

Chasing the Domino

by zhangers

Dumbledore must've seen it so clearly. Cause begets event begets event begets event and at the end of the chain was a conclusion of his own making. Fate's finger trembled and that was all it took to lose them the world. Friendless and a wanted witch in Voldemort's Britain, Hermione Granger hides a secret she cannot remember. Her hunters are many – not least of all Severus Snape.

The Topple

Chapter 1 of 5

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Chapter 1: The Topple

Dumbledore saw the whole picture, laid out in all its elegance and intricacy before him. He saw how the pieces would fall had already fallen in his mind. Cause begets event begets event again, and at the end of it was a design of his own making.

That's the trouble with chessmasters. Grand plans are full of moving parts, and they always manage to be surprised when not everything functions as they meant.

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There was a peculiar grinding noise from above. Hermione realised what it was just a second before everyone else. With all her might, she twisted in Bellatrix's grip, and the Death Eater dropped her onto the hard floor to save herself. Hermione threw herself out of the way just in time and felt the chains and crystal explode at her heels.

Ron's calloused hands scrabbled for hers in the debris, and she was dragged to her feet by his rough, strong grip. She felt a sting and looked down to see blood flowing down both their palms. Harry was a blur at the edge of her vision. He had taken the chance to move. Before either of them could stop him, he leapt over the armchair towards where Malfoy was crouching, face glistening with blood.

Horror struck and frozen to the spot, Hermione could only watch as they grappled on the ground. Everything was in slow motion. They rolled amongst the debris, for a moment unnoticed by the Death Eaters around them. When they broke apart, Harry clutched two wands in his hand. He whirled around and aimed both at Greyback.

"Stupefy!" yelled Harry. The double force of the spell lifted Greyback off his feet. Draco, who still had his own wand, brandished it towards them at the same moment, and by the mercy of timing, the airborne werewolf took the full force of the third spell and shielded them.

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The Dark Lord sat on his throne with Nagini coiled at his feet.

Before him, Dumbledore's death swirled in the Pensieve. The figures of the old man, Snape and Draco Malfoy had risen above the shimmery surface and enacted the moment over and over again before his reptilian gaze.

He turned the Elder Wand over in his skeletal fingers, his mind absorbed by the scene.

"And yet, Nagini," he whispered, allowing the snake to slither slowly over his feet. "And yet it does not work as it should."

He narrowed his scarlet eyes at the tableau, as if willing the answer to come to him. Before his gaze Draco disarmed Dumbledore and failed to kill him yet again.

The Dark Lord flicked his wand and the memories swirled and changed. Dumbledore and Draco dissolved and reformed as the frightened, frail figure of the wandmaker Ollivander.

"Allegiances?" babbled the wandmaker. "The Killing Curse is a way to turn a wand, but a wand's heart is unpredictable. Most wands are easily won by disarming charms and some may even be removed by nonmagical means if the wand considers the engagement a duel. A wand appraises all new owners, and if the rightful owner does not claim it, it may form a new attachment based on merit."

The figure of Ollivander dissolved and Draco Malfoy reappeared. Once again, he disarmed Dumbledore, and the Elder Wand flew out of sight. A few moments later, the figure of Severus Snape grew from the swirling fog and killed Dumbledore again.

"Oh, Nagini..." whispered the Dark Lord, as he considered the problem.

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"I have thought long and hard, Severus... do you know why I have called you back from the battle?"

A little voice told her to get away, before Harry did something reckless, but she was glued to the terrible tableau in front of them. From their hiding place, Hermione could see Snape in profile with his face turned up towards Nagini. They were very close too close and she could see each familiar detail that a year's absence had made even harsher than she recalled. Those cold black eyes somehow looked more desperate, and those thin lips now formed an absolutely straight and bloodless line. It was not a good sign.

"No, my lord," said Snape. "But I beg you let me return to the battle let me find Potter and bring him."

"You are beginning to sound like Lucius, Severus. As I have told you, the boy does not need finding. He will come to me before the end. No... I require another service of you."

"M my lord?"

Hermione almost gasped. In all the years, she had never heard Snape's voice tremble. The feeling of unease grew more insistent. This was not a good place to be at all. She nudged Harry again to get them moving, but he shook her off. She glanced across at Ron and widened her eyes meaningfully. He gave Harry a sidelong look and shook his head. 'Let him,' he mouthed, over Harry's shoulder.

"You have been very valuable to me very valuable."

"My lord knows that I seek only to serve him" Snape sounded so flat, and his face, from what Hermione could see, had gone deathly white. It was odd to see Snape afraid and, even though she reviled him, for a shortlived moment Hermione almost felt something on his behalf.

"Let me go back and bring you the boy"

"I have told you no!" hissed Voldemort.

The terrible sound seemed to continue even when he had shut his mouth, and with a shudder Hermione realised that Nagini's bubble was moving, hovering in the air between Voldemort and Snape.

With a jolt, she realised what would happen next.

"My concern at the moment is what should happen when I finally meet the boy. Why did both the wands I used fail against Harry Potter? My wand of yew did everything which I asked of it, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Olivander told me under torture of the twin cores and for me to take another's wand. But Lucius's wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."

"My lord," said Snape, whose voice was beginning to fail him, "I have no explanation for this. But, please, let me be of service"

But Hermione could see that the cause was lost. Voldemort was no longer listening, and Snape, she thought, would soon be dead.

"I sought a third wand, Severus. The Elder wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore."

Snape finally looked away from the snake and at his master. His eyes were blank and dull, though she thought something on his face was twitching*Occlumency won't save you*, she thought.

"All this long night, when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here, wondering, wondering why the Elder Wand refused to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner... and I think I have the answer."

Snape did not speak.

Hermione did not breathe.

"Perhaps you already know it? You are a clever man, after all, Severus. I wonder how long you have known and not told me?"

"Forgive me, m-my lord. I would wish but I cannot the Vow-"

"Yes, I understand how the Unbreakable Vow functions, Severus. I shall kill Draco Malfoy myself."

Snape looked fractionally relieved, but it was not to be long-lived. The great bubble moved towards him, and he stumbled backwards as the snake came closer and closer.

"My lord - please!"

Voldemort waved a hand lazily, and the great bubble descended upon Snape, swallowing him.

"No doubt you will be compelled to stop me, Severus. I will relieve you of such a need."

The snake struck him on the collar with a mighty hiss, her teeth sinking deep and tearing away robe and skin alike. Snape screamed and would have fallen if the bubble did

not hold him prisoner. The snake delivered a torrent of blows, its neck arching back and forth in a blur, like a whip.

"I do not take lightly to *my* servants making vows to another master," said Voldemort when at last the bubble spat Snape out onto the floor.

"No, my lord, please, forgive me" begged Snape in a wet, gargling voice. He had lost all colour, and blood gushed out of his neck at an alarming rate. His wand lay forgotten at his side all the good it could do against the Dark Lord and Voldemort summoned it with a lazy flick.

"Perhaps, Severus, I will come back for you after my victory."

Then Voldemort and the snake were gone. Snape moaned, stirred, as if compelled after his master, and finally succumbed to unconsciousness as the dark stain of his blood spread across the rotten wooden planks like a glistening, gory rose.

"Let's go," said Harry, shakily. "We can't let him get Draco if he's Master of the Elder wand..."

"Right." Ron looked almost as pale as Snape.

Hermione nodded but did not follow the two boys immediately. Instead, she pulled a bottle of dittany from her bag and sent it through the gap. It floated to Snape where it uncorked itself and poured over his wounds. The potion hissed as it knitted his flesh.

"Hermione!" called Harry.

"Coming!" she returned. *Why had she done that?* she thought. *Why didn't she just let the traitor die?*

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Hermione ran blindly into the Forest. She couldn't risk a light, or care in where she was going. The dark was filled with noises screams, sobs and obscene shrieks of joy and it only mattered that she was running away from it.

Just behind her were Neville and Luna, and ahead of her she could just make out Ginny's red hair in the meagre moonlight. The four of them were all that was left, she was sure, and they had to get away. Voldemort would kill them and besides, Neville had the sword and Ginny had taken Harry's cloak, though they didn't know what either truly was. She had to get the Hallow and the sword to safety, it was the only way, their last hope...

Somewhere not far behind them was a Death Eater she had no idea which one and every now and then he cast a jet of green light through them that lit their path and no doubt betrayed their silhouettes.

"Her my knee!" panted Neville, "We have to split!"

She knew he was right, though she hated the thought. Another jet of green soared past, so close that it ruffled her hair.

"Alright!" she shouted back, "NOW!"

Ginny peeled off to the left between two thickets, and with a bound Hermione followed.

Ginny was fast on foot much faster than her and it was hard to keep up. As they ran, the forest grew darker and quieter, until the sounds of the battle grew faded away behind them. With a mixture of relief and guilt, Hermione realised that the Death Eater had chosen to follow Neville and Luna.

They continued for what seemed like hours, until the forest became deathly silent, the trees too dense for even moonlight to pass through, and their running turned limp and powerless.

Hermione's chest ached, and she was glad when Ginny finally collapsed against a gnarled tree trunk. Hermione fell beside her, gasping and aching. Something cool and smooth brushed her leg the cloak. A sort of relief washed over her.

It was too dark to see Ginny's face, and Hermione was glad. At some point she had stopped crying herself, and her cheeks felt tight in the cold air.

They had lost and He had won. That was all it came down to, and now there was hardly any hope at all.

"Ginny," she whispered, when her heart had stopped pounding quite so hard. "You you and Harry's cloak have to get out of the country."

"What?" Ginny sounded too tired even to be incredulous.

"Just listen," said Hermione. With a sudden clarity, she could see what had to be done, could see it all unfolding like a map. It was mad, it was insane, but it just might work. And it had to be done quickly every minute spent there, like sitting ducks, would give Him more time to find them.

"He's won. We're all going to be killed if he finds us, but there might be a way to bring him down. I can't tell you what I mean not yet. But we'll need Harry's cloak for it, and and the stone. I don't know where the stone is anymore Harry had it last but if could find it or even if we just had the cloak maybe we could do something."

"Stone? Cloak?" Ginny sounded a bit more awake now, and properly confused. "Hermione what's going on? What did you and Harry and Ron get up to?"

