

A Terrible Thing to Waste

by solidground

Picks up mid-DH.

The torture at Malfoy Manor left Hermione in bad shape. Desperate, she put her life in the hands of a man she shouldn't trust, hoping that Albus Dumbledore was right after all.

Chapter One: Life as the Headmaster of Hogwarts

One

Chapter 1 of 4

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Chapter One: Life as the Headmaster of Hogwarts

Welcome to my first Harry Potter fanfic! The works on this site have inspired me to no end and I'm glad to finally be posting something alongside them.

Enjoy!

Kristine

PS: I'm looking for a beta. Any ideas?

General disclaimer: I own neither the characters nor the world involved in this story. Those belong to Ms. Rowling.

The Headmaster's office had changed too little in his occupancy.

With the world falling apart around him, Severus hadn't been too concerned with silly things like interior decorating.

Looking around the room, though, he wondered if it would be better to empty the room of the whirring silver gadgets and bowls of Muggle sweets. It probably gave the wrong impression for him to keep them around as if the room, but as he refused visitors to the office, it mattered little that it served as a silent shrine to his guilt.

Guilt.

Just thinking the word threatened a crack in his Occlumency walls.

He hastily patched the breach with cold indifference. He had come too far to come undone at the hands of emotion. He would not be ruled by it.

Wand in hand, he turned empty black eyes on the far corner of the room. Without rising from his chair, Severus packed every personal effect of Albus Dumbledore's into the bottom drawer of the elegant cabinet holding the Pensieve.

"I wondered when you would take care of that, Severus."

Damn portrait.

He refused to look into the twinkling, oil-painted eyes on the wall behind him.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" he growled.

"Shouldn't you be at dinner? The Easter holiday just ended, no?"

White knuckles clenched around his wand as Severus pushed back his irritation. He closed his eyes and entered the empty room in his mind. Empty and dark, with strong walls and no emotion. It was easier to think this way, detaching himself from all else.

"I was on my way, Headmaster, before you interrupted me to discuss how I choose to outfit my office." He couldn't help the snarl in his voice. It was a default, a defense mechanism that kept him in check. "Now, if you're finished..."

He didn't wait for the painting to respond.

There were several absences at the Gryffindor table. Longbottom, one of the Creevys, and Miss Weasley must have been with Amycus. The wine crossing his lips turned sour at the thought. Severus knew the Carrows, had been at their mercies when he had first turned to the Dark Lord. He knew what the young fools had blustered their way into.

If only they would have kept their heads down, watched for a more prudent time to play an advantage...

No, that kind of thinking was far too subtle for a Gryffindor to manage. Impetuous, blundering fools. Not a whole day past the Easter holidays and already serving a detention.

He tore his eyes away from the table, scanning the Great Hall. Even with the tables shrunk to accommodate the lack of Muggle-born students this year, empty seats glared at him, reminding him of students noticeable only in their absence, like missing teeth after a duel.

Many Ravenclaw students had simply left the school, their parents sending them away to the supposedly safer institutions out of country. They wouldn't be safe long. The Dark Lord had friends everywhere.

Hufflepuff seemed the most complete, if the most subdued. Too loyal to leave the school, too humble to fight the Carrows.

Most of the younger Slytherins were in place, as were their self-satisfying smirks. They knew their House was immune to trouble. Their good pal, Headmaster Snape, had turned a blind eye to his House. There were a few older students missing...nearly all of the students who were of age and a few who were close.

The wine turned sour again. The Dark Lord had requested the young ones to join him during the Easter holiday. Many hadn't come back.

He looked away and, again, Gryffindor held his gaze. There were four seats that had been empty all year; the Gryffindors had deliberately refused to fill them. Some sort of incredibly puffed up honor bound them to leave seats for Potter, Weasley, Granger and Thomas. Dully, he noted that Ravenclaw hadn't done the same for the newly missing Miss Lovegood.

Well, at least Severus knew where she was. It afforded him no real comfort, but at least he could face some of his self-imposed accusations of being a negligent Headmaster by knowing where Luna Lovegood was hidden. It didn't help much with the accusations of others, but that couldn't be helped. Not now, anyway.

Minerva was glaring at him.

He always knew when the old biddy had him in her sights. She, with all of the brazenness of her own House, never made an attempt to hide when she watched him.

"Is there something you need, Minerva? Or would you prefer to have Creevy photograph the moment so you can stare at it a little longer?" he sneered, his eyes sliding effortlessly to meet hers.

Something foreign passed through her eyes.

"Shame," she said mildly.

Severus arched an eyebrow, half hoping she wouldn't continue. He didn't enjoy this.

"You were such a good teacher, Severus."

The Head Table fell uncomfortably silent. Even a couple students nervously glanced at their professors, somehow knowing that Minerva McGonagall had lit a very dangerous fuse.

"Cold and cruel, yes, you were that. But you had standards, once. You demanded excellence of your students and of yourself." She seemed to sigh, her eyes never leaving his. "I never thought I'd live to see you become so..." She took a sip of her wine. "Spineless."

"And you used to be such an intelligent witch, Minerva," he said casually. "I never thought I'd see old age slow your wits, woman."

He took a sip of his own wine, patently ignoring the acid feel of it sliding down his throat.

Ah, she had to check her rage with that one. It wasn't true, of course. Minerva McGonagall was just as clever as the day he had first set foot in her classroom. Tactless and brash, but clever in her own way. He respected that.

Deliberately, the professors resumed their earlier discussions once it had become apparent that Snape wouldn't rise to the challenge. He supposed that the Gryffindor table thought him as "spineless" as their Head of House did, but Severus knew better. He was no coward.

A sharp pain in his left arm reminded him of all the brave things he did for this world. He sniffed as he saw Alecto half-jump to his feet. Severus caught his eyes and shook his head. They would wait until dinner had finished.

With a frown, his colleague sat back down with a sad attempt at masking the movement as a readjustment in his seat. The occupants of the High Table collectively grimaced.

They knew. A good number of the students knew.

But Severus and the Carrows would wait anyway. Appearances and all that.

As dinner drew to a close, Severus realized that this was an occasion that Albus had often used to address the students. A sort of "welcome back from holiday" speech combined with a bit of "time to focus on your upcoming exams" encouragement. Minerva had him in her sights again, as did Pomona and Aurora.

Reluctantly, he crossed his silverware on his plate and took a last swallow of the sour-feeling, sweet-tasting wine. A sneer curled his lip as he pushed back his chair to stand.

The Hall fell silent, awaiting his words. His portion of the table automatically Transfigured into a lectern. Even the bloody castle expected him to speak. He paused to collect his voice, to make it as cold and cruel as he knew how. If he had to speak, it would be on his terms.

"I realize that most of you will now foolishly turn your attention to the end of term and other frivolities, continuing the tradition of imbecilic behavior that most of you exemplify every spring." At least he could be wholly truthful in this speech. It was an odd kind of refreshment, speaking his mind in public. "I will not waste my time telling you how unwise it would be to disregard your studies as I believe the majority of you realize this, but are too thick to act appropriately."

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Minerva give a reluctant chuckle. The speech was worth it, just for that.

"As such, your professors have been given full reign to do as they see fit to combat your youthful idiocy. Exams and the real world approach. Do not squander your time in these halls."

There, that was good enough. He nodded to Alecto as he turned away from the students and left through the side door.

He had been waiting at the Apparation point for six minutes by the time the Carrows joined him.

"Shall we?" He smirked, pulling back his sleeve. The siblings followed suit and, with a twisting, painful feeling, they disappeared into the darkness.

This was to be a private affair in the Malfoy dining room, it seemed. Unexpected things like this made Severus nervous.

Severus and the Carrows immediately bowed before the Dark Lord, the silence in the room overbearing.

No, not silence. Bellatrix was sobbing softly on the floor ahead of him. Something was wrong; tears weren't her style. Pleading, screaming, begging, fawning...those were things that Bellatrix Lestrange specialized in. Crying? Not at all.

"Rise, Severus."

Severus rose, taking refuge in the empty room of his mind.

The man...no, not a man...monster who had tormented his entire existence sat in an ornate dining chair, calm and collected as could be. There even seemed to be a smile on his face. It was unsettling.

"Tell me, Severus, again about the Mudblood that follows Potter around. Her magical talents, such as they are."

