

To Make an End

by JackieJLH

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Part One

Chapter 1 of 3

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Author's Note: This story was written for natasnape, with the prompt:*Dumbledore doesn't send a letter with baby Harry, he sends Snape* The original story was promised at 500 to 1,000 words, but it, um, grew. And became very odd. Many, many thanks to natasnape for the wonderful prompt and for her patience...this was totally supposed to be done six or seven months ago. My undying gratitude goes to princesssteradia for beta reading and providing much-needed encouragement when I was freaking out, to Annie Talbot for her support, advice, and alpha-reading, to Christev for alpha reading and being my sounding board when I was frustrated, to verus_janus for Brit-picking and listening to me grumble about writer's block, to pyjamapants for calming my frustration and donating a line of Lucius dialogue, and to everyone else who had to listen to me wibble about this fic for the last seven months. I love you all.

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To Make an End

Part One

What we call the beginning is often the end,

and to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

~ Four Quartets: Little Gidding by T.S. Eliot

2 November 1981

She was too old to spend her day sitting on a cold stone wall, she thought. Not that her age had ever kept Minerva McGonagall from doing anything she wanted to do.... But still, the cat in her hadn't realised what a bad idea her choice of seating had been, and it caught her by surprise how much her joints ached as she resumed her human form. That ache was nothing, though, compared to the one that gripped her heart as Albus confirmed the details of the previous night's events.

That twisting pain in her chest grew steadily after Hagrid arrived, tiny Harry Potter asleep in his arms. The little boy seemed so tiny, so innocent, and the thought that he'd

grow up never knowing his parents nearly brought tears to her eyes for the fourth time that day.

Minerva trusted Albus, she truly did. She trusted him with her life, with the lives of the students she fiercely protected, with the fate of the only world she'd ever known. But watching him place a letter among Harry's blankets and turn away, doubt overshadowed that trust.

She'd watched those people, those awful, hateful Muggles, all day. How would they react, finding a baby on their doorstep in the morning? What if they said no? What if they refused him, or sent him away somewhere? What danger would befall the little boy if Death Eaters came looking for him in a place where there weren't wands waiting to rise in his defence? Not to mention the fact that it was far too cold for a baby to pass the rest of the night outdoors...her own aching bones could attest to that. And what if he crawled away and ended up in the street? The endless horrific possibilities raced through her mind, and for the first time in her life, she wondered if Albus Dumbledore was really as all-knowing as she'd always believed him to be.

"Headmaster," she began hesitantly once Hagrid had ridden away on his borrowed motorbike, "is it safe, leaving the child here?"

"Oh, quite safe," Albus assured her. "I'll have someone watching over him." He didn't go on, didn't elaborate, but he'd never lied to her, so she believed him.

"Perhaps I'll stay as well," she decided. In cat form, she thought to herself, she could offer the baby warmth while staying mostly out of sight. And then, come morning, she could make sure he was safely placed in the arms of his aunt.

That thought called another matter to her attention, and it horrified her that she hadn't realised it until this moment.

Minerva'd had a sister of her own, once, and while they hadn't spoken in the years preceding Bellona's death, when Dumbledore had brought her the news, she'd felt as though her world had changed forever. Being on opposite sides of a war hadn't negated an entire childhood of memories. Even remembering young Lily Evans complaining to her friends about her sister's aversion to all things magical could not make Minerva believe that Petunia Dursley wouldn't grieve now.

What if, instead of coming to her room in the middle of the night, Albus had simply left a copy of *The Daily Prophet* beside her plate at breakfast? What if she'd come across Bellona's name in a list of Death Eaters killed during a Ministry raid? She thought she may have hexed him. Surely, she'd have been angry. No, furious. And hurt, so hurt. Just imagining it made her feel ill. How could Albus do something so heartless as to leave this woman nothing but a letter?

"I'd like to talk to his aunt," she added resolutely. "She deserves to be told what happened."

"I admire your intentions, my dear," Albus said with a gentle smile, rummaging around in his pocket for more of his infernal sweets, "but I believe Mrs Dursley would be even more upset to find a strange witch at her door. If what I've learned of her is true, a letter really would be best."

"Perhaps you would not believe that," she responded quietly, trying not to let her exasperation enter her tone, "if you'd ever had a sister."

At that Albus stopped his fidgeting, his hand freezing in his pocket as he turned to stare at her. For just the briefest second she saw something in his eyes that she'd never seen there before. Uncertainty, maybe. Uncertainty mixed with pain, or possibly sorrow. She wasn't sure where she'd gone wrong, but she instantly regretted her words.

"I'm sorry... I know you've considered all of this already. You're probably right. A letter would be best," she hurried to say because the stillness of Albus's stance and the expression on his face were terrifying, in a way. Right before her eyes, it was as if he'd become smaller. She would have done anything to take back what she'd said.

"No," he finally answered, his voice sounding far away, lacking in its usual calm confidence. "No, you are correct. I sometimes suspect my efforts to..." He stopped, that worrying look flashing through his eyes again, but then just as quickly, it was replaced by the fond, warm expression he so often adopted when speaking to her. "Never doubt your own judgment in matters such as these, Minerva, and especially not for my sake."

"And yet," he continued, "I still do not believe Mrs Dursley will react well to a stranger. There is another who would be better suited for the task. Someone who may need to deliver this news himself nearly as much as she needs to hear it spoken aloud."

Minerva's eyebrows furrowed as she considered his words. "Who did you have in mind?"

"An old friend of her sister's," he said in that cryptic way that she found both maddening and endearing at the same time. "We'll take Harry to the castle in the meantime."

She wanted to press him for something more, some hint at what he was planning, but she couldn't quite bear the thought of accidentally bringing that hurt look back into her friend's eyes.

"We'd best be off, then," she said instead. "Shall we meet at the castle gates and walk up together, or are there still Death Eaters lurking about?" She didn't worry for herself...she could take down nearly any one (or two, or three) of Voldemort's minions single-handedly if she had to, and Albus was yet more capable. But Harry's life could not be placed in danger at any cost. He was too important.

"I'll go first," he told her. "Wait for my signal that it's safe before following with Harry."

She nodded, taking the Deluminator when he offered it to her, watching him as he walked down the street and turned the corner before leaving for the school, the *CRACK* of Apparition muffled by the distance.

Walking back to the doorstep, she lifted Harry Potter into her arms. He sleepily shifted around before finding a comfortable place to rest on her shoulder. His small cheek was cold against her own, chilled by the night air, and she carefully tucked his head into the crook of her neck and pulled his blankets up around his face. Leaning against the wall of the Dursley home, mostly hidden from the moonlight by the shadow of the hedge and a nearby tree, she waited until Albus's patronus arrived ten minutes later.

"It's safe. You may bring him along now," the phoenix told her in a hushed tone. She nodded her understanding, walking back out to the street and heading in the opposite direction from where Albus had gone. When she reached the corner, she released the street's lights from the Deluminator, tucked the device back into her robes, tightened her grip on the tiny boy in her arms, and Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts.

2 November 1981

"Severus, wake up," Albus said, standing over him. Severus opened one eye and glared at him. He'd already been awake, of course, but couldn't bring himself to care that his boss had broken into his quarters.

"Go away," he answered bitterly, turning over to face the opposite wall. Without warning, the blankets wrapped around him were jerked away, and he spun back around in outrage, his wand pointed at the older wizard's chest. "How dare you..."

Albus cut him off with a raised hand. "You're not going to waste your life away lying in this bed. Get up. There's something I need you to do."

"Go to hell," Severus muttered, climbing off the bed and grabbing his dressing gown from where he'd haphazardly dropped it on the floor two days prior. "And get out of my rooms." Storming past Albus, he went to his sitting room and pulled the half-finished bottle of Old Ogden's from his desk drawer, grabbing a dirty glass from the desktop and then flopping into a chair adjacent the empty, cold fireplace.

He filled the glass, but hadn't even gotten it to his lips before it was snatched out of his hand.

"You agreed to help protect Lily's son," Albus reminded him in a chastising tone.

"And by my calculations, that gives me nine-and-a-half years, or until the Dark Lord comes back, before I have to come out of my drunken stupor. Give or take a month or

two," Severus answered petulantly, taking a sip of the Firewhisky straight from the bottle. "Don't be a hypocrite, Albus. Sybill drinks herself into unconsciousness more nights than not these days, and I don't see you bothering her."

Albus sat down in the chair opposite Severus. "Sybill still teaches her classes...something you haven't done in two days."

"I'm mourning," Severus replied sarcastically, frowning as the Firewhisky in the bottle turned into water with a wave of Albus's hand.

"I'll allow you the rest of the day to sober up," Albus said after a long moment spent watching Severus stare into the non-existent fire. He looked the younger man up and down before adding, "And to bathe. If you are truly interested in doing all you can to protect Harry, then you'll be in my office by nine a.m. tomorrow."

"I thought you dumped the brat with some relative?" Severus asked, not looking up.

"He's going to live with Lily's sister."

A bark of humourless laughter exploded from Severus's lips. "I'm sure *that* conversation went over well."

"It hasn't happened yet," Albus informed him. "You're going to go talk to her, and turn the child over to her for safekeeping. I believe she'll take the news coming from you better than from someone she doesn't know."

Severus stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. When Albus seemed to fail at seeing the ridiculousness behind his idea, he said, "Don't be daft. Petunia Evans hates all things magical...that probably includes babies, and most especially includes me. She didn't even like her sister very much."

"Dursley now," Albus said, conveniently ignoring the rest. "Petunia Dursley."

Severus sneered. "Someone actually married that bi..."

"Severus!" Albus growled. Severus just shrugged, but didn't finish his sentence. "Come to my office. Nine a.m. I'll have the boy ready to go, as well as a letter explaining to Mrs Dursley why it's imperative that she provide him a home. You'll deliver both to her, and inform her of what happened to her sister. Do you understand?"

"I'm not a child, Albus," Severus muttered, getting up and heading back into the bedroom.

"You're certainly acting like one," was Albus's reply as he too rose to his feet, turning and walking in the direction of the door.

3 November 1981

Petunia lifted her somewhat-food-coated son out of his high chair, settling him on her hip and deftly plucking the spoon out of his hand just a second before it ended up in her hair.

"Mummy!" Dudley exclaimed in annoyance, and she smiled until a sticky hand smeared mashed bananas across her cheek. Sighing and shaking her head, she quickly wiped him clean with a damp towel and then set him on the floor. He toddled away, plopping onto the ground and crawling the rest of the way before he'd even made it out of the kitchen. Watching him go with a fond expression, Petunia finally turned her attention back to the messy high chair.

A knock on the door made her stop what she was doing. She couldn't imagine who could be at the door...the post had already come, Vernon had left for work nearly a half hour ago, and anyone else who might come over usually called first. Pausing in front of the hall mirror in order to wipe the remnants of banana from her face, she hurried to the door as a persistent knock rang through the house again.

"Shan't!" Dudley yelled in the direction of the sound...he only knew two words as of yet, and this was his new and favourite one...and Petunia couldn't keep herself from smiling as she opened the door.

The sight of the person on her doorstep made the smile fade into a surprised stare within seconds.

At first she didn't quite believe her eyes. Severus Snape *here*, on *her* doorstep, was so far outside the realm of anything she'd ever believed possible that she couldn't fully comprehend what she was seeing for a few seconds. He stood unmoving, watching her from behind a curtain of the same oily black hair at which she'd always turned up her nose. He was wearing black robes, much like Lily had worn for school...*robes*, on *Privet Drive*.

It took a moment for her to get over her shock, and she may not have at all if he hadn't finally spoken.

"Petunia," he began in greeting, his voice low and scratchy-sounding. He didn't get the chance to continue; as soon as he opened his mouth to go on, she slammed the door in his face, then leaned back against it, her hands trembling.

This can't be happening, she thought in a panic. He had no business being here, no right to intrude on her life yet again after all these years. What was ~~happening~~ *doing* here? Had Lily sent him? Why would she *do* such a thing? Petunia's heart felt like it was going to beat out of her chest, and she couldn't quite bring herself to go to the window and peek outside to see if Severus had gone.

"Mummy!" Dudley called from the living room, and a second later, to her horror, he crawled into the hallway, heading in her direction. Snatching him up into her arms, Petunia brought him back into the living room and deposited him on the floor.

"Stay in here, sweetie," she told him in as pleasant a tone as she could manage. He seemed to sense something wrong in her voice, because he stared at her with wide, confused eyes. "How about Mummy gets you a new toy to play with?" she offered, going to the chest in the corner and pulling out a handful of toys to join the others on the floor. "Here, see?"

Dudley's eyes lit up at the new toys and, fully distracted for at least a few minutes, he didn't even look up when Severus knocked at the door again.

If I just ignore him, he'll get the hint and go away, she told herself, resolving not to answer him at all.

But a moment later he knocked again, and then called out, "Petunia, open the door."

When she didn't respond and didn't move from where her feet felt frozen in place, he added in a slightly quieter voice, "All of your neighbours can see me."

Feeling decidedly trapped and angry, she marched back to the door and threw it open. "What could you possibly want from me?" she snapped, glaring at him.

"May I come in?" He finally lifted his head to properly look at her, and his appearance...dark circles under red-rimmed eyes that would make her think he'd been crying, if she weren't so sure he was entirely incapable of such a thing...neatly cut off the tirade already forming on her tongue.

She stared at him for a long moment, unsure whether she should let him in or just slam the door in his face again. Finally, the decision was made for her. From the vicinity of his feet, she heard a small whimper. Glancing down, she found a baby watching her, wrapped in blankets and tucked inside a large basket with handles on either side.

"Who..." she started to say, her words drifting away from her as she turned a confused look back to Severus.

"Harry," he replied, his voice cracking with the word. He swallowed hard and said again, stronger this time, "Harry Potter."

