Hitting the switch with more force than he intended to, the single light bulb flared to life, illuminating the dusty room. His eyes adjusted quickly to the defuse lighting. Momentarily frozen in place, Harry noticed with a shudder how much his current retreat resembled the cupboard he had had to live in for several long years. Magic was what had gotten him out of there and allowed him access to a world where he felt finally accepted. And yet, it was the same power that had taken away the ones he loved and dictated his life.

Mentally shaking himself, Harry came back to the reason why he had gotten up in the first place. The locket that had haunted his dreams was lying innocently on the desktop. With more caution than before, he picked it up. His eyes searched out the markings a serpentine 's' there was no doubt about its origin. It was Slytherin's locket, the one he and Dumbledore had searched for in the cave by the sea. A Horcrux a piece of Voldemort's soul had resided in it.

It was broken open however, and Harry felt no compulsion against handling it. Still, at one point it had contained strong dark magic. Harry had so many questions. How did it get here? Why was it open? Who was R.A.B? What happened to the soul fragment? He needed to find Lupin or anyone that had information about the dark arts, and most importantly the Black family. There was a link they had missed before.

~o~o~o~

Severus gasped. *Adficio Affectus* was one of the darkest potions in existence. Like magical beasts the Ministry of Magic categorized all potions and draughts. The first two categories included all brews without restrictions on ingredients and the finished product. The third, which included Wolfsbane and Polyjuice, had restrictions on certain components. The final two categories included all of the known dark potions. Any potion that included human blood or flesh was considered to be dark, although that meant banning some of the most potent healing draughts known to wizard kind. Some potions were meant to have harming affects; it was the intent that made them dark. *Adficio Affectus* was a category five potion, fulfilling both restriction clauses.

"I have heard of it. There is, however, no recording of the potion anywhere, and the last master to brew it was destroyed about fifty years ago." Snape tried to remain as calm as he possibly could. The smile that was forming on Lucius's lips made his insides crawl. There was nothing pleasant about the blond man's obvious enjoyment.

"Oh, but there is an old book that belonged to an Alchemist. As a matter of fact, I told you earlier that our lord had made a discovery. The ingredients are being gathered as we speak." Malfoy's eyes were flashing now, something that had not happened since he had been sent to Azkaban. It was a look that screamed malevolence.

Severus remained upright in his chair, his hands clasped tightly together. He looked cool and collected, but his hands were sweating profusely. He dreaded the answer to the question he knew Malfoy was waiting for. "Who will brew the potion?"

Lucius Malfoy chuckled, an unpleasant sound that could have frozen fire. "Why, you of course. That's why I was sent. He requests your presence at the next gathering to relate the details to you."

Snape felt faint a gathering. He hadn't faced his master for more that three months. Being summoned was always straining, but his role had made it easier to deal with the events that happened when the 'business' part was over and the 'party' began. He could give his lord excuses as to why he couldn't stay and was usually allowed to take his leave. Once, during the holidays after the disaster at the Ministry, he was forced to stay. The events that had unfolded before his eyes had literally made him sick.

The little bottle of poison in his cloak started to pound in time with his heartbeat.

~o~o~o~

It was more than a little difficult to get into a hospital room outside of visiting hours. Charlie and Bill had waited until nightfall before returning to St Bartholomew's. What made the whole situation more difficult was that they couldn't use magic here. There were too many people, and a stray charm could cause a lot of injuries.

Draco Malfoy's room was on the third floor. The room number had been coaxed out of a young nurse. Charlie had played the concerned friend, and after some compliments, had gotten the information they sought.

The elevator came to an abrupt halt. The two young men looked up and down the corridor. Other than the core of the building, the west wing was illuminated by a garish, extremely bright light, and the smell of disinfectant agent was heavy in the air.

Room 302 was the last one on the right. Bill peeked inside, and gave his brother a curt nod before they both slipped in, and closed and warded the door. Hearing a gasp from across the room, the two redheads turned to the only occupied bed. Draco was propped up on some pillows, a book hovering above his face. He looked very pale and thin. His body gave an involuntary shudder. The medication numbed the pain, but the spasms continued to wrack the blond's worn out body.

The two Weasleys approached the bed carefully. It was obvious that Malfoy needed magical help to recover. "We have come to get some questions answered," Bill stated calmly. "But first we will get you to Madam Pomfrey."

"What makes you think I'll go with you, Weasley," Malfoy ground out with effort, his body gave another mighty shudder.

"You need proper healing and nourishment by the look of things," Charlie said matter-of-factly, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to help an enemy. Draco's face contorted in pain; he needed another dose of morphine.

"See it this way, Malfoy. We help you get out of here, and after you've recovered, you'll answer some questions for us," Bill said, moving to stand next to the young man. Draco knew that agreeing could get him into prison in the end, but the pain was excruciating at times and he was already addicted to the pain killers. He had no doubt that they would keep their part of the bargain. He had developed a new appreciation for Gryffindor's since he had confronted Dumbledore on the Astronomy tower. The Weasleys and the other associates of the former headmaster could give him shelter, and he could finally pay the debt he owed. His first try had not been working for whatever reason.

~o~o~o~

It was almost four in the morning when Hermione heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs. She had been pacing about the room until her feet got too cold and her skin broke out in goosebumps. For the last thirty minutes she had simply stared at the closed door, the bed covers drawn up to her nose, her wand still clutched in her hand.

The steps came nearer. Hermione held her breath and concentrated on the hex she might use if anyone but Severus entered the room. The door was pushed open carefully and the young witch relaxed at the sight of her former teacher. When he reached for the clasp of his cloak, she remembered the issue she needed to address. As time had dragged by, her worry for both their lives had driven all other thoughts out of her mind.

The sleeping arrangements had to be addressed, but she didn't know how to do that. She had closed her eyes when he rid himself of the constricting frock coat. The mattress dipped in beside her and her eyes snapped open. Severus was now removing his boots. Hermione became panicky when he reached for the buckle.

"Severus, I don't..."

"For once in your life, Miss Granger, hold your tongue. I am tired and have no energy to listen to your chatter," Severus snarled with venom.

Hermione winced at the harsh tone. The polite façade he had put on for her had dropped. Tears stung her eyes. She moved as far away from him as she could and turned her back to the dark man. He didn't really care. The thought hurt her more than she would have liked. It was easier to be so isolated from her friends when she could hold on to the belief that Snape cared for her safety. But it seemed that she would eventually have to pay a price for it.

It didn't take long before Hermione realized that Snape's breathing had evened out. Quietly, she left the bed and padded barefoot into the bathroom, where she sat down in the corner, hidden from view by the large bath tube, and cried herself to sleep.

## Solving Problems

*Chapter 8 of 20*

How do you abduct a hospital patient?

### Chapter Seven Solving Problems

Harry bounded down the stairs with a newfound energy. A Horcrux! He had found one. The grief about Hermione's disappearance had clouded his mind. He had lost focus. But now, his goal was clear again. There were still four Horcruxes to be found. He needed to talk to the one person that could possibly explain the reason why the Horcrux was at headquarters, of all places.

The room Remus Lupin normally occupied was empty, so was the kitchen. A glance out the window answered the question of the other man's whereabouts. A silver-white full moon hung in the clear, inky black sky.

"Harry?" came a rough and sleepy voice. The dark-haired young man turned towards the sound, his eyes coming to rest on his best friend.

Ron looked like death warmed over, Harry thought. He had lost weight; his eyes were bloodshot, and his unhealthy paleness made his dark freckles stand out sharply.

"You look like crap," Ron announced with a hesitant smile.

"So do you, mate." And they both broke out into the first real laughter since their friend was taken from them. It was liberating.

In unspoken agreement, they sat down at the kitchen table, sharing a quite midnight meal. Ron ate with gusto; he had refused meals lately. Concentrated as he was on his mashed potatoes, Ron didn't detect the locket Harry kept close to his plate, his fingers brushing over the markings absentmindedly.

"I wonder how it got here," Harry mumbled between bites of cold sausage.

"What did you say, Harry?"

"I found this," Harry said, holding out the locket for Ron to see.

"That's... eh... nice," Ron replied, eyeing the ugly thing.

"You don't understand." Harry's voice rose. "It's Slytherin's locket; the one Dumbledore and I went looking for the day... the day he was killed. It's a Horcrux, well, was anyway."

"Where did you get it?" Ron asked in hushed awe.

~o~o~o~

How do you abduct a hospital patient? A valid question, indeed. At least it was for Charlie and Bill.

It was an advantage that the patient in question was willing to go along, but Draco Malfoy was not well enough to walk on his own.

"Well, conjure a stretcher," Malfoy prompted the two Weasleys.

"Oh, yeah, why didn't we think about that." Bill was already fed up with the blond's attitude. "What if someone sees you floating around like that?"

They had been discussing ways to get Malfoy out of St. Bart's since he had agreed to go with them about thirty minutes ago. The few possessions he had were packed quickly, but that was as far as they had gotten.

Apparating was out of the question; even Side-Along Apparation would be too much of a strain for Draco. A Portkey was no option either. Neither of the Weasleys knew the exact coordinates of headquarters, as they were protected by a new Secret Keeper. And producing one wasn't exactly easy anyway; their powers didn't extend that far.

"Charlie? Remember the old Ford Anglia dad once owned?"

"The flying one? Yes, but Harry and Ron crashed it a few years ago."

"A flying car is so much more undetectable than a floating stretcher," Malfoy ground out.

The two Weasleys ignored him. "We could borrow one from Gringott's," Bill suggested.

"What about the goblins?"

"You just need to grease them properly, and they'll keep quiet." The Weasley's turned to Draco. Yes, if someone knew how to get by the authorities, it was a Malfoy.

~o~o~o~

"Wow, that's amazing!" Ron had listened attentively to Harry's recollection. "What do you think? Are the other Horcruxes somewhere in the house as well?"

"I don't know. It might be some kind of coincidence," Harry said, though he knew it wasn't. It had not been easy even for Dumbledore and him to get the fake one. Maybe it had been a diversion all along, but that didn't explain the note.

"We have to find out who this R.A.B. fellow is," Harry reasoned. "He's the part that's missing in the puzzle."

"He's a Black, isn't he?" Ron tossed out carelessly.

Harry stared. Ron was right; it was so logical. How could he have been so stupid? It was such an obvious thing. And there he had been, whacking his brain for a connection between Voldemort and Grimmauld Place. "Yes, he's a Black, it makes sense."

"Who's a Black?" A female voice joined the conversation.

"Well, the guy who..." Ron started, only to get kicked in the shin by Harry under the table.

"Em, no one... not a Black, just black... always winning in chess with it." It was lame, Harry knew, but the Auror with the bright violet hair didn't seem to catch on to anything.

"Will Remus be back today?" Harry asked as casually as he could. He needed to talk to him. Not only was the man the only one of the Order Harry trusted infinitely, he was also the closest connection to Sirius and would probably know something about the rest of the Black clan.

"No, he'll stay in the Shrieking Shack tonight and the night after," Tonks replied, frowning. "None of us is able to brew the Wolfsbane Potion correctly."

Everything bad always came down to Snape, Harry thought angrily. His hatred made the cups in the sink rattle softly, but none of the three noticed, because Mrs. Black let out a loud scream.

~o~o~o~

"Fleur will kill me, if she finds out what I did," Bill moaned, almost crashing the flying vehicle into the roof of an old bank.

"She'll understand," Charlie assured his brother. Once the plan was formed, Bill had set off to get the car while Charlie had stayed with Malfoy. The goblins were a greedy bunch, indeed. Bill had had to agree to work for free for three months. His wife of only two and a half months would be livid, he knew. They had been saving money for their own house. At least, he thought, he hadn't taken money out of their vault; she would have realized that immediately.

It was funny how much his wife and mother had in common. He always found it funny how whipped his father appeared. He was not one to talk now. Fleur had taken complete control of their joined finances, only providing him with spending money.

The rest was a piece of cake. The old FIAT was extremely quiet, and the invisibility booster worked perfectly. When Bill arrived, Charlie had already carried Draco onto the roof of the modern side wing where the helicopters usually landed.

In a matter of minutes, they had settled the young Malfoy into the back seat, and were now almost in seeing distance of headquarters.

"We are almost there. I have to return the car tonight. You'll have to explain everything, and don't forget to get Pomfrey," Bill instructed his brother, who turned to look at Draco.

"He's sleeping at the moment, but I think he'll wake up again soon. The spasms got progressively worse when I brought him to the roof," Charlie said in a gentle tone.

Bill slowed the car down, attempting to land the car in front of the house with the number eleven. Both redheads got out. Bill helped his brother get Malfoy out of the car carefully. Charlie carried the blond boy towards the house. Draco was still wrapped in the hospital sheets and was nevertheless shivering violently.

"I'll be back in an hour, at the most," Bill informed his brother before getting into the car and disappearing into the night.

As soon as Charlie approached the gap between houses eleven and thirteen, they were pushed to the side, making number twelve appear. Having no hand free to open the door himself, Charlie did what they all avoided he rang the bell. After a moment of silence, the portrait of Mrs. Black started screaming.

~o~o~o~

Severus tossed and turned, sweat glistening on his forehead. He was dreaming.

*Severus was leading a young woman into greenhouse number two. She was holding his hand and giggling all the while. Her strawberry blond hair swung from side to side, as she and the sixteen year old Slytherin neared the entrance to the glass building.*

*He led the girl to a soft moss-covered place and produced a blanket for them to sit on. While they talked, the young Ravenclaw moved closer and closer to the mysterious dark-haired boy. When Severus turned his head to ask why she was pressing into his side like that, she kissed him.*

*After a moment of shocked surprise, Severus started returning her affections. He gathered her in his arms, not believing a beautiful young girl like her would kiss a loner like him.*

*The situation became more heated, and soon cloaks and shirts were discarded. The girl took his hands and placed them on her chest, giving him all the permission he needed to continue. After a few awkward fumbblings, her bra was unhooked, and Severus admired the first naked breasts he had ever seen.*

*She urged him on, pleaded for more contact, and soon they were both completely naked. Severus' mind had taken leave, his hormones and instincts telling him what to do.*

*It was bliss, his first time. She kissed and caressed his back, and he fought hard to control himself. It wasn't long before he found his release.*

*"Get off me, you bastard," the girl under him sobbed violently. Severus scrambled away from her, unsure why she reacted like that when she had been the one to initiate the contact. He reached out a hand to caress her cheek, but she flinched and backed away to gather her clothes.*

*Severus remained sitting where he was. Soon she had covered herself sufficiently to return to her dormitory. With one last glance in his direction, she ran for the door.*

*"Obliviate!" Severus heard a male voice shout. He stood hastily, pulling his boxers on and running for the exit to see what had happened.*

*The smiling faces of Even Rosier and Walden Macnair appeared. "Happy Birthday, Severus! Liked your present, did you?" Rosier announced brightly.*

*"What... how... she..." Severus was at a loss for words, totally bewildered, confused and angry.*

*"You are not the only one with a talent for potions, my friend," Macnair stated. "Thought we'd help you along. No Slytherin should remain a virgin for more than sixteen years."*

*"Of course, we had to Obliviate her. Can't have the girl running around, telling people you raped her with the help of a lust potion now, can we?"*

Severus Snape woke up screaming, he hadn't had this dream for years. He made his way to the bathroom as fast as his weakened knees could carry him. Leaning over the sink, he splashed water into his face.

He raised his eyes to the mirror, only to see the small figure of Hermione huddled next to the tub. Her eyes were open, and she stared at him with such horror, with the same look the girl in his dream had had. He stumbled to the toilet and was violently sick.

~o~o~o~

Hermione was woken up by an anguished scream coming from the bedroom. She debated getting up to go looking if everything was okay.

She hadn't even time to leave her uncomfortable place on the floor before the door opened and a ghastly pale Severus entered. He slumped over the sink, shivering. When he dried his face and lifted his eyes to the mirror their gazes locked.

She heard his harsh intake of breath, and seconds later he was bent over the toilet, emptying the contents of his stomach.

Her anger and hurt forgotten for the moment, Hermione moved to kneel down next to him. She pulled his hair out of his face and softly stroked his back.

Soon Severus calmed down enough to turn around. He collapsed backwards against the toilet, his eyes closed. Hermione collected a washcloth, wetted it and carefully started passing it over Severus face. The dark wizard was completely sedate, allowing Hermione to tend to him without protests.

"Come, let's get you back to bed, before you catch a cold," she said, surprised when he simply nodded and allowed her to help him up.