Bella convulsed on the ground, her cries growing louder.

Severus snorted convincingly enough. Hermione Granger following Harry Potter like a star-struck teenage girl was an entertaining notion. "It is more likely, My Lord, that Potter follows her around. The Granger girl is a brilliant mimic, able to recall and repeat vast amounts of text in a way that lesser teachers have mistaken for intelligence. Her practical application of those memories is mediocre at best, but her ability to regurgitate other people's work has convinced Potter that she's a valuable resource in his life."

The Dark Lord nodded, motioning for him to continue.

"Her magical talents are a passable imitation of what a weak witch could manage. Granger's strongest skills are minute, mundane spells, like levitation or incendiary charms. According to Minerva McGonagall, she has a modicum of talent in Transfiguration, but McGonagall thinks too highly of her precious little cubs." Severus let the last line draw out into a sneering drawl. Best to keep to truths and half-truths, and that was definitely a truth.

"Does she, Amycus? Alecto?"

They nodded in tandem, eager to prove their usefulness as informants. Idiots.

"Most interesting observations, aren't they, my dear?" A whimper answered him as he stretched his wand over her body. He laughed, a cold and wispy echo in the near-empty room. "Oh, not to worry, Bella. Severus and the goblin have been enough for me to believe you on this. At least you haven't failed me in this."

The witch began to shake again, shocks rolling through her body.

So precious, darling Bella had finally slipped up. Severus didn't know whether to grin or to run at the thought. The haughty witch brought down to earth was an undeniably pleasant sight, but if even she was losing favor with the Dark Lord, it wouldn't be long before everyone else's devotion came into question.

The Dark Lord lifted his wand, and Bellatrix stilled. "It seems that the Potter, Mudblood, and their friends paid a visit to the Manor yesterday, Severus."

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

"Are they still around? I should very much like to, ah, pay my respects." Severus laughed bitterly as he carefully tested the walls of his mind. This was no time to lose himself, even if that stupid boy had ruined everything. "I was regrettably inhibited, so to speak, in my most recent encounter with the children."

The Dark Lord's lipless mouth curled in cold amusement. "I'm afraid Bella and Lucius weren't able to convince them to stay. A misunderstanding about a copy of the Sword of Gryffindor led to poor hospitality, and the children were forced to leave before I could greet them properly."

Severus instantly knew there would be a wave of relief crashing over him later, but for the moment, the Dark Lord's playful mood had set Severus's teeth on edge. His joking about Potter's escape was unexpected and uncomfortable; it felt like he was playing Exploding Snap with Muggle dynamite.

"That was incredibly discourteous of you, Bella. For shame." If the Dark Lord wanted to play, Severus would play. He just wished he knew what the game was for. "I imagine the children would have done well to learn from your influence a little longer. Perhaps Narcissa could have taught them better manners. I certainly would have liked to try."

Bellatrix's head lifted slightly, a snarl twisting her pretty mouth as the Dark Lord laughed. Severus smirked in return. Good. He was playing by the rules.

"It is a shame, Severus, that you were, yet again, deprived of the company you so desire. Perhaps you could help Bella here understand your disappointment?"

Ah, and here was the point of the game. Severus raised his wand toward the now growling Bellatrix Lestrange. Torture at the Dark Lord's hand would have served as a

badge of honor for twisted little Bella; torture at the hands of a man she hated was punishment indeed.

"Disappointment is a mild word, My Lord. I was so looking forward to helping the Mudblood learn to silence her incessant questioning." He sighed theatrically to give himself time to methodically rein the hate and anger that boiled deep within.

"I suppose it will have to wait until her next visit, won't it, Bella?" He saw the challenge in her eyes, remembered the world she had brought him into, and whispered, "*Crucio*."

Two

Chapter 2 of 4

Picks up mid-DH. The torture at Malfoy Manor left Hermione in bad shape. Desperate, she put her life in the hands of a man she shouldn't trust, hoping that Albus Dumbledore was right after all. Chapter Two: A Letter and a Secret

Wow! I received way more response than I could have hoped for! I hope that the story continues to be enjoyable for y'all.

And many thanks to the lovely magicalpresence, who has kindly offered to beta for me. She's been wonderful! Fantastic advice and very kind support and encouragement.

Peace and joy,

Kristine

Disclaimer: Anything recognizable as J. K. Rowling's is hers. Not mine. I own very little.

The next few days were as meaningless as the ones that came before the summons. Potter had escaped and they were all just biding their time again. Waiting for a battle none of them could control.

Maybe this was what war was like for civilians. Severus hadn't experienced that so well the first go-round. He had been a loyal, willing foot soldier for the Dark Lord, casting curses and destroying homes as if it were his greatest pleasure. It had been, for a while.

Each piece of wood he had splintered then helped distract him. Red hair and green eyes mocked him in every memory, tearing at his heart until he believed that there was nothing left to it. But when he had been doing the Dark Lord's work he could rest his mind in the familiar comfort of Dark Magic, no matter how it had pulled at his soul. What good was a soul, anyway, when Lily Evans had broken his heart?

It certainly didn't matter now.

He couldn't blame her for it, not really. It had been his own choices that had driven her away. Severus knew that now.

If only he had known then what his life would become. Babysitting lazy minds in a castle that hated him. Serving two Masters and losing his free will entirely. Bound to a job that he despised and a reputation that kept him alone.

Maybe he would never have called her a Mudblood.

The Headmaster's Office felt empty now, deprived of the whizzing and clinking noises that Dumbledore's possessions had continuously bothered him with. The room held little other than the necessary furniture...a desk, some chairs, the Pensieve cabinet. It was easier to clear his mind this way, living an environment so like the one constructed in his mind. It made the emotion easier to dismiss.

A stack of papers sat on his desk, mail from the past few days. He had ignored it long enough, he supposed. Some of them might have been from the Easter Holidays. He didn't often actually sort through his post. It was a waste of time. The only two people he actually needed to communicate with did not use owls.

Several of the envelopes were immediately chucked into the fire. A missive from Dolores Umbridge was laid on his desk. He would, unfortunately, have to read that one. Others were sorted into a "might think about reading later if bored" pile, a few more burned in the hearth.

He almost missed the last envelope, small as it was, but the Black Family crest caught his eye. Was Narcissa angry at him about that last meeting? That wasn't his fault and she knew it. Sighing, he broke the seal and pulled a torn scrap from the envelope.

It was most certainly not a letter from Narcissa Malfoy.

The hiding place of Hermione Jean Granger is Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

Please, sir. Hurry.

The parchment burst into blue flame, but no ashes fell to his desk. The letter simply dissolved into nothingness. Severus looked at his suddenly empty hands, stunned.

They had found a way to remake the Fidelius Charm, and judging from the small, neat handwriting on the letter, Granger was her own Secret Keeper. It didn't make much sense, of course. Setting a Fidelius was difficult, but breaking one already in place without the consent of the Secret Keepers? Even the precocious Miss Granger couldn't pull off that level of spellwork.

If, by some stroke of dumb luck, she had managed to pull off that bit of dubious magic, then an even greater mystery remained: Miss Granger was under the impression that he needed to know the Secret and needed to visit.

Why tell him? Hadn't she just escaped the clutches of Death Eaters?

"I assume, from the blue flames, that the letter is from Miss Granger?"

Severus turned, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face. "Do you ever sleep?"

"Not really," Dumbledore confessed. "The world is still far too interesting for me to sleep just yet. I still haven't found out what my Chocolate Frog card says now that I've passed."

"Oh, yes. We've all been holding our breath to find that out."

He chuckled. Albus Dumbledore chuckled. Severus managed to keep his eyes from rolling in exasperation. The man was impossibly dotty, even in death.

"Blue flames have always been a talent of Miss Granger's. I trust you remember her first year?"

"Insufferable girl burned a hole in my only cloak. Of course I remember."

Albus merely nodded, obviously waiting for Severus to reveal the note's content. He was no Gryffindor, too proud to ask for help, but he was still reluctant. Saying things out loud made them real.

"It seems that Miss Granger has replaced you as a Secret Keeper. And that she wants me to visit."

"What were the specific words, Severus?"

"T...the hiding p-p..." His thin lips bumbled over the address, effectively proving that Granger had worked the Fidelius correctly. "She gave me the address. And then said 'Please, sir. Hurry.'"