Glancing back and forth from the tiny nephew she'd never met to the obviously upset man standing on her doorstep, Petunia felt like she'd been kicked in the chest. Blinking back tears that welled up in her eyes almost instantly, she nodded and stepped back.

"Come in," she said softly, pushing the door open further. Snape didn't respond, just bent down to take the handles of the basket in one hand, then stood up and walked past her, heading for the kitchen. Following him, she found him sitting at the kitchen table, Harry still in the little basket. The tiny boy crawled out onto the floor, flipping the basket over in the process, and looked around in obvious confusion as to his whereabouts, finally focusing his big green eyes on his aunt.

Petunia swallowed hard around the lump in her throat, choosing to ignore Harry's curious gaze for the time being, not wanting to think about what his presence meant. "How..." she finally managed to ask. "How did she..."

"She was murdered," he answered without looking up from where he seemed to be trying to glare a hole through the table. "Both of them were. By the Dark..." He paused, grimaced, then finished in a choked whisper, "Lord Voldemort."

Somehow, hearing it hurt worse than just knowing it. Petunia crossed the room on shaky legs, sinking down onto a chair across from Severus, tears once again gathering in the corners of her eyes. She'd known, of course, that this was a possibility. Lily had told her about the war, but... still, she'd never actually thought anything would happen to her sister. Even when they were children, Lily had always seemed indestructible.

"He's gone," Severus added suddenly. "The Dark Lord is gone. The war's over."

Mildly horrified that the news of *anyone's* death could make her feel genuinely relieved, Petunia looked away uncomfortably. "Will there be a funeral? Do I need to..."

"They've already had one," he interrupted. "Yesterday afternoon. She and her husband are buried in Godric's Hollow."

Petunia wasn't even sure where Godric's Hollow *was*, and the thought that no one had bothered to tell her anything at all until the funeral was already over made her so angry that she felt like throwing Severus out right then and there. But before she could bring herself to do that, she did want to know one thing. "And the baby? Are you taking him?"

This finally drew Severus's gaze away from the table long enough to shoot an incredulous glare her way. "No," he answered in a tone that suggested he felt her question was exceptionally stupid. "Where would I keep him, the dungeons?"

Petunia blinked at him in surprise. "Wizard homes have *dungeons*?"

"*Hogwarts* has a dungeon," he ground out. "I teach there."

"Mummy!" Dudley called from the other room, toddling through the doorway a moment later, carrying one of his tiny trains in his hand. He stopped when he came face to face with his cousin, looking back and forth from this new little boy to his mother in confusion.

"Twain!" Harry exclaimed, reaching for the toy, and Dudley pulled it away, frowning.

"No!" Dudley insisted, turning around so as to protect the train from Harry's grasping fingers. He'd never said no before, and Petunia felt the corners of her lips twitch into a half smile before she could stop herself.

Harry dissolved into tears, plopping down onto the floor as Dudley walked away with the toy. Sighing, Petunia bent down to pick him up, following Dudley back into the living room and depositing Harry onto the carpet among the scattered toys. "Here, play with these," she offered, placing a few in his lap. His eyes lit up as he snatched some blocks off the floor and promptly put them in his mouth. He gave her a grateful, wide smile, and she tried not to notice the way it seemed to be Lily's eyes staring into hers.

Tantrum averted, at least temporarily, Petunia stroked Dudley's hair as she passed by him on her way back to the kitchen. Severus was still right where she'd left him, but an envelope had found its way onto the table.

"It's from Dumbledore," he said in response to her questioning look.

That was certainly a name Petunia hadn't heard in a long while...and frankly, one she'd hoped to never hear again. Frowning and not moving to pick up the letter, let alone open it, she asked, "What does it say?"

"I didn't read it, as it's addressed to *you*," he replied, leaning back sullenly in his chair. Petunia rolled her eyes and reached for the letter, her frustration with Severus great enough that she was willing to read nearly anything if it just meant he'd leave sooner rather than later. She still felt tears threatening to begin again at any moment, and the last thing she wanted to do was start sobbing with Severus Snape, of all people, sitting across the table from her.

Her eyes flew across the page, stopping as she reached the end of the first paragraph. Lowering the letter back to the table, she turned her gaze back to Severus. "He expects *me* to take him?!"

"It's safer for him here," Severus answered in a weary tone. "Read the rest of it. Albus said he'd explained it all."

Petunia glared at him, but when he didn't elaborate, she returned to the letter. When she'd finished it, she again set it down, her mind racing. "He can't possibly be *serious*..."

Severus raised one eyebrow sardonically. "May I?" he asked, reaching toward the letter.

She absently nodded, and as he skimmed over the contents of the letter, Petunia let her gaze drift to the living room door. She couldn't keep him; Vernon would be furious, and they just couldn't afford him, and... and a thousand other reasons. She just *couldn't*.

But Harry could die if she didn't, as could she and Vernon and Dudley. They needed him as much as he needed them....

How could Dumbledore think that he could just send a child to her home and expect her to adopt him without a second thought, as if he were a stray cat instead of a little boy?

"What if those wizards who killed Lily and James come here looking for him?" she asked, the thought sending her into a near panic. If Harry was in such great danger, how could she and Vernon possibly offer him more protection than wizards could? Would this blood protection keep her family safe from *all* of Voldemort's followers, or just Voldemort himself? Before Severus had a chance to answer, she began shaking her head. "No, he can't stay. Take him back with you; your Dumbledore can protect him."

"Petunia..." Severus began to say, but she cut him off.

"No! I need to worry about *my* family. I'm not putting my son in danger because Lily went off and got herself killed!"

Severus flinched and looked away. After a long moment, he said quietly, "The boy is your family too."

Standing up, Petunia paced back and forth in the small kitchen, feeling trapped. Finally, stopping in front of the window, she answered, "Please, just take him and go. I can't... I just can't."

Pushing back his chair so quickly that it hit into the wall, Severus stood, snatched the basket from the floor, and marched into the other room, muttering, "I told Albus this was a complete waste of time. You've never cared about anyone but yourself," as he went. Petunia blinked back tears as she waited for him to leave, unable to keep from shaking her head as Severus ordered Harry to get into the basket. When Harry started crying, she sighed and went into the living room, eager to have them both out of her house.

"Get. In," Severus demanded through clenched teeth. Harry just screamed louder and threw a toy train at him. When he spotted Petunia in the doorway, he quickly darted past Severus and wrapped himself around her leg.

"Don't you know anything about children?" she snapped, glaring at Severus even as she scooped Harry up into her arms and rubbed a hand gently over his back to soothe him. Harry quickly contented himself with fiddling with the button on her blouse.

"No," Severus retorted, irritation evident in his tone. "Put him in here." He nudged the basket toward her.

"Just hold him," she said, nudging the basket out of the way with her foot. "You can't carry children around in baskets. He's not a newborn, you know. He's going to try to climb out and *fall*."

Glaring at her, Severus reached out to take the little boy from her arms. Harry took one look at the murderous expression on Severus's face and shrunk back against Petunia, his lip quivering with impending cries.

"Would you *stop*!?" she insisted. "You're scaring him, looking at him like that."

"He'll have to get used to it," Severus answered bitterly, reaching again for the baby.

Harry whimpered and turned to look at her, obviously afraid and upset, and Petunia could almost see Lily in his eyes, looking at her in the way she did when they were small, as if her older sister could protect her from all the storms and monsters under beds in the world.

Almost without thinking, Petunia took a step back.

"Just... go. Leave him and just go."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "I don't have times to play games, Petunia."

"As you so kindly pointed out, he's family, and he needs to be somewhere safe. I'm *not playing games*." Turning away from him, she set Harry down on the floor beside Dudley. "He stays. Besides, I dare say he'll be better off here, raised in a normal household, than with *you in that world*."

"The boy *is* a wizard, Petunia," Severus said pointedly in that tone he'd always used when they were children and he'd thought Petunia was being rather stupid for not understanding magical things. "You can't keep him from *that* world...it's just as much his world as it is mine and was Lily's."

"That world killed her!" Petunia exclaimed, refusing to look at him and let him see the tears that welled up in her eyes at the thought. "What's the point of bringing him here to be safe, if you're just going to send him back there later?"

"You can't protect him forever," Severus said. "He needs to learn to protect himself, and Hogwarts is where he'll do that."

"Besides," he added, "I suspect you'll change your mind when his accidental magic kicks in."

That thought gave her pause; Lily had used magic as a child, even before going away to school, and so had Severus. She stared at Harry, wondering what magic already ran in his veins.

Leaving the basket right where it lay, Severus made for the door. With a growing sense of doubt racing through her, Petunia called out, "Wait."

He sighed and turned back again.

"What do I do when he starts... you know?"

Severus raised one eyebrow sardonically...something, if she recalled correctly, he'd inherited from his mother. It was rather more infuriating on him.

"You handle it." Again he walked toward the door, but before he'd made it over the threshold, he stopped and turned back, pulling a quill and a thick bit of paper...more what she'd call parchment, really...out of his pocket. Leaning it on the wall, he scrawled something across the parchment and then dropped it on the nearest chair. "If you find yourself incapable of managing one little boy," he said scathingly, "you can reach me at that address."

In an instant he was at the door and, heedless of her Muggle neighbours, disappeared with a loud **CRACK**.

Angrier than she'd been since... well, since the last time she'd spoken to Severus Snape, Petunia grabbed the piece of parchment, ready to throw it into the fire. But she stopped herself. She would never use it, *never*...she never wanted to see that man again if she could help it...but if there were an emergency....

She tucked the parchment into her pocket, then turned to look down at her nephew, who was quietly chewing on one of Dudley's toys. Dudley twisted around to offer her a look that clearly said, "But why is *he* still here?"

Picking up the abandoned basket from its place on the floor, she frowned at it, unsure if she should just throw it away. Finally she just put it into the hall cupboard. Her mother had always joked that hall cupboards were the perfect places to put things you didn't want to look at anymore because you usually forgot they were even in there until the point where they practically *were*n't, and that sentiment had always seemed to stick in Petunia's mind. The last thing she wanted to think about was what Harry had seen and been through over the last few days...he was only a baby, for God's sake...but who knew if Severus would come back for the basket at some point? At least in the cupboard, it was out of sight and, hopefully, eventually, out of mind.

Settling herself onto the floor between Dudley and Harry, she refused to let herself think about her sister or Severus or the war she'd barely been aware of any longer, and instead focused her attention on how in the world she was supposed to explain all of this to Vernon.

6 April 1982

"We said we weren't going to allow it," Vernon growled. Petunia could already see his cheeks growing red with anger and exasperation.

You said you weren't going to allow it, Petunia thought to herself, but what she said was, "It's not as if he can help it." She didn't tell Vernon that Harry had already done similar things in the past; there was no point in upsetting him further.

Harry turned his face into his aunt's shoulder as her arms tightened protectively around him. She knew that he didn't understand what was going on, but was certain that he realised something bad had happened; his grip on her neck was so tight that it was almost hard for her to breathe.

"He could have killed us all! What if you'd been hurt? Or Dudley? Are you going to just stand back and let him kill our..."

"Of course not," Petunia snapped, setting Harry down on the floor. "Sweetums, go play with Dudders, okay?" she said, nudging him toward the door. He blinked up at her, looking apprehensive, but then toddled away to the living room. Only once he was gone did Petunia turn her attention back to her husband. "What's done is done; there's nothing we can do about it *now*. I'll call around and find someone to replace the window tomorrow, and we can just get on with our lives."

"Until the next window breaks," Vernon muttered as he stormed out of the room.

At a loss as to how to respond to that...really, as much as she hated to admit it, Vernon did have a point...Petunia just began gathering the plates and things that had been hastily abandoned during breakfast, scraping off the barely-touched food and piling the dishes into the sink. Her mind was on anything but washing up.

She didn't know what to do. Things couldn't continue on like this. Between Harry's nightmares keeping her up every night, and the temper tantrums that always held the risk of injury, or at least property damage... well, something had to change. Something had to give.

Petunia didn't know if she could do this anymore, and that thought terrified her. She'd known what she was getting into when she'd agreed to take in her nephew...or at least, she'd thought she'd known. She hadn't realised how difficult it would be, or that she'd have to do it almost entirely alone; Vernon could hardly be counted on to help with anything related to Harry.

Except... except maybe she didn't have to do it on her own. Maybe there was someone who could help, if only by giving her advice. Someone who knew firsthand how to handle magical children; he was surrounded by them all day, after all.

A few hours later, with the boys napping and Vernon dozing off in front of the telly, she was unable to stop herself from going upstairs and retrieving a small box from under her bed. Inside was a single scrap of parchment, bearing an address that she'd sworn she'd never use.

I don't have a choice, she told herself, tucking the parchment into her pocket before gathering paper and a pen. She didn't want to go downstairs...she doubted Vernon would approve of this at all...so she sat on the bed instead, leaning on the book she'd been reading the night before.

Severus,

You said that if ever I needed your help, I should

contact you.... Please, come as soon as possible...

but only during the day; Vernon cannot know.

It's important.

Sincerely,

Petunia Dursley

8 April 1982

"I don't know what to do with him anymore," she said, her arms folded across her chest as the tall, angry-looking wizard paced back and forth in her kitchen. "He's going to end up killing himself, or someone else!"

"What do you expect me to do?" Severus snapped in exasperation. "Take him back to the school?"

"*No!*" she insisted. "But how are we supposed to control his magic *if* he can't?"

"Your parents managed with Lily," he pointed out, and Petunia rolled her eyes.

"Lily made flowers dance. She never blew anything up."

With a huff of annoyance Severus pushed past her and went into the living room. Before she'd even made it through the door, the boarded-over window was repaired.

"There; no harm done," he said quietly, going back to the kitchen. Petunia followed him a moment later.