She led him back into the dark bedroom, where he sank down onto the mattress like a stone.

Hermione was at a loss for what to do now. She sat down next to him on the bed, whispering words of comfort, trying to coax a response out of him. His breakdown unsettled her.

Suddenly, he gripped her hand, drawing it to his chest. She placed her flat palm over his heart beat. "I'll never hurt you, Hermione, I promise." It was whispered so quietly, she almost missed it.

A moment of silent understanding passed between them. Hermione moved to lie down on her side, facing him. Drawing the covers up over them both, her hand still held in his over the soft thumping of his heart. It lulled them both into a deep, exhausted sleep.

In these few minutes, although neither realized it, they had formed a bond.

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A/N: See they will work through it. I'm not that cruel.

## The Reason Why

*Chapter 9 of 20*

*A nagging thought in his mind kept him from drifting off again, something important.*

### Chapter Eight The Reason Why

The three people jumped to their feet as one. Harry hurried to recover Mrs. Black's portrait while Tonks and Ron went to open the front door, wands drawn. The sight that met their eyes was more than unexpected.

"Charlie? What do you... who is that?" Tonks asked, both curious and startled.

"The young Malfoy. The details will have to wait for later. He isn't very well. Can you Floo Poppy for me?"

"Sure," Tonks replied, stepping aside for them to pass.

"You can put him in Fred and George's room; they won't be back anytime soon," said the calm voice of Molly Weasley, who had been woken by Mrs. Black. She eyed the unconscious boy speculatively.

Ron followed his brother up the stairs and motioned for Harry to come along.

Once the Malfoy heir was settled in and Molly was out of earshot in the kitchen, the questions burst out of the two boys.

"What did you bring him here for?"

"You brought an enemy into headquarters?"

"Have you forgotten what he did and tried to do?"

"What if the Death Eaters are following him?"

It was such a jumble of questions that Charlie couldn't distinguish most of them. "Calm down. Bill and I found him in a Muggle hospital in London. It seems that he sustained severe nerve-damage, Cruciatius, I reckon," Charlie explained. "Maybe he can answer some of our questions, maybe he knows where Hermione is. If not, well, we can always hand him over to the Aurors."

Harry huffed and reluctantly accepted the situation. Malfoy was surely no threat in his current state.

Moments later Poppy Pomfrey, closely followed by Mrs. Weasley, brushed past the boys, shooing them out of the room.

"I'm hungry. Let's make some breakfast," Charlie suggested, and together the three descended the stairs. Ron nearly fell when he crashed into something solid.

"Ouch," a high voice squeaked, pulling the Invisibility Cloak away. "Ginny! What the hell?" Ron huffed, the collision had momentarily knocked the breath out of him.

"I wanted to know what happened. Mum caught me when I tried to sneak down to look what was happening, so I..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes fell on the dark haired boy she missed so much in the last weeks. "Harry!" She squealed, pouncing on him. Her arms went around his neck, and she buried her head in his shoulder.

Harry held on to her, his stomach doing flip-flops. They may have split up, but he still felt strongly for her. The loud clearing of a throat broke them apart.

"Now that we are all awake," Arthur Weasley announced, "we can set the table and have a family breakfast. You have a lot of explaining to do, Charlie."

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The bright sunlight streaming through the bedside window roused the wizard from his almost comatose sleep. He cracked an eye open only to growl and roll to his side. Someone had pulled open the dark drapes on the window. He couldn't sleep like that, although he felt as if he were dead. His head was so heavy; he had no energy to get up just yet.

A nagging thought in his mind kept him from drifting off again, something important. An image of a young woman's frightened eyes made its way to the forefront of his musings. His hand wandered to the other side of his bed. Nothing. He sat up. Hermione wasn't there. Panic gripped him. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and padded into the bathroom. It was empty. *'She has left me,'* he thought. *'What if she didn't go willingly? What if Lucius came back?'*

Severus hurried out of the door and down the stair. He grabbed his travelling cloak and was about to bolt out of the door when the clinking of glasses met his ears. The kitchen door was closed, but the sound of light footsteps was unmistakable.

In five big strides, Severus had crossed the room. He opened the door and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Hermione was busy with breakfast preparations. She had already set the table and was at the moment rummaging through the cupboards. The logical part of his mind broke out into laughter, and rightly so. His house was so heavily warded she would never have been able to leave without his help. All means of magical travel were inhibited; his doors and windows were guarded by dark magic.

"Morning," she greeted him brightly. "I made something to eat. I hope you don't mind." She then turned to look at him. "Are you going somewhere?"

"No... I just... never mind," he grumbled. "I was a bit... erm, cold," he lied.

"See, I told you, you would catch a cold. I'll make you a camomile tea, and then it's off to bed again," Hermione stated firmly. Severus took the seat right in front of him, amused that she tried to boss him around. It reminded him of the way Molly Weasley had fussed over him whenever he had come to report after a summoning.

"I'm fine, no need for such drastic measures," he argued. She finished her preparations and plopped down opposite him. "Your stores are really impressive, considering you don't leave this house," Hermione stated conversationally.

"Albus charmed them for me a long time ago," Severus answered her implied question. "I lived here during the summer holidays, and he insisted that I was provided with food in case something happened that would make me unable to venture outside."

Hermione only nodded. She had detected the bitterness in his voice when he spoke about the deceased headmaster. The whistling of the teapot broke the awkward silence. Hermione rose and busied herself with preparing the tea. Severus' eyes followed her every move.

"I'm sorry for my behaviour last night. I shouldn't have shouted. I took my anger out on you," he said when Hermione turned to place a cup in front of him.

Hermione took a deep breath, seated herself, and raised her eyes to his. "It's okay," she acknowledged. She didn't tell him that she had panicked because he had shared her bed. She had admitted to herself when she had gotten up earlier that she felt more secure with him so close by her side. He was no monster; he wouldn't hurt her. It had been her own jumbled emotions that had dictated her reaction to him.

"Who was at the door last night?" She dreaded the answer, but needed to know.

Severus sighed heavily before setting his fork down and answering. "Lucius Malfoy. He informed me that I would be summoned soon. Apparently the Dark Lord has work for me. I wondered when the moment would come; why he hadn't bothered to have me killed yet." Hermione almost choked on her juice.

*'And if it weren't for you, I would have taken my own life yesterday,'* he added in his head. He had considered it briefly. But the remembered feeling of Hermione's small frame pressed to his made it impossible.

"What does he want you to do?" Hermione inquired, her eyes wide with fear.

"He needs me to brew a potion." He wanted to spare her the details, but knew he had to tell her. "He wants the *Adficio Affectus*," he trailed off, trying to gauge her reaction. Her face went from puzzlement, to understanding, to puzzlement.

"It means to exhaust or drain emotion, but I have never heard of a potion by that name," Hermione said, her food quite forgotten.

"I'm not surprised. It's a very Dark potion. There is no record of its formula in any of the books I have ever seen, but Lucius led me to believe that the Dark Lord has found the recipe. I only know stories about it. It is said to require unicorn blood and some other cursed ingredients."

"What does it do?"

"Exactly what the name suggests. Whoever drinks it is able to draw on the emotions of the people around them. Magic feeds on emotions; Potter is the best example of that. It leaves the victims in a state not unlike that of a Dementor's kiss victim."

"How do you know that much, if you can't even be sure it exists?"

"You misunderstand me, Hermione. I don't doubt that it existed once, as there are many references to it in the more questionable potions texts. The potion is legend, just as the Elixir of Life."

The rest of the breakfast passed in silence, the two occupants of Spinner's End deeply lost in thought.

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"You did what!" Molly Weasley was in a rage. She towered over Charlie, her right index finger poking into his chest repeatedly. As demanded by his father, Charlie had recounted the events that led to Malfoy's presence at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. "First you break into a hospital, then you bribe the goblins to lend you a flying car, and to top it all off, you kidnap a patient a Malfoy at that!"

"Mum, he would have wasted away in there. What if he knows where Hermione is? You taught us that even an enemy deserves respect," Bill had just returned and immediately came to the defence of his brother.

"You... you... wait until Fleur hears about that. You are lucky she is staying in Paris with her sister until the weekend. That should give you enough time to think up ways to pacify her," Molly admonished.

"I am glad you brought him," Poppy Pomfrey said in a clipped tone. "He would be beyond my aid, if he had stayed there a day longer. I had to treat not only his nerve damage but also the addiction to a strong Muggle sedative."

Molly's anger deflated just as quickly as it had built. She let herself fall backwards into a free chair, only to jump up again. She picked up the object she had accidentally sat on. "Who's is this?" she asked the assembled.

Harry eyes went wide with shock at seeing the Weasley matriarch dangling Slytherin's locket over the table. "It's... I came down to talk to Remus about it... I found it in a box in the attic... it is... belonged to Slytherin," Harry stuttered.

"Would you all leave the kitchen? I need to have a private word with Harry," Arthur Weasley ordered, snatching the locket out of his wife's hand. The protest died in her throat; quickly she shoved her children out of the door, Pomfrey and Tonks trotting behind them.

Once they were alone, Arthur beckoned Harry to step away from the table. He sat the locket down in the middle and unsheathed his wand. *Specialis revelio!* he intoned clearly. The locket remained unchanged. Several revealing charms later, Arthur sat down, shaking his head in disbelief.

"The locket once carried strong dark power, Harry." Arthur Weasley explained. "I don't know what destroyed it, but the object is now harmless."

"It was a Horcrux," Harry said in a hushed voice. "Dumbledore told me. He wanted me to know how to destroy Voldemort," here Harry paused. Locking eyes with Arthur he continued, "You know, don't you? He told you as well."

"Yes, I know how He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named survived all those years. His soul was still bound to this world by the soul fragments he left behind."

Harry nodded and repeated the tale of the accidental magic.

"Who knows about the Horcruxes?" Arthur asked, after hearing the story.

"Ron and Hermione know everything Dumbledore told me about Voldemort. And I told Ron about finding the locket earlier," Harry said earnestly.

"The Order will need to be informed," the older man said, seeing Harry's look of protest, he quickly added, "At least some members, Remus, Tonks, Minerva, and maybe Kingsley."

Harry nodded. He knew that he needed help to find and destroy the remaining soul fragments.

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**Jacob's Notes:** This is my fiancée's story, but since she has a broken elbow, I'm in charge of uploading for the time being. I realize that this is important to her and her readers, and so I will assist her to the best of my abilities.

## Summoning the Circle

*Chapter 10 of 20*

It was on a Wednesday night when the Dark Mark on Severus' arm started burning.

### Chapter Nine Summoning the Circle

It was two weeks before Draco Malfoy regained consciousness. Thanks to Madam Pomfrey's abilities, he would make a full recovery given time.

All except one of the other inhabitants of number twelve, Grimmauld Place avoided his room as much as possible. After seeing the condition the boy was in, Mrs. Weasley had appointed herself to the task of nursemaid, always making sure he had everything he needed. She followed Madam Pomfrey's orders very strictly. She even cooked a special diet, and unfortunately for the rest of the Weasleys and Harry, it was the only thing she cooked.

Draco had problems speaking and concentrating as a result of the nerve restoratives he had to take. Every interrogation was stopped by either Molly or Madam Pomfrey as soon as the young man showed any sign of exhaustion. So until now, he had not been able to relate any useful information to the others.

It was November now, and there was still no sign of Hermione anywhere. Bill and Charlie had renewed their search after an issue of a local Muggle newspaper fell into their hands or rather was delivered to them by a very upset Percy. It reported the collapsing of the Grangers' house and how the police had found two bodies under the ruins. Their search for Hermione, however, remained futile.

The locket and its origins had not yet been discussed further. Harry and Mr. Weasley had decided to involve as few people as possible, only Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks would be informed. They were the two people Harry trusted the most, and they had the closest relationship to the house of Black. Getting the whole Order involved would be too risky. There was a leak somewhere. During the last three weeks, five Order members had been injured while on a supposedly secret mission. The Ministry, as well, suffered failure after failure. An attempted raid on a known Death Eater hide out that the Aurors had been watching for months had failed spectacularly. Somebody had apparently warned them.

Since there was no knowing who it was, the mistrust within the Order grew. Alastor Moody may have been good at catching dark wizards in his time, but he was an unfit leader. He lacked Dumbledore's talent to keep people together, and the ability to see things from different angles.

The Order meetings were still conducted at the old Black residence, though they now followed strict, almost military-like procedures. Order members were called in to give their reports and assigned new tasks; no discussions, no opposition were allowed.

Malfoy's presence at headquarters was kept a secret amongst the permanent residents for the time being.

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The atmosphere at Spinner's End was better than it had been in years. Often, one could hear female laughter accompanied by a deep baritone chuckle. After the rather rocky start and some misunderstandings, Hermione and Severus began to develop an understanding for each other.

Hermione learned to ignore his harsh comments, and Severus tried not to get annoyed by her incessant questions. During the day, they got on better than anyone would have guessed, but when it was time to retire, the air was ripe with tension. They both anticipated and dreaded going to bed, because the sleeping arrangements hadn't changed since the night of Severus' nightmare.

It was on a Wednesday night when the Dark Mark on Severus' arm started burning. He got up and retrieved the heavy black cloak, silver mask and black leather boots that would transform him into a minion of evil. Unused to a process that had been routine months before, he swore rather loudly, startling his companion awake.

The first thing Hermione saw when she opened her eyes was a black mass of fabric with two legs, turning and twisting in the candlelight. It was hilariously funny, and she started laughing so hard her stomach hurt.

Severus had forgotten the protection spell put on all Death Eater garb. It was an attestation to Voldemort's paranoia that he felt the need to make sure that he had control

over everything, even their clothing. The Dark Lord was more afraid of rebellion from the inside than of the ministry or the crumbling Order of the Phoenix.

Severus tried getting a hand free to get to his wand. Getting strangled by his own robes was not the way he wanted to die. It took him some minutes, but he was finally able to grasp it, touch it to the Mark on his left forearm, and intone the spell that would allow him to put them on. They fell still the second the words left his lips. He dressed methodically then, step by step, to avoid a repeat performance. By the time he was finished, Hermione had regained her composure and was watching him.

No matter how funny he had looked just moments before, the image she now perceived was more than frightening. Even without the mask, he reminded her of the men who had destroyed the safe haven that had been her family. Severus saw her flinch as he approached.

"I want you to remain awake, Hermione," he said in a serious, authoritative tone. "If you hear noises downstairs or if the fire in here turns green, get into the bathroom. The back wall of the shower slides away when you tap the broken tile at the bottom, and it will slide into place by itself when you have passed through. The passage that will open the moment the front is sealed leads to the cellar. There you will wait. I will enter that way when I return."

Hermione nodded dumbly. Why was this safe system built into his home?

"If I do not return for three days, you can assume that I am dead," Severus said in a voice bereft of all emotion. "The stores, as you know, will provide you with food. Only if you are certain that the house is empty again, should you try to get to a safe place, preferably a Muggle area."

Again Hermione only nodded. Severus turned towards the door, but stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "It has been nice having you here these last weeks," he said without turning to face her. Before the confused witch could reply, Severus swept out of the door.

He had already lost much time and would be punished for his tardiness. It was worth it, however; Hermione knew how to react in case of a raid. She would be safe.

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"Ew, what is that crap? You don't want us to eat that do you?" Ron drew a face at the unappetizing brown slush his mother placed in front of him.

"It's dinner, Ronald," Percy's voiced admonished. "You should be grateful that you get anything at all, considering how much you are complaining about the food lately. Our mother does her best to make sure we are all taken care of; you should show her the respect she deserves."

It was almost like old times at the Burrow, before the falling-out, with Percy lecturing his younger siblings. Now the estranged son had come back into the nest, and Molly was more than happy about it.

Harry eyed the scene before him with a frown. Percy had waltzed into headquarters one evening, accompanied by one of Moody's newest recruits. Nobody bothered to ask him about his sudden change of mind regarding his family. Molly had not allowed any accusations to be voiced. Harry had never particularly liked the bespectacled redhead; he was very calculating. Just like everybody else though, he held his tongue.

"Harry, dear, eat before it gets cold!" Mrs. Weasley had moved to stand by his side, smiling down at him while wiping her hands on an old dishtowel. Morosely, Harry started spooning the substance into his mouth. He was extremely relieved when Arthur Weasley came barging through the door. Their eyes locked, and without a word, Harry stood and followed the other man out of the kitchen.

They were not even halfway through the door when Arthur stopped, making Harry running into him. "Ron, are you coming?" Mr. Weasley inquired.