"You should be going, then. I doubt Miss Granger would use the word 'hurry' so lightly."

"And what exactly would I find there, Albus?" His voice stayed level, but he knew the old man knew just how... un-level he was with this letter. Confusion and uncertainty had never sat well with Severus Snape. "Potter, Weasley and Granger, wands drawn and ready to avenge you?"

"What was the last news we heard of them?"

"You know perfectly well what I told you last week."

"Ah, yes. Captured in Lucius's home, managed to escape just before Tom arrived. Bella didn't mention anything about what happened during the children's stay at the Malfoy home, did she?"

Severus smirked. "She was rather busy with the groveling, but *he* mentioned that they had a *fake* Sword of Gryffindor. How they managed to fool Bella with a goblin present is beyond me, but there it is."

Dumbledore folded his hands, eyes focused on something in the distance. "They brought the Sword to the Manor."

"I've told you that," Severus answered, trepidation seeping through the walls of his mind.

They were silent for a moment, both men deep in thought.

"Severus?" The former Headmaster's voice was worried.

"Yes?"

"If Madam Lestrange caught them with a sword she thought had been in her vault..."

Sirius Black had managed to levitate ice down the back of Severus's collar once. Sitting still in Transfiguration as the cold trickled down his spine had been one of the most unpleasant feelings he had ever endured. A sort of teasing torture that tormented with the smallest sensations.

Severus could almost feel the freezing water dripping down his back now as he calmly stood up and turned the chair back toward the desk.

"Headmaster Black?"

"Yes, Headmaster?" replied the reedy voice.

Severus faced the Slytherin's painting.

"I assume that your other portrait has not yet been returned to its proper place?"

"No. The Mud..." Phineas huffed at Severus's stern look. *Muggle-born* still has me in that enormous bag of hers. Insolent witch."

"I see." Severus walked to the fireplace. "Kindly inform the Professors Carrow and the Heads of House that I will be out of touch for the remainder of the evening, but that the staff meeting will still take place tomorrow at eight o'clock. Time is of the essence, Headmaster, and it would be appreciated if you do not attempt to explain my absence. It is nobody's business but my own."

"Of course. A good Slytherin keeps his secrets close at hand, Headmaster Snape," came the cackled reply.

The portrait was empty when Severus looked up to it again. He looked down the wall at his mentor. Dumbledore nodded his reassurance.

Drawing his wand, Severus grabbed a handful of Floo Powder and tossed it into the flames. He muttered his destination and stepped inside the hearth.

Number Twelve Grimmauld Place had never been a pleasant smelling place. The years of neglect had given it an unmistakable stench of decay and the house-elf's substandard service had allowed the build-up of a vast array of offensive odors that had attacked Severus each time he had set foot in the miserable house. He had believed it a fitting perfume for the home of a flea-ridden dog.

Stepping out of the fireplace this time, however, brought an entirely new assault on his senses. Severus felt his stomach clench at the smell of filth, vomit and disease.

"*Homenum Revelio*," he muttered.

Only one other person in the house, then...a very weak person at that. And a house-elf.

At least it wasn't an ambush.

Crack!

The withered body of Kreacher appeared before his first step fell.

"Headmaster must wake the Muggle-born." That wheezing cough the elf called a voice sounded surprisingly concerned. He was cleaner than Severus had ever seen him, wearing a neatly pressed towel and, oddly, a silver locket. The room was cleaner, too. What had happened here?

"Is she asleep?"

"Not asleep," Kreacher croaked. "Not awake." One long, bony hand clenched a rolled parchment, the other a crystal vial. He thrust both fists toward Severus. "Muggle-born says Headmaster is to have these."

Severus took the elf's offering. "Where is Miss Granger?"

The house-elf said nothing, but his ears twitched before he turned to hobble to the foyer. Severus followed behind without a sound, remembering the shrill portrait of Mrs. Black. He had never personally set the woman off, but Nymphadora Tonks had demonstrated the woman's profound ability to screech insulting nonsense often enough to satisfy Severus's curiosity.

Something else awaited him in the hall.

"SEVERUS SNAPE?"

He should have anticipated something like this. Something in the magic made him think of Lupin, but if he were being honest, he was just desperate for this to be a Marauder's prank. It would be much easier if it were.

The apparition's accusing gaze burned Severus to the soul.

Well, at least that proved he still had one.

Thin, knobby fingers pulled at his arm, yanking him away from the form of Albus Dumbledore. Severus couldn't help it; his eyes remained glued to the wispy thing even as Kreacher pulled him up the stairs.

"I didn't murder you," Severus half-whispered, half-moaned, his boots clumsily clattering against each step.

The form of Dumbledore nodded and the spell broke.

The house-elf still pulled him, though Severus was able to watch where he was going now. Kreacher guided him down the second floor to the small bedroom across from the library.

The stench that had assaulted him as he stepped from the Floo was at its full strength here. Had he been the delicate Lucius Malfoy, he would have pulled a scented handkerchief to his nose. Had he been the indomitable Molly Weasley, he would have known the spell to banish the odor from the room.

But he was Severus Snape and he endured the smell.

When Kreacher opened the door, he let his breathing become shallow. It was easier to breathe that way. He tried to identify the smells. Sick, filth, and infection were obvious, but there was something else in the air that Severus could not place. Above all the other scents in the air, this was the one that made his stomach clench.

He had just begun to commit the smell's effects to memory when his other senses took over.

The cold air felt heavy and moist. It sucked the heat from his skin much as a Dementor sapped the life from its victim. He wondered if a Dementor might be preferable to this.

Severus took an involuntarily deep breath as he yawned. His muscles moved of his own accord, drawing the sick air into his mouth until he could taste the room. All of the mold and the vomit and the nastiness that pervaded this room now rested on the back of his tongue. He retched.

There was a pitiful hissing sound coming from the bed on the far side of the room. It was labored and uneven, high-pitched and soft. The girl wasn't breathing well.

Good. That meant that his involuntary yawn had only been a yawn and not a manifestation of a spell to force him to draw in bad air. He focused on his own breathing, returning it to a serviceable shallow pace, keeping his mind guarded and sharp.

He almost lost that control when he finally saw Hermione Granger.

Later, if he was being honest with himself, he would admit that he had been deliberately avoiding looking at her for as long as he could. He didn't want to see, didn't want to face what Bellatrix Lestrange was capable of.

Oddly, it wasn't the cuts and bruises that drew his eye first, but the way her cheekbone rose high above the side of her face. She had lost weight this year while running from Death Eaters. Running from him. Briefly, he wondered what she ate, what she could have found in places like the Forest of Dean. He didn't remember Potter or Weasley looking so thin then, but now, it was the first thing his mind could see about Granger now.

She lay on her side on a dusty bed, facing the door. There was a dirty blanket draped over her...by Kreacher, no doubt...but she shivered still, her body quaking in the cold. Her mess of hair had been pulled back into a braid at some point, but strands of it had escaped, leaving her hair to look as wild as it did unbound. It wasn't the worst he'd ever seen her hair, Severus supposed, and it wasn't altogether unattractive, splayed out over a pillow as though she were in bed for a completely different purpose.

Over the past seven years, Severus had endured hours of Minerva McGonagall preening over the fine, strong witch Hermione Granger would become one day.

Looking at her now, Severus finally believed it. This was a different person than the girl Severus had taught. Even asleep, there was a hardness in her face that had never been present at Hogwarts. Her fingers were dangerously close to the wand lying next to her, ready to hex at a moment's notice. There was something unmistakably powerful about this tiny, sick thing and Severus didn't know what to make of it.

Kreacher tugged at his arm. "Headmaster must wake the Muggle-Born. She must complete Master Regulus's mission."

"Master Regulus's mission?" the question had left his mouth before his mind had formed it. Regulus Black had a mission? The boy had been dead for years, killed by the Dark Lord himself if the rumors are true. Some said he was trying to usurp power for himself, but Severus had never believed that of the younger Black son. Though as arrogant as his brother, he had never been someone that Severus would pin as power-hungry.

Still, he had to have done *something* to deserve death at the Dark Lord's hand. The Dark Lord had been pleased to announce that Regulus had died, something about the price of disloyalty. There had been so many over the years. It was hard to keep track.