"I can't tell you." The answer came out quickly, automatically; after all, the fewer that knew about it, the better.

There was a silence. Could she tell Ginny? She wished she could.

"I can't," she repeated. "No one can know about it, but it's the only hope we have."

There was a second silence. Hermione could feel Ginny's doubt and fear. For a moment she thought Ginny would call her mad and she wouldn't blame her but a cold hand slipped into her own and give a surprisingly strong squeeze.

"Alright. What do you want me to do?"

"Get out of the country for a bit. Do it soon and use Muggle transport. Head for France, but stay well away from Beauxbatons, just in case. Go to Lyon, or maybe Bordeaux. I'll find you when it's time. I don't know how, but I promise I will one day and hopefully soon. You have to find Neville and tell him the same and make sure he keeps the sword hidden. And Luna make sure you tell Luna about the stone and the cloak and ask her about the Deathly Hallows she might know what to do... and..."

Hermione paused, finding her tirade ended quite as suddenly as it began, and racked her brain for anything else useful to say.

"And... stay safe. Leave the rest to me," she said, with a conviction she did not feel.

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Author's Note: The stage is set... the real story starts next chapter!

Crow's Nest

Chapter 2 of 5

In hiding, out of hiding.

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Chapter 2: Crow's Nest

The alarm clock sounded a shrill, demanding cry at 5:30 am. Hermione Granger had been watching the numbers change since they read 4:43 and was, by now, almost fully awake. Her hand darted out of the sweaty covers and crashed down upon the plastic button before the thing could ring a second time. It was a horrible sound which she waited for in a dreadful sort of anticipation. She fumbled in the darkness for a moment, her hand making an awkward angle with the wall and not quite finding the light switch. Fingertips brushed against paper, and she heard a sheet rustle as it fell to the floor.

Her salt-encrusted eyes squinted ineffectually against the naked bulb which seemed to hang far too low above her bed. It filled the tiny little flat with a sickly yellow glare like a harvest moon and, for the briefest of moments, made everything look alien. The ugly shapes and shadows resolved themselves sluggishly into familiarity, and with some resistance, Hermione remembered.

She had moved into this new place over three weeks ago, but it didn't feel like hers yet. Every day she woke up in someone else's home, living the borrowed shell of someone else's life. This latest place was particularly offensive. It was a skinny rectangle, with stains on the ceiling, peeling walls and a pockmarked orange lino floor. Her bed took up the entire width of one end while the telly, kitchenette and bathroom were all crammed at the other. The whole thing was about the size of the Potions storeroom and even had the faint cloying mildew scent of the dungeons.

It didn't matter much as Hermione was going to move again next week. She was already packed or, rather, she had never really unpacked. She lived out of her suitcase. Her perfectly Muggle suitcase that weighed a ton and only had room for everything if she rolled up her shirts. She missed her beaded bag, but she couldn't risk the spell, assuming she could still do it in the first place. The brightest witch of her generation hadn't so much as waved a wand in months. The case lay beside the bed, locked. Ready, in other words. She could leave at that very moment if need be, and there wouldn't be a trace of her left here, if not for the mass of the posters she had begun to put up.

It was a misnomer to call them anything so grand. They were mostly sheets of Muggle printer paper, though there were some scraps of old parchment amongst the number. There were notes, letters, drawings and other scribbles that weren't quite any of those. She had begun making them when she was living in Hackney, and the tradition had followed her to three addresses since. She wasn't sure if they were anything of any worth, other than giving her something to do in the evenings. Hermione recalled something her mother used to say about trauma and psychology, but it didn't much help. She still had little idea of what had been done to her and none at all of what she could do about it.

All the same, she liked to have them. They covered every inch of the wall beside the bed. She had even begun to put them on the ceiling, so that at night they could be the last thing she looked at. She kept a thick stack of paper and a sharp pencil beside the alarm clock so that she could scrawl down the things she saw before they slipped through the cracks in her mind. It was quite ironic, really. She had once been so proud of her mind, as she had been so proud of her magic.

With a great effort and all at once, Hermione pushed herself out of bed. Her left foot made contact with the sticky, cold surface of the linoleum floor; her right landed on the bit of paper that had fallen.

It was a dreadful likeness of Harry's face and some barely legible scribbling. The word 'cloak', in capitals and underlined, caught her eye for a moment. She peeled him off her foot.

"Sorry, Harry," she muttered, her voice croaky from the nightmare.

She didn't put him back to his space on the wall, but instead took him with her to the kitchenette only a few steps away. On the fridge was a large drawing of Ron. It was an even worse likeness, but its expression made Hermione smile so she had pinned him there a few nights ago to grimace at her while she ate.

"Morning, Ron," she said, only slightly seriously. "Brought you company."

She moved the magnets around and managed to line their gazes up. It made her smile despite herself.

Foregoing breakfast altogether, she stepped into her cramped, lime-scaled bathroom and had a shower cold enough to turn her skin red. She put the usual stuff on her face being sure to cake it on thick enough so that she could barely recognise herself put on a dowdy outfit and managed to be out of the house by six.

With her coat collar turned up, she slipped silently into the street. The little lane was empty and quiet, its residents still sleeping. As always, she was the first waking creature of Raven Row.

This was Hermione's life now.

She hated it, but she knew that she was lucky to still have one.

It had been difficult, at first, when the streets had been crawling with Death Eaters, and she had been too frightened to use her Muggle bank accounts and had no idea where to find the right sorts of people. But that was over a year ago, and she was getting the hang of it now. She didn't like to use magic in case they were tracing her (or worse, in case she couldn't), but there were plenty of Muggle solutions to those in the know. Some bills pressed into an open hand in a certain alley bought a new name. Hair dye and makeup worked almost as well as a potion or a spell. Minimum wage jobs didn't ask too many questions.

Her name was Jane Puckle: she was a redhead, a failed student at the Art college and now a hotel floor scrubber.

It was a hateful life, but it would do until... Well. Hermione had no misgivings about this anymore. In the beginning, she had thought about making her life so many things. She had thought she would find the other survivors and reforge the Order. She had thought that she would avenge her friends. She had thought that she would undo what had been done to her.

'Until' was never to be. From time to time, as if proving her own sanity, she caught herself wondering why she clung on to such a life. Fortunately, the question of how to keep doing it usually pushed the problem of why to second place. She almost felt guilty, sometimes, of how easy it was to work, eat and sleep without thinking of the future. The same could not be said of the past.

As Hermione stepped down the street, she tucked these thoughts duly away and let her mind be absorbed by the material, mundane and Muggle.

She walked down the street to the station, she commuted, she walked up another street, she put on her work gear, pretended to care about the other girl who worked there, scrubbed.

Nothing remarkable happened until lunchtime.

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Snape was at his desk. It was an ostentatious thing in ebony and green dragon skin, and even had carved snakes. It had been a house-warming gift from Rabastan and Snape had to wonder if Lestrage hadn't based the gift on Lucius's tastes. Or even if it had been intended for Lucius, once upon another age.

The house still felt new, though it was where he spent all his time these days in the service of his Lord. He still did not understand the miracle of his survival or the greater miracle of the Dark Lord's forgiveness. He had not witnessed it first hand, but the story of Potter's defeat was of an effortless, humiliating one, and perhaps he had that to thank. Or perhaps the Dark Lord simply could not afford to lose another seasoned supporter, so many having fallen. He tried not to dwell too often on this. Snape had seen too much to step down such a slippery path. But his mind wandered more than it used to.

Whatever the reason, when the Dark Lord at last claimed his open victory and took his coronation as Sovereign of Britain, Severus Snape was given his place back and his share of the spoils besides. He was reinstated as Headmaster, made a member of the Wizengamot and 'special correspondent' of the new Minister. In truth, Snape had no real duties except to wait for the Dark Lord's call.

And brew a certain potion to his Lord's specification. Powdered Cinnabar, nectar of Ambrose, a bezoar, crushed amber, jelly of the African bee. And a full pint of Unicorn's Blood. Deep red and viscous with the scent of Frankincense. Cinnabar, Amber and Unicorn Blood were for preservation, obviously. Bezoar purges the body. Bee's jelly provides nourishment. Snape had considered every possible analysis of the draught. It was potent restorative a variant on the deathstopper for someone with a slowed metabolism and perhaps instability of mind.

But for whom? The Dark Lord was in no danger now Potter was dead and the Dark Lord was the master of the Elder Wand. He couldn't be killed even if anyone dared to try. Yet every month Snape made this curious potion and delivered it unquestioningly to the Dark Lord's own hand. To question openly was to die, now as much as ever, and Snape needed to live.

And live in more comfort than he was used to. What was a 'war hero' without the reward of a vault of gold and property?

So it was that Snape spent entire days at his ill-fitting desk serving the one master he had left. The work was generally a different flavour to what he had been used to for eighteen years, though on this day he felt an unbidden and largely unwanted return to form.

In the morning he'd had a Floo call from the Chief Peacekeeper. They had caught scent of Longbottom, Lovegood and Ginny Weasley on a port at Dover but had lost them again. Vanished into thin air. Undetectable, uncurable, unSummonable. Which could mean many things, but was especially suggestive of one.

Snape had spent the morning looking over the problem. Spread across the desk was his dossier on the Undesirables. A year old, they had been thumbed frequently and were beginning to curl at the edges. He lined them up and surveyed their faces coolly as they blinked up at him. A pathetically small number had survived the final battle. McGonagall and Aberforth were officially missing, as was Granger. He amended the sheets for Ginny Weasley, Longbottom and Luna Lovegood. Sighted at Dover.

There were now certain actions he must take and an urgency to his other project. He took out a bit of parchment and scrawled a quick note to the head of foreign affairs.

Mr Chang,

Alert the European Ministries of the Undesirables Neville Longbottom, Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood to arrive by boat or other means of Muggle transport. To be captured alive and sensible.

-S. Snape

For a moment he considered alerting the Dark Lord as well.

His Lord did not like to be kept ignorant of news, but neither did he like to be troubled for small matters. There had been no rebel act since the capture and execution of Molly Weasley six months ago, and these three would not concern the Dark Lord as much as Snape's continued efforts in finding McGonagall and Dumbledore's brother.

No. This was a mere crumb of ill news could wait.