Ron shot to his feet immediately, meal quite forgotten. Percy made to follow as well, but was stopped by the raised hand of his father. "This has nothing to do with you. As glad as I am that you have come to your senses, you have to earn your place in this family again." With that Ron, Harry and Arthur stepped out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Arthur led the two curious boys up the stairs, not giving reason or explanation for the summons. They entered the attic room where Harry had spent weeks crying and raging over the disappearance of Hermione; only it looked nothing like it had then. The room was now spotlessly clean. The moth-eaten drapes had been changed, the window was clean, and there was no sheet of dust on the floor anymore.

The bed Harry had slept on had been replaced by a comfortable looking dark red sofa. Two matching armchairs sat on either side, grouped around a round table piled with books. A duplicate of the Black family tree hung on one wall next to what looked unmistakably like a Muggle flip chart.

A knock sounded at the door, and without waiting for a response, Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks entered. Obviously not expecting any more people, Arthur warded and locked the door. He beckoned the boys to sit; Remus and Tonks did as well.

"I summoned you all here today to discuss a matter of great importance," Arthur Weasley started. "Harry has recently brought something to my attention. Albus had for a long time suspected that You-Know-Who has found a method to bind his spirit to this earth. This locket," he held up the heavy golden object, "was a Horcrux once." Here he paused, trying to gauge the reaction of the two other Order members. Tonks looked blank while Remus gasped.

"It was found here in this very room. It holds no more dark magic; all the tests I performed gave the same results. The question that is important for us to answer now is, how did a Horcrux, which Albus believed to be hidden in a cave many miles away, come to be here? You two," Arthur turned to address Tonks and Remus, "are the closest connection to this house. You know about the family of Black. We need your help to determine why this locket came to be here."

"I have no clue," Tonks blurted. Remus took a moment to think before he looked up at Arthur. "The Blacks had many ties with Voldemort. It was tradition for them to join the Death Eaters. It's impossible to say who might have brought it here."

"Remus?" Harry started tentatively, "Do you know a Black with the initials R.A.B.?"

"The only Black with 'R' I know was "

"Regulus!" Tonks almost screeched. "Regulus Arcturus Black."

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Hermione spent the night with her wand pointed at the door. Every noise scared her. Twice she had bolted into the bathroom, only to realize that the noises were unthreatening the hooting of an owl, a car.

It was about five in the morning when the bathroom door opened, and Severus fell through, barely able to stay upright. Blood was coming out of his nose and mouth, and his robes were torn in several places, showing deep cuts.

Hermione rushed to help him to the bed, only to be pushed aside roughly. She chose to ignore his protests and made a second attempt. This time he allowed her to guide him to the bed. He sat down and let out a strangled sound of pain. "Potions... bathroom... cabinet... *Prince*..." Speaking robbed him of his last strength, and he fell back onto the bedding, unconscious.

Hermione rushed into the adjoining room, paying no mind to the red bloodstains on the white tiled floor. She found the cabinet, but it wouldn't open. "I need the password, damn. What did he say... 'cabinet' and... 'Prince.'" The cabinet door swung open. She picked up one bottle after the other, reading the labels, trying to figure out what she would need.

Arms full of vials, she returned to his bedside and started to administer a pain relief potion. It was difficult to get him into a position where he was able to swallow it. When that

was done, she carefully stripped him down to his boxers. The damage was excessive. He had been cut with a knife several times and been beaten, if the bruises that were forming on his torso were anything to go by.

For two hours she worked, healing the exterior damage as best as she could. By the time she lay down next to him, the sun had come up. He would pull through, she hoped. There was no telling if any internal damage had been done.

## Trust

*Chapter 11 of 20*

*One problem was solved, and so many more questions were opened.*

### Chapter Ten Trust

Four pairs of eyes locked onto the young Auror whose hair had turned white from shock.

The linking piece had been found. Sirius' younger brother Regulus was the reason why Slytherin's locket was here. Harry closed his eyes and fought back the urge to scream. The events of the trip to the cave with Dumbledore came crashing back to him. They had been through hell in there, and for what? Nothing. A false trinket with no worth what so ever. The ensuing weakness of the headmaster had been a direct result of the potion he had imbibed. Was it just a potion or was it poisonous? How did Regulus get in there and back out again?

One problem was solved, and so many more questions were opened.

"You said it was harmless," Remus asked, breaking the uneasy silence. "How was it destroyed?"

"I have reason to believe that it was Harry," Arthur replied quietly. Harry was on high alert. He hadn't done anything with it. There had been just the red cloud and the explosion.

Remus started to speak again but was interrupted by Harry's astonishingly steady voice. "I was angry, really furious... and then I felt a kind of strange energy shoot through me. I remember a thick red smoke, like a cloud but more dense. And then there was an explosion, and I became kind of weak-kneed, I felt drained. I picked the locket up of the floor, but I didn't realize what it was at first. I was so sad and tired, I just went to bed."

"Was it already open when you found it," Remus inquired.

"Yes," Harry answered.

"How did it look? Anything curious about it?" Remus pressed on.

"There was a dark spot inside," Harry said, drawing the locket out of his pocket. He passed the thing over the table to Remus.

"It looks like dried blood," Ron joined the conversation, craning his neck to get a better look.

"I believe you are right," Remus half-whispered. "The question is, whose blood could that be?"

"There is a way to find out," Arthur said, meeting Remus' gaze. Understanding passed over his face.

"We need to inform Minerva," Remus said. "She is the only one with the authority to give us the samples we need."

"You are right, of course," Arthur consented, though reluctantly. He didn't want to involve more people. Minerva trusted Moody a lot, as they had been acquainted for a long time. It couldn't be helped however.

"Who will brew the potion?" Tonks asked, pulling herself back together. "We don't have a Potions master anymore."

"I'm sure we'll find a way. I don't want more people drawn into this." That said, Arthur declared the meeting closed for now. If Minerva was willing to help, it would be back to Hogwarts for them as soon as possible. For now they all needed a good night's sleep.

Harry and Ron stood, not really understanding what had just been decided. What samples? Why did McGonagall have them? Nevertheless, they left the attic to go to their room, hoping to make sense of it all together.

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Severus woke up, feeling astonishingly little pain. His back was sore, and his head felt a bit dizzy, but apart from that he was fine and extremely hungry. Rolling out of the bed, he was astonished to note that it was already past noon.

He looked over at the young woman, lying on her side, still deeply asleep. Her chest rose and fell softly with her slow, even breathing. She was still dressed in her everyday clothes, a white shirt that had been his when he was younger and one of his mother's floor-length skirts. She had put them on while he was gone to be ready for whatever happened.

It was such a peaceful sight, though it brought back memories he did not want to contemplate. Flashes of his mother's form, lying on the same bed, her arms bruised and her clothes torn came unbidden. She would sleep just like Hermione did now, only the marks on her body giving away the lie that her life had become.

Eileen Prince had not loved her husband, barely known him really, when she was forced to marry him. Society did not take well to unmarried pregnant women, even if the conception was the result of a not entirely consensual one-night-stand. Her parents had insisted on an official binding after their daughter had revealed that she was expecting. Severus' grandparents were of the opinion that having a Muggle in the family was slightly better than their only child bearing a bastard.

His mother had loved him as much as she was capable. She tried to protect her son against his father's wrath and often enough took the brunt of it herself. When Severus magic first manifested itself, he spent three nights in a small cellar room.

Severus shook himself mentally. Those times were long passed; his parents were dead. He drew his gaze away from the brown-haired woman to stare out of the window. A



small dark speck in the sky caught his attention. It was coming closer, its form becoming more defined.

The eagle-owl perched on the windowsill and held up its leg for his perusal. It carried a small rectangular package. Severus brought down the wards with a whispered incantation and opened the window. He grabbed the delivery and shooed the bird off. It was the Malfoy family owl, and he did not want its sharp beak and claws anywhere near Hermione.

Getting a cloak out of the closet, he quickly dressed and tucked the package in his pocket. After a last glance at the bed, he left the room for the sitting area below.

Once there, he tapped the package with his wand to enlarge it and see if it held any dangerous magic. It didn't, so he carefully ripped the brownish paper off. He lifted the lid of the box. His eyebrows drew together in a frown. He carefully picked up item after item, expecting them closely.

"He was, indeed, serious," he mumbled to himself, fingering the cap of a little bottle, which held a silver liquid. "I will have to do it."

"What do you have to do?" came a sleepy voice from the doorway. Hermione had woken up the moment she had felt that Severus wasn't there anymore. Rational thought and instinct kept her from panicking and carried her down the stairs.

"Do you remember the potion I told you about?" At her nod he continued, "I got the recipe last night. And just now, the first set of ingredients arrived."

Hermione had so many questions, but the mentioning of the previous night made her skin crawl.

"What did they do to you? Why did they beat you? I always thought he would use the..."

"Cruciatus Curse?" He interrupted her concerned ramblings. "He wants me to brew a potion that requires me to work very carefully and precisely. Cruciatus affects the nerves, which means he would risk destroying the fine nerves in my hands. If they aren't steady anymore, I can't brew."

"Oh. But you could have died. You were in such a horrible state. There was so much blood..." Hermione winced at the memory.

"I'm very grateful that you were there to help me. Thank you." Hermione's eyes lifted to his, her breath catching at the open and vulnerable look in his black eyes. His defences were lowered, and she felt a sudden skip in her heartbeat at this show of trust.

"Can I help you?" she blurted, seizing the opportunity of speaking to this new Snape before he vanished. At his raised eyebrow, she amended, "With the potion. I could help prepare the less dangerous ingredients."

"Yes, that could be helpful. Though I want you to promise me that you won't touch anything unless I allow it. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Okay," she answered, beaming at him. Brewing this potion would keep her mind off things. She only hoped that Severus wouldn't revert back to the nasty Professor Snape when they were working together.

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It was late in the morning when Minerva McGonagall arrived at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. She had been eating breakfast with Hagrid and Argus Filch when a little over-eager owl landed in her cereal. After her first annoyance wore off, she noticed the unsigned note it was carrying.

*Be at headquarters by noon! Important meeting. Don't tell Moody!*

She had been suspicious at first, but the penmanship was one she knew well. Arthur Weasley had taken to documenting the meetings when Dumbledore was still alive.

She would go and see if it was, indeed, his request. She only needed to take a few precautions. Apparating there directly would be too risky. Anybody following her would be able to trace her Apparation pattern. She needed to make sure to shake whoever was trailing her.

So it was that she spent an hour popping about from one place to another. When she finally arrived in London, she was relatively sure that no one could have followed. She knew the wards by heart and managed to enter without making any noise.

On entering the kitchen, she was immediately drawn aside by Arthur.

"I'm sorry for the way the message was delivered. Moody is blocking all ways of communication. We couldn't risk him finding out," Arthur told her.

It didn't really make sense to her, though the urgency in his voice stilled most of her questions.

"What do you need?" It was the only thing that mattered at the moment. He would explain everything to her in time.

"Let's not talk about it just now," Arthur said, casting his eyes around the room. Percy was watching them over his newspaper, and even Harry and Ron were unusually silent. Only Molly seemed oblivious to everything, chatting away and fussing about Ginny's choice of clothes.

Minerva nodded her consent, entered further into the room and bid everyone a good morning.

The atmosphere was ripe with tension. When it was time for lunch, Fred and George paid a surprise visit. They took seats on either side of Percy. The mischievous glint in their eyes did not go unnoticed.

When Molly excused herself under the pretence of going to the bathroom, in reality taking Draco his lunch carried in a special box inside her robes, the twins saw their chance.

Fred grabbed Percy's glasses, and George put a few drops of their newest innovation in his dinner while everybody else was busy watching Percy's fruitless attempt to get his spectacles back.

"Stop that, boys!" Arthur said through his chuckle, "That's enough."

"No reflexes, that one," George pointed out.

"No wonder he's the only one in this family unable to stay upright on a broom," Fred added unhelpfully, holding out the glasses for Percy to take.

Angrily he snatched them out of Fred's hand. He cleaned them carefully before putting them back on. They all turned back to their respective meals.

"That was so lame..." Ron started, but an almost female shriek from Percy halted his complained.

Percy was scrambling away from the table as if it were burning. "There... maggots... spiders..." He started spitting and dry heaving before making a dash for the door. Molly, who was just on her way back, had to jump out of the way.

Fred and George broke out into laughter, and most of the others followed suit. Even McGonagall's lips twitched with silent mirth.

"The spell was on his glasses, wasn't it?" Ginny asked between giggles.

"It's a two-component thing. A spell on the glasses and a few drops of our newest product Liquid Boggart in his dinner," Fred said proudly.

"It works with all sorts of food and drinks," George explained. "It makes you think you're eating the most disgusting stuff you can imagine."

"Now that we know it works, we can market it," Fred finished.

Molly just shook her head and sat down. Those two, she knew, would never change.

The rest of the meal passed without further incident. Percy left without finishing his meal, still looking a little too pale.

When Molly started cleaning up, Arthur motioned for Minerva to follow him.

In the newly installed meeting room in the attic, Arthur keyed her in.

"And you need the blood samples to verify whose blood that is," Minerva asked, not yet believing that Albus would keep something like the existence of the Horcruxes from her.

"Yes," Arthur replied. "And we need to utilise the labs at Hogwarts."

"Who exactly is 'we'?"

"Remus and I will be brewing the potion. However, I want Harry and Ron there as well."

"I will organize rooms and try to organize a Portkey. Albus always kept one in his desk."

"We are on the right track with this, Minerva," Arthur emphasized. "We now know what is necessary to bring him down. Everything will work out in the end."

## Like Old Times

*Chapter 12 of 20*

*"OUT! Hermione, get out!"*

Chapter Eleven Like Old Times

"Miss Granger, could you please stop staring at me?" Severus growled in exasperation. For the last three hours, they had been in the cellar of Snape's home, trying to get the base for the Adficio Affectus right, and Severus' patience was wearing thin.

After Hermione had diced, ground, and purified all the ingredients, Severus had her read the instructions to him out of the old book. The old script was difficult to decipher, and after one batch failed because she wasn't fast enough, Severus snatched the book out of her hands. It was now floating at his eye-level next to the cauldron of boiling liquid. Severus was, however, not making much progress either.

He had confined Hermione to a corner of the room, so she would not get in his way. The room was small and much more unorganized than the labs at Hogwarts. The diffused electric light gave the room a strange greenish, wet glow. The room was boiling hot from the open fire, and Severus had unbuttoned his shirt almost halfway and rolled up his sleeves.

Hermione couldn't stop admiring the lean form and precise movement of her former professor. *'He smells divine too,'* Hermione's mind provided unhelpfully. Her curiosity about him, and the potion, prompted her to walk up to him and peer into the cauldron now and again, only to be met by his piercing gaze and a growled command to seat herself again.

Severus, for his part, was swearing and grumbling to himself, unsatisfied with his progress, or lack thereof. The old, handwritten script was extremely cramped, some letters blending together, others almost faded. Severus added a drop of Manticore blood and stepped back from the brew. The base turned a dark red before giving off an incredible amount of thick, pink smoke.

"OUT! Hermione, get out!" Severus bellowed, clapping a hand over his mouth and running for the door. Outside, he stood panting heavily, trying to catch his breath. He looked around, noticing with horror that Hermione hadn't followed. He strode back into the room and immediately started coughing. The smoke had receded somewhat, but the air was still heavy with it. He peered around, his eyes stinging severely.

Hermione was lying next to the cauldron, wand in hand. Severus hurried over and picked her up carefully. The moment he stepped into the corridor, he warded the door. Then, he carried the young woman up the stairs.

Still in his arms, Hermione's eyelids fluttered open. She gave him a hesitant smile that drove the fear Severus felt away. "Sorry," Hermione whispered, blushing for no apparent reason. "I thought a containment or stasis charm would do the trick."

Severus stared at her in disbelief. He had run and she, Gryffindor that she was, had faced the supposed danger. He shook his head and set her down. By rights he should be angry with her, but his relief about her being well made him laugh out loud.

Hermione joined in his mirth, feeling strangely carefree and unconcerned. Severus also felt elated, as if there was no world outside this house, just the two of them. Their mingled laughter turned into near hysterics. Hermione clutched his arm to keep her balance, so intense was the sensation. Severus shuddered at the contact, his deep chuckles stopping as abruptly as they had started. Hermione's tittering abated as well.

The silence around them was ripe with an un-named tension. Their eyes locked, and in unspoken agreement, they moved closer to each other until their arms were wound around each other, and their lips met in an unplanned but passionate kiss.