The house-elf tugged at his arm again, this time pointing to the letter and vial Severus still held. "Muggle-Born said to give Headmaster those. Said that it would answer questions."

He looked at the items in his hand and back to the woman across the room. He took in her translucent skin, lined with tiny red welts and cuts. There were bruises blossoming on her neck, bruises in the shape of a woman's long fingered hand and a large bite. Something seemed off about the color of her skin.

Severus nodded at the elf and sat down at the chair by the head of the bed, setting his wand down on the bedside table. Slipping the vial in his pocket, he opened the letter.

He immediately recognized Granger's handwriting. It was small and meticulous, but easy enough to read. How many times had he seen it cramped into the last inch of parchment?

This writing, however, was far more uniform than even Hermione Granger could attempt without magic. It had been dictated, then. Had she lost control of her hands?

With one last look at the sleeping form beside him, he read the letter.

Headmaster Snape,

It feels so weird calling him that. Like admitting that he really did... Oh drat, stupid Dictaquil.

Sorry about that, Professor. I'll try to keep on track, but I'm afraid it's been difficult to focus my thoughts since leaving Malfoy Manor.

I suppose you're curious as to why you're here, although you're intelligent enough to have guessed why I need you. I've always thought you were really brilliant, Professor. You had to be, really, to have been hired so young! And your skill with Potions is really just...

Ugh. Focus, Granger.

You probably know that we had been captured. We got lucky again and got away. I seriously don't know how we've been so fortunate. Maybe there's something helping us to fight this. Like some sort of watchful fate-guiding hands working against the Dark.

Anyway, we got away, can't tell you where, but we did get to safety. When we were there, we started the process of healing. Our hosts fixed the Stinging Hex I placed on Harry and healed Mr. Ollivander and Luna's cuts and bruises and such. Dean seemed to be okay and Griphook wouldn't let us do anything so we supposed he was fine too. Ronald managed to escape with a small cut, but it was easy to mend. His injury was more emotional than anything. It hurts him to see me hurting. He fancies me, you see, and I think he feels resp...

That was no shock. If possible, Weasley had even less subtlety than Potter.

Nevermind, it's not his fault. If anybody was responsible it was me! I should have known better!

I was so worried, when they took them away, that they would hurt them. All I could think about with Bellatrix Lestrange walking toward me was how much I hoped Ron and Harry would be okay, that they would make it, even if I didn't. So much is riding on Harry, on all of us and I had totally wasted the opportunity to protect them! I began reciting a list of wandless protecting charms I should have placed on them before they were taken from me, even knowing that there would have been no way to cast them, bound and frightened as I was.

I tried to keep track of the curses that Madam Lestrange...

Madam Lestrange? How she could remain so proper when under such pressure was astonishing, though perhaps in character for the girl. She had always been respectful to him as her teacher.

...threw at me. I lost count after the one Furnuculus Curse, a couple of mildly thrown Sectumsempras, and the third Cruciatus. I do remember something purple and fiery, not quite like what Dolohov threw at me in the Department of Mysteries, but similar. It had more pink to its color and there were tiny sparks flitting through the flames. It was pretty, in a way...

I don't think I remember all that was done to me. Not all of my injuries are accounted for. I pulled out the memory and placed it in a vial. I hope Kreacher understands that I mean for you to have it. I hope it helps.

Ah, the vial. He would have to wait until returning to Hogwarts to find out what damage had been done. He glanced back down at Miss Granger and lifted a wand toward the blanket. Pulling it back slightly, he could see the remnants of the torture. Boils that had been diminished to angry scars, Sectumsempra cuts that still stood open, the bruises on her neck, and this close, he could see a spiderweb of silver-blue, twisting about her bare shoulders, neck and face.

What was that?

When we escaped, I was barely conscious. When we got to safety, I was treated as far as our hosts could treat me. Neither are Healers, though one has experience with curses, and my condition started to deteriorate. My cuts won't heal and my bruises won't fade. I can't stay awake for very long, and breathing is difficult.

I feel fuzzy when I'm awake. Would you believe I've been working on this letter for four hours now? At least that's what Kreacher tells me. I can't stay focused for long enough to finish. He has to keep waking me up, poor dear. He doesn't really like me, but he still seems so distressed by my health. He knows I have a task to help finish, and I do. I have to get back to Harry and Ron. We have to destroy You-Know-Who.

So that was Master Regulus's mission, defeating the Dark Lord. No wonder he'd been killed.

This is where you come in, I suppose.

Nobody in our safe place could heal me and, obviously, I can't go to St. Mungo's. I needed someone who understood the curses Madam Lestrange used and someone who wouldn't turn me over to the Ministry, but nobody still in our... acquaintance, so to speak, could do that.

I told our host to take me here, that I had a plan. I didn't tell him what it was; nobody would have listened then.

I don't know how or why I trust you to help, but I do. Maybe it's desperation. Maybe one of the spells is making me delirious.

With Kreacher, I set wards about the house. We broke the Fidelius Charm and I reset it. I am the Secret Keeper now, and you are the only person with the Secret. I also set a bit of a sleep-stasis-inducing charm in this room. You probably felt it try to make you sleepy, yawning and such? I hope so. That means it's keeping me alive. It will break when you say my name, so I hope you haven't said anything just yet. Sorry it feels so miserable in here.

So that's what that was. And working with the house-elf? Clever move, really. Unorthodox, but it worked.

There are other wards on the house. You should be able to Apparate and use the Floo (It's still unregistered, but I hid it. A combination of @onfundus and a Fidelius charm. I think being so incapacitated and somewhat delirious has pushed me to take risks and to invent spells. I hope they're holding.), but no Portkeys. There's also a protection against unintended magic from an unconscious person. Kreacher helped me with that. I don't want to accidentally burn the house down.

I'm sure you still have questions I haven't or can't answer, just as there are many things I'd like to ask you. What in the world made you create Sectumsempra? You must have really hated someone for that. And in your sixth year, too! So clever, brilliant spellwork, really, but wow... you had to have been so angry.

Severus nearly dropped the parchment at that. Of all the questions that must be rattling through that mind of hers, that was the one that slipped to the Dictaquil?

Bother. I'm sorry about that, Professor.

I think I've gotten into unnecessary rambling now. I remember how much you hated that in the classroom, but please forgive me now. I can't help it. I only ask that you help me far enough that I can heal the rest on my own. Well, really, I don't ask much at all. I beg. I implore. I wish. I hope. I pray. I'm relying on and trusting a man that all logic and reasoning tells me to suspect, but I can't help it. Please, anything you need to do, you have my permission. Please, just...

Besides, you could leave me for dead and I'd never know. I suppose that's comforting, though when I die, you'd become the Secret Keeper and Harry and Ron couldn't retrieve my body. Oh, I feel that I could ask at least that of you. If I die, please let Arthur Weasley know where I am. He'll handle it best, I think.

Thank you for your time, Profess...Headmaster Snape.

I hope Dumbledore was right.

"So do I," Severus murmured.

He folded the parchment and placed it in his pocket before picking up his wand. A quick spell pulled the blanket off of her. Not knowing what the silver lines were made him cautious; touching her could be risky for them both.

Severus watched, fixated in horror, as her skin was revealed inch by inch. She had only worn her underthings to bed, for which he was grateful. He didn't know if he had the resolve to undress her, not when every spare bit of her skin was marked by something that shouldn't be there.

Bella had done her finest. Hermione Granger would forever be her masterpiece.

A heat radiated from her that had nothing to do with the fever chills shivering down her spine. Her hands trembled and her muscles convulsed, rippling beneath her marked skin. The boils would scar; there was nothing that could be done about that now without the proper balms and those would react badly with treatment for Cruciatus. He had no idea what the blue lines were, but the cuts he could heal.

They were his fault, after all. A curse he never bothered to teach people to heal. He should have taught someone.

After a precautionary antiseptic spell...he had smelled infection...he stood over the bed, letting his wand flow over her body. The tip of it glowed with a pale gold light as he began the song. The words didn't matter as much as the intent; he had never sung the same song twice. But as he sang, Severus focused on his regret for her harm and his hope that it could be undone.