"And what of the next time it happens?" she asked quietly, leaning on the door frame and watching Severus warily. "What if next time it's not just a window? What if he starts a fire?" She sighed, sinking down into a chair at the table. "Please, there has to be something we can do. We can't just *hope* any longer."

Severus seemed to consider this for a moment, then finally answered, "I'll cast wards and protection spells; he won't be able to cause but the most harmless of mischief."

"Vernon won't approve," Petunia answered slowly. To be entirely honest, she didn't really approve either, but she also knew that no matter how much she hated magic, there was only one way to combat it...more magic. She was so tired and stressed out that she wasn't about to limit her options if she could help it.

"Your husband will never know." Severus stood, surveying the room with a pensive expression. "I'll start in here. It won't take more than a couple hours."

She regarded him silently for a moment, struggling with her indecision, but finally nodded. "Fine. I'll leave you to it, then."

Severus just nodded without turning around. "I'll have to renew them once a month."

"Okay." She turned to go back to where the boys were playing, but paused long enough to say a grudging, "Thank you."

3 November 1982

"Have you gone completely *mad*?" Petunia's words came out as a shrill shriek, and Vernon finally stopped what he was doing for a moment and turned to look up at her.

"I can't take the crying anymore. And besides, he won't wake up Dudley this way," he explained in that confident tone of his that in the past, had always made her inclined to defer to his judgement. This time, just the thought of agreeing made her almost sick with guilt. The fact that Vernon had come home early to do this when he'd known she was at the park with the boys only made her angrier.

Seeming to sense the tension in the room, Harry tightened his grip around her neck. He looked up at her for reassurance, and it was almost more than she could bear.

"He's not sleeping in a cupboard," she said icily. "Move the cot back upstairs."

Vernon let out an exasperated growl. "We're never going to be able to get a full night's sleep again. You do realise that, don't you? That boy is a problem." He jabbed his finger in Harry's direction as if to emphasize his point. "He..."

"It's not his fault that he has nightmares, Vernon!" Petunia snapped even as Harry dissolved into frightened tears at the raised voices, burying his head into her hair. "Put it back," she repeated wearily, storming past Vernon on the way to the living room, hoping that the distraction of playing with his cousin would be enough to calm Harry quickly. She was just settling him down on the floor when a knock on the door echoed through the house, and it took less than a second for her to realise what day it was.

"I'll get it," she called to Vernon, but she could already hear him getting up.

"I can open the door in my own damn house," she heard him mutter, and before she'd made it even as far as the hallway, he threw the front door open. She turned the corner in time to see Vernon take in Severus's long robes and then turn a rather brilliant shade of red...a sure sign that he was pushing beyond anger and bordering on rage.

"Who are you?" he demanded, and Severus, not appearing intimidated in the least, merely frowned.

"Severus Snape," he answered frostily. "I..."

"He was a friend of Lily's," Petunia interrupted, worried about just how much Severus was about to say. She'd managed to keep his monthly visits a secret thus far; she wasn't about to give Vernon yet another reason to be angry.

"You're the one who brought that boy here," Vernon said, apparently recognising the name.

At Severus's impatient, "Yes," Vernon nodded and pointed toward the living room.

"Good. You can take him back, then. We don't want him."

"Vernon!" Petunia hissed. Hurrying forward to put herself between the two men, she sent a pleading look Severus's way. "Now's not really a good time," she snapped at him, all but pushing him away from the open door. He looked as though he were about to say something, but then nodded his head and disappeared on the spot, the *CRACK* of Apparition ringing through the half-open doorway.

"What was *he* doing here?" Vernon demanded.

"Probably just checking up on Harry," Petunia lied as she turned around, unconsciously pursing her lips at the sight of the cot lying in pieces on the floor. Steeling herself for what she was sure was going to be a rather long and bitter argument, she steered the conversation back to the matter at hand. "Vernon, you can't honestly want to put him in a *cupboard*?"

4 November 1982

Petunia was already half-expecting Severus to return the next day, but she still jumped at the force of the knock on the front door just minutes after Vernon left for work. Before she'd had a chance to even leave the kitchen, the door banged open. She hurried into the hallway to see Severus staring into the empty cupboard under the stairs. He turned to glare at her with a furious expression.

"Tell me that it was my mind fucking with me," he said, his lip curling into a sneer, and Petunia frowned at his tone and his words. "Tell me that I did not see your husband putting that boy's cot in the *cupboard*." Her eyes widened slightly, and she opened her mouth to respond, but he cut her off with an angry wave of his hand. "Don't. I know what I saw, Petunia. How could you..."

"I *didn't*. I made him move it back upstairs...which is where Harry is now, *sleeping*. As is Dudley," she said pointedly. "And who do you think you are, barging into *my* home and yelling at me as if I owe you *any* sort of explanation at all?!"

Severus only glared at her. "If that man every tries anything like that again, I swear to you, I will..."

"Don't you *dare* threaten my husband!" Petunia snapped, suddenly more furious than she could ever remember being before. "You wizards think you know everything. You think you're better than the rest of us. Especially you...you always have. But you don't know the first thing about what living in this house for the past year has been like. You come here and cast your...." She paused, waving her hand dismissively as she continued, "Your *spells*, and then you get to go back to your *castle*, job well done. Well I don't get to leave. Vernon doesn't get to leave."

She couldn't seem to stop herself from saying exactly what was on her mind, and truly, she didn't *want* to stop. Every bit of anger that she'd felt toward this man for the last thirteen years seemed to flood into her mind and spill from her in bitter, icy words even as angry tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, and she struggled to keep her tone quiet enough as to not wake the napping boys upstairs.

"Did you know that Harry has nightmares every night? That he wakes up screaming and crying *every night*? Sometimes more than once. He doesn't sleep. I don't sleep. Lately I'm so tired that I don't wake up until *Vernon* wakes me up, and so then I not only have Harry crying, but usually Dudley as well *and* Vernon's in a dreadful mood all day. Everyone in this house is exhausted and frustrated all the time."

"So yes, Vernon made a serious... error in judgment..." she ignored Severus's derisive snort at that phrase..."but I would be lying if I said that *any* solution, no matter how terrible, didn't sound tempting. Especially if it would mean having a full night of sleep, or getting through two days without arguing with Vernon over the boy."

The last of her words caught even her by surprise, and she finally dropped Severus's gaze, folding her arms self-consciously across her chest. Her anger seemed to deflate, leaving only the same weary frustration to which she was becoming rather accustomed. Wanting the conversation...if one could really call it that...to be over, she finished quietly, "I agreed to look after Harry, to watch out for him and keep him safe, and I'll continue to do that. I'm doing the best that I can, trying to handle the mess that *your world* made and then didn't want to deal with anymore. But I will not have you coming into my home and treating me as if I were one of your students, or a servant to be ordered about."

Severus was silent, and when she glanced up at him, he was still staring at her, his expression having lost most of its earlier fury, but not appearing apologetic or understanding in the least. Not that she'd expected him to be apologetic or understanding, really. After all, he never had before, in her experience.

As if on cue, Harry's wails filled the tense silence, echoing down the stairwell. Feeling a headache already coming on, Petunia sighed in exasperation and headed for the stairs, pausing only long enough to say over her shoulder, "Look, cast your spells or don't; I don't care. Just do whatever it is you're going to do, and then get out of my house."

Hurrying to Harry's room before his cries woke Dudley, she quickly lifted him out of his cot, rocking him back and forth as he clung to her, still trembling from his nightmare. He didn't calm down as quickly as he usually did...she suspected it had something to do with her own shaking hands and the angry tears she couldn't quite hold back anymore...but eventually he drifted off to sleep, his face buried in the crook of her neck and one hand knotted into her hair. She rested her cheek against his small head and willed herself to calm down; allowing herself to be upset would only end with one or both of the boys being upset as well, and she didn't think she could handle the temper tantrums and crying that would accompany that situation. Not today.

She was surprised to hear Severus's footsteps on the stairs a few moments later, and she turned her back to the open doorway and stared out the window as he walked by, headed for the last room at the end of the hall. He worked his way through the rooms silently...she heard her own bedroom door open, then Dudley's, and finally he stood in the doorway of Harry's room. She didn't say anything or turn around, hoping that he'd take the hint and just get on with what he was doing.

Instead, without stepping into the room, he quietly said, "There may be a way to deal with the boy's nightmares."

A bitter retort died on Petunia's lips, and she couldn't quite ignore the spark of hope that raced through her as she turned around. Severus stood leaning against the doorjamb, his gaze focused on the floor and his hair hanging around his face like a curtain, hiding his expression from view. Unable to find what seemed like a proper response, Petunia just waited for him to further elaborate.

"It may be possible to remove the memory of the..." He hesitated, and there was a catch in his voice as he continued, "...the attack from his mind. If that night is, as you implied, the cause of his nightmares, then they should stop entirely."

Petunia frowned, not quite liking the sound of what he was suggesting. "You want to alter his memory? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not if done by someone who is skilled in Legilimency," Severus answered, and she nearly rolled her eyes. As *if that* answered her question at all....

"And who, exactly, would that be?" she pressed.

"The Ministry employs many of them, but I doubt it would be safe to allow the boy's whereabouts to be known, and it's likely that not all of them could be trusted. I believe Dumbledore may be the best option, in this instance." He turned to look at her, seeming to consider his next words carefully before saying, "I'll approach the headmaster with the request tonight. If he agrees, I'll return for the boy tomorrow. It would only take a few hours at most."

Instinctively, Petunia tightened her arms around her nephew's small body. Though she'd never actually met Albus Dumbledore, just his letters had been enough to make her despise him, and the thought of sending Harry to a place where she couldn't follow to let that man mess with his memories did little to assuage her misgivings about the entire idea. But she was, quite frankly, desperate for a solution, any solution, and while she may not like Severus any more than she liked Dumbledore, she did trust him to not intentionally allow harm to come to Lily's son. After a long, silent moment, she slowly nodded.

"Fine," she said quietly. "You'll let me know when to expect you?"

"I'll send an owl," he answered. Normally she'd be concerned at the thought of an owl making an appearance at her home when Vernon might be around, but even Vernon couldn't possibly complain about *this*.

"I need to cast the wards in here," Severus added, looking at her expectantly. Petunia nodded, turning away again as he stepped into the room and began silently waving his wand this way and that. When he'd finished, he left without a word, and a few seconds passed before she heard the muffled sound of him Apparating away.

Part Two

Chapter 2 of 3

Vernon would be furious if he ever found out that she let them watch Severus cast spells. Well, Vernon would be furious if he ever learned that Severus had been using magic in the house at all—or that he'd even been in the house.

To Make an End

Part Two

17 November 1982

Petunia had nearly given up hope that Severus would return when he showed up on her doorstep, not appearing the least bit apologetic. She was about to complain at him...honestly, how could he just disappear without a word for two weeks?!...when he said, "The headmaster has... declined," bitterness in his tone.

Her mouth snapped shut, her earlier anger quickly buried under new fury and resentment.

"Declined?" she finally managed to ask, incredulity seeping into her tone. *'Declined?!'*

"He feels that the boy may need that memory one day, and that removing it by force, since he cannot hand it over himself, runs the risk of damaging it," Severus explained, sounding nearly as angry as she felt.

She couldn't help it; she laughed. There wasn't an ounce of humour in the sound. "Fine. Goodbye, Severus." She moved to close the door in his face, but without warning, he reached out a hand to stop her, pushing the door open again.

"Wait," he said, his voice almost so quiet that it she wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly at first. He stared at the half-opened door for a long moment before nodding, almost to himself, and then saying softly, "I'll do it." He looked up, finally, though he didn't quite meet her eyes. "I cannot take the boy back to Hogwarts, though; it'll have to happen here."

Petunia stared at him in confusion. "But... you said that it was only safe if someone skilled in that... thing..." She waved her hand in the air, trying to come up with the right word.

"Legilimency," he replied expressionlessly.

"Yes, that," she agreed. "You said someone who can *do that* had to do it."

"It isn't difficult." Stepping closer, he eyed her impatiently until she stepped aside and let him into the house. "There's very little risk involved; a mind as young as his is very... pliable."

:Petunia hesitated. She wanted Harry's nightmares to stop. No, she *needed* Harry's nightmares to stop. His inability to sleep was very quickly ruining all of their lives. But the only thing worse than a nightmare-plagued, crying toddler was a nightmare-plagued, crying, *brain-damaged* toddler, and the possible risks were almost too much for her to even consider.

"Isn't there anyone else?"

Snape rolled his eyes...which was, quite frankly, the attitude she was used to dealing with from him, so it was almost... comforting, in a way. At least some things never changed.

"You don't know how to..."

"Yes, I do," Severus interrupted, glaring at her. "I assure you, I would not do it if I believed there to be any risk."

"If you knew how, why didn't you just do it in the first..." she began to demand, but he cut her off with an angry wave of his hand.

"Do you *want* to never sleep again?" he snapped.

And as much as she didn't want to trust his words, as much as she wanted to scream at him for making her wait two weeks for him to return when apparently he could have just done this *Legilimency* thing himself in the first place, she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Something needed to change... and she didn't think Severus would ever be able to bring himself to permanently damage Lily's son.

"I'll get him," she finally decided, heading into the living room and scooping Harry up from the floor, where he and Dudley were staring at awe at some cartoon on the telly. He started to cry and try to get back down on the floor, but went silent and clutched onto her neck when he saw Severus standing in the hall.

"Put him in his chair," Severus said as he headed for the kitchen. Petunia slowly followed after him, apprehension in every movement as she slid Harry into his high chair. Severus pulled his own chair up close to Harry, then turned to glare at her as Harry reached his arms up, trying to get her to pick him up again.

"He can't be distracted by you." He jerked his head toward the other room. "I'll call you when we're finished." Petunia frowned, opening her mouth to protest, and he cut her off, saying, "If he pulls his attention away, it could have dire consequences. You cannot be in here. It should only take a few hours...I need to extract the original memory, and then the memories of the nightmares."