In the cellar room, the potion was bubbling merrily, the smoke forming little pink circles before receding slowly.

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With a resounding thump, Harry and Ron landed at Minerva McGonagall's feet, in what had once been Dumbledore's office. Little had changed in the months since Harry

had last been there. The perch Fawkes had always occupied was gone, along with several of the curious instruments that had always fascinated Harry.

"Shouldn't have eaten that second helping," Ron huffed, holding on to Harry's arm with a vice-like grip. His face had a slightly green tinge, and his breathing was irregular.

"I would welcome it, if you could refrain from making a mess in my office, Mister Weasley," McGonagall said in her stern, authoritative voice.

Harry suppressed a chuckle. It felt so much like old times. "Hello, Professor," he greeted his former Head of House.

"Sit down, boys," she commanded. "We have to wait for Remus and Arthur. I have no idea why they refused to take the Portkey, but well... Would you care for a cup of tea?"

Harry and Ron settled themselves in the plush armchairs in front of the desk, nodding their assent to McGonagall's offer.

"Maybe you'd like a lemon drop as well? I always enjoyed one when I indulged in a late-morning cuppa."

Startled, the young men turned to face the familiar voice. Albus Dumbledore's portrait-self was lounging in an overstuffed armchair, his hands drumming softly against his frame.

"Professor!" Harry exclaimed excitedly, though sadness immediately tore at his heart, his eyes stinging with tears. Dumbledore levelled his warm blue eyes at the boy, who had come to mean the world to him.

"No need for tears, Harry," Dumbledore admonished kindly. "My death was a necessity; you will understand it in time. I had a fulfilling life, and I'll never be completely gone."

Harry couldn't help the tears from coming, though he nodded his understanding. Ron just kept quiet, feeling like an intruder. This was a private conversation that, although not much was spoken, told volumes about the depth of their connection.

McGonagall returned with a laden tray, oblivious to what had happened in her office while she prepared the brew, and had the elves send some biscuits from the kitchens. The portrait-Dumbledore was now leaning against the frame, his eyes closed. If either Harry or Ron found it odd, neither said anything.

"He's always asleep, that one." McGonagall huffed. She had tried to rouse Albus repeatedly, without success. "I think Albus did that on purpose. The portrait must be charmed somehow," she said to no one in particular.

Strange, Harry thought, what reason could Dumbledore have to pretend sleep?

During the next hour of idle chat about old times, and a boringly detailed account of McGonagall's school days, Harry watched the portrait out of the corner of his eye. He swore he saw the mouth twitch now and again. There was, however, no obvious sign that Dumbledore might be awake.

Just as Ron's stomach announced the lunch hour with a loud growl, Remus and Arthur entered the office. They were covered in mud and greenery, looking like two soldiers who had spent the last hour skulking about through the forest.

"Someone burned Malfoy Manor to the ground," Arthur explained while McGonagall attempted to clean their clothes with a few well-meant spells. "We have been searching the area and the ruins for clues," he went on. "There is no telling if there was anyone in there during the fire."

"Does Dra..." Ron started, but Harry kicked him quite forcefully, cutting off his sentence. McGonagall looked at the younger redhead for a moment. Something was going on, and she didn't like being kept in the dark.

"The incident is going to be kept within the Ministry for now," Remus said, quite unaware of the older woman's suspicions. "They think it is best not to interfere with quarrels between Death Eaters."

"Is that what you think this is about?" Harry asked. It didn't make sense to Harry. Why would a Death Eater burn down the house of another? To conceal some other crime, perhaps; he was confused about this new development.

"I have no clue, nor does anyone else," Arthur answered.

"Why were you there anyway?" Ron piped up. "Mum would have a fit if she knew you were sneaking around there again."

"Someone we have in, let's say custody," Arthur replied, looking Harry in the eyes, willing him to understand the hint, "has finally started talking. He told us where to look, but when we arrived at the Manor, the whole place was swarming with Aurors and Ministry officials."

"Who is this mysterious informant?" McGonagall asked; she felt as if she was missing something crucial.

"I can't tell you, Minerva," Arthur said, avoiding her eyes. "For his safety, I can't tell."

McGonagall huffed. *Fine*, she thought, *I'll find out somehow*. Remus could be bugged into telling her, she was sure. Quickly changing the subject, she told the others that she had un-warded the labs, restocked the stores, and that the house-elves had prepared rooms for them.

Silently, they all followed the new headmistress out of the office. Harry couldn't help looking back at Dumbledore's portrait one last time. He received a conspiratorial wink and a small, mischievous smile for his trouble.

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Severus Snape felt like floating. The young woman in his arms kept her body pressed tightly to his, her soft lips moving against his own. Her tongue started probing his mouth, asking for entrance. He granted it with a deep, guttural growl. This was what he had wanted for some weeks now. His dreams and fantasies about their first kiss did no justice to the sweet reality of the moment.

Hermione was in a daze. The moment she had seen his dark eyes alight with worry and a deep longing, she felt compelled to kiss him. It was an irrational, emotion-driven action, one that was quite unlike her. He clung to her with both arms; she could almost taste the urgency and desperation behind his kiss. In automatic response, she attempted to deepen the kiss, which he allowed.

The potion, meanwhile, was changing from a deep ruby red into a pure white. The surface became as still as a deep lake, and the last of the smoke vanished into nothingness.

Hermione felt her mind clear simultaneously. She became aware of her current situation and drew back horrified.

"Professor... I..." she stuttered.

"Severus, my dear. Call me Severus," was her companion's breathless reply before he covered her lips with his again.

Hermione struggled against him. She felt helpless. Why was he kissing her? Why had she allowed it? With more strength than she thought she had, she pushed her former professor away and fled to her bedroom.

Severus remained standing where he was, not knowing what had just transpired. He shook his head at the absurdity of it all before descending the stairs to see if the smoke had cleared in his makeshift lab.

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"I really can't understand why we have to sleep in the dungeons," Ron whined, chewing on a piece of bacon absentmindedly.

"And in the Slytherins' dorms as well," Harry repeated the complaint that he had voiced to McGonagall several times.

"She could have allowed us to sleep in Gryffindor tower. I find it creepy down here," Ron agreed wholeheartedly.

The headmistress had decided that it was best if they all stayed together and close to the labs in case anything happened. After the attack in the summer, she was not sure that the castle's ward could not be breached or passed again. The best option was the students dormitories, the Slytherin dormitories to be exact. It meant they could be in close proximity to the Potions office and the labs that could be accessed from there.

If Harry and Ron were honest, they had to admit that it was quite exciting too. They could explore the rooms of their enemies, maybe discover some secrets. They were too busy grumbling about it, however, to see the opportunities that no other student before them ever had. Not just now anyway.

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**A/N:** Aww, the first kiss. Now, why does Hermione run? I sure wouldn't.

And Harry and Ron sleeping in the Slytherin dorms, oh I think Salazar's ghost is going to haunt me for this.

## Revelations and Decisions

*Chapter 13 of 20*

*Severus didn't understand his own feelings and reactions either.*

### Chapter Twelve Revelations and Decisions

He paced through the room like a caged lion, his untidy blond mane flying behind him.

Some weeks ago, he wouldn't have liked to be associated with that particular animal, but things had changed drastically. He was living among them in the proverbial lions den and was feeling more akin to the people around him than he felt to the poisonous snakes that had bitten him when his back was turned.

It was a strange thing to happen to a Malfoy, being at the mercy of the people he had always regarded as beneath him. The male Weasleys regarded him as an intruder, but accepted that he needed protection. The thing that had really surprised him was the caring and compassion of Molly Weasley. She was almost solely responsible for his fast recovery. She fussed about him, prepared his food, and sat by his bedside, listening unflinchingly to his ratings and ravings.

In the morning, he had finally broken down. Molly had brought him breakfast earlier than usual, catching him off guard, or more precisely, still immersed in nightmares. Draco had woken up in sweat and tears. Molly was soothing him, softly inquiring after his dreams. Between sobs and great gulps of air, he had told her everything that had happened after the flight from Hogwarts in the summer.

He told her about the punishment the Dark Lord had delivered, about his failed attempts to justify himself and get back into his good graces. He told her that his father had dumped him in front of St. Bart's when he had been ordered to 'dispose of the boy'.

The most difficult part to get a grasp on was his feelings of guilt and obligation to the deceased headmaster. "He saved my soul," he had whispered. "He saved my soul... and I owe him."

Molly had been surprised to hear that it was the young Malfoy who sent the letters, warning the Order of coming attacks. Softly, the Weasley matriarch asked after the Grangers, but Draco wouldn't talk about it.

The young man felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. And because she hadn't said anything accusing or judgmental to him, he voiced his concerns about his mother's safety. Molly had agreed to send trustworthy people to look after her.

And that was exactly the reason why he was pacing. It was some days later now, and no news had yet come, though he was sure Molly knew something.

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Moodily, Severus stirred the Adficio Affectus, trying to keep his mind as blank as possible. Memories of his fervent kisses with Hermione kept intruding, breaking his concentration. It had been oh-so-sweet to finally hold her... she was so willing... 'Yes,' his inner voice commented dryly, 'that's why she ran off like that, eh?'

This was indeed the thing he couldn't understand. What he knew, however, was that it was the reason she had avoided his presence for the last couple of days. He had hoped to talk to her when they retired in the evening, but no such luck. He wasn't sure exactly where she slept, but it wasn't in the bed with him, or the couch in the sitting room; he had checked every night.

Severus didn't understand his own feelings and reactions either. One minute he was angry and wanted to throw her out of his house; the next he wanted to grab her and tell her how very sorry he was. It was completely unlike him to feel so much at once. His emotional rage had broadened considerably; whether it was due to Hermione's presence, he didn't know.

The cauldron in front of him started emitting a whistling noise, a sure sign that the smoking would start any moment now. After several similar reactions from the brew, Severus knew what to do. He grabbed the shawl from the table and fastened it behind his head, so that it covered his mouth and nose.

Thus guarded against the biting fumes, he started preparing the ingredients for the next step of the potion.

After only a couple of minutes, a strong panic overcame him. What if the fumes were poisonous? He could die, and nobody would look for him. Hermione would be alone and defenceless. He needed to get out as quickly as possible. In his haste, he knocked over a bottle of unicorn blood, but he didn't care. He only wanted to get out, to safety, away from the potion.

He flung open the door and ran into the last person he wanted to see now.

Hermione.

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It was a tired and completely fed up Hermione that decided to end her imprisonment, for that was what it felt like to her. Since the 'incident', as she referred to the kisses she had exchanged with her former professor, she had not spoken to him, nor stayed in a room when he entered.

Her new retreat in the cellar was dark and dank, but she had access to food and was connected to the bathroom some floors above. The mattress she slept on was in need of cleaning, but she didn't dare do any magic. She slept in her clothes because it was very chilly, that is if she slept at all.

When a small eagle owl arrived, baring the new ingredients for Voldemort's strange potion, she had seen her chance. A hastily penned letter was fastened to the leg of the bird, which she sent away to Grimmauld Place. Someone there would find it and come looking. She had described the house as best as she could, even going so far as informing the Order that she was in Snape's house.

Hermione knew it would take a while until they would find her, but she was willing to wait for them.

Happy with her accomplishment, she bounded down the stairs to get back into her cellar room and ran into Severus.

~o~o~o~

"God, this is so boring," Ron exclaimed, yawning. He was lounging on one of the black leather sofas in the Slytherin common room, popping chocolate into his mouth.

"You don't even know if it is night or day down here," Harry added, looking up from his wizarding crossword.

After two days of chopping and grinding all sorts of roots and beetles, there was nothing left for the boys to do in the Hogwarts Potions lab. Remus and Arthur were busy with brewing almost the whole day, and McGonagall was usually elsewhere on Order business.

The two young men were forbidden to leave the Slytherins' rooms; every excursion they took would be reported to the headmistress via the portraits.

"Pity you don't have your cloak with you," Ron mumbled.

Harry banged his head onto the table. "I have it with me. Since Dumbledore requested that I carry it with me last year, I haven't gone anywhere without it."

"That's great," Ron said, grinning broadly and standing up with a newfound energy. "Let's go wandering the school. Maybe we can visit Hagrid."

It took them less than five minutes to get ready and leave. Up the narrow dungeon stairs and along the corridors they went, out the great front doors and directly to Hagrid's hut. Unfortunately, the half-giant wasn't home.

"Pity," Harry muttered, "let's go back inside; it's too windy to stay outside."

"Maybe we can get into the Room of Requirement, practise some new hexes or the like," Ron proposed.

They had just entered the school building again when they were greeted by a smiling Albus Dumbledore, waving at them from a flower painting. He winked at the boys and motioned for them to follow him.

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A knocking on the door startled Draco out of his thoughts. He bid whomever it was to enter, hoping it was Molly bringing him the news he longed to hear, that his mother was fine.

He was therefore surprised when a frowning Ginny entered, dumping a tray onto the chair beside the door.

"Your lunch," she commented dryly, turning to leave.

Draco spoke before he thought about it. "Stay! I mean... would you like a game of chess or Exploding Snap?"

Ginny slowly turned back to the blond. "Oh, lowering yourself to play with me, are you? Well, I don't think I can stand your company for the duration of a game."

Enraged that someone would dare talk to him like that, no matter how much he deserved it, Draco started flinging insults at the young redhead until Ginny exploded with anger, revealing something that should have been kept quiet.

"Just because your family manor was burned to the ground, and my mother asked us to be nice to you, doesn't mean I will stay here and listen to you spewing filth. Go to hell, ferret face."

And with that she stormed out and banged the door shut, leaving a shocked and frightened Draco Malfoy behind.

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**A/N:** I'm sorry for the delay, but real life is giving me hell right now.

Anyway, Hermione has sent a letter to Grimmauld Place. What will happen?

## Where the Stairs Lead

*Chapter 14 of 20*

*His eyes widened, and his arms wrapped around the curly-haired witch.*

WARNING: Evil cliffhanger ahead! If you tend to throw things at your screen or bite your nails, please take a Calming Draught and relax for a bit.

Be aware that you read this at your own risk.

You have been warned.

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### Chapter Thirteen Where the Stairs Lead

"Where is he leading us?" Ron asked, puffing heavily. It was difficult for the two boys to keep up with Dumbledore as he swept from painting to tapestry to portrait without any effort. Harry and Ron were still clutching the protective Invisibility cloak, which made their progress even slower. Ron had to duck a bit to make sure his whole body remained covered.

"I have no bloody idea," said Harry's equally breathless voice.

Up another flight of stairs and around another corner they went until Dumbledore stopped in a colourful African setting. He motioned at a door to his left.

"The Trophy Room?" Ron inquired helplessly. Why would Dumbledore lead them here?

"Well, let's go in," Harry said. "It's not as if we have anything else to do."

Ron nodded and pushed the door open.

The room looked like it always had. There were numerous glass cases reflecting the light that fell through the stained-glass windows, displaying the trophies and awards won by students from the past and present. The most majestic, the Quidditch Cup, sitting on a special shelf, drew the boys into the room.

"Gods, I miss Quidditch," Harry said, throwing the cloak off. There were no portraits in the room, only an old, faded tapestry, which now hosted a twinkling Albus Dumbledore.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, rolling his shoulders in an attempt to work the kinks left by the stooped position out of his muscles. "I'd love to kick some Slytherin asses... Well, Hufflepuffs would do; I'm not that fussy."

That made them both break out into the first real laughter for a long time.

"Oh, boy," Harry exclaimed, still grinning, "for that alone, coming here paid off."

"I'm glad I could lighten your mood," said the smiling portrait of the former headmaster. "However, it is not the reason why I brought you here."

Harry and Ron turned towards the tapestry, the light atmosphere becoming serious within seconds.

"What is the reason?" Harry asked, his voice taking on a much more mature tone than moments before. "Are you going to tell me everything now? Or will it be bits and pieces and half-truths again?"

"You must forgive an old man's mistakes, Harry. I know that there have been occasions when I have been everything but open with you," Dumbledore ventured, holding up his right hand to stay Harry's protests before they were even voiced.

"I wanted to protect you. You were much too young for all the things that were put on your shoulders. The danger of you succumbing to fear or charging head-first into your death was much too great."

"How come I faced off with Voldemort more than once, if I was oh-so protected? How come I was abducted during the Tri Wizard Tournament? How come Quirrell could live directly under your nose, although he had Voldemort sharing his body? How come you allowed Snape to..."