The first time he had healed *Sectumsempra*, it had been an accident. He had been perfecting wand movements for the newly-minted curse and had been shocked to see his mother's cat suddenly sliced and bleeding. A young, frightened Severus had knelt over the poor thing, his wand shaking as he tried to remember a healing spell. He sang that stupid lullaby his mother had always hummed, desperately trying to comfort the cat in what was surely to be its last moments of life. Remorse had poured through the song and, just as now, the tip of the wand shimmered with light and life.

Severus watched as his song stitched up the cuts on her body. She had been lucky Bella hadn't been too forceful with the curse. The wounds were shallow enough to keep from permanent harm, though her previous hosts must have had to spend their whole store of Blood-Replenishing Potion to help her stay alive. She was still pale with the blood loss and dittany would have been preferable, but the unknown silver web kept him from touching the girl. She would just have to deal with the scars.

He yawned as the last of the slices mended; the stasis spell was doing its work. He would have to leave soon. Looking over Miss Granger, he noted again how filthy the bed was.

"When was the last time you cleaned this room, Kreacher?"

The house-elf quivered under his glare. "Kreacher cleaned when the Muggle-Born first arrived. Kreacher was told not to touch anything until the Headmaster came."

A growl formed deep in his throat. How long had that letter been sitting on his desk before he opened it? The stupid girl should have at least told the elf to clean the sheets. If the curses didn't kill her, infection would.

"Keep the room cleaned. Don't touch her, but make sure the bed is cleaned, sheets changed. Is that clear?" The elf didn't move, obviously trying to figure out whose orders took priority. He angrily waved a hand toward the bed. "If you don't keep this clean, she'll die. And put a night dress or something on her."

Kreacher nodded and bowed, nose touching the floor. Good. That was taken care of.

A third yawn pried his mouth open. "The room will be spotless when I return," he commanded.

"Of course, Headmaster," Kreacher croaked, bowing lower still. With a small pop, the gnarled little elf disappeared, leaving Severus alone with the girl.

He turned to look at her one last time. Healing the cuts would help the situation and the boils had been healed well enough to pass for now, but the blue-silver lines twining about her body worried him. It wasn't often he came across a curse he did not recognize. Severus did not want to think on what would happen if he couldn't figure out what had been done to her.

Raising his wand, he levitated the blanket over her too-thin body and let it fall slowly. He watched the fabric drifted into place, mesmerized by the way it fluttered about her form, conforming to all the little curves and lines that made up Hermione Granger. He tried to ignore the pessimistic poisons flooding his thoughts, hateful words telling him he'd be the last to see her alive, the last to hear her shallow, uneven breaths.

Severus closed his eyes, focusing on the cold, empty room of his mind. His emotions and doubts settled behind thick walls, hidden even from himself. With deliberately even steps, he left the room and went downstairs. Thankful that the apparition did not manifest itself again, he walked to the fireplace, closed his eyes, and Flooed into the cold, empty office he called home.

Three

Chapter 3 of 4

Picks up mid-DH. The torture at Malfoy Manor left Hermione in bad shape. Desperate, she put her life in the hands of a man she shouldn't trust, hoping that Albus Dumbledore was right after all. Chapter Three: Memory

Thanks to all of you reading and reviewing and simply stopping by to see the story. It brightens my day.

Thanks again to magicalpresence and her magnificent beta work, ideas, and support!

Love,

Kristine

A lot of dialogue in this chapter is taken directly from Chapter 23: Malfoy Manor of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J. K. Rowling. Any paragraph containing quoted or very closely paraphrased material will be marked with an asterisk. No infringement is intended. I simply admire the canon work and wish to integrate it into my little plot. I make no money from this.

"How is she, Severus?"

He didn't know how to answer the question. He didn't really know how she was, did he? "She's unconscious, kept in a stasis spell for now." Severus slipped the vial from his pocket and set it on the desk.

Albus looked at the little thing. "Did she give you that?"

"I didn't take it from her, if that's what you're asking." Despite the words, his voice carried little bite; his emotions were too contained for that at the moment. Severus turned from the portrait and drew his wand. There were wards to be set. An interruption would be costly.

"Were Harry and Ronald there?"

It took him a moment to register that nobody could actually come in the room without his permission. He cast the wards anyway; paranoia had served him well over the years.

Severus shook his head, finally realizing what the Headmaster had asked him. "Only Granger and the house elf were there. It seems that we're the only ones to know the Secret."

"That's quite a display of trust, Severus."

He scoffed, the ridiculous notion of *trust* causing a bit of feeling to slither through his walls. "She said herself that she was on the edge of delirium and she couldn't think of any other options."

Albus was quiet for too long after that, so Severus continued, "Most of the damage should be easy to fix, but her veins have turned a silvery color and there's a smell in the room I can't shake. I think that is what stumped whoever she was with."

"I see."

He swung around to eye the painting. A taciturn Albus was not a good sign. "What are you planning, old man?"

The old man in question held up his hands in a half-hearted display of innocence. "I can plan nothing at this stage, my boy, not without knowing more of Miss Granger's injuries."

He picked up the vial on the desk, gripping it perhaps a bit too hard. "Then I suppose I'll not prolong your suspense, Albus. I don't want to stand in the way of your scheming."

"That's not fair to say, Severus."

With a harsh laugh, Severus opened the cabinet on the other side of the office. "Isn't it?" He uncorked the vial and let the silvery substance fall into the basin.

Running his finger over the runes, Severus lowered his head into the mist.

The Malfoys' ornate drawing room held many memories for him.

Bellatrix, foolishly trying to seduce him to the Dark Lord's side with her lackluster wit and overbearing beauty.

Friendly drinks with Lucius, the display of trust that had actually seduced him to the Dark Lord's side.

A warm summer evening that had been his first meeting with the Death Eaters.

A cold spring night that had been his first meeting with the Death Eaters as a spy.

Countless other pieces of his life flooded him as this new, foreign memory solidified around him, but in the moment he saw Hermione Granger, he knew ~~that~~*this* would be what would occupy his mind should he ever set foot in the room again.

Fenrir Greyback, that sorry piece of filth, slid one dirty hand across her face and the other down her backside, crooning to her as Bellatrix cut her free from the ropes binding her to Potter, Weasley, Dean Thomas, and a goblin. "I'd be much obliged, Madam Lestrage, if I could have the Mudblood after you've finished," he cooed. "I'm not too particular about the state of her, long as the skin's still on her, see."

Granger didn't flinch under his caresses. She ignored him altogether; her eyes were focused over his shoulder, on Weasley as he pleaded to take her place. Even with the blood drained from her face, she looked calm and determined.

"It'll be okay, Ron," she said softly. "I'll be fine. Really, you'll see. It'll be okay."

Laughing, Greyback leaned in and pressed his lips to her neck, no doubt letting his teeth graze over her skin. Still, Granger held firm and murmured broken reassurances, eyes locked with Weasley's.

"Don't worry, little blood traitor," Bellatrix sang sweetly. Too sweetly. Severus steeled himself. "You can take the Mudblood's place when she dies." She tossed Greyback a wand. "Take them downstairs, wolf. Unharmed."

Greyback complied, brandishing his wand before him to push the struggling boys and half-conscious goblin out of the room, but Severus watched Bellatrix. Her face was contorted in a fury that Severus had never seen her endure. It was understandable, in her peculiar way. The Dark Lord was her entire reason for life, for existing. If he found out that she had lost the Sword of Gryffindor...though she'd never had it, really...everything she had would disappear in an instant.

"Where did you get that sword, girl?" Bella's voice was painful to hear, far beyond nails on a chalkboard.

"We found it in a forest," Granger answered, voice steady and eyes calm. Severus got the strange feeling that she was managing a vague sort of Occlumency; he

recognized the stony, indifferent look on her face as one he often wore.

The madwoman stalked around the room, her wand sparking and flaring as she eyed Granger. *Sectumsempra*," she whispered.

Despite himself, Severus shivered at the intensity in her voice.

Cuts bloomed across Granger's face and arms. They were shallow enough, but she stumbled forward as the blood began to drip down her body. "It was in the Forest of Dean, Madam Lestrangle," the girl said quietly.

"You *dare* lie to me!" she snapped, wand hand flying. A wobbling liquid mass appeared above Granger's head and Severus smelled vinegar.

"What a terribly Muggle way to inflict pain, Bella." Lucius laughed with approval. "Very appropriate."