There was, however, business that couldn't wait now, in light of these three. He had been wavering about it for a fortnight and had made over a dozen plans. It was time to finally realise one of them.

He quit the office and went upstairs to change out of his robes.

.....O.....

Hermione had dinner in a bistro on Charing Cross Road, opposite the Leaky Cauldron. It was too loud, too expensive and by far too close to the Wizarding World, but something in her that was daring and wild chose it before she had a chance to think. It was the sort of daring that was born from confused and reckless fear rather than courage. Tonight she needed to see the Leaky, to watch the people coming and going and to know what they were doing.

She was also too scared to go home. If they if he was watching her, then she had to stay where there was a good crowd to hide in. That much she had learnt.

The problem was, she still couldn't be sure. She had seen something, but she saw something at least once a fortnight. Paranoia was a part of being on the run.

She forced herself to stop feeling for a moment and really consider the evidence. In her head she ran over the entire thing again, trying to remember it exactly as it really happened.

There had been rain, and the lunch crowd had tracked mud all the way across the foyer. There had been a particularly stubborn patch that wouldn't shift by the lounges, and really, if she hadn't stood exactly there, she mightn't have seen him at all.

He was sitting in one the armchairs by the back wall, and from her perspective it was just possible to make out his profile, cast in shadow under the fringe of greasy hair, and a hand, scribbling in a thick journal.

She had lingered and watched him, making sure to keep her head bent low and only to observe from the corner of her eye. She had to admit that it could easily have been a Muggle man with a big nose. He wasn't dressed too strangely and he didn't look too out of place he was even using a ball-point pen.

Then, he was a half-blood and could surely impersonate a Muggle better than most wizards could. There was a horrible familiarity in the way he bent over and the way his hands moved as he wrote all sharp strokes and forceful turns - how often had she seen him do just that at his desk at the front of the class?

Then there was the thing that happened after that. As he put his journal back in his briefcase, a tiny scrap of paper fluttered out of it and disappeared somewhere under the table. He did not appear to notice and went on his way, thankfully towards the lifts and not towards Hermione.

Hermione grabbed her chance and picked it up, pretending to clean around the chairs.

She wished she hadn't. The writing was unmistakably his. She had deciphered it countless times for Harry and Ron. The overly tall T's, the D's that looked like B's they so long was the stem and strange, cursive E's that were wholly out of place in the mass of spiky text it was as unique as a fingerprint or a Patronus.

There could be no doubt, as unlikely as it was, that Severus Snape had been in a Muggle hotel. The same Muggle hotel where she worked. Hermione did not believe in coincidences on principle.

Hermione took another long swig of her wine for courage.

She enumerated the facts, as she knew them.

Snape was Voldemort's right-hand man, a traitor, a spy, and a murderer. He would have followed here - would be watching her now. Which meant - she forced herself to think, to rationalise&mdash which meant he would wait until she'd finished here, until it was completely dark and there were fewer muggles to deal with. He would follow her home, Disillusioned, wait until she reached a quiet spot and then... Would he kill her? No. He would torture her for information or more likely turn her over to Voldemort so he could do it himself.

That certainty of this outcome had a strangely calming effect.

Harry and Ron were both dead. As far as she knew, so were the others. She had been given a year more than what everyone else had. She was effectively a nobody now, and it didn't matter to anyone if she died. As to the information they wanted... they would never get that out of her, which was something.

She drained her glass and finished the last bite of her dinner with only mild hand tremors. She never looked away from the Leaky, but no one had left the building, nor had she heard any Apparations nearby. Which meant, probably, that the Death Eaters had apparated remotely to lay an ambush for her. They probably already had her surrounded on all sides.

For a moment, she considered her limited options. If she were Harry, she might prepare some last words about heroism and truth and sacrifices. Ron would probably add an insult for which his captor would make him pay later. They would tell her to swallow her fear and, head held high, simply stride out to let them take her.

She smiled faintly to herself. This was not quite true or fair. Both of them would want her to try something a bit less lame. She thought she ought to try to please them.

A crude and impossible plan took rapid shape in her wine-loosened brain. She could use the bathroom window and sneak into the back alley. And then if there wasn't a Death Eater there she'd levitate herself onto the roof, maybe. Surely she could manage a Levitation Charm. If she was silent, they might not find her. If she was not, it was her duty to take down as many as she could. She remembered Peter Pettigrew and the explosive charm. It was the sort of magic that worked in desperate situations, she hoped.

Casually, Hermione slipped her right hand into her coat pocket and found her wand. Its handle felt a little alien in her hand. Without a backward glance, she made her way to the restrooms and pushed open the heavy door that proclaimed 'Ladies'.

All the stalls were empty, and she breathed a sigh of relief for small mercies. The door was a slow-closing one, and she had to wait a little before locking it.

The mirror gave her an idea. She squared up her enemy, pointed her wand at own face chest and concentrated with all her being on the Disillusionment Charm...

She never got the chance to cast it.

Her body went rigid, though she never heard the incantation. Overbalanced, she fell backwards towards the hard floor, only to be caught by an invisible, vice-like grip on her shoulders.

"You were not easy to find, Miss Granger," whispered the familiar, dangerous and disembodied voice of Severus Snape.

-o-

Author's Notes : A cliffhanger is my way of tricking you into reading more. ;-)

The Undesirable Miss Granger

Chapter 3 of 5

She had a second to make her choice – run and take her chances or face a duel with Dumbledore's killer.

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Chapter 3: The Undesirable Miss Granger

Hermione wouldn't have screamed even if she were able. Whatever courage she had had a moment ago dimmed, died and finally dissolved into thin air leaving in its place a gutful of cold, shuddering fear more paralyzing than the spell.

The invisible grip squeezed her shoulders painfully and moved her plank-like body with ease. Forced to stare straight ahead, Hermione could only watch as the bathroom scrolled haphazardly across her vision. The ceiling became the mirror again as she seemed to fall in reverse, and then the stalls paraded before her at a strange angle as she was pivoted and dragged across the room. She came to rest against the locked door, posed at a precariously acute angle and staring into deceptively empty space. A nauseous feeling began to well up in her fear-fluttered stomach.

This was only made worse when he finally Disillusioned himself. Up this close, it was monstrous to watch. The ebony tip emerged first, tapping once into nothingness a mere foot away. For a second, there remained nothing. Then the air began to ripple around it, like the ribbons of steam above a hot bitumen road. The image of Snape was regurgitated by his own wand, spreading forth its shape and colour like a spider's web until it covered her entire vision with very real and very familiar details.

He was tall, but she had been posed to stare directly into his face. Strange that she recalled his handwriting but forgotten his cruel sneer and his empty eyes, like long, dark corridors. He was staring imperiously down at her in a way that reminded her ridiculously and hysterically of Potions class, and despite it all Hermione laughed.

A frenzy of pain shot through her body as it fought against the curse, her throat swallowing its own silent tremors.

"Do not struggle," warned Snape, too late.

His voice was low, smooth and as inscrutable as his expression. He stared back for what seemed an eternity, studying her and looking for god-knows-what: Fear? Surrender? She remembered with a jolt that he was an expert Legilimens.

Suddenly, the ebony wand tip was pressed directly between her eyes.

"*Imperio*," he whispered.

She might have fought it if he had been a second slower.

The pain of her stiff body slipped suddenly and blissfully away, and she stopped struggling. Warmth seemed to blossom from his wand from him and as it trickled through her body, she felt suddenly light on her feet. Her fingertips tingled gently, and she felt a small, contented smile creep across her face. From that small smile grew a bigger one, one that seemed to trickle down her body until it made her heart dance. Or was it the other way round? It was difficult to care when you were so happy. She hadn't felt so unburdened for years. She had been caught found. This meant she no longer needed to worry about running away. All she had to do was what her captor told her. All she needed to care about is how to obey him, and soon very soon it would all end...

Surrender control, said the low, seductive voice in her head. She listened.

She felt the body-bind give out so that she could move the muscles in her legs, her arms, her throat if she wanted...

Stay silent. There is no need to speak said the voice.

There is no need to speak she echoed.

Stand up straight.

She stood up straight. It felt good to be free of the hard door with its bruising knob. She was grateful to stretch her aching muscles.

Give me your wand. Turn out your pockets.

This was a good idea. She hardly needed it anymore, and her pockets felt awfully heavy. With care, she handed over her wand handle-first and began to empty all her pockets. In the left pocket of her coat she found the scrap of parchment and was glad to return it to him.

Snape raised an eyebrow, but received it. He muttered something and sneered, but she didn't catch it as the voice outside was not as important as the one inside. She opened her coat and unzipped the secret, interior pocket. She took out her wallet and placed it into his hand.

She waited for the next instruction.

He was now looking down at her expectantly.

Nod if there is anything else. Shake your head if there isn't.

She shook her head. He frowned, as if puzzled, and put her things into the pockets of his Muggle outfit. She waited for an instruction.

Now climb out of the window.

Yes, that was a sensible thing to do. It had been her original plan after all, and now she had help. Snape was giving her a boost up to the ledge. She went over gracefully like a gymnast and landed on her feet in the darkened alley.

Wait for me, said the voice.

But the alley was empty, and she could hear Snape climbing out himself. In the distance, she saw the lights from Charing Cross Road and the evening bustle.

Why? asked a second, quieter voice. *Why wait? Why not run now there's no one to stop you.*

Stay, said the first voice. Snape was out too, now.

You should've run, whispered the small voice.

Snape waved his wand in the direction of the street, and a red brick wall materialised to cover the narrow alley. The Muggles, as usual, saw nothing. She was sealed in with him.

Open your mouth and tip your head back.

She had just parted her lips when she saw the small, clear vial he had withdrawn.

That's Veritaserum don't do it.

Snape frowned and gave a small, sharp flick of his wand.

Open your mouth. Tip your head back.

The voice was insistent. Her mouth opened fractionally more, and Snape managed to wedge the vial between her teeth.

Now tip your head back and swallow.

No. The small voice had grown. *Don't. Look, there, in his pocket!* She obeyed. Her wand was there, the end sticking out of his trouser pocket. *Do it! Quickly!*

With a great shudder Hermione spat the Veritaserum vial into Snape's face (where it bounced off his overgrown nose) and made a grab for her wand.

Snape leapt back with surprising nimbleness. Her grasp slipped and the wand clattered to the floor.