Reluctantly, she went into the other room, her ear all but pressed to the door as she waited for something, anything to happen. Harry cried for a moment after she left, but then fell silent, and the only sound in the house was the chattering animals on the telly and Dudley's occasional giggle.

And then, nearly twenty minutes after it had all started, she heard what sounded like a groan of pain in the kitchen.

Unable to stop herself, she swung the door open just enough that she could peek inside.

Harry still sat in his chair, his expression completely impassive. It was Severus, sitting with his head down on the table, that had made the noise. In shock, Petunia watched as his body jerked with sobs like she'd never seen from, well, anyone over the age of five, honestly, let alone a grown man. With what appeared to be an enormous amount of effort, he finally lifted his head, choking back more tears even as he again raised his wand toward Harry, touched it to the boy's head, stared at him intensely for a moment, and then pulled the wand away with some sort of silvery something attached, which he quickly deposited into a bowl on the table. His hands shook as he moved.

Not wanting him to see her watching, she gently closed the door, her mind reeling.

What on earth was he...

And then it hit her. Of course. If he were digging through Harry's memories, if he were seeing what Harry had seen....

Was the memory of Lily dying sitting in that bowl on the table? No, dozens...maybe hundreds of memories.

No wonder he hadn't wanted to do this. Of course he hadn't. She almost couldn't believe he'd agreed to it at all.

The thought of seeing something so terrible, over and over, was horrifying, and almost without thinking, she crossed the room and scooped Dudley up into her arms, ignoring his protests as she walked away from the telly. She relented a few moments later and let him scurry back to his show, but she didn't move away from the doorway until finally she heard Severus's chair scrape against the floor and Harry's babbling chatter begin anew.

Letting out a sigh of relief, she pushed the door open fully and stepped into the room. Severus was pouring the contents of the bowl into a glass container...a beaker, was really the only word she could think of to describe it...and he pointedly avoided her eyes as she drew closer.

"Did it work?" she asked finally, unsure of what else to say.

He gave a curt nod. "It appears so. No damage was done, at any rate. We won't know for sure until he gets through a few weeks without any nightmares. With any luck, they'll be gone for good."

A few *weeks* without nightmares sounded like pure heaven, in Petunia's mind. The thought that they may never occur again, or at least not any more than any other child had nightmares... she didn't even know how to put what she felt about *that* into words.

Harry stared up at her, his face breaking out into a tiny grin when she looked his way, and she couldn't help but return the smile...maybe, just maybe, her family would survive this after all.

Of course, none of this had come without cost, she realised as Severus moved to place the bowl back on the table, his hands still shaking violently.

She couldn't help but wonder if they'd just simply traded one boy's nightmares for another's.

"I'm going to make some tea," she decided. "Will you stay?"

He looked as though he were going to decline, but then he seemed to reconsider, and in the end, nodded and sank back into his chair. On impulse, she paused beside him on her way to the kettle, her hand finding its way onto his shoulder. He flinched slightly, but didn't pull away.

"Thank you," she told him quietly, wishing she knew what else to say. What else she *could* say. He remained silent, staring at the table, as she lightly squeezed his shoulder and then turned to go make the tea.

15 June 1983

"Sebbus!" Harry shrieked joyfully as Severus walked into the living room. As if sensing that Severus had been the source of his restless nights, the boy had developed a bit of a fascination with the dour man...one that Severus did not return, but seemed to tolerate well enough, for a few hours, anyway.

"Hi, Sebbus!" Dudley called out nearly at the same time at his cousin.

Severus muttered a very formal, "Good afternoon, Mr Dursley. Mr Potter," and nodded his head in the direction of the boys before walking up the stairs. Nearly falling over each other getting out of their seats, the two boys hurried up the stairs after him.

She should call them back, she knew. Vernon would be furious if he ever found out that she let them watch Severus cast spells. Well, Vernon would be furious if he ever learned that Severus had been using magic in the house at all...or that he'd even been in the house. But she did have such a hard time telling them no....

Finally, she settled for just rolling her eyes at all of them and returning to her magazine.

14 September 1984

Severus,

Harry's managed to turn Dudley's hair green. Vernon

is absolutely livid, and it won't wash out. I've even tried
dying it to no avail. Help?

Petunia Dursley

*

Harry and Dudley exchanged sheepish looks, both of them pointedly avoiding Severus's piercing gaze. Each time Dudley ducked his head down to stare at the floor, his bright green hair caught the light and Petunia fought the urge to flinch a little.

"What in Merlin's name did you..." Severus began to ask.

"He asked me to!" Harry interrupted, quailing as Severus's expression became even more furious. Beside him, Dudley nodded miserably. "I didn't know it would even work...."

"We didn't think my dad would get so mad," Dudley added.

"No, it doesn't appear *thinking* was high on your list of concerns today at all," Severus replied. Petunia almost told him to calm down a bit...really, they were only children...but Vernon's anger had scared even *her*. Both of the boys, *especially* Harry, needed to learn to control themselves, or life was quickly going to become very miserable for all of them.

With a wave of his wand, Severus reverted Dudley's hair back to its normal colour. Dudley almost managed to hide his disappointment.

"Go to your rooms. Both of you," Petunia ordered, and they quickly scurried up the stairs, probably eager to get out of her sight before she added, "And no games or toys while you're up there." She shook her head at the thundering sound of their retreat and turned to share a commiserating look with Severus, but was surprised to find him trying, and failing, to suppress an expression that could only be described as proud.

"Just what are you so happy about?" she asked, exasperated.

"Changing someone's hair colour is fifth-year magic," he said with the barest hint of a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "The boy lacks control and there isn't a single trace of good judgment in his head..."

"He's four," Petunia interjected.

"...but I wouldn't be surprised if he grew up to be a very powerful wizard."

Petunia wasn't sure whether to be proud or worried over that, so she settled for feeling relieved that Dudley's hair was blonde again.

"I was just about to make some tea before you arrived," she said, walking toward the kitchen. "Would you like to join me, or do you have to get back to the school?"

Severus seemed to consider the offer for a moment, then gave a half-hearted shrug and followed her into the kitchen.

5 July 1985

Severus,

I'm sorry, I know this is the third time in a month. I

have no idea what to do at this point.... I know this

is the wizarding equivalent of a temper tantrum, so

I'm tempted to just ignore him, but that's not exactly

an option right now. There's a turtle stuck to my

kitchen ceiling, and I can't imagine it's enjoying itself.

The man at Eeylops assures me that you'll get this around

3 p.m. If you do, I'd greatly appreciate if you could pop

over before six. Vernon will be home by then, and it's

doubtful that he'll be amused by this. He complains at

poor Harry enough as it is....

Also, I apparently own this owl now. (Why isn't there

an owl post office in Diagon Alley???) What am I even

supposed to feed an owl? Please tell me she doesn't need

to sleep in the house....

Petunia

*

Petunia,

Your husband is a git.

I'll be there by five. Will bring info on owls.

Severus

25 December 1985

Severus,

Thank you for Harry's and Dudley's presents.

They were thrilled... they've been playing with them all day.

They wrote you notes, which I've enclosed, along with the present they picked out for you. I should probably apologise now; Harry was very insistent on this particular colour, and I couldn't dissuade him. Sorry. If nothing else, hopefully it'll help keep you warm, assuming you'll actually wear it in public.

If you find yourself too bored up there, what with the children gone, I'm sure they wouldn't mind a visit...especially Harry. Though if I know you at all, I suspect you're enjoying your temporary reprieve from all those students....

Happy Christmas, Severus.

~ Petunia

22 August 1986

"Harry, your uncle's here!" Petunia called up the stairs. Harry tore down the steps, jumping over the last three to land on his feet before the front door.

"Hi, Uncle Severus," he said with a grin, looking proud of himself for his 'daring leap'. Severus just shook his head.

"You really think this will work?" Petunia asked worriedly, ruffling Harry's hair...he tugged away, sharing a pained look of annoyance with Dudley...before handing him his overnight bag.

Severus shrugged. "Perhaps. Some children need to be coached in controlling their magic."

"You didn't," Petunia pointed after Harry had darted off after Dudley. Laughter rang through the open doorway as they tumbled onto the grass outside. "Lily didn't."

"I *did*. I had my mother," Severus pointed out. "And Lily was exceedingly gifted at controlling her magic. A lot of Muggle-borns are. The common theory is that it's nature's way of keeping them alive and safe without magical parents."

Petunia began to protest that Harry really should have benefited from the same thing, then, but stopped when she realised that no matter how he was raised, Harry was born to a witch and a wizard.

"Of course," Severus continued, "the more likely reason is that Muggle-borns simply don't realise what they're capable of, and so their magic is relatively limited to the things they discover by accident. Harry already knows he's a wizard, and so naturally he *tries* to do magic more often, creating more opportunity for problems."

Rather liking this theory better, Petunia nodded in agreement.

"He knows not to mention anything to other children at school?"

"Of course. We've talked about that. There's a lot of eye-rolling whenever I bring the subject up these days. I think they're both tired of hearing it."

Severus smirked. "And Vernon...?"

"Thinks both of them will be with the Polkiss family for the weekend, and is very excited at the idea of a quiet house for a couple days." She shook her head, a bemused expression flitting across her face.

It had occurred to Severus more than once over the last couple years that if Vernon Dursley ever figured out all the secrets his wife kept from him, it'd likely be the end of their marriage entirely, but he couldn't really see that it was any of his business.

"All right, then. Harry," Severus called out the open door, "time to go."

Harry excitedly rushed inside, saying a quick, "Bye, Aunt Petunia," and grumbling when she enveloped him in a tight hug before nudging him toward Severus. Gripping his uncle's hand, he grinned madly before disappearing right before her eyes.

"Mummy," Dudley said, leaning into her side, his arms wrapped around her waist, "why can't I go?"

"Because Severus isn't your uncle, darling," she explained gently, sighing at the sad expression on his face. "Come on, let's get some ice cream, and then we'll start packing your things to go to Piers's house."

"I wish I could do magic," Dudley said dejectedly. Something inside her heart twinged painfully, and in an instant, Petunia tugged her son back against her, kneeling down so that she could look into his eyes.

"Don't," she said emphatically, praying that he'd listen. "It's not for everyone, and you're just perfect without it." At Dudley's sceptical expression, she continued, "Let's have that ice cream, and then I want to tell you a story."

"About what?" Dudley asked.

"About me," she answered, giving him a weak smile. "Me and my sister."

11 - 13 March 1988

Petunia,

Harry contacted me by Floo today to ask when I would next be coming to tea. I cannot have children bothering me during my classes. What is he even doing with access to the Floo powder? I thought we agreed that it was only for emergencies? If anyone figures out I permanently connected a Muggle Floo to the network, there'll be hell to pay. Please do something with the boy.

He's as rebellious as his father...I shudder to think what he'll be like once he gets to Hogwarts.

~Severus

*

Dear Severus,

You know how stubborn and resourceful little boys can be.

I didn't give him the Floo powder, he found it. That Malfoy child you let him play with showed him how to use it, I might add.

Am I to assume from your apparent crankiness that Slytherin lost the match yesterday?

Whatever the reason, at least try to be nice, or you won't be invited to tea anymore.

~Petunia

*

Are you telling me that I might get to spend my one free afternoon a week doing something that doesn't involve children? I fail to see the incentive in being 'nice'.

And I'm not cranky, *thank you very much*.

*

So I shouldn't expect you on Wednesday then?

*

Don't be ridiculous. It's the only time I get out of this castle. And there are significantly fewer children at your house than at Hogwarts. I'll be there on Wednesday, invitation or no invitation.

Besides, I wouldn't want to disappoint the boy.

*

He does have a name, you know. And your owl looked hungry...I gave it chicken, I hope that's all right.

*

Half a step away from teaching my owl cannibalism is what it is. I cannot see how teaching your child to use Floo powder is worse.

*

You're hopeless. And also the only one complaining about Harry's Flooing (is that even a word?) abilities.

*

Point noted.

(And no, it's not a word.)

Tell Harry I'll see him Wednesday. And for Merlin's sake, find a better place to hide the Floo powder!

3 November 1989

Petunia glanced up at the sound of the door opening, surprised to see Severus standing in the doorway.

"Harry," he said in way of explanation, sitting down beside her when she shifted over to make room.

She let out a frustrated sigh. "I should probably go reclaim my Floo powder."

He held up a hand for her to wait, reaching into his pocket and quickly producing the small tin that she'd thought she'd so carefully hidden. Petunia offered him a weak smile as he handed it to her, quickly looking away. She knew she must look terrible; she'd been crying half the day.

"Are you all right?" Severus asked after a long, silent moment passed.

"No," she answered truthfully. "I will be, but... no."

Severus shifted uncomfortably in his seat...uncharacteristic of him, Petunia thought, but then, he probably wasn't confronted with crying women on a regular basis. Crying teenagers, maybe, but it hardly seemed like the same thing. After all, teenagers generally didn't have to deal with their husbands leaving them.

"When is he moving out?" he finally asked, trying for what she could only assume was 'gentle', but coming across as 'irritated' more than anything else. This wasn't really a surprise; he'd always hated Vernon.

Petunia sniffled. "He already has. Apparently he's been planning this for a while." She dabbed again at her eyes with her wrinkled handkerchief, a broken-sounding laugh escaping her. "You know, I'm hurt and angry...and sad, obviously...but more than anything, I'm almost... *relieved*." She sighed, looking down at her hands. "That's terrible, isn't it?"

"Hardly," Severus said with a snort. She turned to frown at him in surprise. "The man's a tyrant."

"He's not a *tyrant*," she said, defending Vernon out of habit. "He's just..." she paused, struggling to find the right words, "very stubborn. Set in his ways." When Severus rolled his eyes, she ignored him.