"Leave Severus out of this!" Dumbledore all but screamed, startling Harry into silence. "You are still to set in your childish conceptions of black and white. The world is made up of a million shades of grey. I told you once, Harry, that I trust Severus Snape with my life, and I do not regret my association with him."

"But he killed you!" Harry bellowed with equal force, making objects rattle with the intensity of his emotions. "I saw it! I was there, remember? You can't lie to me..." His voice broke and sobs born of anger and frustration made their way to the fore.

Ron had to support his friend, so that he wouldn't fall. Carefully, he coaxed Harry into a sitting position, so that Harry could lean back against one of the glass cases.

"Looks can be deceiving," Dumbledore admonished not unkindly. "I thought you learned that much in your association with Mad-Eye's impostor. Do not let yourself be blinded by your dislike for Severus. Do not draw your conclusions before you know the whole story."

"What's the story?" asked Ron, who until then thought it better to allow Harry to handle the conversation since he had always had such a close relationship with the deceased headmaster.

"I can't tell you the whole story without endangering Severus' life. That is something I refuse to do. Suffice it to say, I would have died with or without Severus' involvement. He merely showed me mercy and ended my suffering."

"If he had helped you, you would have been able to get away from the Death Eaters," Harry reasoned. He couldn't believe that Dumbledore was protecting his murderer.

"Ah, but you do not understand. The curse that withered my hand would have weakened me more and more. It is the way of most Dark Magic; it seeps into every living cell and consumes you from within. Only Severus' potions kept me functioning. He could slow the process, but no potion in the world would have been able to stop it."

"Maybe he didn't try hard enough. There are other Potions masters; someone would have been able..." Harry tried to desperately hang on to the reality he knew.

"No, Harry. And even if there had been, the potion, or poison I should say, I ingested in the cave would have killed me sooner or later. That is all I can say right now; when Voldemort is defeated for good, I will answer all your questions. For now, please accept that Severus did what I asked him to. Please, Harry, please?"

Harry stared into the twinkling blue eyes that pleaded for understanding. Nodding slowly, the dark-haired boy decided to let it drop until he had mulled it over in his head for some time. There were more important things than blaming Severus Snape right now.

"Why are we here, Headmaster?" Ron asked. As interesting as this all was, it was getting darker, and as a result, his stomach begged for dinner. They also had to get back to the Slytherin quarters before McGonagall made her daily visit.

"Ah, of course, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said, relief about the change of subject colouring his voice. "As a portrait, I'm bound to the castle. I can feel the magic pulsing through its walls. And on my wanderings, an unexplainable repulsion would overcome me whenever I went near this very room. I asked the other portraits and even the ghosts for answers." The former headmaster paused in his tale, searching for the right words to make the boys understand.

"All but one of the former headmasters and mistresses shared my experience. Phineas was the only one who told me that he feels compelled to come here often. That gave me an even greater puzzle to solve. It was the Bloody Baron who brought me on the right track. Nigellus, he told me, was always drawn to the dark."

"But it isn't dark in here," Ron said. Ironically the last red of the sun was gone from the sky now, and the room was cast into darkness. "Well, you know what I mean," the redhead mumbled, lighting his wand with the only non-verbal spell he had really mastered.

Dumbledore smiled. "I had the same thought at first. The solution, I think, is that he is drawn to some lingering dark powers in this room. You see, for a portrait day and night, light and dark, are inconsequential."

"Why do the portraits sleep at night then," Ron asked, completely off-topic.

"Force of habit, I think," Dumbledore replied before going on as if there had been no interruption. "Dark Magic was my only explanation. People who are attuned to their environment, as the portraits are to Hogwarts, are able to feel traces of magic long after the spell and its effects have vanished..."

"You mean there is something in here?" Ron sounded stunned and slightly panicky. He turned left and right, seemingly expecting a Dementor to leap out of a shadowed corner.

"Yes, but don't worry, it is quite faint," Dumbledore assured the two young men. "That's why I need you; I can't do any magic, so I can't locate it."

"Is there a spell?" Harry asked, his interest was certainly peaked again. "I do not know if I learned one. Hermione would know, but she is..." Here he broke off, looking to Ron for help.

"Eh, I can't remember either," Ron agreed.

"Ah, of course," Dumbledore smiled. "There is a book in the Restricted Section called 'Discovering the Hidden' by Elias Hommet."

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"What do you do here?" Severus shouted at the young woman in front of him. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her, trying to make his emotions known, verbally as well as physically. The little package she had been carrying tumbled to the floor.

Hermione didn't know what to say. She was totally taken aback by Severus' physical attack. "I wanted to bring the new ingredients," Hermione explained as calmly as she could.

The reaction in the dark wizard was immediate. His eyes widened, and his arms wrapped around the curly-haired witch. He drew her into his body, nuzzling her hair with his nose. He mumbled sweet nothings, and his lips began to travel over her neck.

Confused by his sudden change of behaviour, Hermione didn't draw away, although she did not feel all too comfortable. "Eh, Severus," Hermione ventured carefully, "would you let me go, please? We should put the ingredients into the lab before we step on them and..." Hermione never finished because Severus let out an anguished curse that had her silenced.

"It's dangerous," he whispered, clutching her even closer, though the amorous edge was completely gone. Fear emanated from his body, and cold sweat broke out on his forehead. Without warning, he lifted her into his arms and backed away from the lab door.

He carried Hermione up the first flight of stairs, bypassed the sitting room sofa, and went up a second. Only when they reached the bedroom they used to share did he set her down.

Hermione scrambled onto the bed in a strange mix of fear and anticipation. Severus' reactions were strange. There was no obvious reason for the fast changes of behaviour. He had not been subject to any curse or spell; they used almost no magic in this house. The only thing that could explain it was...

"The potion!" Hermione exclaimed. It had all started with the potion... the kisses... the screaming she could hear when he prowled the house at night... and today.

Severus felt his emotions settle again. He felt calmed and composed, if slightly confused. "Of course," he agreed with his former student, having gone through the same thoughts in his head. "It makes all sense now. It's the bloody fumes that affect me. And the other day when we..." Realization hit him; she had not been herself when she kissed him. "Hermione, I'm so sorry."

Silence descended in the room. Both felt guilty, although for different reasons. Hermione decided not to tell Severus about the letter right now. Tomorrow, she thought, would be soon enough.

"Now that we know," Severus concluded, "we have to make sure we do not inhale the fumes. The moment the potion starts whistling, we leave the room."

Hermione was startled about the 'we' since she had not helped him much anyway. However, she decided not to probe. "It's late," she said instead. "Maybe we could have some dinner, and then you could show me how far you have gotten?"

"Sounds like a plan."

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Idly, Percy Weasley played with the small buttons of his new, dark green shirt. It was a colour that suited his red hair quite nicely, or so his new girlfriend Daphne always told him. She was from a good background with good connections within the Ministry. She had helped his career along quite nicely already.

A tapping noise startled him out of his daydreams. A small, slightly familiar eagle owl sat on the low windowsill. In two big strides, the bespectacled man crossed to the window to admit the bird. It fluttered onto the table and immediately attacked the cookies Molly had baked in the morning.

Frowning, Percy sat back down and untied the note, trying not to disturb the bird. He unfolded the little piece of parchment and scanned the note quickly. He was completely nonplussed, but soon a wide grin broke out on his face. Hermione was alive, and he could earn his family's trust again. He needed to tell his mother of this interesting turn of events.

~o~o~o~

"Where the hell are they?" It was a rare sound, indeed, to hear Remus Lupin shout. He and Arthur Weasley had finally managed to identify the blood inside of Slytherin's locket. After their first series of testing had not given them any results, they had nearly given up.

A spell to break down poisons into their ingredients finally got them on the right track. The blood in the locket was a mixture of blood from two different people. One could be identified as Tom Riddle's, the other was yet unknown.

That Riddle's blood-sample was ninety-nine percent similar to the blood in the locket, gave them a lot of information. The Horcrux was created very early in Riddle's life before he started the transformation of his body via Dark Magic and long before his first downfall.

The two men had come down to inform the boys of their success, only to find them missing. "I guess they were bored," Arthur explained. He knew his son and his best friend all too well. "We should just wait until they come back."

"No," came the stern voice of the Headmistress, who had been standing in the door long enough to know what Remus was angry about. "We should go and bring them back here, as fast as possible. There is something they should know."

Without asking for explanations, they left the common room to search for Harry and Ron. It was past midnight already, and McGonagall was noticeably worried, although she didn't give the two men any reasons.

~o~o~o~

A stair creaked loudly, and the young man stayed frozen in the same spot for a moment or two, listening for any sign of waking. Assured that the residents of number twelve, Grimmauld Place were still deep in slumber, he crept down the stairs without making any further noise.

There was no light in the basement, and there was no need for a guard to stay awake all through the night. He snorted quietly. They had made it so easy for him.

The newly oiled door opened quickly and without any problem. No wards kept him from leaving; no alarm sounded when he slipped through the heavy wooden door and closed it soundlessly behind himself.

Cautiously he took one step after the other until he stood in the middle of the dirty street. He turned one last time to look at the house that, for the last few months, had been both his haven and prison alike.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and Apparated to Knockturn Alley. He needed a new, unregistered wand. Then he would go to the manor to see the destruction with his own eyes.

"I'm going to find them, Mother," he promised. "They will pay."

The soft 'pop' of Apparition was the last thing heard of Draco Malfoy for a long, long time.

~o~o~o~

It was almost two in the morning now, but neither Severus nor Hermione felt like going to bed. After a drawn out dinner, they had gone down to the lab. They shelved the new ingredients and cleaned up the floor and workspaces with a few quick swishes and flicks. The motions were so practiced that it didn't take much concentration or time to leave the room impeccably clean.

They were sitting on the couch in front of the fire like old friends, the events that had driven them temporarily apart quite forgotten, now that the source was found.

They traded jokes and argued like they had in the weeks preceding 'the incident.'

A sudden loud noise in the street had them both focusing their attention on the door.

Moments later, somebody was pounding hard against the front door, and a deep, familiar voice was clearly heard through the thick wood. "Snape! We know you are there. Open the door, or we'll be forced to take drastic action."

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**A/N:** Sorry you had to wait so long, but my beta was really stressed out. I think everyone can understand that.

On another note: mugglegirl0908 has started a Yahoo community for the exchange of SS/HG fiction and art. If you like to join, or want to know more take a look at [http://community.livejournal.com/sshg\\_exchange/](http://community.livejournal.com/sshg_exchange/)

## Fight and Flame

*Chapter 15 of 20*

*It was a nightmare come true.*

### Chapter Fourteen Fight and Flame

Dust flakes swirled in the center of the Trophy Room, making the two boys cough and sniff uncontrollably. The light from the newly-conjured light spheres bathed the room in a warm glow. Supervised by the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, Harry and Ron had opened all the cabinets and were in the process of pulling one trinket after the other from the shelves.

"Seems I was the last one to clean up in here," Ron huffed, lifting a heavy golden bowl from the top shelf of the biggest case.

Harry smiled; it was nice remembering old times when everything was still a kind of game, deadly as it had been even then. They had all been so naïve, had so much trust in their own luck and Dumbledore's guidance. Hermione had always said that what he showed the public could not be all there was to him. Harry frowned; he had never listened to that. Yes, he had raved after Sirius' death, but could there be a dark side to the twinkling wizard?

"...a million shades of grey..." Dumbledore had said. Did he include himself in this; was it a hint? Harry shook his head slowly. Dumbledore was dead. He would not think about the bad traits he may or may not have had.

"So, what do we do now?" Ron asked, turning to face the tapestry. "Hey, where has Dumbledore gone off to?"

Harry looked over his shoulder to see that the former headmaster was indeed nowhere to be seen. Before he could say anything, the door was flung open with force.

"You two have some nerve," Remus bellowed, "traipsing off like that without informing anyone."

"But Dumble..." Ron started only to be nudged by Harry. He had dealt with an angry Lupin before and knew how to deal with him. He needed to get it all out before he could be reasoned with.

Most importantly, however, Harry was not sure if Dumbledore wanted anyone to know that he was involved. He had seen on two occasions how the portrait of Dumbledore pretended to be asleep or left the room when McGonagall or others were present. It was an odd behaviour, but after everything that had happened in the past, Harry had learned to not draw any rash conclusions. For now, Dumbledore's continued guidance would remain a secret.

"What in Merlin's name is the meaning of this..." McGonagall shrieked, indicating the trophies and awards that the boys had stacked pell-mell on the floor.

"We just..." Ron's attempt at an explanation was interrupted again, this time, however, by a shout of pain.



~o~o~o~

Severus had no sooner drawn Hermione to her feet than the wooden door was blown off its hinges. Splinters and dust flew everywhere, making the figures that had just forced entry quite unidentifiable.

Severus pushed Hermione behind himself, drawing his wand, ready to defend them. He was not sure who the intruders were or if he could take on all of them, but he would not allow any harm to come to the shaking woman behind his back.

"Well, well, well," came a sneering female voice. "Isn't that cosy?"

"Explains why the potion isn't ready yet," a cloaked figure added.

Hermione drew in an audible breath. Five Death Eaters stood just inside the house, fully attired, wands drawn.

It was a nightmare come true. He had lived with the knowledge that he would die sooner or later by the hands of his one-time allies, was resigned to the fact even. He never thought that he could be that afraid again. For his life. For Hermione's life.

The month with her had softened him up, it was true. But it was the potion that had taught him again what desire and longing felt like. And if he was completely honest with himself, he had to admit that he had more feelings for Hermione than were entirely proper. It was not lust or even love, but a longing for companionship. He loved challenging her, although he did it in a sarcastic way. No matter how difficult he made life for her and her friends, she had always respected and defended him.

"What do you want?" Severus asked, his voice cold, but not as steady as he would have liked.

"Why, how polite you have become," said the only female of the group. She made a show of removing her mask, lowering her hood and shaking her black hair back over her shoulders.

Bellatrix Lestrange looked nothing like she had when Severus had last seen her. Her face had smoothed out, the eyes were still dark, but she looked less drawn. A strange magic had surely been at work here, for she looked younger, but a lot less human. Hermione shivered and grasped Severus' robe for comfort.

"Yaxley, Avery, get the potion and ingredients," Bellatrix ordered. "They should be somewhere in the cellars. Bring them directly to our Lord; do not linger." The two smallest men of the group nodded and turned to comply. When they were out of earshot, Bellatrix turned to address Severus again.

"I always knew that there was something fishy about you. And here I find you protecting one of our enemies. When I was told that you were guilty of betrayal, I..."

Bellatrix never finished. Hermione had used her distraction to cast a non-verbal Petrificus Totalus. A moment of wonderment, and then all hell broke loose.

Spells were flying, destroying furniture and walls.

Hermione and Severus were separated by their enemies. The two male Death Eaters were advancing on Hermione while Severus was busy duelling with Bellatrix.

Hermione ducked an unknown spell and was hit by a slicing hex. She screamed in pain, clutching her bleeding shoulder. Severus turned at the anguished shout to see if he could help. This second of inattentiveness was all it took for Bellatrix to utter the Cruciatus Curse.

Severus fell to the floor, his muscles spasming from the power of it. His only lucid thought was Hermione. He could hear her sobs, could hear someone talking to her. The more he concentrated on her, the more the strength of the curse lessened, and he tried to crawl to her. He had vowed to protect her, and he would do so even if it cost his life.

He could see her, near the couch they had occupied. Someone was bending over her, watching the blood pouring out of a big cut. He needed to get to her. He tried to rise to his hands and knees only to fall down when his muscles burned in protest.

"*Stupefy!*" someone yelled, and the pain receded. Then all went silent around him.

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"No! Please don't!"

Severus was slowly regaining his consciousness when Hermione's sobbed plea penetrated the haze of his mind. Believing her in danger, he tried to lift himself from the floor. Something heavy but soft was pressed against his back, and it took him a moment to realize that it was a human body.

"Hermione?" he croaked, his voice rough.

The person resting over him stiffened momentarily before the weight lifted from his back. Two knees came into his line of vision and tender hands helped him roll over.

"Hermione?" he asked again, trying to focus his heavy eyes on the concerned face hovering above him.

Hermione softly stroked his hair, undisturbed by the presence of Aurors and Order members.

He coughed heavily, trying to sit up to ease his breathing. Hermione moved behind Severus and carefully repositioned his head in her lap.

"He needs a glass of water," she said, catching Kingsley Shacklebolt's eye. "And then he'll need to see Madam Pomfrey."

"Miss Granger," the tall black Auror cautioned, "he is a known Death Eater and murderer. I can't... He'll get treatment at St Mungo's, but after that I'll have to turn him in. I would lose my job if I didn't."