"*Accio...*"

But she'd dived before he could finish, and her right hand closed around polished wood. She spun her arm upward and brandished it wildly, hoping against hope that something might happen, that something might land.

"*Stupefy! Expelliarmus! Reducto!*"

Uneven jets of light flew in all directions as dormant magic flooded impatiently down her arm and exploded out of the tip of her wand. They missed Snape, but the wall had come down, and she could see the street lights ahead. She scabbled off the floor and made a run for it.

Snape returned fire behind her, and she saw a red jet out of the corner of her eye where it missed her by an inch. She had a second to make her choice: run and take her chances or face a duel with Dumbledore's killer.

She ducked her head and ran zigzagging towards the street, pointing poor Shield Charms blindly behind her. Snape's Stunning Spells were flying everywhere now, too, ricocheting off the walls and metal skips so that the air was filled with colour and jets of light that collided above her, behind her, around her, exploded erratically with spark and fire.

But by a miracle nothing hit her and she ran on, towards the streetlights and people and the slimmest chance of survival...

...and slammed headfirst into something solid in midair.

Her own momentum carried her forward until she was crumpled, pressed tightly against an invisible barrier, absurdly defying gravity for the briefest of moments.

Then she fell.

By the time she hit the ground her hands, and feet were tightly bound by smooth black cords. She had fallen in a twisted heap with her left ear pinned painfully against the invisible wall and her nose in the grimy bitumen. The street beyond was so close, yet the humdrum had been muffled. No one would hear her scream. Out of the corner of her eye, dragonhide boots stepped briskly, purposefully, fatally towards her.

It took her a moment to muster her strength before twisting her neck painfully up at Snape. She wore the defiant, fearless expression she had been practising for just this occasion. She had prepared many different last scenes in her head, and this one was just for him.

She had tried, hadn't she? No one would blame her for losing, would they? She could think of nothing to do, so she laughed. It was a short, joyless yap that sounded wholly foreign to her.

Snape looked quite demented with rage. His breath came out in ragged puffs between crooked teeth as he glared down at her with revulsion.

"Quiet," he said, in a voice just louder than a whisper.

"Or what?" asked Hermione recklessly, shrilly. She half hoped to goad him into ending it. Half. "You'll murder me like Dumbledore? Sell me out to Vol..."

"Quiet!" he said, much louder, raising his lethal wand.

"Or maybe..."

"QUIET!"

She waited for the curse, but it didn't come. Instead, the sound of Apparation rent the air. Three cracks in quick succession, right outside the mouth of the alley, somehow breaking through the sound charm. The barrier fell and left her on her back.

Snape stepped over her body to meet the mystery trio.

From her vantage point on the ground, Hermione could just see past his legs. The one closest to Hermione was a skinny, dirty-looking wizard with long hair and Kohl-lined eyes. Behind him, Hermione could just make out a tall blond wizard and with him her heart skipped a beat Cormac McLaggen. She felt a pang of regret, even though she couldn't honestly say that she was surprised.

The long-haired wizard gave Snape a low, somewhat outlandish bow.

"M'lord," he said, with a humour that Snape did not return, "I didn't expect to see you today."

"Neither did I. Nor am I particularly pleased to be disturbed." Snape's voice was cool, but there was, Hermione noted, a degree of familiarity.

"And we wouldn't disturb you, Headmaster," said Cormac, in a way that was somehow at once arrogant and ingratiating, a trick that only Cormac could pull, "but we had reports of a disturbance from the Leaky. Had we known it was you..."

He glanced past Snape, and for a second his eyes met Hermione's. Hermione tried to make her silent glare mean everything she felt.

"...Merlin! Who's that?" Cormac's eyes narrowed. "What were you doing with her, Headmaster?"

The long-haired one gave him a dirty look. "Mind your tongue, McLaggen."

If Snape angered, he did not show it.

"As it happens," he drawled, sounding almost like he did in class, giving a particularly basic explanation. "I was apprehending an Undesirable. She had a little more fight in her than anticipated."

The long-haired wizard's face lit up with a hideous expression that was between hunger and derision. He too peered around Snape to get a better look.

"It's the Weasley girl, isn't it?" he said, eyeing the fall of dyed red hair.

"Better than that," replied Snape. Although she couldn't see his face, she could hear his lips curling unpleasantly as they often did. "This is..."

"...Hermione Granger," finished Cormac. He had gone slightly pale and a small crease appeared between his eyebrows.

Hermione wondered if he was remembering the time they had spent in the Slug Club together and what he had been trying to do to her. She wondered whether that would be enough to get him in trouble with his new friends. She certainly hoped so. Out of nowhere came the image of him hanging with a sign around his neck that read "Mudblood Lover". It was at once horrible and delightful. She strengthened her glare.

All three crowded around her now, pointing bright lights into her face. The blonde one, who looked oddly familiar somehow, knelt down beside her. He rummaged around in his robes and withdrew a piece of parchment that Hermione recognised as her own wanted poster. He held it up to her face, his eyes darting from the one to the other.

"The hair is different, but it is definitely her," he pronounced. Oddly, Hermione noticed a faint European accent underneath the polished, posh tones.

"I will take her to the Dark Lord at once," said Snape. "You three will return to the Ministry and wait for my call. Take no action until I return. *No action* do you understand?"

"But, Sir," said Cormac, a little shakily, "It's policy..."

"No. The Dark Lord will decide. Until then, you will take no action."

They looked less than pleased the long-haired one in particular had a mutinous look but they made their bows and their "yes sirs" before Disapparating to leave Snape and Hermione alone again.

She made no overt struggle when he grabbed her arm. Instead she concentrated with all her might as the world compressed around her.

She disappeared and reappeared.

Splined.

She hoped it was bad enough. There was a fiery pain shooting up her right thigh, and it reminded her suddenly and inconveniently of a recurring dream. Ron splinches his arm during his exam, and the dittany hisses like Nagini as it seals his wounds... the blood spreads over the wooden floor from a sea of black robes and black hair... or was that something else... she was feeling a bit queasy... it was a good splinch after all...

She crumpled onto the soft grass.

It took Snape a moment to realise.

Through the haze across her vision that had come from nowhere, she saw his dark shape swoop down beside her, then the long, thin arm press her flat onto her back. She might've stopped him tearing her clothes out of the way if he didn't move so unnaturally fast. She looked down at her handiwork too. There was a fist-sized chunk of flesh missing, grotesque and caricatured like a bite out of a gory cookie, with an awful lot of blood.

Snape had taken his wand out at some point, and he pressed the tip to her injured flesh as he muttered something that sounded like a low, mournful song. The pain receded, and then stopped altogether.

It was the first thing that had gone right for Severus Snape all evening, and the last in a line of things gone horribly wrong for Hermione Granger.

"Fuck... you... Snape," Hermione managed before she blacked out.

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Author's Note: A short one this time. Next chapter promises to be longer, more action-packed and possibly quite surprising. Tune in. Flip over.

-Zhangs

Dundee and Dover

Chapter 4 of 5

Hermione is not the only one who has been on the run.

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Chapter 4: Dundee and Dover

Aberforth poured himself another tot of cheap scotch and downed it in one. The burn was nice, but it did nothing to settle his restless nerves. She was late. If he knew her at all, this was not a good sign. It was a dangerous one today. They were all dangerous, but for this one they should have gone together. Or, even better, not at all.

At the other end of the table, Sybil was laying out a round of cards.

"The reversed Wheel again," she muttered, her huge spectacled eyes blinking blindly down in the low light. "Unexpected bad luck. The Hermit advises caution. This is not a happy set, not a happy set at all. The High Priestess brings duality and mystery. I fear it doesn't go well with our quest."

"Is that a fact?" said Aberforth, before he could stop himself. Luckily, she hadn't heard. She was squinting at the cards as they held the secrets of the universe, and weren't four sickles a pack at Flourish and Blotts. That was the thing about Seers they always fooled themselves first.

Evidentially finished with this version of the future, she shuffled again, shaking her head so violently that the ends of her fly-away hair whipped past the oil lamp, for a moment in real danger of catching light. She didn't notice it, of course. Aberforth moved the lamp another inch forward.

Minerva had been the one to insist that Sybil come with them. He still thought it was mad, when Sybil could have stayed safe at home if they had let her alone. 'Safe' as Voldemort understood the word, of course. But it was still better off than being on the run with two of the most wanted heads in Britain. From what he had heard, most of the professors had been let off fairly easy for their part in the battle: no Azkaban time and discipline through the Headmaster instead of the travesty of the courts. Snape had been happy with a bit of light torture and a few ordinary, breakable vows of loyalty. Sybil could have stayed on in her smoky tower with her crystal and tea cups, and not be here on a sliver of a chance. Aberforth had never considered Minerva a gambling woman, until now. Perhaps she still wasn't one. A gambler understood risk and stakes, and lately Minerva seemed to have forgotten. All she could see was the prospect, glittering away in the distance, a shiny little bauble of hope. Never mind the risks for Sybil. Or the cost to them in bringing her along. Tunnel vision. She was a friend of Albus's alright.

Irritation mounted and hammered out the start of a headache. Sybil finished shuffling and began to lay out another round. Aberforth had lost count of how many times today. He didn't mind the waiting had always been the patient one in the family but it turned into hard work with her. Could he say that this didn't have something to do with why he resented Minerva bringing her, if he was honest? She annoyed him with the cards, the crystal gazing, the tea dregs, and the endless, endless prattle. That was all there was to it. After a year on the run, it was the small things that mattered more than the big, noble ideas.

He had come to realise why she did it. Sybil liked to keep up the mysterious, mystical act, but like most people, she was frightened of silence and her own company. When nerves ran high, she needed the cards just as much as Aberforth needed a strong drink. The trouble was that his mind strayed to escape her mutterings, and when his mind strayed, it went to places there was no real point going. Round and round, like a rat in a wheel, scuttling over the same old set of questions no one had an answer for anymore. There wasn't much difference between the two of them, thinking on it. Maybe he couldn't stand his own company either.

Clearly, his mind was wandering again.

He peered out of the little window. They were a few days off full moon and the park was lit up like Honeydukes on a Hogwarts weekend. He could make out the outline of every single tree for a hundred yards and the mirror gleam of a pond in the distance. There was not a breath of wind; the leafy summer branches stood perfectly still like a Muggle painting. It would have been a lovely evening, if they were doing anything else.