The vinegar spilled over Granger, mixing with her blood. She cried out and bent over, groaning as her skin burned.

"Tell the truth, Mudblood," Bellatrix ground out, eyes flashing with wild rage.

With slight difficulty, Granger turned her bloodied face up and looked her in the eye. Brave girl. "That was the truth."

"*Crucio!*" Bellatrix shrieked, all pretenses of composure gone. "Where did you get the sword?"

The groans grew into a terrible scream as she fell to the ground. Granger was holding back; Severus was sure of it. He could see her fighting for control, even as her body twitched and twisted.

Several minutes passed before Bellatrix lifted the curse, her own body heaving as she drew breath. Holding the Cruciatus so long could be dangerous for both involved, even for as experienced a practitioner as Bella. The madwoman advanced, silver knife trading places with her wand. Pulling the girl up by her neck, she drew the blade across Granger's arm with an angry hiss.

The poor girl screamed again, dropping to the floor and unable to process the questions that Bellatrix now shouted at her. Severus didn't hear them either; he was transfixed by the blade that Bella yanked back. It was glowing as it sucked the blood into itself.

He had seen it before. That blade was a wicked one, devised by Rodolphus before Azkaban stole his vicious brand of intelligence away. He had never seen it in action, but as Severus watched, the veins in Granger's arm begin to shine with silver.

The silver-blue spider web, then. That would be... difficult.

"I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword?*Where?*" Her wand descended again, and boils exploded across her skin. The Furnunculus.*

"We found it...we found it...PLEASE!" Granger cried. Blood and vinegar were drying on her face, and the boils he could see churned with magic and putrid liquid. It nearly hurt him, watching her squirm with discomfort as she tried to relieve the pressure on the sores.*

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth!*tell the truth!*" Bellatrix's face was flushed with her anger. Severus had never seen her look so alive. "*Sectumsempra!*"*

Granger screamed again, the sound echoing off the well-adorned walls. It was fortunate, Severus thought, that Bellatrix did not possess the personal, deep-running hatred that was necessary for the curse to hit with its full force. Prejudice and anger wouldn't cut deep enough to kill.

That observation didn't help the girl writhing on the ground. By her count and by the amount of damage he'd seen on her, that was the last of Sectumsempra. At least there was that.

The screams lessened and, with a jolt of admiration, Severus realized that Granger was speaking through her pain. "The forest! We found it in the forest!"

Bellatrix growled, lunging to the ground with her knife and wand. She yanked up Granger's shirt so she could press the tip of the blade over her heart. "What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!"*

Granger just shook her head. The blade slipped against her skin. Blood was absorbed nearly as quickly as it spilled and a new line of silver crept into Granger's veins.

"What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME!*CRUCIO!*"*

The girl screamed and jerked and twisted beneath Bellatrix, who held the knife still. The second Cruciatus, much more intense than the last.

"How did you get into my vault? Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"*

Bella still hadn't let up on the curse when she stood up. Her wand arm held steady.

"We only met him tonight!" Granger was sobbing through the pain of the curse now, her words not much more than half-formed gasps for air. "We've never been inside your vault..." Her body shook. "It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"*

"A copy?" screeched Bellatrix as she released the spell. She threw her hands in the air and turned away from the shivering girl. "Oh, a likely story!" She began to mutter, obviously distressed. This was not going how she wanted. She threw a purple shower of light at the girl and Severus was grateful to see it was nothing more than unleashed energy. It wouldn't complicate anything.*

"But we can find out easily!" Lucius said, almost as smooth as he'd ever been. "Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"*

Draco...wretched, thin Draco...left the room silently with an almost grateful look on his face. Severus wondered if anybody but Narcissa noticed how badly he was shaking. He empathized. They'd both seen torture at the hands of the lovely, talented Bellatrix Lestrangle, but the game had changed with Hermione Granger at the receiving end of that walnut wand.

The girl's sobs turned to retching during her brief reprieve. Bellatrix paced, occasionally slinging sparks toward Granger, though none actually hit her.

Draco returned with the goblin, who was immediately shoved to the floor. He was half-awake when he came into the room, but the sight of Bellatrix's twisted face seemed to startle him to full consciousness.

A loud *bang!* from below stopped Bellatrix from beginning her interrogation.

Lucius's head snapped toward the door. He had gotten a bit jumpy since Severus had seen him last. Of course, being around a seething Bellatrix would make all but the Dark Lord nervous. "What was that? Did you hear that? What was that noise in the cellar? Draco...no, call Wormtail! Make him go and check!"*

Again, Draco walked from the room without a word, his face blank. He really was broken, wasn't he?

Bellatrix, furious at the interruption, had taken the chance to throw an angry *Crucio!* at Granger. Her body danced with the pain and screams tore from her throat, but Severus got the impression that it was mere reflex acting now. Her eyes were empty and her movements loose. She was still conscious, as the memory was intact, but her mind had stopped resisting and let go of the pain.

Bellatrix leered at the goblin. "I think the Mudblood provides enough motivation for you to be truthful?"

The goblin nodded earnestly, his eyes darting from Bella's anger to Granger's still thrashing body. Bellatrix's lips twisted into a horrifying grin. She enjoyed torture, even while consumed with fury.

The curse was released for the third time, and Bellatrix nodded at Narcissa, who handed the Sword over to the goblin.

"Well, is it the true sword?" Bellatrix sneered, wand raised in warning.*

He turned the sword over, ran his fingers down the hilt and blade. "No, it's a fake." *

The goblin lied. Surely he knew that this was the real thing, but he lied? Good. This was good.

"Are you sure? Quite sure?" Bellatrix was almost childlike with hope.*

"Yes."*

The anger and desperation drained from her face. She practically hummed with glee as she flicked her wand at the goblin, cutting his face and kicking him away. "And now, we call the Dark Lord!" she crowed, ecstasy lighting her face. She pushed her sleeve back and pressed her forefinger to the Dark Mark there. "And I think we can dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her."*

The werewolf had just enough time to take a step toward the motionless Miss Granger before all hell broke loose. Weasley burst through the door, Potter behind him. Curses and hexes flashed through the air, but Severus kept his attention focused on Granger's still body. He had to know if anything else hit her.

Bellatrix had her body now, pulled her up and pressed the silver knife to the young woman's throat. Little drops of blood seeped out of the shallow slice and trembled over the glowing blade before disappearing altogether. The silver lines had already traced her neck, and those nearest the new cut grew thicker and stronger.

At a groaning sound from the ceiling, Bellatrix jumped to the side, dropping Granger to the ground. An exquisite, priceless chandelier fell, crashing onto Granger's lifeless body. The cuts from the broken glass barely mattered; the girl's skin was carved to pieces. Greyback wouldn't enjoy her so much now.

The memory dissolved just as Weasley removed her from the wreckage.

Finally, Granger had slipped into the mercy of unconsciousness and Severus was slipped back into the Headmaster's office.

He reached into the back of the cabinet, pulling out the liquor that Dumbledore had stashed there years ago.

"That bad?"

Severus poured a finger of Firewhiskey with barely shaking hands. "Bella was desperate."

"And as imaginative as ever, I'd guess."

A bitter sound escaped the current Headmaster as he finally turned to face the one he'd replaced. "In the opening act, she poured vinegar on the girl's cuts."

Albus looked grim, but patient. He was waiting for Severus to say it. Always waiting, that man. Damn his patience and uncomfortable silences.

"Most of it was standard enough...Cruciatus, Sectumsempra, boils, bruises." He swallowed the whiskey with an expressionless face and stared at the blank patch of wall beside the portrait. Severus let the silence grow.

After a moment, Albus's voice...cold, but gentler than he'd ever heard it...broke in. "And the silver veins?"

Severus groaned. It wasn't easy to admit this. "Do you remember how Rodolphus Lestrangle was in school, before all of this?" The man in the portrait nodded gravely before Severus continued. "Always a new spell, a new potion to show off. Incredibly crude efforts with limited results, but innovative enough to draw the Dark Lord's favor." He looked at the floor with a deep breath. "He got better with... time."

He couldn't quite say "... *with my assistance.*"

"What was it, Severus?"