"You'll have to get past me then," Hermione threatened. "I'll not allow you to take him away." Although the young woman knew that her threat was quite idle, she would not let Severus down. He was one of her friends now, and she always fought for her friends.

Bill Weasley handed her a glass of water, looking Snape over with a rather calculating expression. He seemed to take stock of the former professor's injuries. And then his eyes lifted to Hermione's face.

With an almost non-existent nod of his head, he whirled around, wand raised. *Obliviate!* he shouted, and a beam of bright blue light hit Kingsley squarely in the chest.

"Get him out of here!" the red-haired man shouted to his brother Charlie. He immediately complied and led the confused Auror out of the room.

"What...?" Hermione's confused gaze shifted between Bill and the only other remaining person in the room, Nymphadora Tonks.

"I won't tell a thing," the pink-haired woman assured her. "You better get him to headquarters before the reinforcements get here."

"I..." Hermione was at a loss for words. She couldn't believe that her friends trusted her judgement enough to allow a supposed murderer refuge.

Tonks drew an old handkerchief out of her pocket and brought it to the couple still on the floor. She thrust it at Hermione with a sad smile. "Portkey," she explained. "Ministry authorised. It'll take you directly to Grimmauld Place. It's empty but for Molly."

Hermione took the piece of cloth and wrapped it around Severus' hand. She then drew him closer against her body and took his hand. Tonks tapped her wand at their joined hands and mumbled a word to activate it. A blink of an eye later, the two were gone, leaving two relieved and concerned people in their wake.

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All eyes turned to Remus Lupin, who was tearing at his robes with a vengeance. His face was contorted in pain, teeth biting his lower lip to keep from screaming out again. He felt as if he were on fire.

Arthur made to assist him, and winced at the fire that immediately set in his veins. He tore his hand away and reached for his wand. Sweat was running down Remus' forehead and his body shuddered as if he were under a curse.

Just when he was about to faint from exhaustion and pain, Harry yanked the robes from Remus' body. The heavy fabric landed with a thump on the floor, knocking several trophies over. The five watched with rapt attention as a strange green fire burned a hole through the dark brown fabric.

"What the bloody hell..." Ron wasn't quite sure what he wanted to say, but his outcry pulled the other four out of their trance.

Spells were cast, but the fire persisted. The light in the spheres flared high before they went out, casting the room in near darkness. The green flame flickered once more and went out with a hiss.

"*Lumos!*" the voice of Minerva McGonagall intoned, but nothing of her usual briskness was left. The lights went back on, and all eyes went to Remus' burned robes. A small vial, containing the blood of the boy Tom Riddle, was hovering over them, encased in green flame. It swung back and forth before it suddenly picked up speed and aimed for Harry.

He lifted his wand, ready to cast a Shield Charm or anything else that could deflect the thing. As if it could sense the resistance, it took a sharp turn and landed on a small golden shield at Ron's feet.

"That was totally crazy," Ron exclaimed. Without thinking he reached down and picked up the little bottle and the award. "They're stuck together," he told his flabbergasted audience.

"Let me see that," Harry said, his voice stern. He took the two objects out of Ron's hand and stared dumbfounded at the engravings of the golden shield.

"Remus, what's in that bottle?" he asked, dreading the answer he felt would come.

Remus moved to look over Harry's shoulder and in a quiet voice answered, "It's the blood sample of one Tom M. Riddle."

Harry nodded, his eyes still fixed on the second object. It was an award for special services to the school, and it had been awarded to the Head Boy, Tom Riddle, when he had accused Hagrid of setting free the monster of Slytherin.

The pieces slowly clicked into place. The residual dark power in this room, Riddle's award, his blood, the disturbing reaction.

"It's a Horcrux," he whispered.

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**A/N:** I know it's been a while, but I hope the chapter was at least worth the wait.

## Back to Headquarters

*Chapter 16 of 20*

*There was no answer yet anyway.*

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**A/N:** Sorry for the time it took to post this, but I have a very good reason. I got married. Enough of me, on with the story.

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### Chapter Fifteen Back to Headquarters

A loud hooting sound rang through the silent house, rousing its only occupant out of her uneasy sleep. She winced at the popping sound her knees made as she stood from the uncomfortable kitchen chair. She rolled her shoulders for a moment, trying to work out the cramp the prone position had left her with.

With practiced motions, she turned to prepare a pot of tea for the people that would be arriving soon and to calm her frayed nerves. The news about Hermione's current location was as much a relief as a shock.

Percy had handed her the letter with an almost apologetic smile. An impromptu meeting of all the available Order members had been called, and they had formed a small squad to get Hermione out of her precarious situation, planned out the strategy... but one thing posed a great problem.

No one knew where Snape lived, or did they?

It was Percy who was able to give them directions. No one asked how he knew; they were all much too worried about getting their missing member out of harm's way.

*'If everything goes well,' Molly thought, 'she'll be safe soon.'*

The whistling of the teapot coincided with the sound of two bodies hitting the carpeted floor in the living room. There was a kind of shuffling noise before Hermione barged in through the kitchen door.

"Help me!" she urged the older woman, who in turn started open-mouthed at the brown-eyed young woman.

"What is it, Hermione dear?" Molly asked, concerned, looking her up and down. "Are you hurt? Come sit down." She tried to push Hermione into a chair.

"No, I'm fine," Hermione said firmly. "It's Severus. He's injured. Badly."

Hermione grabbed Mrs. Weasley's arm and dragged her into the adjoining room.

"I can't believe you brought him here after everything... Oh, my God!" The moment the motherly woman's eyes fell onto the barely-breathing man lying on his back on the floor, her protest about his presence in the house stopped. With often-used wand movements, she conjured a stretcher under him and proceeded to direct her floating patient towards the staircase.

"What did they do to you?" Molly mumbled to Severus' still form. It was uttered just loud enough for Hermione who was not going to let him out of her sight to hear and answer.

"We were attacked by Death Eaters," she explained. "They came for the potion we were brewing... and to kill us." The last was added very quietly. "The Order arrived just at the right moment."

There was a long silence as they ascended the stairs and turned into the bedroom that had recently served as Draco's. Carefully, the two women positioned Severus on the bed.

"He needs treatment," Molly stated the obvious. "I'll Floo-call Poppy. She's patched him back up more times than I can count." She started to leave the room, but turned again when Hermione let out an audible sigh of relief and exhaustion.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, he saved me," she said sincerely, a tired smile on her face. *In more ways than one*, a little voice in her added.

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"How can you be sure?" Remus asked, his voice heavy with confusion and disbelief. "The award is Riddle's, yes, but the blood may have reacted because of something else."

"We did a lot of tests with it," Arthur added.

It was disconcerting to say the least, to know that a piece of Voldemort's soul had resided at Hogwarts for years without any detection. Yet, it was the only answer for the spontaneous occurrence of the unknown dark magic he could think of. How could something like a Horcrux have been hidden in a school, under the watchful eyes of Albus Dumbledore no less?

There was no answer yet anyway. And since the portrait of the deceased headmaster refused to speak, the answer would probably remain unknown for some time to come.

"I'm sure it's a Horcrux," Harry whispered. "I can feel it."

McGonagall looked up sharply. She didn't like any of this one bit. Dumbledore had kept the knowledge of the soul-pieces from her deliberately; instead he had confided in a boy not even out of school. The same boy that had meant more to him than his own life and well-being. He had watched over the boy all his life, guided and formed him. Dumbledore had put Harry through hardship and abuse only to turn a blind eye whenever the young Gryffindor rushed headfirst into danger with his two friends.

"What do you feel?" she asked in a rather harsh voice. She didn't mean to sound quite so snide, but the whole day had just gone from bad to worse. She had only come to inform the group that there had been news from Hermione, and now she had to deal with dark magic of the worst kind.

"I'm... I can't really explain," Harry's voice broke her train of thought. "I feel drawn to it somehow, like it belongs to me... but not completely..."

"May I suggest we return to headquarters?" Arthur interrupted before Harry revealed something he wasn't ready to divulge just yet.

"Yes, I think it would be for the best," McGonagall agreed. Remus and Ron nodded their approval, while Harry stared at the award he still held in his hands. His index finger was tracing the engraved letters, and his scar throbbed in answer. It wasn't pain he felt though; it was a pleasant thumping, like a small, regular heart beat. The red flecks that shone in his eyes for a moment were gone before anyone could notice.

The little pulse, however, remained even after he turned to follow the others out of the Trophy Room and out of Hogwarts.

Riddle's award and the little bottle of blood were still clutched in his hands.

*'One step closer,'* his mind acknowledged.

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The two women came rushing into the room, wasting no time on keeping their entrance quiet. Hermione had moved behind Severus, whose head was again resting in her lap. Poppy Pomfrey didn't even bat an eye at the scene before her. She had seen a lot in her years as a nurse first at St. Mungo's, then at Hogwarts, a student comforting a man twice her age was just another thing to add to her list.

"Miss Granger," she said in a busyness-like voice. "I need you to tell me exactly what happened to him. Leave out no detail, it could well be vital."

Hermione recounted the events, ignoring Molly's gasps of horror. It was freeing to talk about it, though she realized again just how close a call it was.

Poppy nodded, passing her wand over the unconscious man, noting the red flecks in the light that surrounded him. After she had double-checked his heartbeat and brain functions, she let out a relieved sigh.

"He will be up and about in no time," she announced with an honest smile on her face. "His unconsciousness is due to stress and a concussion. The curses had surprisingly little impact."

Hermione mustered a smile, which turned into a huge yawn. Severus was going to be fine. All the tension left her body, and a heavy sleepiness took over. Without thinking much about it, she moved from behind Severus to lie by his side.

Molly wanted to protest, but Poppy held her back. The nurse produced an assortment of miniaturized vials out of her pocket. A wave of her wand and they enlarged. She leaned over carefully and administered a general healing potion that would take care of the concussion and all the minor wounds he might have. A good sound sleep would take care of the rest.

Molly, ever the mother, spelled away their shoes and part of their clothes, then produced a blanket and covered the sleeping couple.

"We have to keep his presence a secret, Molly," Poppy said soberly. "Whatever happened with Albus last year, I don't think we know half of the truth."

"Yes," Molly agreed. "It never made sense that the boy would do something like that out of his own free will. He adored Albus too much."

Together, both lost in thought, the two women descended the stairs. A cup of tea was what they needed now.

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"Scum of the earth! Befouling the most noble house!"

"Oh, bullocks!" Ron's voice was barely heard over Mrs. Black's screaming. "Can somebody please shut her up?"

It took a Remus a moment, but he finally managed to draw the curtains on the portrait closed.

"We really need to find a spell to get rid of her," Harry said, frowning.

Before anyone could remind him that they had already tried everything, the door of the kitchen opened, revealing an annoyed Molly and a shocked Poppy.

"I haven't heard that voice for a long time," Poppy said with some humor. "A bit more high-pitched than I remember, but you can clearly hear the insanity."

Disbelief passed over the faces of the assembled before they broke out into laughter. It was quite refreshing.

"Well," Poppy announced. "I'll be on my way. Hermione is safely tucked in just..."

"Hermione is here?" Ron and Harry asked almost simultaneously.

"That's what I came to tell you," McGonagall answered. "She sent a letter, and the Order went to retrieve her after they had figured out her location."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Harry inquired through clenched teeth. He could barely contain his anger. Did people always have to keep things from him?

"If you hadn't run off in the first place..."

"We discovered something important, didn't we?"

The shouting match between Harry and Professor McGonagall would have gone on for quite a while, if Arthur hadn't interrupted.

"How is Hermione?" All it took was a simple question and both parties fell silent.

"She is fine," Poppy assured them. "But she needs to rest. No one, and I repeat no one, is to disturb her tonight. I have warded the room securely, believe me."

Ron was about to protest, but Harry would have none of it. "I know how it feels," he told his friend in a quiet voice. "The best we can do is wait for her to come to us."

Ron nodded, though everyone could see that he wasn't happy with the decision.

"It's off to bed for you, I'd say," Arthur urged gently. "It was a trying day for all of us."

Although he was tired, Harry didn't sleep at all that night. He felt under his pillow for the award again.

The fourth Horcrux. Two more to be found.

## Kisses and More

*Chapter 17 of 20*

*Without thinking, he bent his head to press his lips against it.*

**A/N:** I could give you an amazingly long list of excuses. The truth is I just couldn't seem to get this chapter right. I wrote three versions and was never satisfied.

I know it's boring to listen to that, so here you go.

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### Chapter Sixteen Kisses and More

When Hermione woke the next morning, she felt disoriented for a moment before she became aware of her surroundings. She was indeed back at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

It surprised her to feel a little sad about it. Hadn't she longed to be back here with Harry and Ron just yesterday? It seemed like a lifetime ago. Now that she and Severus had worked out their differences, she was afraid of what the change of scenery would bring. She had been miserable in the days she'd separated herself from him hidden herself, more like.

She turned to the dark-haired man snoring softly next to her. The sound was comforting. Ever so slowly her hand travelled over his newly-healed skin, coming to rest over his heart. The rhythm was stable and unhurried. She sighed softly.

"Checking to see if I'm still alive, witch?" came the sleepy baritone of her companion.

"Hm, quite. How do you feel?"

"My head is a bit woozy. Other than that I feel surprisingly well. You?"

"I wasn't hurt much to begin with," she lied. At his imploring glare, she conceded that Bill had taken care of her bleeding shoulder immediately after the Death Eaters were taken care of. They had gotten the two men, while Bellatrix had fled.

Severus shifted in the bed until he had a clear view of the affected shoulder. Carefully he rolled up the short sleeve and peered at it. A thin whitish scar was stretching across the soft skin.

Without thinking, he bent his head to press his lips against it.

Hermione felt her heart give an involuntary leap. This gentle show of affection was so much more intimate than the heated kisses they had shared in the lab.

She was unsure what she should do. Initiate a real kiss? She wanted to but didn't have the courage. Back at his home she would probably have done it, but here?

Hermione was both relieved and disappointed when her growling stomach spoiled the moment. She got up as casually as she could and excused herself to take a shower.

~o~o~o~

The moment Hermione pushed open the kitchen door she was hugged and kissed by her two closest friends.

"We were so worried," Harry told her.

"Yeah, we thought you were dead," Ron added. "Moody refused to send people looking for you. Mind you, Bill and Charlie did anyway."

"Where have you been?" Harry asked his green eyes full of concern.

"I... was in hiding... and..." Hermione didn't quite know how to answer. They wanted to reassure them, but she couldn't tell them about Severus. They'd never understand. Luckily, Bill came to her rescue once again.

"She was quite safe," he assured the boys. "The moment she got hold of a post owl, she sent a letter to us. We retrieved her yesterday."

"But Pomfrey said you were too exhausted to speak to us yesterday," Harry accused. "Why would that be if you weren't injured or anything?"

"It was quite stressful," Hermione quickly said. "Never knowing if you are going to be discovered..." She trailed off, making sure to look cast her eyes down as if in remembrance of something bad.

The boys seemed satisfied and didn't probe.

They settled around the breakfast table and chatted as if the last few months had never transpired. When they were alone in the kitchen, Harry started another line of conversation entirely. He filled Hermione in about the Horcruxes they had discovered and the difficulties they had in breaking the wards.

"Are you absolutely sure that it is a Horcrux?" Hermione asked for the umpteenth time.

"Positive," Harry answered.

"Maybe we should look through the book Dumbledore mentioned," Hermione, ever the bookworm, suggested. "Can you remember the title?"

"It was *'Discovering...'* something by Grommet or the like," Ron said.

"*'Discovering the Light'* by Boris Grommet?" Hermione asked puzzled. "That's a book about forms of magical lighting. Are you sure, Ron?"

"It was something like that," Harry agreed.

"Maybe you can cast a spell that would light all the things that hold dark magic," Ron surmised.

"Hm, I don't think it will hurt if we read through it," Hermione said. "This house has a decent library; we could see if there is a clue in one of the books. Oh, and McGonagall could get us some from Hogwarts."

Ron groaned. No school, but he still had to pour over old books. Well, it was for the greater good.

"May I take a look at the award?" Hermione asked.

"Sure, it's..." Harry broke off abruptly as the door opened and Arthur entered with Ginny.

"Hermione!" the female redhead squealed. "It's so good to see you. I had to spend the last couple of days with Fleur. God, that was horrible."

Hermione laughed along with her. It was good to be back, after all. Her friends were here, and she had research to look forward to.