He thought of the Hog's Head, which was just about the least useless thing he could think about. On an evening like this, he would chase the last customer out and close up early. He might go for a walk up to the Screaming Shack, might have a look across at the castle from the hill or even venture into the edges of the forest. He would pick some of the little purple flowers there, for Ariana. She always loved a balmy summer's night. She would have a smile for him as he fell asleep on his favourite chair.

That wasn't quite right, of course. That was what he would have done before. More likely, he would send Ariana for Neville and give the kids a bit of food, listen to the latest act of foolish hero-play with a pot of Murtlap for the taleteller, and pass on the owls to the smaller ones' parents. He would tune into Potterwatch with them, while doing his best to hold his tongue.

Actually, that was *before* as well. Now he would have the fresh Scottish breeze blowing gently through his beard as he swung from the Hogsmeade gallows, with his bloated, purple-faced corpse magically preserved so that his neighbours could have the pleasure of gazing up at it for months. It wasn't a nice image, but had lost its potency long ago. Aberforth shrugged rather than shuddered. 'Would' was a big word. Empires rose and fell on 'would' and 'might' and 'if'.

He was about to pour himself another drink when he saw it: a small, nimble-footed creature weaving through the thicket in the distance. In the moonlight, it cast an unmistakable shape.

"She's back," he said, setting down his glass. He pushed his stool back with a scrape and took his position by the door.

Beside him, Sybil made a sort of squeal and rattled as she stood as well, not quite knowing what to do.

"Just be ready to run," he said in answer to the silent question. "Remember the plan."

He set his wand at the ready and eased the door open just enough to peer out without being seen. He searched the distance, but the tabby cat was quite alone, which was not good. It raced up the slope without any sign of slowing and darted past his legs almost too quickly for his eyes to follow.

He turned around to find Minerva McGonagall out of breath and pink in the face. Strands of her greying hair had fallen out of her bun, and her robes appeared to be covered in dirt. It was beginning to look very bad indeed.

"What" began Aberforth.

"McMaster won't," said Minerva, quite simply. Her lips were pressed very tightly together, making a thin, bloodless line. "What's more, the Death Eaters are on their way."

Sybil dropped the deck she had been scraping together and the cards exploded across the table, making them both jump. Minerva turned suddenly around as if she had forgotten there was a third person in the room.

"Now? Here?" whimpered Sybil, her eyes bulging beneath her spectacles.

"I don't think I was followed, so we should have a little time," she said. "I wiped his memory, but only just. He put up a good fight. They must've increased the reward recently."

She gave an offended sort of sniff. Minerva took things like this personally, even now. It wasn't a feeling that Aberforth shared. He wasn't disappointed or upset because he wasn't the least bit surprised. McMaster was the sort that would sell his own mother for a drop of water in Hell, as he had tried to tell Minerva earlier. It was useless to bring that row up again, of course.

"We need to get a move on," he said, instead.

They were well hidden, but it was safer to move out of town before the Death Eaters got serious. Their responses were good and getting better. A year ago, they could have expected a pair of Snatchers searching McMaster's street; now, there would be a dozen combing through the whole of north Dundee within the hour. Their magic was good, too. Unnaturally good, for the sort of fresh-faced, newly inked kids that always got sent for this. Voldemort's Youth, or whatever they were called, knew their business and had more than a few spells up their sleeves. How they managed that sort of magic was yet another answerless question.

He gathered up the bottle and empty glass, and pushed them back into the Mokeskin pouch around his neck.

"Quite right," said Minerva, who was beginning to catch her breath back. She had polished her glasses and was putting them delicately back. "I know a place in Perth. We can try the Magees there. Their Jessica was attacked for breaking curfew and Drostan has always been sympathetic, no matter what he might say now. Come on, Sybil."

"Oh, right," said a startled Sybil. She shoved the cards into her already bulging bag and took Minerva's proffered hand. Aberforth took the other, and the three of them Disapparated into the night.

The quest would continue. It was a goose chase in Aberforth's eyes. They could go up and down the country for another year, for the next decade even, knocking on a thousand more doors, but they were as close to re forging the Order as they were bringing the dead back to life. There was not a drop of resistance left in Britain, as far as he could see. But for now, there wasn't anything else to do.

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"That's not him," said Ginny.

Luna tilted her head quizzically and leaned backwards on her chair to get a better look at the leather-clad blonde who was draping herself all over the bar. Her tits were in real danger of knocking over her companion's pint, but oddly enough, he didn't seem to mind.

"Are you sure?" she asked airily. "He said he would be disguised."

Ginny gritted her teeth. She could feel a headache coming on, a bad one. She liked Luna, as she reminded herself more and more often these days, but it was sometimes difficult to deal with her. Sometimes she suspected that she said stupid things like this on purpose. Ginny wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her, or even hex her with something not too nasty.

"He did say that," she said, taking a slow, calming breath, "but that is not him. Definitely not."

"I think we'd better order soon," whispered Neville who was leaning furtively across the table. He had that shifty expression that he always got when he was nervous. It was the same sort that Percy used to get and was, Ginny thought, glaringly, dangerously obvious. She wanted to tell him to relax, or at least try look it. She half thought it was his shiftiness that had given them away at the docks. But it wasn't the sort of thing you could say, not if you wanted to keep the peace.

For the hundredth time, Ginny wished that Hermione had picked someone else for this - someone with a little less temper and infinitely more patience. The last year had felt less like being on the run and more like being ten again, stuck at home with her mum all day while the others were at Hogwarts. "Burrow Fever" was what she and Ron used to call it, though she was the only one who had to endure a whole year of it alone. Waging war had proven not to be about duelling and battles, rather waiting, planning, and hiding. None of these were exactly Ginny's favourite.

She used to be so proud when people said that she was like Harry, but she was beginning to understand that this war no longer needed a Harry. Even if he had survived, she wasn't so sure that he could lead them through the endless meetings and negotiations. It was a horrible, hurtful thought that she couldn't quite push out of her mind. Was it alright to betray the dead in order to help the living?

Neville gave a pointed look at something past her shoulder. Ginny followed his gaze over to the Muggle barman, who was staring back at them across the room in with narrowed, flinty eyes. They had been sitting there for a good while, after all, sticking out like three sore thumbs amongst the boistrous, after-work crowd.

"I'll go, shall I?" offered Neville. He pulled a fistful of Muggle money out of his jacket and laid it on the table as inconspicuously as possible. This was rather difficult as it was a very large, motley pile.

"Hang on", he said, as he sorted out the Pounds from the Francs, Levs, Roubles and even a few leftover wizarding coins.

"How much have you got?" Ginny felt her own pocket for the few coins there.

"Nine pounds forty," replied Neville, looking a bit disappointed.

"I've still got about twenty," said Luna. "But that isn't very much, is it? It's a shame we can't visit the bank."

That had been their original plan, before their little run-in with the Snatchers. That was yet another thing that Ginny hadn't counted on, and which had proven to make up a large part of their 'war effort'. It turned out that you couldn't really skimp on the three meals or the roof over your head, even if you were Britain's last hope. She wondered how Hermione had done it without going spare. It still annoyed Ginny, the hours spent on useless, domestic stuff every day, but they were getting the hang of it at last. They were very good at 'borrowing' from Muggle banks and those money machines, but they couldn't risk it now. The area was bound to be crawling with Death Eaters on the lookout for any suspect activity. Then there were the rumours about new, nationwide magical detection systems that could trace everyone in Britain, even of-age wizards. Ginny had no idea how true this was. The Confrérie certainly didn't think it was possible, even for Voldemort, but since their encounter Ginny was less sure. They had been disguised, they hadn't mentioned anything taboo, and yet the Snatchers were on site almost as soon as she had pulled out her wand.

Their situation was desperate. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Olivier was their last hope. The prospect of spending a night on the streets was not exactly warm and welcoming. Ginny was sure she would remember those days in Budapest for the rest of her life.

Neville got up from the table and began to make his way to the bar. Ginny cast her eyes around the room again, searching, as she had been for the last quarter of an hour. None of them looked likely.

"How about that one?" asked Luna for the nineteenth time, tilting her head towards the door.

Ginny had a retort ready, but was forced to bite it back.

Someone had just come in. It was a man, which was already an improvement. He perfectly Muggle in his duffle coat and jeans and almost indescribably ordinary. Middle height, middle build, with a face that was instantly forgettable, like the fourth member of a boyband. Ginny knew the spell well. He was, however, holding a very eye-catching bouquet of flowers. They were orange blossoms, tied with a length of satin ribbon in a very particular shade of pale gold. They seemed to tremble even in the still pub air.

Their gazes met through the throng and locked for a long moment, mutually wondering. Ginny nodded almost imperceptibly at him as a test. All doubt was erased when he smiled a perfect, bland smile and made a beeline for them across the crowded room.

"Long time no see, Jennifer," he said, jovially and just a little too loudly to be credible. "Is this your Lovely friend?"

Ginny nodded, opened her mouth and then closed it again, not quite sure how to proceed. Her eyes darted around the room - they were hardly free to talk.

"I got you these," said Olivier to the room at large, as he handed Ginny the flowers.

Something in her chest lurched unexpectedly as her fingers made contact with the cool, dewy stems. They were like relics from a bygone age, even though it had been less than three years ago. The ribbon brushed against the back of her hand, and she remembered, suddenly, the piles and piles of them she had cut on the kitchen table as Hermione made them up into bows next to her. Every now and then, they would sneak each other sidelong glances, half-amused and half-terrified, as the muttering and clanging from the kitchen reached crescendo. Through the window, she could make out her dad, gesticulating wildly to the boys as they struggled to raise the tent. They were fighting a losing battle the white fabric was billowing like a giant topsail in the morning breeze.

"Thanks," said Ginny, her throat feeling uncharacteristically tight, as he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

"Let's go somewhere more private," he whispered, just loudly enough that Luna might also hear. "There is so much to tell you. I have a safe place close by."

"Good." Ginny breathed a sigh of relief. It was only the prospect of moving again that made her realise how claustrophobic it felt in there.

Olivier pulled away and put on that slightly overacted voice again.