"Shouldn't you be teaching right now?" she asked, changing the subject.

"I cancelled my classes for the rest of the day," he replied. "I doubt the students will complain."

Petunia smirked half-heartedly. "At least someone is getting something good out of all this." With a sigh, she admitted, "I don't know how to do this. This *being alone* thing. I never have, you know. I've always had my parents or Lily or Vernon. It's... terrifying."

"You have Harry and Dudley," Severus pointed out, speaking more sensibly than she really was inclined to tolerate just now. "You're not alone."

"They're children. It's not the same and you know it," she said quietly.

"You're not alone, Petunia," he repeated pointedly, looking everywhere but at her.

30 July 1991

Harry sneaked a peek out the back window and saw Aunt Petunia busily pulling weeds from a flowerbed. Dudley was upstairs playing on the computer. It seemed like the perfect time.

Tiptoeing into his aunt's bedroom, he crept to the chest of drawers and tugged experimentally on the one drawer that sported a lock. Frowning and checking over his shoulder one more time, he placed his hand over the lock and whispered the spell Draco had taught him. "*Alohamora*!"

It took three tries, but then he heard the lock click open, and he quickly opened the drawer and pulled out the small jar of Floo powder. Closing the drawer carefully so as not to make any noise, he hurried back downstairs and threw a small pinch of the powder into the fireplace. "Malfoy manor," he said softly. A moment later Draco's dad's head appeared.

"Harry," Mr Malfoy said in greeting. "I take it you're looking for Draco."

"Yes, sir," he answered respectfully...Mr Malfoy liked when people treated him with respect, and while Harry wasn't usually very adept at showing respect to adults, he was just a little bit afraid of his friend's father. Uncle Severus had told him that fear of Lucius Malfoy was a sign of intelligence, and Harry liked when Uncle Severus called him intelligent. It meant more than when Aunt Petunia did it because she was kind of like his mum, and so it didn't really count when *she* said it. Everyone knew mums couldn't be trusted to tell the truth about things like that; she was always saying that Dudley was handsome and intelligent, too, and Harry couldn't help but feel that she only really believed that because Dudley was her son.

"Is that what I think it is?" Mr Malfoy asked, looking toward Harry's hand, not moving to get Draco.

"Yes, sir," Harry answered again, proudly holding up his Hogwarts letter. "It came this morning."

"And your aunt, what did she have to say about that?" he asked, looking somehow amused in that way he only ever did when talking about Harry's family. Draco said it was because Harry's family was made up of Muggles and Muggles weren't as good as wizards, and even though he had to agree when it came to *most* Muggles, he did love Aunt Petunia...even if he'd never say as much to Draco because boys weren't supposed to talk about love.

"She was excited," he answered, which wasn't quite true. She'd tried to *act* excited, but her eyes had been sad, and she'd spent most of the day outside. He'd even seen her crying, and he'd felt awful... but he *had* to go to Hogwarts. He was going to be a wizard, just like Uncle Severus, just like his real parents. Aunt Petunia might be sad, but he was certain that she was nowhere near as sad as he'd be if he had to go to Smeltings with Dudley.

"Good. At least she understands what's best for a young wizard," Mr Malfoy said with an approving nod, and Harry grinned. "Hold on." The head disappeared from the flames, and then a moment later Draco's appeared in its place.

"Look, I got my letter," Harry told him, holding it out. Draco didn't look impressed.

"Yeah, well, I got mine months ago," he said with a shrug. "We knew you'd get one anyway...you've been doing magic *foages*."

Harry tucked the letter into his pocket. "You're still going shopping for school things with me and Uncle Severus, right?"

"Maybe. Mum said she's not sure she wants me going if your aunt's going to be there." Draco wrinkled his nose. "Does she have to come?"

Harry shrugged again. "I think so. She said she wants to, anyway, and Uncle Severus got annoyed with me when I said she shouldn't go because it'd be weird for a Muggle to shop in Diagon Alley."

"Maybe Dad can talk to him.... I'll see what I can do," Draco said imperiously. Just then the sound of the back door opening met Harry's ears, and he waved Draco away.

"Okay, fine. I've got to go. Bye!" The green flames died down, then disappeared just as Aunt Petunia came into the living room. She narrowed her eyes at Harry, then looked at the fireplace, then back again. Holding out her hand, she waited expectantly until he reluctantly moved his hand from behind his back and handed her the small jar of Floo powder.

"I just wanted to tell Draco I got my letter," he whined when she looked like she might yell at him. "I can't call him to tell him things like Dad can with his friends...."

She pursed her lips and was silent for a long moment, and he looked down at the floor, focusing on the toes of his shoes.

"Just ask next time, okay?" she replied with a resigned sigh, tightening the lid on the little jar and depositing it into her pocket. "And stay out of my bedroom, or I'm taking your computer away for a month."

"Okay," he mumbled, trying to look contrite. Really, he didn't care...at Hogwarts he wouldn't be able to use his computer anyway. But he didn't want her to think up any other punishment for him, so he just said, "Can I go?"

"Yes, but stay inside. It's going to rain soon."

He grinned and darted up the stairs. Shaking her head in bemusement at the energy contained inside a nearly eleven-year-old boy, she headed for the kitchen, trying not to think about how Harry would be leaving her soon. The weight of the jar in her pocket was a constant reminder, though, and finally she hid it away again...this time in a high kitchen cupboard, where, with any luck, Harry wouldn't find it for a few weeks.

1 September 1991

"SLYTHERIN!" the hat yelled. Harry leapt up from the stool, barely allowing time for the hat to be plucked off of his head, and nearly ran to the empty seat between Draco and Greg.

Only once he was in his seat did he let himself crane his neck so that he could look over the heads of the other students to meet Uncle Severus's eyes. No, Professor Snape's eyes. He had to get used to thinking of him that way, at least while at school. *Professor Snape* nodded at him in approval, then turned his attention back to the Sorting.

Harry grinned, letting his eyes drift over the others seated at the head table. He knew who most of them were; Uncle *Professor Snape* had told him about them all at one point or another. So he knew it was Albus Dumbledore who was staring at him, his expression unreadable, but disconcerting. Lowering his head back down to hide himself from sight behind the dozens of other students, he shot a confused look at Draco.

"My dad says Dumbledore's just a barmy old fool. Ignore him," Draco said with a shrug. Feeling mildly reassured, Harry turned back to the happenings at the front of the room just in time to see the Weasley boy that Draco had warned him about settling nervously down onto the stool.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat shouted almost immediately.

"Surprise, surprise," Draco muttered. Harry muffled a laugh with his hand.

4 September 1991

"Severus?" Petunia only just stopped herself from leaning out the door to see if Harry was lurking somewhere behind him, surprise evident in her expression. "Is everything all right?"

"It's Wednesday," he said, then frowned and started to turn away. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"No!" she interrupted, suddenly understanding. "No, I was just... I forgot what day it was," she finished lamely, knowing he could hear the lie in her words but not sure what else she could say. "Come in."

He hesitated on the step, and she pushed the door open a few more inches. "Please," she added softly. "It won't be a proper Wednesday without stories of teenage idiocy to laugh over."

Offering her something that was probably supposed to be a smile, but looked strained and awkward from general misuse, Severus nodded and stepped inside.

25 June 1993

"Have you lost your mind?!"

Lucius rolled his eyes, apparently bored in the face of Severus's outrage. "Stop pacing; you're ruining the pile of the rug. Narcissa just had it imported last week."

Severus purposely ground his heel into the carpet before resuming his pacing.

Shaking his head, Lucius just continued in a placating tone, "Be reasonable. The young Dark Lord will eventually figure out how to achieve the power his older self did. And who better to guide him, at this tender age, than the person who orchestrated his resurrection?" He sipped at his drink, and was entirely caught by surprise when the glass was forcefully slapped from his hand, sending brandy and shattered glass flying. Irritation breaking through the calm exterior, he waved his wand and Vanished the mess.

"How long do you expect that he'll be willing to quietly remain here?" Severus asked through gritted teeth. "He'll grow up to be even worse than before!"

Lucius just smirked. "Not all of us were unhappy with the way things were *before*, my friend." He stood up, reaching out a hand to rest reassuringly on Severus's arm. Severus jerked away, his expression turning even more furious.

"What if someone else brings the Dark Lord...the original one...back? Do you really want to be in the middle of a power struggle between the most powerful wizard alive and *himself*?"

"Well, I was only trying to help restore him to power in any way I could, wasn't I?" Lucius said, adopting an innocent tone, then laughing. "You worry too much, Severus. This is a *good thing*."

"And what about Harry?" he snapped. "You're sentencing him to death. *Harry*. The boy who's been Draco's best friend since they were six!" Just the thought made him even angrier, and it was all he could do to keep from hexing his long-time friend. Only the thought that young Tom Riddle was somewhere in the manor kept him from making too much of a commotion; he didn't want to be anywhere near the freakish child who was already insisting that everyone call him *Lord Voldemort*.

"The prophecy applied to the older Dark Lord," Lucius said dismissively. "And I've no intention of allowing *him* to come back...he was entirely too focused on Potter by the end. *This* Dark Lord is just a boy, barely older than Potter himself. He has no argument with a child, especially if that child will swear loyalty to him, just as any respectable Slytherin should."

Severus's glare only intensified. "Harry will do no such thing. I won't willingly let you lead him down that path." He paced back and forth, his mind reeling.

Lucius shook his head, a bemused expression flitting across his face. "Potter would do well in our Lord's army...a fact of which, I'm sure, you are well aware. Your concern is less for him than it is for his Muggle aunt and disgraceful cousin. Honestly, Severus, I'm rather fond of you, but you must admit that your taste in women has always left something to be desired."

At that, Severus finally lost his temper. In an instant he was across the room, his wand pressed against Lucius's neck. "Stay away from Harry Potter," he said menacingly, "or I promise you, Lucius, I will make sure you regret it." With that, he stormed out of the manor.

Lucius rolled his eyes and poured himself another drink.

12 August 1993

"I wish Dudley could come home before I leave for school," Harry grumbled, leaning with his elbows on the windowsill, staring forlornly at the group of boys riding past on their bicycles.

Petunia sighed. "So do I, dear," she replied, but the truth was, she didn't. Dudley was safer where he was. If she'd had her choice, both boys, along with herself, would be elsewhere right now. With Sirius Black on the run, nowhere felt safe. She'd sent Dudley to his father's, where...as he'd very miserably informed her the night before...he was suffering through a visit from Marge. Petunia couldn't stand Marge, so she certainly didn't envy Dudley his relative freedom, despite having been trapped inside the house with a very moody and unhappy Harry for the last week.

Severus had shown up in the middle of the night, practically shaking with rage at Sirius's escape...Petunia certainly understood that; Severus had told her what Sirius had done to Lily and her husband. What he'd *caused*. She couldn't help but hate Sirius, though she suspected Severus hated him even more.

Severus's sources said that Sirius may be heading to Hogwarts, so the idea of sending Harry there before school was back in session had been discarded quickly. Instead, Severus had cast spells and charms to protect the house from anyone but her, Harry, Dudley and himself from entering, forced Portkeys of questionable legality into her hands with strict instructions to always have one in her pocket and make sure Harry carried one, practically ordered her to send Dudley to Vernon's house, and then stormed out, only to return each night to make sure that no one was lurking around. Petunia wasn't honestly sure whether Severus was more interested in protecting her and Harry, or recapturing Sirius Black.

"Why don't you go play on your computer for a while?" she suggested. Harry slumped his shoulders forward and sighed, obviously disinterested. "It's better than just staring out the window all day...."

"I'll just listen to my new CD. *Again*," he muttered, trudging across the room and up the stairs. She shook her head and sighed, turning back to her most recent dilemma...how to get the milk inside. She'd slipped just an arm out the door to put out the milk bottles early in the morning, but when she'd gone to retrieve the new milk from the step, she'd found a stray dog sleeping between it and the door. She'd waited a little while, hoping he'd leave, but so far he hadn't shown any signs of even being *awake*, let alone having any intentions of going away. It had been nearly an hour now, and it was a hot day; she had to do something soon, or the milk would spoil. Calling someone to come deal with the dog may not work with all the protection spells that had been cast on the house.

Finally, tired of waiting for the dog to leave on his own, she got a broom and opened the door a crack, nudging the dog with the broom handle. "Go on, get out of here," she commanded, turning the broom to try to push the dog off the step with the wider end. The dog raised its head and stared at her dispassionately, but didn't budge.

With a groan of frustration, she stepped closer, placing one foot outside the door and pushing harder. "Shoo!"

More staring.

Pursing her lips in irritation, she moved closer again and swatted at the dog with the broom. "Just move! You can come back in a minute," she offered, feeling ridiculous. She was talking to a *dog*, of all things. But at least if she could get him to get out of the way, she could get her milk and then talk Severus into chasing him off later.

She again swatted at the dog with the broom, trying to coax him into moving, and was about to yell at him to please ~~just~~ *get up already*, but the words turned into a shout of surprise as the dog suddenly leapt up and jumped against her, knocking her backward through the door. She threw her hands up to protect her face, sure she was about to be bitten, but the dog just jumped over her sprawled legs and landed inside the house. She scrambled to stand up, but froze in horror as the dog shifted and changed, hands sprouting where paws had been, hair sagging away and becoming clothes, until Sirius Black himself was standing just feet away from her. He was thinner than she remembered, and seemed to have aged more years than he really should have, but she'd have recognised him in an instant even if his picture hadn't been all over the telly just days ago.

"You always were the sort to hit a dog," he growled out, his voice hoarse and raspy, and she jerked out of her shock, bringing her quickly to her feet.