"A silver knife. The properties of the silver alloy were perfect for holding the enchantments in place. Exquisitely designed, and probably the most elegant of Lestrangle's work." Another deep breath. "The blade draws power from the blood it spills. It absorbs the magic of the wizard or witch into its blade, using it to both sharpen the edge and release a slow-spreading magic into the bloodstream. The blood turns to a living potion...a variation on the Animus Exuro...that feeds on the magic and the mind of the person infected."

Silence settled in again as both men processed the half-confession, the said and unsaid words. The other portraits were listening in; Severus could feel their eyes. Dilys Derwent dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Well?" the reedy voice of Phineas Nigellus Black demanded. "What's to become of Miss Granger?"

With that, questions and exclamations burst from each portrait in the room. Severus thought he could hear a witch sobbing hysterically. Had they become attached to Miss Granger from afar? Or was the horror of a dying student too much to bear?

"How far has it progressed?" Albus's question cut through the rest, straight through the din and into Severus. He was reminded of the ghostly Dumbledore at Grimmauld Place as, once again, his intact soul made itself known.

The other portraits quieted as Severus murmured his reply. "Her whole right arm, half her torso, and her neck and face."

Another round of sobs and whispers and questions broke out, once again silenced by a question from Albus Bloody Dumbledore.

"Can you keep her alive long enough for Tom to fall? Harry must not be distracted now."

Severus's black eyes snapped to Albus with a snarled "Certainly." The whiskey glass shattered against the picture frame, shards embedding in the canvas.

Without another word, the current Headmaster of Hogwarts disappeared into his quarters, leaving behind a wall full of his sputtering, sobbing predecessors.

Four

Chapter 4 of 4

Picks up mid-DH. The torture at Malfoy Manor left Hermione in bad shape. Desperate, she put her life in the hands of a man she shouldn't trust, hoping that Albus Dumbledore was right after all. Chapter Four: Waking Hermione

By the next afternoon, Severus had regained his control and repaired the painting. Albus wasn't in it.

It had been almost a year since he had slipped like that, flying into a rage and taunting Potter as he ran to the Forest like the coward he had been that night. Then, it had been humiliating: a reminder that without his masters, he had no control over himself.

Last night, though, had been liberating. Being angry on someone else's behalf was certainly different from losing his temper over wounded pride. It was a rush that had fueled a full night's worth of research.

Books were stacked high around the room and parchment covered his desk. His once-empty office no longer echoed every sound. He couldn't check on Miss Granger until after the staff meeting tonight, but he had used the time he had today to begin categorizing his notes on Animus Exuro and anything else he could think of.

Nobody had ever survived Animus Exuro; according to his research, very few lived six weeks past being dosed. But not much had been tried to counteract the potion either, and he wasn't one of the highest regarded Potions experts in Britain for nothing.

Few of the ingredients had true antidotes, but several could be suppressed long enough for him to experiment and brew treatment for the Animus. The ingredients he needed were rare and pricey; one could only be useful if harvested during the rise of a full moon on an equinox. He would have to go to the Potions storeroom for some of them and sneak them out from under Slughorn's fat nose.

Stealing from the Potions stores to save the life of his Potions storeroom thief...the humor, grim though it was, was not lost on him.

He would need to analyze her blood first and test the makeup of the potion, as well as potential antidotes. Several samples would be best, though he would, of course, need to take such samples carefully. Miss Granger had lost a lot of weight and likely a lot of blood. Losing even the blood tainted with the magic of Animus could be problematic for the girl.

The day passed too slowly for his taste. More than once, he stared at the beaten, worn out watch on his left wrist just to prove to himself that time was, in fact, moving. Each glance at the dull face burned in his mind...surely more time had passed.

It felt as though ten days had gone by before Severus found himself striding into the staff meeting, long robes whipping behind him. Murmured greetings reached his ears, but he returned them with silence. The less he participated, the less he encouraged them, the faster this would end.

The room stilled as he pulled back his chair and sat down. Though the Carrows technically shared the position of Deputy, it was Minerva who had parchment and quill charmed and ready to record the meeting.

"I have little business for you tonight, only reminders. First, on each Saturday evening, each professor is to submit a full report of the students he or she has given detention in the previous week. As a whole, your adherence to this part of your jobs has been, at best, disastrous this year. You are to include the student's name, offense, and manner of discipline."

Alecto managed to contain her shock at the admonishment, though her brother could not.

"How're we supposed t'keep up wit' this rabble, hmm?" the man sputtered. "I'm havin' t'give out detentions right 'n' left in me classes. There be no way to keep track!"

"Really, Amycus? I have had fewer disciplinary issues in my classes than in any year I can remember," Pomona said, grey curls bouncing as she turned to face her coworker.

Flitwick's squeaky voice cut in just as Alecto drew breath to defend her brother. "There are several charms which could work well to automatically record the information you need. If you combine them appropriately, the charms could even rate and record the severity of the student's offense and create a cumulative system in which the behavior of individual students could be tracked over time. The incantation begins with..."

"After the meeting, Filius. We have other business," interrupted Severus. If he had not cut the small wizard off, they would have sat through a full history of the charm, its variations, and other trivial information. Flitwick's intervention had been timely, but it did not take long for Severus to grow exasperated with him.

"Yes, Headmaster, of course."

"Secondly, the Wizarding Examinations Authority has requested that each Head of House submit a full roster of students taking the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. examinations by the end of next week. Their lists have not been able to keep up with the recent changes in enrollment."

Severus looked around the table to meet the eyes of each Head of House. Slughorn gave him a resigned nod; Filius nodded enthusiastically enough that the long-legged chair he sat in wobbled. Pomona smiled.

Minerva held his gaze without moving for a full five ticks of his watch's second hand, then looked down briefly. That would be good enough for the moment.

"Excellent. My final piece of business is to remind professors that a representative from the Ministry will be attending and reviewing classes to ensure that you have kept your curriculum within the guidelines set forth by the Ministry and myself. The visits will occur without warning. Do not disgrace yourselves or this school."

A round of nods acknowledged the warning in his voice. Several faces even appeared to be somewhat grateful, notably Sybill's.

A grimace set on Severus's lips. "With that settled, if any of you have new business to discuss, this is your time to speak." Severus was always reluctant to open the floor for fear of Carrow stupidity occupying the remainder of the evening.

Tonight, however, brother and sister were silent. It was, surprisingly, Firenze who spoke up.

"Headmaster, I have business."

Curious, Severus waved him to continue.

"During my nightly study of the heavens, there were anomalies which puzzle me. Together, they seem to indicate that the date of completion for the continued war has

changed again. The stars continue to hide the date, but the most recent movements imply that there are actions to be taken soon which carry such influence that they could decide the battle before it begins. It seems that uncertainty over the wellbeing of a major player has obscured the path."

"Damn horse," muttered a Carrow. Severus could not decide which and honestly did not care. What little patience he had for centaur nonsense was surely in short supply this night; only a genuine interest in the wellbeing of a certain "major player" kept him listening.

Firenze's nostrils flared, but he carried on. "Headmaster, I have reason to believe that a woman born under Mercury is the key finalizing the date of the war's end."

"Ah, but I have seen this as well!" Sybill exclaimed, her breathy, alcohol-scented voice wavering with excitement. "A woman born under Mercury always carries great influence in times such as these! Her determination and loyalty! Her courage and intelligence! There is one at the center of these times, though clouded by the fickleness of the Sight!"

"Perhaps your Inner Eye would be a mite more reliable if you stopped poisoning it with cooking sherry, Sybill," snapped Minerva.

"It seems we have strayed from the business at hand," Severus said coldly, drowning out Sybill's outrage. "If we have nothing more to discuss than vague inclinations about the future, I believe that we have a school to run." He stood, the chair scraping and groaning. "Dismissed."

With Firenze's warnings clamoring in his mind, Severus strode from the room as quickly as possible. A woman born under Mercury. Granger was born in September; that he knew. And her wellbeing was certainly under question.

It did not take him long to prepare to leave once he returned to the Headmaster's office, but, as he stood in front of the fireplace, Severus had trouble calling enough courage and grim determination to continue into the Floo.

Knowing the challenge he faced in Miss Granger's body both comforted and disquieted him. It was like standing before the Dark Lord, a known entity with the full capacity to turn on him in an instant. This potion, this Animus Exuro, was something he knew quite well, but part of knowing it was knowing that he could very well fail.