"Let me treat you all for dinner I have a table at that nice Italian place. Where is Mr Short?"

Neville was just returning with their drinks. Wide-eyed, he looked between Ginny and Olivier. She shot him a meaningful look.

"Oh" began Neville. He didn't quite know how to finish. Fortunately, Olivier proved a quick thinker.

"Long time no see," he said, clapping a startled Neville on the back. "Put those down we're all set for dinner. Come on we don't want to be late."

Ginny clambered to her feet, slung the backpack over her shoulder and followed as close as she could across the crowded pub. The balmy night air was on her face in no time, and with it came the old mixture of excitement and apprehension. Meeting a contact was dangerous on so many levels, but at least they were done with the waiting.

"Just follow me," said Olivier, as he wend his way through the dinner crowd who had almost completely blocked off the path in front of the neighbouring Chinese restaurant.

"Where are we really going?" whispered Neville, from over Ginny's right shoulder. He had missed a vital part of the conversation.

"Somewhere private," Ginny whispered back.

They had reached the end of the street and Olivier was leading them around the corner to a slightly quieter one. He was walking more quickly now, and the three of them were struggling to keep up.

"And you're sure..." said Neville, with consternation.

"...that it's him? Positive."

"You did the questions?" asked Neville, sharply.

"Didn't need to." A guilty, shameful feeling started to blossom all the same. She really ought to have done the questions anyway. It wouldn't have taken that long, and the

pub would have offered better protection, just in case. She was sure he was safe, but all the same.

"What? Gin..."

"The flowers," said Luna, matter-of-factly. "They were from the wedding."

"I can hear you, you know," said Olivier. He stopped so suddenly that Ginny almost ran into his back. By force of habit, she reached for her wand.

"I think Mr Short is right," he continued, speaking over his shoulder in a hurried mutter that barely carried above the noises of the street. "But seeing that we are in the open and would very much like to get out of it soon, I think, let's do it quickly. My codename is Pax, my Patronus used to be a dormouse, and my codename is Pax. Does that do?"

"Used to be?" Neville was beginning to sound very suspicious, and with good reason. It was routine to show Patronuses as identification.

"The Confrérie haven't recorded any change," said Ginny, who was beginning to share his feelings. She had spent hours looking over his file before they had left, and there had been nothing about a new Patronus. She berated herself for being so quick to trust him.

Olivier assuming he was really Olivier sighed and turned around. He was wearing an exasperated expression that didn't suit his open, unmarked features.

"That would be because it only happened a few days ago. Don't ask me why I have no idea. I haven't had the opportunity to get word out yet. You know how difficult it can be. And now, with you three, they are bound to tighten the borders even more."

"Convenient for you," said Neville. Ginny felt him draw his wand subtly from his jacket. She did the same with hers. A Stunning Spell thrummed through her fingertips, straining to get out. They could take him out if it came to it, but getting away afterwards might be a bit more difficult. They would have to squeeze under the cloak again. They might have to disillusion him and float him along, although that would surely set off any magical detectors, assuming the rumours were true.

"Whoa," breathed Olivier, throwing up his empty hands in surrender. "Not here they're still patrolling the streets. You want more proof I understand that. I would want it as well. How about this: Fleur's tiara came from your great-aunt, the gift bags were sugared pistachios, Miss Lovegood here had come dressed as a sunflower, and you refused to dance with me, twice. Surely this will do? You weren't there, Neville, you will have to trust the ladies on this."

He looked rather imploring between Ginny and Luna, occasionally flickering his water blue eyes downwards to their half-drawn wands.

"I believed him from the start," pronounced Luna, lightly. "He was the cousin in the teal robes, even though he looks different now."

"So do I," said Ginny. It was only as the words came out of her mouth that she realised, with relief, that she actually believed them. The answers to the security questions might have been tortured out of him, and the bouquet intercepted, but these were details that the Death Eaters wouldn't have thought to ask about. They were far too trivial. She put her wand back.

"Neville?"

Neville stared unblinkingly into Olivier's face for a long moment, unblinking like a predator. Then his brow softened and a crooked smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Alright," he said, a little sheepishly. "Sorry about that- just trying to be sure, you know."

"I do," replied Olivier. "No hard feelings. We're almost there follow me."

They followed him in silence down the street, which grew quieter and quieter until they found themselves in a narrow, dilapidated lane lined on both sides with grim, old apartment buildings. The streetlamps had all been extinguished. The only light came through the gaps in dingy shades.

"You're sure it's safe?" whispered Ginny, as Olivier busied himself with the Muggle security system of the most dilapidated-looking one.

"Perfectly." The heavy door gave with a click. "No wards, of course," he said, starting up the narrow, dirty stairwell. "Impossible with all the people that come through, but that also makes it undetectable."

They followed him up to the top floor, where there was a single door with peeling green paint and half a dozen different latches. He opened these by hand with an enormous ring of keys.

The door creaked open, and they piled into the brightly lit apartment. Ginny rounded on him as soon as it clicked shut behind them again.

"So, what's been happening on this end?" asked Ginny. There had not been any proper news for a few months. To say that they were eager was an understatement.

"Wait," said Olivier, looking a little harrassed.

"Sit down first there is a lot to say. We could do it here, crowded in the doorway, or could make ourselves comfortable and have a civilised discussion."

He ushered them further in. Ginny had a good look around at the place. There were two windows that she could see that would make good escape routes as well as giving a view into the street below. They were on the fourth floor, which was just low enough to climb down, given enough incentive. They had certainly stayed in worse.

The three of them settled into the dusty leather sofa, leaving their bags and coats on the rug by their feet.

Olivier took the armchair opposite, sinking into its depths with a posture of total relaxedness, almost nonchalance. It was remarkable, considering their circumstances. It was slightly infuriating.

"Well?" prompted Ginny, who was not nearly as composed. Anticipation was a dreadful thing. She felt her hands beginning to tremble and so folded them tightly in her lap, locking the fingers securely together.

Olivier seemed to take his time, stretching his arms along the armrests and giving the three of them a level look.

"I think," he said, solemnly. "I should start with the bad news. Your mother..."

Ginny's heart skipped a beat, before it sunk heavily into a familiar place in her chest.

"I know about that already," she said. "Le Presige published it." Her lips were threatening to twitch so she pressed them tightly together too. A cool hand slipped into hers. She gave it a quick squeeze and vowed, not for the first time, to be nicer to Luna Lovegood.

"Ah." said Olivier looked like he was about to say that he was sorry. Ginny was grateful when he didn't. "And your brother Percy-"

"That too."

There was a long silence. She didn't fill it. These were two facts, that was all, and there was nothing left to be said about them.

"I take it you don't know who leaked it?" asked Neville. She could feel him pretending not to watch her.

It was a question that they'd discussed a hundred times before. Whispers of British news made it to the French papers every now and then, even though international communications had supposedly stopped. The Confrérie had finally convinced the editor to share his sources a few months ago, only to discover that he was getting it through one of his Muggle-born junior reporters, who received it in turn through anonymous letters addressed to her parents. It was unbelievably elaborate. Someone working in International Affairs had to be on their side. The trouble was, it wasn't one of their people.

"No, I'm afraid not," frowned Olivier. He stared thoughtfully into the middle distance. "I can't think of anyone who would risk it, or even be inclined to. There is no resistance in Britain anymore. They have all the troublemakers well-watched, if they're not in Azkaban or worse. But I will have to keep an eye out. Anyway, whoever they are, they're doing us a great service. Let's consider it a secret friend which is infinitely better than a secret enemy. If the Prestige is publishing, then it must be going well at home?"

"It's been pretty good," replied Neville. "Paris hasn't stopped talking since the Battle. The anti-You-Know-Who feeling is pretty strong and growing. Only problem is, there have been quite a few... suggestions that it would be easier to go anti-Britain altogether."

"Hmm," mused Olivier. "I have been expecting something like that. Is L'ordre de l'hexagone winning the assembly? They have been trying to declare war on England for centuries."

"Actually," continued Neville, "it was La Mutuelle. They're the ones making the most noise. Fortunately, most people think they're a bunch of nutters. It's all real brimstone and fire stuff about how You-Know-Who will take over the world. They have a Seer on their side, but apparently there hasn't been a real Prophecy about it. It's all nonsense."

A dark look crossed over Oliver's soft features.

"So we hope," he said. "And what about the rest?"

"Not too badly," said Ginny. She went through the inventory of their work. It was hard to keep pride totally out of her voice; They had done well. "We saw Fleur in Switzerland last month, and you couldn't ask for better. There has been some talk of a contingency alliance against Britain, but it's hardly mainstream. The Swiss are mostly keeping their heads cool. Germany has been made aware, but no word yet on their plans. The murmur is the country is really splitting on the topic. There have been some high level meetings in Greece, so they are taking it seriously at least. The Spaniards and Italians have gone for flat out denial, which is a bit disappointing. We're hoping they'll change their tune once the rest of the continent starts moving."

Oliver's frown relaxed slightly. "And further east?"

The three of them exchanged a glance. That had been a long, hard, fruitless few months. Ginny decided to break the news straight.

"No luck," she said. "We found Krum eventually, but he wasn't up for it. He said that the new headmaster at Durmstrang would join You-Know-Who in a blink, and he'd take the north with him easily. The Slavic Union is looking less than sympathetic, but they were always a long shot. Charlie and Bill have gone underground, but no results yet."

"That's not exactly what we need to hear," said Olivier, looking as deflated as they all felt.

"It wasn't all bad," said Luna, airily. "Victor said that he knew more than a few people who would never join You-Know-Who, which is something. And he said that he would hide Hermione if she needs to get away from Britain. Or any of us, if it comes to it."

"Ah... About Hermione Granger."

Ginny's stomach lurched. The look on Oliver's face was all too familiar to her. It was the face of someone about to deliver the worst news imaginable.

"Oh, no..." she whispered, not willing to believe it.

She looked around. The others were wearing the same look of despair. They had been doing their best abroad, but all of it was sideline in comparison with Hermione. The real war depended on her. There was no plan, no hope, no anything without her. Only questions without answers.

Olivier steepled his fingers together and gazed at the ceiling for a moment.

"The truth is I am not sure what has happened to her. She was caught six days ago by Severus Snape."

Ginny opened her mouth and, finding that she had nothing ready to say, closed it again.