She nearly yelled for Harry to run, but stopped herself, knowing it would only alert Sirius to Harry's whereabouts faster. He'd gone to listen to his music; she couldn't hear it, so he was undoubtedly wearing his headphones. Many occurrences of having to go into his room and actually remove his headphones in order to get his attention had taught her that even shouting from his *doorway* was usually pointless; he wouldn't hear her.

"What do you want?" she asked instead, trying to sound less terrified than she felt and failing. "You don't have any business being here. Get out of my house."

"Where's Harry?" he asked, ignoring her words. He looked around as if expecting to see the boy standing there, and the wild, mad look in his eyes made a shiver of fear run up Petunia's spine.

Casting around for the right thing to say, she finally answered, "Hogwarts, where he's safe from *you*."

He let out a low growl, sounding like the dog he'd been just a moment ago, drawing close enough to her that she stumbled backwards, pressed against the wall. Up close, he smelled of filth and old sweat. She grimaced. "I just saw him in the window. Don't *lie* to me. Where is he?" When she only stared at him, defiantly silent despite her terror, he took a step back and held his hands out to his sides. "Petunia, I just want to see my godson. It's my job to protect him. Tell me, or I'll just find him myself."

"Protect him like you protected his parents?" she ground out, trying to stall for time. Before she had a moment to react, Sirius leapt at her, pulling a long knife out of his pocket and pressing it threateningly against her throat.

"Don't you *dare*!" he shouted as she froze in place, tears rolling down her cheeks. "You know *nothing*, Petunia! *Nothing*. I would never have hurt them. *Never!*"

With a gasping sob, she whispered, "Please... please just go. Harry's fine here. Please..." She never finished the sentence. A door opened upstairs, and Sirius's head spun around, all of his attention now focused on the sound. A second later, Harry wandered around the corner, dropping his CD player to the ground when he saw what was going on at the bottom of the stairs.

"Go!" Petunia screamed at him, sending him running down the hall. Sirius started up the stairs, and Petunia dashed after him and grabbed his ankle, trying to pull him back, to allow time for Harry to escape. Sirius kicked backwards, knocking her down to the bottom of the steps, and her head connected painfully with the railing. She struggled to

her feet, ignoring the pain radiating from the side of her head, not allowing herself to think about the blood that seemed to instantly run down through her hair and onto her shirt. A wave of dizziness made the room spin, and she forced herself another step closer to the stairs before collapsing onto the bottom step.

The Portkey, she reminded herself, shaking her head to try to regain her focus and finding herself rewarded with only more pain. Reaching into her pocket, she tightened her grip around the little marble Severus had given her. He'd said to hold it for fifteen seconds...a precaution put in place after Harry accidentally Portkeyed himself to the Hogwarts dungeons while getting dressed two days go. Fifteen seconds seemed like an eternity now, and her stomach turned dangerously as she heard Sirius's footsteps thunder back down the hallway, coming her way.

"Where did he..." he began to say, but then stopped when he saw her, muttering an irritated, *Fuck*," as he came down the steps. She scrambled away from him, mentally counting. Only a few more seconds...

"Would you stop? I just want to..." he said, reaching for her, then narrowed his eyes and grabbed her wrist, pulling her hand out of her pocket and prying her fingers away from the marble. It dropped to the floor and rolled away, and Petunia choked back an angry sob. Out of options, she struggled to pull her arm out of his grasp.

"Calm down! I'm just trying to see," he demanded, reaching toward her head with the hand still loosely holding the knife.

"NO!" she screamed, kicking wildly until she felt her foot make contact with his shin. He groaned in pain, releasing her arm, and she twisted around, reaching desperately for the marble. She'd nearly closed her hand around it when she heard the most beautiful, wonderful sound she'd ever heard in her life...the *CRACK* of Apparition. She looked up to find Severus standing in her living room.

After taking one look at her, lying on the blood-splattered floor, Severus raised his wand and pointed it at Sirius.

"*Snivellus*! " Sirius bit out, but at the sight of the wand pointed in his direction, he held up his knife. Without warning, a bolt of green light soared over Petunia's head, and Sirius silently fell to the ground, collapsing across her legs, the knife clattering harmlessly to the floor.

Petunia screamed, scrambling against the body that pinned her down, and then Severus was at her side, shoving Sirius away and helping her sit up. He pointed his wand at the floor, and white mist flowed out of it, forming into what looked like a small animal made of mist. "Shacklebolt, I have Sirius Black. Number Four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging," he said to it, waving it away. It bounded through the closed door, and Petunia blinked in surprise, her heart still racing.

Severus turned his attention to the cut on her head, prodding at it and then lifting his wand. A tingling sensation ran over her skin. "Aurors will be here in a moment; I have to wait for them. Harry will be safe at the school for now," he told her. She nodded, willing her hands to stop shaking.

"Is *he*... dead?" she finally asked, pointedly refusing to look at Sirius.

"Yes," Severus answered, his voice tight and tense.

Petunia shuddered. Unsure what else to say, she just added, "Was that thing a squirrel?"

"It was a message," he replied. "Hold still."

Forcing herself to stop moving while Severus healed her throbbing head, she just closed her eyes.

"Are messages always squirrels?"

Severus paused in his movements, but when she opened her eyes to look at him, he quickly turned away, focusing back on his wand. She didn't think he was going to answer, but after a moment, he said quietly, "Only recently."

Part Three

Chapter 3 of 3

"Wherever Harry Potter is, Severus seems to have hidden him away entirely and without any outside help. No one knows where they are."

To Make an End

Part Three

24 June 1995

"Severus, calm down!" Albus demanded, getting up from his seat as Severus paced back and forth before his desk.

"The boy could have been killed, Albus. Barty Crouch, right here in the school all year, and you didn't even notice?!"

"Nor did you," Albus pointed out quietly, restraining the anger he barely managed to keep from seeping into his tone. "Harry is alive..."

"No thanks to you!" Severus insisted, stopping his pacing to glare menacingly. "Four children dead in as many years, a reincarnated Dark Lord running around Britain with the stolen life-force of a girl left in your charge.... Hogwarts is too vulnerable, Albus. Harry shouldn't be here. Surely there is a safer place to teach him what he needs to know to get through his NEWTs."

Albus considered his next words carefully. *Perhaps*, he thought, *it's time Severus knew the truth*.

"It's not quite so simple as all that," he finally answered, sinking back into his seat and gesturing for Severus to take the chair opposite him. Only once the other man was seated did he continue. "There was a prophecy..."

"Yes, yes, I'm well aware," Severus said impatiently. "Obviously."

"No, you're not," Albus snapped, taking a moment to regain his calm before going on. "You didn't hear the entire prophecy. No one but myself, in fact, is aware of what else

was said. But it's time you knew." He leaned forward over the desk.

Despite his irritation, Snape silently nodded, waiting to hear what Albus had to say.

25 June 1995

The sound of the front door banging open made her nearly leap out of bed. Footsteps thudded up the stairs, and in a panic, Petunia reached for the phone on the bedside table.

"Aunt Petunia!" Harry's voice called from the hallway, sounding frantic, and she dropped the phone back into its cradle and bolted out of bed, throwing the door open to find Harry and Severus standing before her.

"What..." she started to ask, then glanced back the alarm clock. What on earth were they doing here at two in the morning?

"Go wake your cousin," Severus said, nearly shoving Harry out of the room. Petunia blinked in surprise, turning a confused and terrified look on the man standing before her.

"Get dressed. We must hurry," he ordered. He turned to walk away from the doorway, but she grabbed his arm to stop him.

"What's going on?!"

"Harry's in danger," he said, spinning back around so quickly that she lost her grip on his arm. "On the word of a known fraud, Dumbledore is sending your nephew off to die."

Petunia's eyes widened in shock, even as her brain scrambled to process the insanity she'd just heard. "But... but he's fourteen," she protested numbly. "He can't get involved in the war. What is Dumbledore..."

"He's not being sent to war; he's being sent to *die*, like a sacrificial lamb," Severus interrupted, bitterness and anger radiating from his tone. "We don't have much time. Albus will realise I've left and taken the boy. Hurry," he insisted again.

Petunia stared at him in shock for the briefest of moments, then nodded and ducked back into her room, pushing the door shut behind her.

"What about Vernon?" she called through the door as she pulled her nightgown over her head. "I can't just take Dudley away from his father without..."

"There's *no time*," Severus nearly shouted.

"I'm going with you and Harry," Dudley's voice echoed through the wall. "I'm not living with Dad. I want to go with you!"

"Of course you're going with us," Petunia answered distractedly.

Severus's voice rang out again a moment later. "Dress warmly and comfortably!"

"Should I be packing our things, or..." Harry asked from somewhere in the hallway, and Petunia listened in horror, though not quite surprise, as Severus told him to pack nothing; everything must be left behind. Finally pulling on the last of her clothing, Petunia threw the door open and then leaned on the doorjamb as she tugged her shoes onto her feet.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Out of the country. After that, I don't know," Severus answered. His words did little to reassure her.

Almost afraid to hear the answer, but wanting to know, she pressed on, "For how long?"

"Until the war ends," he answered softly. "I'm not sure. Years. Maybe forever, if the rumours of the Dark Lord's new-found immortality are to be trusted."

Petunia stared at him in shock, only looking away when Harry and Dudley came barrelling out of Dudley's room.

"We're ready," Harry said, pulling out his wand. Petunia reached out and snatched it away from him.

"No. Wait. This is... we can't just *disappear*!" she insisted, looking pleadingly at Severus.

"Then Harry will die," he snapped.

A feeling like an icy fist clenching around her heart raced through her at those words, and with a trembling hand, she gave Harry his wand. "Okay." She nodded as it to reassure herself. "Okay, let's..."

A thud echoed from downstairs, and the very walls seemed to ripple.

"Hands, now," Severus demanded. Harry clutched Dudley's hand tightly in his in an instant, locking his other hand around Severus's wrist. Not allowing herself to hesitate, Petunia clutched onto her son's arm as Severus tightly squeezed her other hand in his. For a horrible moment it felt like the world had turned upside down, and then the very air seemed to press in on her as the four of them disappeared from the hallway.

Less than a minute later, Albus Dumbledore broke through the wards protecting the house. Still clutched in his fist was the note he'd found on Severus's desk just moments earlier.

I won't allow him to become your pawn, Albus.

I speak from experience when I say that no good

can come of such a thing.

Two of the beds upstairs were unmade, and clothes were strewn around the otherwise immaculate bedrooms. No one was in the house.

With anger burning in his eyes, Albus Dumbledore Apparated away from Privet Drive.

26 June 1995

Harry and Dudley had fallen asleep nearly an hour ago, curled together in the room's only bed. Petunia sat on the small sofa, watching Severus as he hovered near the window, his eyes darting here and there around the busy street below. It was only just beginning to get dark, but none of them had slept much the night before, and they'd been moving from place to place all day.

"We left Madge," she suddenly realised, more panicked at the thought than she was inclined to admit.

"She'll be fine. Owls are self-sufficient," Severus answered reasonably. She frowned.

Petunia had to agree that Madge was fairly capable of taking care of herself, but still... the thought that the poor bird would be waiting in the tree near her bedroom window for a family that wasn't coming back nearly broke her heart. Somehow, she found herself missing that little owl more than she missed the house itself.

"Are we safe here?" she asked quietly, changing the subject to get her mind off of the owl.

"For tonight," he answered after a moment. "We'll need to be on our way again by morning."

"This prophecy..." she asked reluctantly, her voice dropping nearly to a whisper so as not to wake the boys, "is there any chance that it's true?"

"No," Severus answered without hesitation. "I wouldn't trust Sybill to accurately predict the *weather*."

Petunia sighed and looking around. Both Harry and Dudley had argued that they should be allowed their own rooms, but Petunia hadn't much liked the idea of them being out of sight, and Severus had agreed. Unfortunately, that didn't leave many other places to sleep in the tiny room. She wondered if perhaps she could squeeze into the bed beside Dudley and manage to not get shoved out over the course of the night. She knew he tended to toss and turn in his sleep.

As if hearing her thoughts, without even turning around, Severus said suddenly, "Take the sofa. I won't be sleeping."

"But you've been up for as long as we have," she protested. "You can't just..."

"I'm a Potions master," he interrupted, a hint of amusement in his voice. "I didn't come empty-handed. I can stay awake on Pepper-up for days." Finally turning away from the window, he waved his wand at his cloak where it lay draped over the end of the bed. It seemed to stretch and grow, and a few moments later it had turned itself into a blanket. He picked it up and carried it over to the sofa, handing it to her. "Get some rest."

Petunia didn't know what 'Pepper-up' was, but Severus sounded sure of himself, so she didn't push the matter. Toeing off her shoes and leaving them beside the sofa, she pulled her knees up close to her chest, curling up on her side. Tugging the blanket around her, she watched as Severus made his way back to the window, standing protectively between her family and whatever danger might lie outside the heavily-warded room.

"Thank you," she said softly. "For everything."

He glanced over his shoulder, offering her a grim smile before turning away again. Her gaze didn't leave him until she drifted off to sleep.

14 November 1997

"Arthur's dead." Minerva nearly collapsed with exhaustion onto the worn mattress that had served as the only bed for five different people for two weeks now. She delivered the day's bad news without expression or emotion; she'd long ago stopped allowing herself to cry for every lost life, if only because after a while, she'd never have been able to stop crying. Of all the things that had happened, Minerva's quiet acceptance of loss seemed to make Albus's heart ache the most.

"Molly?" he asked quietly.

"She's a wreck. Of course. Who can blame her, with half her family gone inside of two years?"

He'd been wrong; indifference made his heart ache, but hearing the bitter despondency that seeped into Minerva's tone with those words hurt infinitely worse.

Across the room, seated at the scarred table, Andromeda Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt continued their conversation in angry whispers. Minerva seemed to try to listen to what they were saying for a moment, then shook her head and turned onto her side. Her own voice dropped to a whisper as well as she asked, "I take it that the tip we received..."