~o~o~o~

It had been three days since they had arrived at headquarters, and he hadn't seen anything of Hermione since the morning after their arrival.

He felt the withdrawal like an addict who needed his next fix. She was his drug his one craving. Never in the last twenty-plus years had he felt that lonely. He watched the minutes tick by on the old clock over the door. Dinner would be over soon. That meant Molly would come up with his meal.

Severus had asked her about what Hermione was doing whenever she entered his room. The woman was normally quite chatty, which he found incredibly annoying, but she remained tight-lipped. All she would say was that Hermione was fine.

*'Of course she doesn't tell me anything. Why should she? I'm a murdering Death Eater who kidnapped a young woman to have his way with her!'* He snorted. He was a prisoner in this house, nothing more. It was a nice warm prison, with good food, yes but a prison it was, nevertheless.

The door creaked open slowly, and a heavily laden tray came into view.

"Put it on the table," he huffed. "I'll eat it later."

"I thought," came Hermione's soft voice, "that you'd be happy to see me." She sounded sad and confused.

The moment the chocolate eyes he so loved came into view, Severus was off the bed. He took the tray and placed it on the dresser by the door. He enveloped Hermione in his arms and mumbled an apology for his harsh tone.

The door was shut securely before he let her to the chair closest to the window.

"I missed you," he said, brushing a hand over her wild curls. "What have you done for the last few days; why haven't you come to see me?"

"Harry and Ron are trailing me like dogs do their master," she stated more angrily than she wanted. It was hard for him, she knew, and it wasn't that she hadn't missed him. Seeing his hurt look, she added in a gentler voice: "It was too dangerous, Severus." She reached out her hands to take hold of his. "They can't find out you are here, not yet."

He nodded in understanding and retrieved his meal. Taking the seat opposite her, he started to eat. Neither talked for a long while.

When the last morsel was consumed, Hermione moved to take the tray. "I'll try bringing you something to read tomorrow, but I can't promise it."

"Don't go," Severus said covering her hands with his.

"Severus, I..."

"Hermione, I'm going mad in this place. Can't you at least stay here with me tonight?"

"But Ginny would know I wasn't in bed."

"Just tell her you needed some privacy. Your friends think this is an unused bedroom, don't they? Why shouldn't you stay here?"

"I had a hard day, Severus. I'm no good company for you tonight. I'm knackered. The moment I lay down I'll fall asleep." A huge yawn followed her statement.

"Then sleep. Just stay here. Don't leave."

Hearing the desperation in his voice, Hermione gave in; she had no energy to fight. She needed rest badly. Without a word, she pulled off her shoes and climbed into the bed. It was so soft and smelled deliciously male and so familiar. Her eyes closed.

Minutes later, she vaguely registered the mattress dipping behind her. The unbelievable warmth at her back was welcome, and so she snuggled closer. A strong masculine hand began stroking her belly and hip, lulling her into a deep slumber.

~o~o~o~

It became their routine. Every evening Hermione would return to Severus' room and spend the night with him. They easily settled back into the friendly companionship they had shared at Spinner's End.

Her friends had accepted the excuse that she needed time alone, without much protest. Harry understood her well and managed to get Ron to at least keep his comments to himself. Strangely enough, it was Ginny who was not happy with it. She had even gone and informed her mother.

Molly didn't like it, but she had resigned herself to the fact that Severus and Hermione had formed a bond over the time they'd stayed together. With a smile that didn't reach her eyes, she informed her daughter that at 18, Hermione was an adult and could therefore do as she pleased.

It was not the real reason she allowed it, Hermione knew. Molly was, more often than not, still even ordering her older children around as if they were six years old. Hermione wouldn't look that particular gift horse in the mouth, though.

In the last two weeks, the dynamics in her relationship with Severus had shifted. They had started kissing each other good night every evening. It felt so natural, and she couldn't really tell who had initiated it. The good-night kisses lead to good-morning kisses, to kisses they shared just because they were together.

~o~o~o~

Angrily, Hermione stormed into their shared bedroom one early evening and flung herself facedown onto the bed. With an amused expression, a black eyebrow cocked in question, Severus crossed to the bed.

"Did you run in to Umbridge?" he asked deadpan. He carefully pulled off her shoes and socks.

"Moody," came the muffled reply.

"You want to talk about it?" Severus moved his hands up and down her legs.

"No," she said rolling over to face him. "The man is a menace. Apparently he wants to start some kind of recruiting program. Can you believe that? So much for the Order being a secret organisation."

"Mad-Eye has never been a fit leader," Severus agreed, starting to unbutton her cardigan. "But, it is no use raging about it. You can't teach an old kneazle new tricks."

Hermione smiled at the mention of a kneazle. She was overjoyed when Harry and Ron had informed her that Crookshanks had been rescued.

"When you smile, I love you even more." The words slipped out before he could help himself. His hands stilled he wanted to slap himself. Before he could withdraw, however, Hermione had grabbed his collar and was drawing his face down to hers. Their lips crushed together. At first, it was awkward because Severus wasn't expecting the move. But as her lips worked slowly against his own, he started to relax into it.

"I love you too," she confessed against his lips.

"Gods," he gasped, wrenching his lips away from hers. His hands went back to their previous task. Layer after layer their clothes vanished until they encountered nothing but skin under their fingertips.

With light touches, he started exploring her body. He was mesmerized by its softness. Every contour was committed to memory. Had it ever been like this?

Hermione was surprised by how much she needed his touch. She could quite keep up with him. Severus didn't seem to mind, though.

Soon, she felt his tongue join his hands. He kissed and licked his way from her throat to her breasts, toying with the soft, rosy-peaked flesh while his hands caressed her belly, hips, and thighs. Only moments later, Hermione's hands were grasping fistfuls of his hair, drawing him back up to meet her lips with his. She couldn't take more of this teasing. She needed him.

Carefully, he positioned himself, and at her nod of permission, he completed their joining. For endless moments, they stayed wrapped around each other, unmoving in silent awe. Slowly, Hermione's hands made their way from Severus' neck, over his back, down to his hips. She stroked his firm buttocks with one hand and nudged his hips with hers. Severus raised his dark head from its resting place on her right shoulder and pulled out just halfway before sinking back into the warmth of the woman he loved. He established a slow rhythm, listening intently to the changes in her breathing, the little whimpers and growls she emitted now and then.

Only their hips moved as they kept their bodies pressed together as closely as humanly possible. Having picked up tempo, the two lovers were rapidly hurling towards the edge, their groans and moans mixing together. Hermione turned her head to softly bite Severus' shoulder. The added sensation proved to be his undoing and with a soft growl Severus let himself go.

## Of Men and Spells

*Luck, however was not on her side.*

## Chapter Seventeen Of Men and Spells

As the first beams of cold winter sunlight filtered into the small room, the young woman's eyelids began to flutter. She emitted a contented, cat-like purr and stretched languidly, slipping free of the covers. Her companion didn't even stir, so deep was he immersed in his own dreams, a relaxed smile still visible on his lips. She got up and peered out of the dusty window, watching the first snowflakes dance in the soft breeze.

For the first time in a long while, she was completely at ease with the world around her. Sure, thoughts of her beloved parents still infiltrated her dreams, but the despair was gone. It hurt; however, she wasn't alone anymore.

Severus rolled onto his stomach mumbling incoherently. His hand moved searchingly over her vacated spot on the mattress. He looked adorable, Hermione thought. His hair was a mess, his lean body tangled up in the white cotton blankets it was a picture that made her smile.

Hermione had fantasised about him since their first potion-induced kiss. She was ashamed of herself at the time. How could she like him after what he had done?

"Hermione, come back to bed!"

The yawning request of the naked man in the bed drew her thoughts away from the stressful past. It was of no importance now.

She moved to his side and sat down, her hand moving to stroke his strong back. "It's late already," she said, checking the little clock on the nightstand. "You can stay in bed, though. I'll take a quick shower before I get you some breakfast. I hope they are all having a lie-in today. I don't feel like meeting people."

Severus turned to face her, struggling with the covers as he tried to move into a sitting position. "Why don't you stay in bed with me? I'm not hungry anyway."

"I can't, if they are up they might wonder where I am."

"I'm sure Molly can come up with something," Severus countered, taking hold of her waist to draw her against his chest.

"I don't think Mrs. Weasley really likes this arrangement. She may have defended my choice to the others, but I see the way she looks at me. It's the same look she gives Fred and George when she's disappointed in them," Hermione mused.

"Well, she wanted you to marry one of her cubs," Severus replied, his right hand combing through Hermione's wild curls. "And there you are, settling for a dark, anti-social bastard. A man who killed..."

He didn't finish because Hermione had two fingers pressed against his lips. He could see the concern and regret sparkling in her eyes as she shook her head slowly. "I know you had a reason," she told him simply. He nodded; if she could forgive him his past, he'd try to forgive himself.

"Well, I'm off to the bathroom," Hermione smiled, ruffling his dark locks in an affectionate way. He scowled, but the effect was not the same without the voluminous black robes. A quick peck on the lips was all he got for his efforts before Hermione walked out of the room still quite naked.

~o~o~o~

After a refreshing shower, Hermione dressed in some comfortable and warm clothes Molly Weasley had provided. The old house was drafty, and no magic seemed to be able to keep it warm.

As she rummaged through her drawers, she realized that she had virtually nothing left. Everything had been in her parents' house, apart from a few books and her school uniform. Severus watched her silently, a slight frown on his face. She didn't know if he was aware of her thoughts or if he was just cranky that she wasn't coming back to bed. She didn't ask; he'd tell her if something bothered him.

She kissed him before she left, with much more passion than earlier, and it seemed to appease him. He let her go without a fuss.

Slowly she walked down the stairs, listening for signs of the others. If she was really lucky, she could grab enough breakfast for two and eat with Severus.

Luck, however, was not on her side. Harry was already at the table, helping himself to kippers and toast.

"Morning," Hermione greeted. Harry nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on his lap. "Are you alright?" She asked. It was disconcerting to see him like that. He had seemed detached lately. "Harry," she carefully grasped his shoulder, it worked to turn his focus away from... she didn't even know from what.

"Oh, morning, 'Mione," he said as if nothing had happened. "The others are all outside, putting up extra wards and trying to fix the roof. You should get yourself something to eat before Ron smells all the food."

Hermione grinned. That was the Harry she remembered and loved. Whatever it was that occupied his thoughts lately obviously had nothing to do with her or Ron.

Knowing that her friend's suggestion was a rather good one, she filled her plate and helped herself to a huge mug of coffee. She'd take the cup with her later, so that Severus could have his daily dose of caffeine.

She had just settled back down when Ron entered, greeting them with a loud rumbling stomach. As his eyes moved from the delicious breakfast to Hermione, he flushed a deep crimson. She was puzzled, but didn't comment.

The color had barely drained from Ron's face when they both reached for the pitcher of pumpkin juice. The redhead drew his head away as if stung, muttering apologies and trying to avoid her eyes.

"What the hell is wrong with you this morning?" Hermione asked exasperated.

Ron was saved from answering by the arrival of his sister. She had a murderous look in her eyes and her face was almost the same color as her brother's, though for a different reason.

"Did something happen to you?" Hermione asked carefully.

Ginny just shook her head. She grabbed a plate and some toast before she started buttering it with more force than strictly necessary.

"Are you sure you are alright?" Hermione inquired. Why were they all behaving so oddly?

"No, I'm bloody well not alright," Ginny ground out through clenched teeth. "I didn't sleep much last night."

Hermione, completely missing the dirty look the other girl gave her, forged on trying to be helpful. "You should have taken something for it. I'm sure there's some sleep draught in one of the bathroom cabinets."

"And you," Ginny countered, rising from her chair and pushing her still full plate away. "Should remember to cast a Silencing Charm the next time you decide to play with

yourself."

That said, she stormed from the room.

The rest of the meal passed in an awkward silence, all three friends pretending that nothing had happened, though their flushed faces told a different story.

As Hermione climbed the stairs back to her room, she silently thanked whoever would take credit for it that Severus had been relatively quite last night. And she vowed to remember the spell from now on.

~o~o~o~

The next week passed without a repeat of the breakfast incident. The boys had calmed down, though Hermione caught Ron looking at her strangely now and again. Ginny, on the other hand, was still giving her the cold shoulder. She avoided her as much as possible.

There was, however, no time to think about it. The research they had done so far had brought no new information. The Black library was extensive, but the tomes held more Dark Magic than was healthy. The only one of them able to read the books for any length of time without getting sick was Harry. Well, and Severus, though the boys, of course, didn't know that he helped.

McGonagall had brought dozens of tomes from the Restricted Section, though nothing provided an answer. It was highly frustrating. They needed clues as to where the remaining soul pieces could be, and even more importantly, a way to destroy the one already in their possession.

Harry, Hermione noticed, had developed an unhealthy attachment to Riddle's award. He carried it everywhere he went and could often be caught tracing the engravings with trembling fingers.

Today, the house was full of people. Bill had announced that his wife was expecting, and Molly had insisted on an impromptu celebration. Hermione was happy for the Weasleys, though she knew that she'd not see much of Severus that day.

Before dinner, she moved down to the kitchen hoping to smuggle a plate up to her room. It was risky with so many people about, but she didn't know if she'd get a chance later.

She let out a relieved sigh as she pushed open the door. The table was already set, and Molly was the only one in the room.

"I wanted to get something for him, if it's alright with you?" Hermione asked carefully.

Molly pointed to one of the filled plates on the table. "You can take that one," she replied gruffly. "It would have been Percy's, but he has a prior engagement."

Without waiting for more to follow, Hermione disillusioned the plate and dinner and left the kitchen. She could understand Mrs. Weasley's disappointment, but that didn't mean she had to be rude.

When she arrived in her shared room, Severus was in the shower. She could hear the water hitting the tiles in the adjoining bathroom. Knowing that dinner would start soon, she left the meal on the table.

~o~o~o~

Dinner was a noisy affair. It was no wonder, considering that most of the people present were Weasleys. A lot of toasting and backslapping preceded the actual eating, and Hermione saw that even Harry was cheery and smiling.

The puzzled looks on Fred and George and their inquiry after Percy's whereabouts went unnoticed in all the hubbub.

The peace was, however, not to last. Hermione had just taken the first bite of her roasted chicken when a heavy crash and male shout of disgust was heard.

Immediately alert, people went for their wands and hurried up the stairs, a panicky Hermione on their heels.

Harry was the first to reach the door. "There is someone in Hermione's room," he said, his voice cold.

Before she could say anything to explain, he had melted the door away with some unknown spell.

"YOU!" Harry shouted. "I'll kill you."

"No!" Hermione moved as fast as she could. "Harry, no! You don't understand!"

"Stay back, Hermione! This is something between him and me!"

"No, I won't," Hermione tried to reach Severus, but Harry blocked the door. "You can't kill him! He saved my life!"

"He is a murderer!"

"Severus, tell him the truth!" Hermione pleaded. "I can't lose you, just tell him!"

"I... he wouldn't believe me, my love," Severus voice sounded resigned and defeated. It made Hermione's heart clench. The other people around them stood motionless and stared at the scene wide-eyed.

"Well, he has nothing to say," Harry mocked. "Let's see how you can cope with pain, shall we."

"NO!"

"What the hell?!" Harry exclaimed. The moment he had readied himself to throw a hex at the man he hated more than anything in the world, a sharp pain seared through his right shoulder.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Two voices shouted, and Harry's wand flew from his loosened grip.

Feeling that the immediate danger was gone, Crookshanks released the shoulder of the dark-haired young man and trotted into the bedroom.

Hermione hurried past him not even sparing her friend a glance. "Severus!" She screamed and threw herself into his arms and sobbed. She could have lost him.

In the distant she heard a familiar voice ushering Harry down the stairs. "No," the boy argued. "I want answers first!"

"Now, Harry, we have to get your shoulder fixed..." Remus' coaxing words were interrupted though as Severus decided to speak.

"The headmaster was dying, and he knew it well. All I could do was slow the curse that was eating away at him. You saw his blacked hand, didn't you? There is magic in this world much darker and older than you can imagine," he paused, his gaze travelling slowly over the faces of all those present.



"Albus' greatest fear was dying at the hands of an enemy. I only did what he wanted me to do. It is not my fault he is dead. I only released him, like he asked me to."

"That you did, my boy." All faces turned at the sound of the familiar voice.