"Then... that's it," whispered Neville beside her, his voice coming out thick.

Olivier shook his head. An odd, almost-smile twisted his top lip.

"Not quite. Not necessarily. You see, Snape took her straight to the Dark Lord, and since then, there has been no official announcement. Six days is a long time. Usually the corpse that is, the death notice comes within two or three days at most. We have not had anything yet, not even the announcement for her capture."

"Wait," said Ginny, who had finally found her voice. "If there's been no announcement for her capture, how can you be sure that she was caught?"

"Oh, I am sure. I was there," said Olivier. His clear eyes seemed to flash with an unreadable expression. "Snape had her in this alley off Charing Cross Road. It was so close to the Leaky that the barkeep called in the Peacekeepers for the disturbance. I was only there by chance, doing the inner London patrol. By the time we got there, he had more or less finished with her. It was incredible the whole alley was blown apart, but there wasn't a scratch on her. She must've put up an amazing fight."

Ginny felt a jolt of pride and a glance at Luna and Neville told her that they felt the same. It didn't take away the uncertainty but, dead or alive, it was a tiny and important consolation that Hermione had given as good as she got.

"It was all very strange," continued Olivier. "Snape is officially in charge of finding the Undesirables, but it's supposed to be in name only. In reality, our department does the work, and he passes the big news to the Dark Lord. I have been keeping an ear open for the smallest thing on her for months and months, but there has been nothing. Absolutely nothing even less than on Aberforth Dumbledore or Minerva McGonagall. I double-checked the file last night just to be sure, and it was completely empty. So unless it was a coincidence and he just happened to meet her outside the Leaky Cauldron, then, well, he must have been tailing her himself. And if had been tailing her himself, we have to begin to wonder: just how big really is this thing that she wouldn't tell you? And, more importantly, must we assume now that the Dark Lord knows it?"

The silence that followed was terrible. Olivier had said something that all of them had thought of had feared at one time or another. Ginny wrestled with it in her mind, but a happy solution seemed impossible. Everything they had done had assumed one thing: that Hermione would find them again, that she would have the answer, that she would lead the attack. They had put all their eggs into this one basket. This news had taken all the wind from under their wings and left them stuck.

It was Luna who spoke first. "So... we don't know if she's dead or alive?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm sorry," replied Olivier.

"Can you find out?" asked Ginny. They had to be sure one way or the other, regardless. She forced her mind to work, to take them out of this dead as best she could.

Olivier seemed to consider this very seriously for a moment.

"I will try, of course, but it may be very hard. She was taken to the Dark Lord. I'm not sure that even Snape knows her fate anymore."

"Please try."

"And what about you three? What will you do now?"

Ginny thought hard.

"Nothing," she said, at last. "We did have plans, but we can't do anything until we know for certain. We'll stay here and wait for news. And if the worse happens, well, plans do change."

Olivier smiled that strangely empty smile again.

"Good," he said, getting up. "I have to go now, I'm afraid. I have a night patrol in London again. I'll come back next week - earlier if I can make it. I think it's best if you don't leave this place at all in the meantime. I've stocked up the kitchen, so you shouldn't need anything. It's best not to try and contact me at all, just in case."

"Thank you," said Ginny. For a moment gratitude rose above the maelstrom of other, much less pleasant feelings.

"Wait," said Luna, quite suddenly, in an uncharacteristically urgent voice. "We're not quite helpless without Hermione. There's one thing you could do for us."

-0-

Mercy

Chapter 5 of 5

Hermione received mercy, though not as she might understand the word.

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Chapter 5: Mercy

"Ennervate."

It took Hermione a while to get her bearings. She was back in the cell, and it was Theodore Nott in his dark robes standing over her instead of Voldemort. She looked down. She wasn't bound, and he had repaired the worst tears in her toga. She lifted its tattered hem immediately and saw no new marks upon her legs. This meant it had been mostly Crucio.

The theory was confirmed when she tried to sit up. A throbbing pain engulfed her body, seeming to come from nowhere and everywhere at once, drumming out a hideous, reverberating beat which swelled to a head-splitting crescendo just behind her eyeballs.

Her stomach gave the customary response.

"*Evanesco*," said Nott, flatly. The mess vanished, though the smell did not.

"Time? Day?" she spluttered, wiping her sour mouth on a corner of already crusted cloth.

Nott remained silent as he always did and instead grabbed her chin in his unfaltering, impersonal grip. He tipped the usual blend of potions into her mouth. She cooperated. The first time, she had sprayed it all over his face, and he had Crucio'd her almost as hard as Voldemort himself. Funny, of all the Slytherins at school, she would never have picked Theodore Nott for the Cruciatus curse or to join Voldemort's circle. She never once saw him in Malfoy's gang and remembered him coming second to her in the Charms OWL. This was ancient history now, of course. How the new regime had changed things.

Satisfied with his prisoner, Nott turned on his heel without another word and crossed the cold, stony cell in three echoing strides. Hermione jumped as he slammed the ironclad door loudly behind him. It set off her neighbour, and through the thick, stone walls came his rasping, inhuman wail. This blended discordantly with the staccato beat of four heavy latches clicking, and the reverberating bass hum of a strong warding spell.

Nott took the lights with him, and Hermione was left in a darkness that was both soothing and terrible. She listened as his brisk footsteps echoed down the hall and faded to nothing, leaving only the whimpers of whoever or whatever occupied the cell behind hers.

He always did that when the jailor came for Hermione, though to date she had never heard his door open. Sometimes, when she moved herself to the wall that they shared, she could hear him there, with his rasping breaths like air escaping from a gas pipe. It had terrified her in the beginning. It reminded her of Nagini, or Harry when he had spoken Parseltongue in second year, and it had been the most evil sound Hermione had ever heard in her young, sheltered life. She had grown used to this fellow prisoner now and had even come to find his presence reassuring. She felt sure, as cliché and irrational as it was, that he was trying to communicate with her through their shared wall.

The snuffling became a little louder and more persistent.

"Yes," croaked Hermione, as loudly as she dared. "It's me."

He didn't answer. He never answered. Hermione suspected that they had pulled out his tongue, a thought that made her own feel conspicuously swollen and heavy in her mouth.

On bruised knees, she half-crawled, half-slid to the corner where she slept. Amongst the scratchy folds of the hessian rags, she sought out the thick, smooth shape of the iron nail. The snuffling followed her as she felt her way along the back wall. She traced her fingers along the soft mortar between the second and third row of stones until she found the line of deep gouge marks. She had gotten the idea from the collection of fifteen by the privy that she had found on her first day, scratched out by some poor soul who had probably slept in the same corner, used the same facilities and endured the same curses. She wondered about this predecessor, about whether she had known them and where their body was now. Her line of uneven notches was eleven long, for which she supposed she ought to be thankful. Although, to put it less pleasantly, this meant she had another four to go.

Three to go, in fact. She scratched out another mark. This made it the twelfth time that she had been back to the cell and, at her best guess, as many days since her

capture. There was no way of being sure, though. They took her up to Voldemort in what she would call the mornings, though the manor was perpetually dark. Then He would question her. *What were you doing with Harry Potter? What was Dumbledore planning? What secrets did the Order of the Phoenix hide? What do you know about the Elder Wand?* She knew the questions off by heart. He tried all manner of curses, potions, and even a Pensieve once. Nothing worked. The answers were well and truly gone, for which she was almost grateful.

He seemed to have settled finally on Legilimency. For hours, she would endure the invasion of her mind. It was terrible to find his cold, mocking presence there, amongst what memories she had left, as He ripped them out of her, one after the other. He moved through her like a hurricane pulling up the roots of trees at random; or a petulant child, whose godlike finger dealt out life and death to a line of scurrying ants; or a dozen striking snakes, their biting heads piston-like, at once unavoidable and unpredictable.

It felt exactly like this and nothing like this.

Hermione resorted to such tortured similes because mere words could not describe Voldemort. He was beyond the comprehension of mortals. He simply was. There was no reason to what He did, only that He did them. Sometimes He sought out Harry's face, other times He brought forward painful recollections simply to mock her. If He liked, He would put false ones in that seemed so, so real that she screamed to drown them out. Had Harry really died like that? Had her parents really called her that? Had Ron and Lavender really...

For the most part, she tried to make herself as pliant as possible, even as He cast the Cruciatius Curse again and again and again. He saw nothing to his pleasure, and by the end, she was nothing but a conduit for his rage. Rage was self-fuelling; He would never stop until she passed out, and even then might wake her for more.

Afterwards she would be taken back in her cell to be healed a little and fed a little for the next day.

It had only been twelve days.

She would die soon. It wasn't histrionics, it was a fact. They did not give her enough to drink, and she couldn't keep any of the food down. Her throat was always parched, and the sores on her mouth had stopped mending altogether. Her hands trembled violently if she let them alone, which was a well-known side effect of too much Veritaserum. If she stayed still for too long, her nerves buzzed with the memory of old curses. When she managed to sleep, her mind seemed to drown in the seething mass of her own fractured thoughts, half-memory and half-dream.

She might make fifteen, like her predecessor, or even last another week, but Voldemort would grind her into nothing eventually. Or perhaps his patience would wear out at last and he would give her the mercy of the killing curse. In a way, it would be an almost-victory.

-O-

Ginny picked up her cup of plain water and bothered to raise it all the way to her lips before setting it down again. It made a louder than necessary rattle and caused Neville to jump. The glossy insert from the morning's paper (10 Water-Saving Tips for Your Summer Garden) slid from his face, exposing one sleepy, grumpy, glaring eye Luna, of course, did not seem to notice. Her head was still bent determinedly over The Express, scanning a page of lonely hearts' ads. Little pictures of hearts and words like "gorgeous" and "naughty" leapt embarrassingly out of the sea of tiny, cramped columns.

"Sorry," muttered Ginny, even though she felt anything but.

She got up and marched to the door to squint through its smudgy peephole again. The stairwell was disappointingly empty and silent, but its concrete walls and iron railings looked extremely cool. The heatwave that seemed to set in just for them was making the flat unbearably hot and stuffy, not to mention the stale smell that was starting to build up. She had suggested that they open the window just a little bit, but had been outvoted. Stealthily, Ginny turned the door handle just a fraction clockwise

"Gin!"