"You will not be able to help her from here, my boy," Phineas Black murmured in his wheezing voice.

"Of course not," Severus replied. He tossed the Floo Powder into the flames and stepped onto the hearth.

Severus took a deep breath as he examined her skin. The Stasis Charm was keeping the potion from spreading for the time being, and he had no idea how quickly it would spread once it broke.

He sighed. She had to be woken. He couldn't treat her without knowing how badly her magic and mind had deteriorated so far, and he could not quite bring himself to draw blood without her consent.

She had said that the spell would break with his speaking her name. He hoped that a half-dead girl and a house-elf had managed not to bungle that spell.

Severus stepped back from the bed, watching the young woman intently.

"Miss Granger," he murmured.

No movement.

"Miss Granger."

Nothing.

"Hermione?"

She still wasn't waking.

What was her middle name? He thought it might be Jane. Why hadn't he looked this up before coming here? He was usually so thorough when it came to research.

"Hermione Jane Granger."

He watched, frozen in place as he waited for a change. When none came, he turned and began to pace. What if the Stasis Charm hadn't slowed progress enough and she would never regain consciousness? What if she had miscast the Charm and made it permanent?

Severus ran his long fingers through his hair and stared at the wall. It seemed too soon, but if she had already passed into the final stage, he would have to inform Arthur.

A brief burning sensation hit him in the neck. "Don't take another step."

Her voice, no more than a choked whisper, was much more commanding and authoritative than he'd remembered. Grown up, even.

"Drop your wand and turn around."

His wand clattered to the floor as he turned around slowly. "Good evening, Miss Granger," Severus said calmly, hoping to reassure her.

The little witch was standing beside the bed, her wand aimed at his chest and a determined expression on her face that almost masked the tremors that ran through her body. "Tell me something only Professor Snape would know." Impertinent, but he understood the paranoia, had lived it time and time again.

"I taught you Potions for five years and have always believed you to be a showy know-it-all with a penchant for asking incessant questions and overstepping your place in my classroom."

The grip on her wand tightened and the slightest hint of red light sparked from the tip. "True enough, but anybody would know that ~~Professor~~. Try again, but this time, make it count. You won't get another chance."

"Good girl," he murmured. The sparks brightened at the surely unexpected compliment, and he hastened to set her mind at ease. "In your first year, you set fire to my cloak. In your second, you solved the mystery of the basilisk." The look on her face had softened slightly, but he continued. "Third year, you hexed me in the Shrieking Shack. The next year, I teased you about your overly large front teeth. In your fifth, you led Dolores Umbridge into the Forbidden into the herd of centaurs." The corner of his mouth slipped upwards. Watching Umbridge twitch at the sound of hooves was a very fond memory. "And last year, Miss Granger, I found Cormac McLaggen with his hands hexed together after Slughorn's Christmas party. Does that suffice?"

Her wand lowered as relief washed over her face. He tried not to think about what it meant that she was more afraid of a stranger than the man she knew had killed Albus Dumbledore. "I don't know anything about that last one, Professor."

"I'm sure you don't," he said, watching her closely. From the way her eyes lowered and the shy smile pulling at her mouth, she should have been blushing. Even in the dim light, he could see that her cheeks weren't turning pink, but silver.

Her shoulders were shaking. She had to be cold, standing there in nothing but an oversized t-shirt. She wouldn't be able to stand for much longer, and she really needed to

be warm. And he really didn't need to be standing in the room with a half-naked student.

"Miss Granger, if I have proven my identity to your satisfaction, I believe it would be best for you to sit down and cover up. You are overtaxing yourself."

A shiver of relief shook through her body as she sat on the edge of the bed. She weakly pulled the thin blanket over her shoulders. Her eyelids were drooping and her body hunched, but she held out an arm to examine herself. "You were able to heal the cuts?"

"Yes."

"You left the boils. They were mostly healed, and I assume you didn't want to chance a reaction in mixing healings. Treatment for exposure to the Cruciatus Curse would be difficult alone, so no need to risk it."

Her mind hadn't been affected yet, then. She was definitely tired and certainly rambling, but she was thinking as reasonably and excessively as before. "Very good so far, Miss Granger."

She laughed weakly, the dry husk of her voice harsh. "That was the easy part, of course. The silver veins I cannot account for. It's like some of my blood has changed into a weird potion or something." She looked at him, the question written plainly across her face.

"A sound deduction." Severus returned her look as evenly as he could. "The blade Bellatrix cut you with was enchanted to release a magical agent into your bloodstream. It reacts with your blood to make a potion similar to the Animus Exuro." He paused to watch her, half hoping that she knew what it was and that he wouldn't have to explain.

He was not disappointed. She had always been his best student.

"Animus Exuro, the Soul-Burner." She stared at the floor with empty eyes, her words textbook perfect. "A misnomer, as the potion burns not the soul but the affected wizard's mental and magical control. The name likely finds root in a misunderstanding of the symptoms; the victim will eventually resemble a recipient of a Dementor's Kiss."

He took a step toward the bed and stopped. Who was he to comfort a dying girl? Lestrangle would have never pulled off an enchantment strong enough for that knife if it weren't for him. He carried her blood on his hands.

Her body was shaking again, convulsing with dry sobs. The blanket had slipped from her shoulders, and she began to shiver with the cold. He couldn't abide that. Severus walked to her side, careful to move slowly. He replaced the blanket and smoothed out the bedsheets. In a moment he would later view as a display of sheer insanity, he sat down next to her, elbows on his knees and head in his hands.

She looked up at him after a moment, all trembling lips and red eyes and grim Gryffindor determination. He could see her staring at him even as his hair half-hid her from sight.

"I don't have a lot of time, do I, Professor?"

"No, Miss Granger, you do not," he murmured in reply.

She was leaning against him now; she was probably unable to support herself. He shifted, uncomfortable with the contact. Severus turned to look down at her shivering frame.

"I'm afraid," she whispered, looking straight ahead.

She should be afraid. "I need to take a sample of your blood, Miss Granger."

"There is no cure, Professor Snape. You know that."

"I'm hoping to slow the effects long enough for you to continue helping Mr. Potter."

"They don't need to see me like this."

"No, but they do need to see you. Hold out your arm."

He touched his wand to a thick silver line, slicing the skin with the slightest magical force. The silver-blue potion trickled out into a small flask from his robes. They both watched the thick liquid as it filled the container.

"You need to sleep, Miss Granger."

"I know."

"Perhaps you should lay down, then?"

"Perhaps."

She made no move to lay down, simply continuing to stare at her arm.

He stood up, tucking the vial of her blood...his potion...into his robes. "Miss Granger?"

Slowly, she turned her face to his. "Yes, Professor?"

"Lay down. Go to sleep."

Her movements were halting and uncomfortable to watch, but Severus did not move to help her. There would be time enough for that later; she needed to savor this independence while she had it.

She pulled her body up on the bed and rolled on her side so she could see him. The nightshirt left her legs bare to his sight; there were scars and bruises there too, but he did not see the discoloration of the Animus Exuro yet.

"My middle name is Jean, Professor," she said just as he began to turn.

"I know that, Miss Granger."

"You called me Hermione *Jane* Granger, Professor Snape. I do not share a name with the despicable Madame Umbridge."

He laughed, the sound hollow in the sick feeling room. The majority of the stench had been cleaned away and breaking the stasis spell had broken the cold atmosphere, but the one particularly offensive smell remained. It was the potion; he knew that now. It made the room feel like the tomb it was and even his short, humorless laugh seemed out of place in such a death-painted place.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger. I misspoke."

"Of course, Professor."

"I will return as soon as I can. Will you be requiring anything? Clothes, food, toiletries?"

"Kreacher will take care of those things, thank you."

"Of course, Miss Granger."

He turned to leave, the sight of her pale, weary face too much for the night.

"Professor?"

Severus kept his face toward the door. He would not turn around.

"I should not have been surprised that you came to help. I am sorry that I doubted you were on our side. You are a much better man than any of us gave you credit for, and you did not have to do this for me. Thank you." The words came out in a strained whisper, but Severus cherished each one as though it were a sermon shouted from the mountains.

"You're welcome, Miss Granger."

He left the room and the house, her words ringing in his head.