## The Truth Will Set You Free

*Chapter 19 of 20*

*"How?" Severus asked, his voice shaking.*

### Chapter Eighteen The Truth Will Set You Free

Deep in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic, a ragged curtain began to flutter, moved by an unseen breeze. Beams of pure white light swirled above and under the rows of stone benches. A very soft tune could be felt more than heard it told of despair and unfulfilled dreams. Notes like the clear sound of a harp started humming a familiar tune.

Like crystals, the old stones broke the light into a multitude of colors brighter than the sun. The beams danced to the song, giving hope to those lost souls that were stuck between here and the beyond.

As the phoenix song reached its peak, the mystic curtain caught fire. With lightning speed, the colors raced towards the flames, and then down the concealed tunnel behind the veil. They collided with a barely discernable shadow miles under the surface. They were rapidly absorbed, leaving everything to fall into darkness again. The shadow became solid and shifted to form the body of a man at first indistinct, before the hair lengthened, flowing around the aged but kind face.

The pearly white ghost shook his long beard and smiled. This process was indeed a wonder; he should have it written down in the magical tome that still resided in his old quarters, where it would remain until his rightful heir came to claim it. No time to think about it now though. He had a job to finish and a friend to thank. Closing his eyes, he cast out his soul to reach his destination, his haunt.

Seconds later, he was squeezed through the void that only the immortals had access to the sensation was similar to that of Apparition only he had no idea where he would land.

He was mildly surprised when he materialized behind one Arthur Weasley on the second landing of the old Black residence.

He hadn't heard what had been said, but the fact that he was here and not at Hogwarts told him all he needed to know. Severus had finally broken his silence, had broken through his own guilt and thereby lifted his soul from the limbo in between worlds.

"That you did, my boy," Albus Dumbledore said, testing his voice for the first time. It sounded just as kind as it had when he left the realm of the corporeal. He watched in amusement as all faces turned in his direction, his eyes scanning the crowd for the faces of those he had missed the most. He was only mildly surprised to find Severus embracing young Miss Granger. His Potions master had always had a soft spot for the girl, though he had long hidden it from her. His teacher reports about the Gryffindor, however, held nothing but praise.

Next, he looked at the dark-haired young man on the stairs, who was clutching his bleeding shoulder. Had he been able to, he would have cried. Cried for all the pain he had caused him over the years, the pain that his death had added, but most of all because of the darkness that seemed to cling to Harry like an invisible cloak. Something was very wrong.

"You are a ghost," Ron announced, startling the stunned group out of their collective shock.

"Indeed I am, Mr Weasley. Thanks to Severus, my soul was released from the Veil of Death."

The announcement was followed by a lot of muttering; no living man had any knowledge about the making of spiritual beings, and even the ghosts themselves never spoke about it. So of course, people had problems believing their eyes and ears figments and echoes of deceased loved ones were much more common, and could occur spontaneously.

"How?" Severus asked, his voice shaking. How could it be that Dumbledore had returned to them after months as a ghost, yes, but still?

"I'm not completely sure," the former headmaster answered. "The guilt you felt weighed heavily on my soul, a spiritual weight keeping me grounded in the dark void, unable to rise."

"I see," Severus said quietly, tightening his arms around Hermione. His eyes stung, but he wouldn't allow himself to cry. He hadn't since he was an eleven-year-old first year boys should be strong. His father, and later Potter and Black, had made sure he understood that. So, he had learned to bury his emotions deep inside. Hermione had been the first person to break through his shell of indifference and sarcasm to wrap her hands around his heart, warming it, filling it, squeezing it until it picked up the natural rhythm of life again.

And he could have lost all this again in seconds. He had no doubt that Potter was able to cast an Unforgivable all it needed was enough hate. And Potter hated him, and it was his own fault. Everything was his fault. It was all too much. The dams broke, flooding him with emotions he had long forgotten he was capable of and the tears finally came, rolling hotly down his pale cheeks. With a heart-wrenching sob, he buried his face in Hermione's shoulder and started to weep openly.

"We should go downstairs," Remus suggested softly. "Harry needs medical attention, and we haven't eaten yet."

Quietly, the group trotted down the stairs, leaving the two lovers alone. No one knew what else to say or do.

Together Hermione and Severus settled down on their bed after closing and warding the door for privacy. They desperately clung to each other for strength.

"He could have killed you," Hermione whispered. "Oh god, he could have killed you." Her own tears mingled with his as she snuggled still closer to him.

"Shh, he didn't," Severus soothed, his voice still rough from crying. "Everything is going to get better now. With Albus back, there is new hope for us all."

They stayed thus entwined for a long while, occasionally petting their furry savior, or reaffirming their hold on each other. Everything was out in the open now, and with Dumbledore around, Severus was safe.

~o~o~o~

Down in the kitchen, Molly was carefully applying a healing solution to the scratches and bite marks Crookshanks had left on Harry's shoulder, while Bill recounted the events of the last months as best as he could.

"...and we went up the stairs to Hermione's room. What I don't understand is why he shouted," Remus concluded.

"Eh, well, Liquid Bogart, I recon," Fred said, avoiding his mother's gaze.

"Yes, you see," George added, brushing imaginary lint from his robes. "It was a new version, needing only one component."

"We wanted to try it on Percy again, not Snape. We didn't even know he was here," Fred huffed.

Angrily, Molly approached her sons, ready to tell them off.

"Ah, well, thanks to that," Dumbledore said, "we now have the chance to work together towards the final end. It is very disconcerting for me to hear that you did not work together as was my wish. What you discovered had more to do with luck than actual work. We need to strengthen our ties and friendships; they are, after all, what made us strong and helped us overcome so many dark times. With Severus in our midst, we have a chance to end this war."

"I still don't like that you play tricks on your brother," Molly admonished her sons, before waving her wand over the cold meal. In moments, steam rose from the plates and the smell of food filled the room. Slowly people started settling down to finally eat their abandoned dinner. Only Ron and Harry weren't hungry anymore.

"I can't believe Hermione likes the git," Ron grumbled.

"I can't believe she'd choose him over us," Harry added. "I hate him."

"Something weighing on your stomachs?" Dumbledore asked. "If you aren't ready to eat, I'd like to have a little chat with the two of you."

Both boys nodded and followed the former headmaster out of the room.

"Is there somewhere we can talk privately?" Dumbledore asked.

"The attic," Harry answered, leading the way up the stairs. He wanted answers. And he would get them. This time Dumbledore would not be able to placate him with empty words.

And so Dumbledore's ghost recounted the events that led to his death the curse that had blackened his hand, the poison he had drunk in the cave by the sea, his plea for Snape to do the right thing.

"Wait! Snape had taken an Unbreakable Vow, you said," Harry huffed, still not willing to take everything at face value. "Snape would have killed you anyway, to save his own hide. To me, he is still a murderer."

Harry's voice was calm and devoid of all emotions. And not only Ron felt the drop in the room temperature, though he wisely chose not to comment.

"Harry, think! The Vow said nothing about killing me, only about finishing a task in case young Mr Malfoy couldn't. What that would entail was never directly named. Severus wouldn't have dropped dead the moment he refused to kill me because the task could have been another one entirely," Dumbledore implored.

"I don't see what that changes," Harry growled.

Surprisingly, it was Ron who answered. "Everything, mate. Don't you see that? What Snape said was the truth. He acted the way he did because he had to."

"Did it never occur to you," Dumbledore continued, "that Draco's mother was afraid for her child and went to seek my counsel?"

"I... no... not really," Harry answered, a bit puzzled now.

"Then you didn't think I was aware of what she planned, or indeed that it was I who told her what to do and how to go about it. There were always many people suspicious about Severus' loyalties in the ranks of the Death Eaters. So we made a deal, Mrs Malfoy and I..." Slowly Dumbledore told the two boys about the events that had taken place in Snape's house more than a year ago. Ron and Harry listened intently.

"That doesn't change the fact that he killed you," Harry protested.

"No, it doesn't, but I would have died anyway. He saved me from Greyback and a death at the hands of my enemies. And at the same time he saved the life and innocence of a young man."

"He could have fought them," Harry said, although there was no force behind his words. The truth began to slowly sink in. Had he really been wrong?

"No, Harry, no. It was the only way. My time had come, I felt it."

"Oh god, what did I do!?" Harry's shoulders slumped and he began to shake uncontrollably, his body was wracked by heavy spasms. Ron was talking to Harry in a desperate sounding voice. He had seen this reaction once before, and it didn't bode well.

"Move him to lie on the couch," Dumbledore ordered. He had an idea as to what was causing the reaction in the boy. He could feel the energy around his dark-haired charge change noticeably. The dark was expelled, finding no purchase in Harry's soul now the hate was gone.

Ron complied, lifting his now unconscious friend out of the armchair to deposit him on the plush sofa. The Riddle award flew out of Harry's pocket then, as if guided by an invisible hand. No sooner had it landed on the heavy carpeting, then Harry's body went still. He opened his eyes and blinked against the bright light.

Before Ron or Dumbledore could inquire after his well-being, the award began to tremble and exploded seconds later in a shower of red sparks.

All that remained was ash and an outlandish-looking coin.

## Allies

Carefully, he brushed his long hair before pulling it back and securing it with a black ribbon.

## Chapter Nineteen Allies

The wooden floor boards creaked loudly under the fake leather boots as the young man paced back and forth like a caged tiger. Nervously he wrung his hands, his eyes never straying from the closed door. Any minute now he would come face to face with the man who both shaped and ruined his life.

He felt old, so old.

His life was one big mess and, although his body was completely healed, his soul felt bruised and torn. In recent weeks he had tried to come to terms with all that had happened since that fateful summer night at Hogwarts. The revelation his musings had brought was frightening.

He was wrong, had been his entire life. The blame could easily be apportioned to the precocious prejudices he had been spoon-fed since early childhood. It was so easy to think himself superior when he was safe within the walls of the castle, when he had friends who were like him, that thought as he did. It was different when you were suddenly exposed to reality. There, everyone was on their own.

When your own father abandons you to die, you inevitably lose faith in his words. Yes, Draco had believed that his time had come, even relished the thought, for how can you go on with that kind of betrayal?

And now he was here, waiting for the man that had caused him more hurt and grief than anyone else, and he was here to get answers. He had to know about his beloved mother, too weak to oppose her dominating husband and sister. But what to do after that? Should he go and hide?

Possibly.

Draco stopped his circuit abruptly and stared straight at the door. The quiet footsteps on the carpeted floor outside could be anyone's, this was a hotel after all, but the rhythmic thudding of the heavy metal hitting the floor was unmistakable. Only the sound of his father's cane could send such shivers down his spine.

Although he was prepared, he still jumped when the knock finally came. He hesitated a moment before lowering the wards.

"Enter!" He hated the tremor in his voice.

Slowly the door was pushed open to allow the blond man entrance. He looked as impeccable as he had in his prime. Draco felt the gooseflesh rise on his arms it was almost like seeing a ghost from the past. He remembered well the last time his father had worn these velvet robes: just before his fifth year at Hogwarts, when Umbridge had been invited to dinner in the manor.

He unconsciously took a step back and swallowed against the bile rising in his throat. Seeing the sneer contorting his father's features, Draco tried controlling his breathing before bravely motioning for Lucius to take a seat.

"Aren't you going to offer your father a drink?" Lucius asked with faked politeness.

"No, this isn't a friendly meeting. You are here because I want some questions answered."

"I was quite surprised when I got your message...."

Draco snorted. "I can imagine. After all, you thought I'd bleed to death in that Muggle hospital."

"It was the only choice!"

"No, it wasn't. But it doesn't matter now. What did you do to Mother?"

Lucius chuckled. It was a nasty sound, and Draco was hard-put not to reach for his wand. "Is this the reason you called me here? Surely you've read the *Prophet*? The manor was burned to the ground by the Mudblood-loving...."

"NO! It was you. I know it. You couldn't stand that she'd gotten so much more confident during the time you were in prison, that she started thinking for herself. You simply could not tolerate her trying to keep me from becoming like you!"

"Your mother was weak. She'd never been able to make the right decisions."

"Because you wouldn't let her." Draco was angry. Tears were running down his cheeks, but he didn't care. He was right, his father had killed her. He knew it.

"And you are just as useless. I tried pushing you in the right direction, but she spoiled you. I thought my genes were stronger than hers...."

"You killed her!"

"She was a disgrace! She was going to betray the cause!"

Shakily, Draco stood, panting heavily. He couldn't run not now not after he knew for sure. He had to fight for his mother, for people like the Weasleys who had taken him in and nursed him back to health, and yes, even for the Muggles who had done their best to save his life, although he had no money, no papers.

His new wand was drawn quickly. He levelled it at Lucius' chest, but his father just smiled.

"You do not have the guts to do it. So much like your mother, she didn't even run."

Slowly, Lucius rose to his feet, drawing his wand with deliberate ease. There was no trace of fear as he stood tall and proud before his son.

"Show me what you have learned then, Son!"

~o~o~o~

Without hesitating, Ron bent down to lift the coin from the pile of ashes. Carefully, he blew the last of the soot from it. The metal felt strangely hot in his hand and gleamed red in the ill-lit room. It was no currency he knew, but judging by the crossed wands on the number side, it was magical money.

"That is a piece of the first independent currency ever used," announced Dumbledore in an astonished voice, motioning for Harry to make space on the couch for his friend. Harry's hand involuntary stretched towards it. Suddenly, Ron gave a shout and let the coin fall to the floor.

"Gods... it burned my palm," he grunted through clenched teeth.

"Let me see that," Dumbledore asked gently. Ron stretched out his hand and flinched as the ghost passed his long fingers over, or more precisely, through his stinging flesh.

"I don't see a mark, it's not even red. Is it still hurting?"

"No, your coldness... I mean the coldness of your hands numbed it, kind of. It tingles a bit," Ron answered, his eyes fixed on his palm. This coin had to be treated with care. It had really hurt, but Dumbledore was right, he could see no evidence of it. Too late he noticed that the coin was no longer where it had fallen.

"I don't feel anything," Harry mumbled. Two sets of eyes watched anxiously as he lovingly stroked the engravings.

"Do you know what exactly it is? Is it foreign?" Harry asked curiously.

Dumbledore floated closer and peered at it from above. "When the two worlds at first separated, wizards used Muggle money. It was much easier. The community was small and magical folk needed to trade with Muggles on a regular basis. Around about the same time Hogwarts was founded, the Ministry decided we needed our own money. Turn it around."

Harry flipped the coin over. There on the other side was a bird in full flight, its wings spread wide.

"Hmm, I wasn't aware that these existed. I've never seen one with an eagle before. But there aren't many of these coins left, so I don't think it meant anything. However, it was somehow inside the award, and to be safe I want Severus to take a look at it."

"No," Harry growled.

"Harry, I thought I explained...," the late Headmaster started carefully.

"Mate...," Ron warned.

"Can you just let me finish," Harry grumbled, frowning at his best friend. "I don't want to disturb him and Hermione just now, okay? I'll show it to him tomorrow. Until then I'll keep it safe since neither of you can touch it."

Dumbledore nodded, convinced of the boy's sincerity. Changing the topic smoothly, he asked the boys if they read the book that he'd recommended.

"Discovering the Hidden', that was it," Ron groaned. "Makes much more sense. We couldn't remember exactly and so we read something that sounded similar by someone called Grommet. Quite boring that one. Who needs sixty different spells to light a torch?"

Dumbledore laughed heartily. It was an eerie sound coming from a translucent ghost. "Ah, well, I always kept a copy of Hommet in my office, I'm sure Minerva hasn't thrown it out yet."

~o~o~o~

While people at Grimmauld Place were still morosely eating their dinner, the blond man prepared himself for his first meeting with the new spy. It was important that everything should go smoothly. He was fed up with betrayal and the need to hide. He wanted this war to come to an end and for the right people to take over. Maybe he could use the fool's knowledge for his own ends?

Carefully, he brushed his long hair before pulling it back and securing it with a black ribbon. He wanted to look regal and powerful. The idiot who thought himself able to fill Severus' position would immediately know he dealt with a dangerous man. Lucius so loved seeing the fear in the new recruits eyes when they were handed to him for a bit of training.

Cautiously, he lifted his eyes to the mirror, hating to see them red and swollen. It had not been easy to dispose of his last living family member, but it had to be done. Some things, his father had taught him, should never be accepted. Betrayal of one's own family fell firmly, and fatally, into that category.

Lucius took a last look out of the window. The street below was deserted good. With a last glance at the still form slumped over the old chintz armchair, he grabbed his heavy velvet cloak and slipped out into the night

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**A/N:** A big Thank You goes to Warty for the beta work.