"Came to nothing," Albus finished for her. "Wherever Harry Potter is, Severus seems to have hidden him away entirely and without any outside help. No one knows where they are."

With a sigh, Minerva twisted around onto her back, closing her eyes. Albus leaned his head back against the wall, willing himself to rest for at least a few minutes, but was dragged to consciousness by a barely audible, "This is all my fault."

Frowning and opening his eyes, he turned to look down at his long-time friend, shaking his head. "No, Minerva. Arthur's been reckless ever since they lost Ginny. It was only a matter of..."

"No, not..." she interrupted, her gaze focused on the ceiling, but then shook her head as her words trailed off, blinking back the first tears he'd seen her cry in nearly a year.

"We cannot waste time on regrets, my dear," he said softly, reaching out to squeeze her hand in his. "There are a thousand things each of us would do differently if we could, and there's no way of knowing whether it would have made any difference. Torturing yourself by second-guessing things that cannot be changed is pointless. Try to get some rest."

She nodded against her pillow, tugging her hand away and turning to face the wall. He sat beside her for a long time, but knew from the pattern of her breathing that she never actually fell asleep.

2 May 1998

Normally Petunia was the first one awake in the mornings, and she didn't even notice anyone else as she made her way through the dark kitchen and began filling the tea kettle. She nearly leapt out of her skin in fright when a paper crinkled behind her. Spinning around, she sighed and shook her head as she caught sight of Severus sitting at the table.

"You're up early," she said, trying to mask her fear in the mundane. Even after all these years, she still felt as though she were constantly jumping at shadows and looking over her shoulder.

Severus didn't answer for a long moment, and she shut off the tap and left the tea kettle on the counter in order to see why the newspaper he was holding seemed to have captured his attention so thoroughly.

At a glance, she could see it was a wizarding paper. The moving picture on the front caught her eye. She didn't know where Severus got them, and never asked, but once a week or so, a paper would be delivered by a ratty-looking old barn owl. For the longest time it had been only *The Daily Prophet*, but then the *Prophet* had been taken over by the Death Eaters, and now the papers came from all over the world.

Severus stared blankly at the front page, his expression terrifyingly grim, but when she reached out to take the paper from his hand, he quickly folded it and placed it on his lap.

"What is it?" she asked, her heart racing.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, seeming to consider his words. Finally he answered, "The war's over. Voldemort's won."

Stunned, Petunia sank into the chair beside him, unsure what to say. Holding out her hand expectantly, she waited until he finally relented and pushed the paper across

the table toward her. Even though it was the Canadian paper, all of the news was of the war back home. No, not home; England hadn't been home in nearly four years. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she'd always expected to go back one day. Now, that didn't seem like even a remote possibility.

Each page that she turned detailed a new horror, a new atrocity. Not just things happening in the wizarding world, but in the Muggle one as well, as the Dark Lord had turned his focus to the world as a whole. Finally she couldn't read any more, even though she hadn't made it even halfway through, and she folded the paper and pushed it away. Severus didn't say a word the entire time.

In the faintest of whispers, she found herself asking, "Could he have stopped this? Could Harry have... the prophecy said...."

"No," Severus answered firmly. "I've told you, prophecies...especially ones made by Sybill Trelawney...are pure rubbish. If Dumbledore couldn't stop Voldemort, then no one could have. Least of all a teenage boy."

Any apprehension she felt was quickly outweighed by relief. Harry was just a child; there was no place for him in a war zone. And honestly, even if the prophecy had been true, she didn't know that she would have done anything differently. That realisation made her feel so selfish and guilty that she thought she might be sick.

"Dudley will ask about Vernon," she said quietly. "Is there any way to find out if he's still alive?"

"I can't imagine he's high on Voldemort's list of priorities. And there's a chance that he may have left the country already; many Muggles have. But no... there's no one I trust left in that part of the world at this point. If we're going to find out, it'd have to be through Muggle means. I'm sure Harry or Dudley would be able to find out more on the internet than we could discover through my sources. Knowing the Muggles, they've probably set up some sort of registry for refugees and survivors."

Petunia nodded, not feeling certain at all that Vernon would have left before things got really terrible. She'd never met anyone more stubborn, or more capable of self-delusion, than her ex-husband. The thought brought tears to her eyes. Despite all that had happened between them, the thought of anything happening to Vernon terrified her, and she could only imagine how scared Dudley would be.

Overhead the sound of an alarm clock blared, stopping abruptly as footsteps creaked across the floor.

She stood and walked in the direction of the stairs, but then hesitated. "How am I going to tell them?" she asked in a watery voice, listening as a toilet flushed and a second set of footsteps joined the first.

Severus appeared behind her, gently placing a hand on her shoulder, and she turned into his embrace, letting herself lean her head on his shoulder as she cried. Without a word, he tightened his arms around her, resting his cheek against her hair. "I'll go with you," he said after a moment. "We'll tell them together, and then we'll see what we can do about finding Vernon and getting him out of the country."

She blinked up at him in surprise. "You despise Vernon."

"But you don't, nor does Dudley. If he's alive, we'll find him and have him brought somewhere safe," he answered, then qualified, "~~No~~there." The corners of Petunia's lips twitched with a weak smile.

Dabbing at her eyes with the back of one trembling hand, she stepped away from him and reluctantly led the way up the stairs.

24 December 2002

"It's remarkable," Albus said, reaching out a hand to gently run a finger along the bevelled edge of the largest hourglass in the tiered Time Turner. He'd never seen one quite like it, and he'd been looking forward to seeing *this one* finished for quite some time now.

"It's nearly completed," Hermione Granger said. At his questioning look, she explained, "We're not sure it would bring you back to this time. The charms are... difficult. It's never been done before. I'm fairly certain it would take you further than the average time turner...one year per rotation of the largest glass, one day per rotation for the next, and then one hour for the smallest. It'll go back as far as fifty years, certainly...but you may not be able to return."

"If this works, there won't be a *here* to come back to," Albus pointed out. Hermione nodded slowly, looking away.

"Will we all just... disappear, then?" she asked quietly.

"We'll start over," he answered. "And if I may be frank, Ms Granger, I doubt there are very many futures that could be worse than the one we're living."

Her eyes were still hesitant, almost fearful. "I knew I was magical before I got my letter," she says after a long moment. "I knew all of my books before I came to school. I thought finally, finally I'd have a place where I fit, where I didn't have to hide things. Hide myself." She looked around the underground shelter that had housed her and six others for nearly two years now, letting out a weary sigh. "You don't know what you're asking of me," she finally finished quietly, reaching out to lift the Time Turner from its place on the table. The muscles in her arms tensed under its weight. "But I want better. Not just for myself. For my family. For everyone. This thing we're living... it isn't really a life, is it?"

Albus accepted the Time Turner, holding it steady so as not to send the hourglasses spinning. "You're making the right decision, Ms Granger. Your invention may be the thing that saves the world."

"Have you decided on a time yet?" she asked, changing the subject. The right time had been the topic of discussion during each of the five meetings they'd had over the last seven months, ever since he'd learned that his former student was holed up in a hideaway in Spain, busily working on a way to fix the past while Voldemort's forces quickly spread over Europe, systematically ruining the future.

Selecting the correct time was important. He wouldn't have long. If the past changed, so did the future. If the new timeline did not involve Hermione Granger inventing an advanced Time Turner, or if it didn't include Albus's decision to use said Time Turner and go back to the exact same time, he would blink out of existence. One couldn't change the past from the present...he would still have existed in the new timeline, even if the future changed and he never actually went back. And such an outcome was inevitable; something had to be changed to bring about a different future. So the dilemma had become finding a time he could alter enough to make a difference, but in such a way as to not make any real changes until the very last second. There would be no second chances; in a different timeline, Hermione Granger may never have spent four months in hiding with an Unspeakable who'd worked closely with Time Turners before the war, or Albus may never have heard the rumours about her project, or the girl may never have survived her run-in with a troll when she was twelve. There was just no way to know.

After five months of poring over endless parchments filled with Arithmantic equations, running the numbers over and over and matching them against seemingly random memories stored in a cracked Pensieve, the decision had been made, albeit reluctantly. Numbers didn't lie; his chance of success, of truly creating a different future, was substantially higher in one particular scenario than in any other, and despite having started over numerous times, despite searching and searching for another moment that looked equally...or even comparably...as promising, he'd finally had to admit to himself that in this thing, what was *right* couldn't be considered; only what was *necessary*.

"Yes, I think I have," he finally answered. "I need to go back to 28 October, 1981. Early evening, if possible."

She nodded, kneeling down to set a small dial near the bottom of the Time Turner. "Push this button," she said, pointing to a little knob on the side of the dial, "and it will take you to that date and time. The Turner doesn't travel well by Apparition, so you should jump back from somewhere nearby, then Apparate once you're in the correct time." Her hands shook as she made the final adjustment. "This place wasn't built then. You'll need to go outside first, or you'll end up twenty feet underground."

He nodded. "Thank you again, Ms Granger. You will not regret this."

"Of course I won't," she said wryly, her tone reminding him so much of Minerva that his heart ached. "I won't be here to regret it, will I?"

He inclined his head, conceding the point. "Do you wish for me to wait a few days? Until after Christmas, perhaps?"

She seemed to consider that for a moment, then shook her head. "No, sir. It wasn't going to be much of a Christmas anyway."

28 October 1981

He hadn't seen Hogwarts in over three years, back in his own time, and when he had been there, the grounds had been battle-scarred and one of the towers had leaned. What a thousand years of harsh winters, countless misfired hexes, Potions class explosions and a basilisk hadn't accomplished, the final year of the war against Voldemort had; the school had closed, too damaged to be considered safe. There were rumours that Voldemort was planning to reopen the doors in 2004, once repairs were completed, and Albus wasn't sure what was worse...the school sitting unused and broken, or being used as a recruitment tool for young Death Eaters.

In 1981, the sight of the castle made his breath catch in his chest. It was perfect, standing tall and proud and undamaged in the shrouded darkness. Hogwarts recognised him, and the locks instantly slid open to allow him to enter the school, as they always had.

Making his way up to his office, he gave the password, grateful that he'd checked the Pensieve to see which one he'd used that week, and then stepped inside. Fawkes trilled happily at him, then cocked his head to one side and studied him, looking vaguely confused.

"It's me, old friend," Albus said reassuringly even as he waved his wand at the portraits that lined the walls, causing each one to fall asleep almost instantly. "In a few moments I will need you to deliver a letter to Griphook at Gringotts. Will you do that for me?"

Fawkes fluttered his wings, a familiar action that Albus knew was a sign of agreement.

"Thank you."

Albus reached into his pocket, pulling from it an envelope addressed to himself, and quickly tucked it under a book he knew he'd pick up later that evening. Then, with a wave of his wand, he sent his Patronus soaring toward Minerva's office. A few moments later, she tapped at the door, then stepped inside. Something in his chest twisted painfully at the sight of her. It'd also been three years since he'd seen her, and just like the school, she too had been too injured that day to go on any further. He'd buried her in an unmarked grave in Germany...the best way he knew to protect her from ending up like so many others, on display and degraded even after death.

"Good evening, Albus. I thought you had a Governors' meeting tonight?" she said in a tone that suggested exactly what she thought of the school Governors and their regular, yawn-inducing meetings. She didn't seem to notice the way he was looking at her.

"It let out a bit early," he answered, motioning for her to take a seat. He sat beside her instead of behind the desk, his solemn expression causing her to frown.

"What is it?" she asked, and when he didn't answer, she went on impatiently. "Albus, what is it? What's happened?"

Of course she'd expect the worst. Even in 1981, it'd seemed as though they were losing friends every other day.

"Minerva," he began slowly, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, "do you trust me?"

She blinked in surprise. "Of course." Her answer, offered so quickly and without hesitation, made Albus's heart ache.

"I need to ask something of you."

She shook her head slightly in confusion, her frown deepening. "Anything, as always." She studied him critically. "You look as though you haven't slept in weeks. I just saw you a few hours ago.... What's *happened*?"

He had to choose his words carefully. Small things could be changed without affecting the time line. This conversation, for one, had not changed the future, or at least, hadn't changed it so much as to affect his decision to return to this night. But one wrong word, and all of his effort would be for naught.

"Think of your favourite memory of Bellona," he said, and she sat back in shock.

"But... why?"

"Please, my dear, it's important."

She stared at him for a long moment, but then slowly nodded.

Reaching into his pocket, he removed a vial and offered it to her. "I need you to give me that memory."

At this she abruptly stood up, backing away. "No," she answered firmly. "I've given the Aurors enough of my memories. I don't have any left that will be of use to you or anyone else."

"Minerva," he said with just a hint of hurt in his tone, "you claim to trust me. I am asking you to do this not only as your friend, but for the sake of the war." Even as he said the words, he hated himself.

Some of the defensive fury in her expression ebbed away, but she kept her distance.

"This memory will not help you," she insisted again. "We were only children at the time."

Offering her a gentle smile, he said, "It's more important than you think."

He waited patiently, watching her as her usual tendency to follow his orders unconditionally warred against her desire to protect what memories she had left of her little sister. Finally she sighed and looked away, her lips pursed in irritation, and he knew that the hardest part was over.

"Will I get it back?" she asked, her voice strained.

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. He felt he owed her that much.

Reaching quickly for the vial...once she'd determined that she was going to do something, Minerva had never really been one to procrastinate...she concentrated for a moment, lifted her wand to her temple, and removed the memory, carefully depositing it into the vial. Putting the stopper into the end of the vial, she handed it over to Albus.

"Thank you, my dear." He hoped she could *feel*, somehow, just how grateful he really was. Getting to his feet, he took a roll of parchment out of his pocket. Poking the vial into the centre of the roll, he put the entire thing into a long tube, then tied the tube to Fawkes's leg. Having already received his instructions, Fawkes hopped onto the windowsill and then took off into the night.

Albus would have to hurry now. Fawkes's appearance in London tonight may change something unforeseeable. There wasn't much time left.

Turning back to Minerva, who was watching him curiously, he gave her a weak smile. He reached out, taking her hand in his...a show of friendship and closeness, but more

importantly, locking his fingers around her wand so that she couldn't point it toward him.

His other hand twitched, angling his own wand toward her head.

24 December 2002

"Aunt Petunia," Kayla whimpered, tears streaming down her tiny cheeks, "Lisa said Santa isn't real!"

Petunia sighed, kneeling down in order to be eye-to-eye with Harry's daughter. "Don't listen to Lisa. She's wrong, and besides, don't you know what happens to people who don't believe in Santa?" she asked, the American name for Father Christmas still feeling odd on her tongue even after all these years.

"They don't get presents?" Kayla asked, sniffing and wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

"That's right," Petunia answered, nodding solemnly.

"I believe, I do!" the little girl reassured her.

With a smile, Petunia replied, "Well then, you have nothing to worry about, do you?"

Kayla shook her head, wrapping her great aunt in a quick, slightly sticky hug before dashing off to play. Cindy, who'd somehow managed to escape both her mother's arms and her nappy, chased after her.

"I despise that woman," Petunia muttered to Severus, who was standing beside her with an amused smirk on his face. "That nasty, awful...." She trailed off, her lips pursing into a tiny frown as she glared across the room at Lisa, Dudley's latest girlfriend.

"I would have thought you'd be the one most likely to give her a chance," Severus replied, "considering she's *you*, thirty years ago."

Mildly offended, Petunia turned her glare on him. As usual, he didn't see bothered by it.

"I wasn't *that* abhorrent," she insisted. His right eyebrow lifted in smug *knowing* way that always made her feel torn between wanting to laugh and wanting to yell at him, and she rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine, I was. But I grew out of it."

Severus shrugged. "Perhaps she will as well. I'm rather more concerned with the fact that your son seems determined to marry his *mother*. This is the third one like this that he's brought around."

Petunia was about to answer with a rather scathing retort when she felt a sudden pressure in her chest, as if the very air were closing in on her, chasing away all thoughts of Lisa. She froze, the errant thought of, *But I'm too young to have a heart attack* running through her mind. Leaning against the wall, she looked over to see Severus pressing one hand against his chest, the other holding his wand out defensively. A quick glance around showed that Harry had pulled his wand as well, and Lisa was staring at them all as if the world had turned upside down. Everyone seemed to be in pain; in the other room, Cindy and Kayla started screaming, and Natalie was on her feet in an instant, her wand clutched in her hand as she hurried to her daughters.

"What's happening?" Harry groaned, looking to Severus for answers.

Severus leaned forward, bracing his hands against his knees. "I don't know. Petunia, you and Lisa... upstairs, now. Harry..."

"Yeah," Harry interrupted as he stumbled toward the back door, "I'm on it."

"The children," Petunia managed to get out as she slid down to the floor, unable to even imagine walking as far as the stairs. "You have to...." She couldn't continue, but Severus nodded, crawling more than walking past her, gripping his wand so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"What's going on?!" Lisa demanded, curling up into a ball on the sofa. "Make it stop! What are you..."

28 October 1981

"I'm sorry," Albus said softly, tightening his grip almost painfully on Minerva's hand, and her eyes widened in sudden fear and anger. Before she could react, he thought the spell: *Obliviate*.

Her expression turned lax, her free hand hanging loose at her side. Stroking his thumb over the knuckles of the hand he still held, Albus sighed. "If I'd ever had a daughter," he told her, "I'd have wanted her to be like you." She blinked at him slowly, not seeming to hear his words.

"We never spoke tonight," he continued, stepping back. "You spent the night marking essays, and came in here to get some sherbet lemons. You're going to lift the charm on the portraits, but you won't remember doing so. When you see me this evening, it will be the first time you've seen me since lunch." He paused. He was reluctant to go on, but he had to. For the sake of everything. For the *greater good*. He shuddered as those words played through his mind, but pressed on.

24 December 2002

"What if this doesn't work?" Hermione whispered into the curly hair that brushed against the underside of her chin. Bill's grip tightened around her. The tiny, warm body tucked between them was both comforting and heartbreaking.

"Then... well, then we'll try something different in another world," Bill said, sounding more sure than he really felt. "It'll be all right, Hermione, I promise. No matter where we end up, I'll find you. I swear I will."

"You won't know to look for me," she pointed out in a watery voice, a fresh wave of tears welling up in her eyes. "You'd already left school by the time I got there. We're only here together because of the war and you *know* it. If there isn't a war, then there won't be *anus*." She hugged the sleeping boy in her arms closer, adding in a whisper, "There won't be a Hugo." A sob wracked through her body, tears that she'd been holding back finally streaming down her face.

"Hey," Bill said, reaching to stroke his hand across her cheek, "nothing in the world will keep me from loving you. You could rewrite the entire universe, and I would still find my way to you. We'll be together, and we'll have our son. I know we will. We'll have Hugo, and he'll be raised in a world where he can play outside, and go to school and be *happy*."

Hermione wished that she believed him, but she could tell that he didn't even believe himself.

"Mummy?" a sleepy voice whispered into her neck. Hermione leaned back to look down into Hugo's confused eyes. "Why Mummy cry?" he asked, leaning up to clumsily pat her cheek and press a kiss to her chin.

"I had a bad dream," she said with a weak smile, trying to reassure him. "But I feel all better, having you and Daddy here."

Hugo grinned, nuzzling his head into her hair. Hermione closed her eyes, the twisting ache in her chest growing by the instant. Then the ache turned into something more, something truly *painful*, and she whimpered. This was it. It was starting.

"Ow, Mummy!" Hugo shouted, trying to push her arm away. Hermione was barely touching him, and the thought that he was feeling the same pain she was experiencing nearly made her burst into another wave of tears.

Bill's face contorted into an expression of agony.

"Daddy!" Hugo screamed in her ear, flailing his tiny arms and legs around. "Mummy, stop!"

She held him tighter, even as she felt like she was being torn in two. "I'm so sorry," she gasped out. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm..."

28 October 1981

"You never had a sister," Albus finished.

With the last word, he felt an enormous pressure, then the feeling of being stretched, too fast and too far and *toothin*. It hurt, hurt more than he'd thought possible, and he collapsed to the floor. Above him, Minerva stared blankly at the space where he'd been.

With a barely audible *POP*, Albus disappeared.

Minerva remained where she was, as if in a trance, for only a few moments longer. Then with a sudden shake of her head, she awoke the portraits, moved to the desk, and reached into the first drawer. She'd never really liked sherbet lemons, to be honest, but she'd suddenly been gripped by a craving for a few, and she opened the tin Albus always kept in his office, pocketing a few sweets before popping one into her mouth.

2 November 1981

Minerva trusted Albus, she truly did. She trusted him with her life, with the lives of the students she fiercely protected, with the fate of the only world she'd ever known. But watching him place a letter among Harry's blankets and turn away, doubt threatened to overshadow that trust.

She'd watched those people, those awful, hateful Muggles, all day. How would they react, finding a baby on their doorstep in the morning? What if they said no? What if they refused him, or sent him away somewhere? What danger would befall the little boy if Death Eaters came looking for him in a place where there weren't wands waiting to rise in his defence? Minerva would be the first to admit that her experience with children started when they were age eleven, she didn't know *anything* about babies, but the entire thing just seemed... wrong.

But still... Albus probably knew best. He usually did, and who was she to question him, when he'd been planning this for the better part of the last two days? He'd taken the time to write the letter he was leaving, so surely he'd considered all of the consequences and benefits of handling things in this way.

Beside her, Hagrid cried, his shoulders shaking. Albus came back to stand on her other side, looking sad and worried, and she couldn't quite bring herself to question his judgment. Blinking back tears...for Lily and James, for poor little Harry, for Mrs Dursley, for *everyone*...she waited, not wanting to leave just yet. The baby seemed so very small, lying there. And so alone.

"Well," said Albus finally, "that's that. We've no business staying here. We may as well go and join the celebrations."

Minerva couldn't manage any circumstances that would bring her to *celebrate* this night, but she nodded anyway.

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "I'll be takin' Sirius his bike back. G'night, Professor McGonagall ... Professor Dumbledore, sir." Minerva watched as he settled himself onto the motorcycle and sped off into the night sky.

"I shall see you soon, I expect, Professor McGonagall," Albus said, nodding at her. She didn't answer, just blew her nose.

He turned to walk down the street, and she started off in the other direction, letting herself shift back into cat form as she passed through a dark shadow. Once around the corner, in a less visible, less well-lit area, she Apparated back to the gates of Hogwarts.

5 March 1999

"And what is it that you expect to do as an Unspeakable, Ms Granger?" Minerva asked, eying the girl's proposal critically.

"I want to work with Time Turners," Granger rattled off, obviously having anticipated the question. "More need to be created anyway, and I'm already well-suited to that task; I've been reading about them quite a bit ever since my third year. I've always found them fascinating, for some reason."

Minerva nodded more to herself than Hermione, reading over the parchment covered in careful, precise script. It was obvious that the girl had put a lot of work and thought into her career choice, and Minerva would have been hard pressed to think of anyone else that she'd want researching and developing something as dangerous as a Time Turner. She would write the letter of recommendation that Granger wanted...she'd known that as soon as she'd received Hermione's request...but she'd asked for this meeting because she wondered if the girl didn't have some specific motive for wanting to pursue such a specific and rare field of study.

"Is there anything in particular for which you think a Time Turner should be used?" Minerva asked. "There are many who believe that their destruction was a good thing...that playing with time is too dangerous."

Granger seemed to consider this for a moment, and when she finally spoke, there was a very cautious edge to her words. "I believe the danger associated with them is dependent on the person using them, Professor. At the beginning, my research would be strictly academic, and it may never go beyond that, but...." Her eyes flickered up over Minerva's head as her words trailed off. Minerva didn't have to turn around to know where the girl was looking...Severus Snape's portrait. Of course. Granger and Potter had both spent the better part of the last year trying to devise some way to resurrect Severus, despite the impossible odds stacked against such a venture.

"Well," Granger finished, "if there is a way to right some wrongs that occurred during the war, and to do so without creating major changes to the time that's already passed... isn't that worth exploring? At least theoretically?"

Minerva sighed, doubting the wisdom of such a pursuit. But she knew that even without her recommendation, Granger...and probably Potter as well...would still attempt to go through with their plan. And honestly, if there were anyone who could figure out the mechanics of such a thing and manage to not destroy the world in the process, it was probably Hermione Granger.

"You are playing with fire, Ms Granger. I hope that you will keep all the possible consequences in mind; I'd rather not wake up one morning to find myself living in a Voldemort-run world."

Granger nodded hurriedly. "Of course, Professor. All of my work would need to be approved by the Ministry anyway; I'm sure they wouldn't approve anything that involved too much risk." She smiled reassuringly, nearly causing Minerva to roll her eyes. The Ministry, well-meaning as the current administration was, never seemed to think anything through. That much hadn't changed in all the years Minerva had been alive.

Still unsure whether she was doing the right thing, Minerva reluctantly said, "Leave your proposal here with me. I'll send off a letter of recommendation to the Ministry before the week's out."

Granger thanked her profusely before scurrying out of the office, an ecstatic smile on her young face. Shaking her head, Minerva turned her attention to yet another bit of paperwork for the Ministry (she had better things to do than deal with their bureaucratic nonsense, but she didn't want to make things any more difficult for Kingsley than

they already were) and was just finishing it up when she heard a loud rapping on the windowpane. She turned to find an owl glaring impatiently at her, and with a sigh...honestly, did Shacklebolt really have nothing better to do than send her letters all day?...she stood and opened the window. The owl hopped in and perched primly on the windowsill, looking thoroughly annoyed.

Minerva flicked her wand at the string tied to the owl's leg, deftly catching the leather tube that dangled at the other end before it could fall to the floor, then placed a few owl treats on the windowsill while examining the delivery. It was marked with a Gringotts seal, not the Ministry's, and she expected it to contain nothing more than a notification that a sum of Galleons had been left to the care and maintenance of Hogwarts in the will of yet another former student. These letters always made her heart ache; more often than not, this was the first information she'd received about the death of someone she'd taught for seven years. But still, the Gringotts letters had tapered off six months ago, so she cast a few revealing charms before finally twisting the end off of the tube and carefully removing the enclosed piece of parchment.

Unfurling the first few inches of the rolled letter, she blinked in surprise at the handwriting that she recognised instantly despite not having seen it in over a year.

Dear Minerva,

If you've received this letter, then the war has ended in our favour, but I have not survived. There are things you need to know, and I could not allow them to go unsaid, even in the event of my death. Once you read this, I expect that you will find yourself hating me. I cannot say that I would particularly blame you...but please know that no matter your feelings now, in another life, you would have agreed that what I did was for the best.

Minerva glanced up at the portrait behind her desk, frowning when she found that Albus had disappeared. What could he possibly have done to make her ~~hate~~ hate him? The closest she'd ever come had been just after the war, when she'd learned the truth about Severus and had seen Albus's manipulations for what they'd truly been, and even that she'd come to terms with, in time. Despite only existing within the confines of a portrait, Albus remained her oldest and dearest friend.

When he didn't return to his frame, Minerva turned back to the letter, unrolling the parchment a few more inches. She felt something tumble inside the curled paper, and as she turned the parchment onto its end, a small vial dropped into her hand. Holding it up to the light streaming in through the window, she inspected the thick liquid inside the vial, almost certain that it was a memory. Now more curious than ever, she set the vial down on the desk, settled into her chair, and returned her attention to the letter.

I think that, all things considered,

the best place to start this tale is at the end....