Neville was fully awake now and frowning a clear accusation at her across the room.

"I was going to leave the latch on," said Ginny through gritted teeth. It was more or less true.

She escaped into the kitchen so he wouldn't see her rolling her eyes and mouthing silent curses. She opened the fridge door, relishing the Muggle-made coolness. It occurred to her that the fridge was worryingly empty already. There was a drop of milk left and a heel of ham. The pantry was equally useless. It wasn't that it was ill-stocked, only, the stove was a gas one, and Oliver had forgotten to give them matches. Wands were out of the question, of course. It was beyond stupid that he could forget something like matches but remember to order them a paper delivery. It was always the small stuff that people made mistakes about, and always the small stuff that made a difference. Always. The need to throttle him rose in her. She filed it away for later.

"I reckon one of us will have to go out under the Cloak and get some food," she said, only half seriously.

"Ginny!" The reply was instantaneous and predictable. Neville sounded properly agitated.

"Kidding," she called back.

"Ginny!" It was Luna this time, and something in her voice made Ginny pull her face out of the icy blast of the refrigerator. She peered back around the corner.

"What?"

"I think we found it," said Neville, jerking his head at the newsprint. He wore a strange look that was between anxiety and bemusement.

Ginny slammed the door shut and practically ran across the room.

"Just here," said Luna, pointing a pale finger at a column of small ads. Ginny followed it.

"Buxom brunette, 39, seeks friendship?"

"No the next one down."

Ginny obeyed.

"Dashing French male, seeks redheaded filly to save my world. Enjoys travelling, especially North Sea and Scotland. Should be patient - busy between work and other projects and will be severely late. Require functioning sense of caution - no rash moves, must not be seen out of house. Pax."

There was a moment of silence in which Ginny tried to meet both her friends' gazes at once and failed. Her mouth flapped open absurdly, not quite sure what shape to form.

"No way," was all she managed in the end. She stared at Luna, who, to her credit, did not look at all about to say 'I told you so'.

"I know what you mean," mused Luna. "I am a little disappointed. It's almost clever, but mostly silly, when he could have used the telephone or sent a letter. It's like something in a story. It's very stylish, though."

Ginny could not think of a better way to put it. A secret message in a newspaper was unbelievably stupid. That is, about as stupid as forgetting the matches. She really was

going to let the Gallic git have it, when he came back. How late was severely anyhow? And what was all the rest of the cryptic nonsense?

Neville looked about as confused as she felt.

"So he's travelling at the moment," he reasoned, wearing a frown that made him look years older. "The North Sea has got to Azkaban, I reckon."

"Right," said Ginny, thinking out loud. "But why is he in Scotland? Hogwarts? Unlikely - it's still holidays."

"Could be just your usual terror and torture trip," quipped Neville rather bitterly. "He's officially a Snatcher, or whatever they're called now. Bound to be going up and down the country all the time, flushing out rebels."

"Could be," considered Ginny. "But why would he tell us that?"

There was a perplexed silence.

"Do you think..." whispered Ginny, who was beginning to feel a seed of hope growing treacherously at the back of her mind.

"I don't think so," said Luna. "He would have said something else if it was Hermione."

There was a look of such acceptance and serenity on her face that it was almost infuriating. She fixed her grey-blue eyes unblinkingly onto Ginny's brown ones.

"We really shouldn't get our hopes up," she pronounced, folding away the paper. "It doesn't help."

-O-

Snape's left forearm was burning.

It had been almost a fortnight since Granger, and he had been waiting for the call ever since, pacing his study night after night as if that would have any bearing on the Dark Lord's whims.

The Mark had been still for thirteen days, which was a disturbingly long time. He did not know what to make of it and so had forced himself to make nothing of it.

The call could have nothing to do with Granger at all, in fact. It was almost time to deliver the Dark Lord's special potion. He had finished brewing it the night before, and the large crystal vial sat on its holder on his desk, its rich, velvety depths swirling like dark blood, sluggish and sanguine.

She could be long dead. This the most rational and probable outcome, so he had reconsidered his plans in light of this. All the same, hope was a difficult beast to slay.

As was regret. He had thought to have long since weaned himself off contemplations on 'what if'. But for thirteen days his mind was clouded by the infinite, impotent permutations of alternative actions, passed out of his reach. If only he had waited a little longer and not made his move so close to the Wizarding world. If only he had taken her away immediately. If only he had cast a stronger Imperius curse. If only he had Obliviated Scabior, McLaggen and Glis. He could have taken them without too much trouble. The odds had been against him, but three to one was still significantly better than they were now.

He had been unspeakably foolish and had paid for it. Ginny Weasley, Longbottom and Lovegood had their uses, but Granger had been his centrepiece. It was humiliating. Worse than that, it was potentially devastating.

Snape tossed back his wine, pocketed the vial, pushed these wayward thoughts as far out of mind as he could, and clasped his right hand over his left forearm.

He materialised in almost the exact same place where Granger had splinched, just outside the gates of what had been Malfoy Manor only a few years ago. Dark Mark aloft, Snape strode through the barrier without hesitation. He covered the familiar path in long, purposeful strides. To an onlooker, he would appear no different than he usually did, which was the point. The mansion grew out of the distance, casting a stately shape against the darkening sky, and in no time at all he was under its ostentatious, arched portico.

The opulent doors swung open for him, and revealed a most unexpected sight.

Theodore Nott was waiting in the hall. Snape felt an eyebrow rise before he could stop it. The ranks were full of his ex-students now, but he did not remember Theodore being this way inclined. Studious, lonesome and a little conceited was how Snape remembered the boy. He had been a competent student, but offensively ordinary, with the career goal of "entering the Department of International Cooperation". He wondered how Nott had found himself here instead, and on whose recommendation he had been admitted. Only the privileged few were ever allowed into the Sovereign's private home, and Theodore had no living connections that he could think of.

"Professor Snape," Theodore greeted him with a very proper new order bow.

"*Headmaster*," corrected Snape, as he had to find something to say.

He gave the boy a surreptitious scan as he did so. Expensive robes, skull pin, haircut and bags under the eyes - these were all new, no doubt in honour of the new post. He wore his wand in a holder, the corner of which Snape could see hanging by his right side, just within the fall of his robes. The edge of a gauze bandage peeked out from under his left sleeve which suggested that he was very new indeed.

"I beg your pardon, *Headmaster*," continued Theodore, curling his slightly stubbled top lip. "The Dark Lord is expecting you in the library."

This was more like the Theodore Nott that Snape knew - somewhat entitled and a great admirer of his own subtlety. It didn't warrant a reply. Snape stepped past the boy and made his way up the familiar staircase.

To his irritation, Nott's eager trotting footsteps followed close behind.

"I take it this is about Hermione Granger, Headmaster?"

That did get Snape's attention. Turning, he gazed down to find Nott wearing an expression more insufferable than the aforementioned Granger and Potter combined. It claimed confidence and suggested that its owner at least thought he had the upper hand. It was also the sort of expression that on the Dark Lord's servant did not often foretell longevity. He had thought Nott smarter than this. He allowed the silence to brew.

"It's no secret to me, sir. You see, the Dark Lord entrusts his household needs to me. I'm in charge all our prisoners and ... pets."

Snape could feel the corners of his mouth threatening to travel upwards. *Household needs* meant he had had his recommendation from Rabastan. It was an interesting choice. Lestrane no doubt was desperate enough to take the first halfway competent volunteer he could find. The position was an envied one, but far from desirable in Snape's experience. Or Lestrange's. Or, indeed, anyone who had served him long enough to know of Peter Pettigrew. All the advantages of pillow-talking the Sovereign aside, one couldn't escape the cold, hard fact that the Dark Lord's domestic servants did not last. He pitied Nott. And Lestrane, who would no doubt get a little of the splatter for recommending the unfortunate boy.

"How admirable," he pronounced, hoping that Nott would leave him soon.

"Between you and me, sir, we'll be cleaning out her cell today. I didn't think she'd last this long, to be honest. They usually don't you know. She must be terribly important."

His attention peaked, but Nott's face told him plainly that he did not know for sure one way or the other, which did not advance Snape's position one iota. His sudden candour and ingratiating affability was more interesting. He couldn't see why Nott was telling him this in the first place, nor what he could possibly want in return. He studied the boy's face a little more closely, and found there the tiny, flickering expressions of curiosity and avarice.

The fool was fishing for information himself.

"I'm quite amazed that the Dark Lord has kept her alive, here, all this time," he continued. "They say Granger was travelling with Potter and Weasley during the Rebellion. I almost wonder what..."

"Nott."

He had to put an end to it then. The conversation had somehow taken a sudden turn into treasonous territory.

"As pleasant as it is to chat, I am expected by the Dark Lord. No doubt He will be most displeased to hear that I kept Him waiting for such *atrilovous* conversation."

"*Frivolous*, Sir? "

"Quite frivolous. I don't consider for a moment that you were seriously questioning the wishes of the Dark Lord. Nor, I'm sure, were you seeking privilege to my business with Him."

He fixed the boy with a stare that he hoped would serve as adequate warning. The colour drained obligingly from Nott's face as the message sunk in.

"No. It is quite clear that this has been nothing but small talk. I, however, have urgent business with our Master. As your erstwhile headmaster, I congratulate you on finding such an august position so soon out of school. May you keep it well."

He didn't wait for the answer, though he hoped the warning would do something to help preserve the boy, and made his escape up the remainder of the staircase. His feet seemed to take him towards the library of their own accord, even as his mind threatened to take flight. He pulled it back to earth with some effort and took one last breath before knocking on the ornate, ebony door.

"Enter," came the sibilant rasp of a command.

The door caught on something as he pushed it open. He looked down and saw, with an inward jolt, that it was Granger.

She was lying sprawled at his feet where she had obviously fallen, or been thrown. Her skinny arms were akimbo, like the legs of a buckled spider, and her face obscured almost entirely by that mess of dyed hair. The short toga that barely covered her broken body was crusted with dark brownish stains which made her skin beneath seem even more pale and grey, here and there blossomed with purple welts.

He had already resigned himself to it, but something in his stomach clenched at the sight. Her life was worth something, he was sure, though he knew not quite what.

Then he noticed the feeble rise and fall of her chest, barely perceptible. She was not dead, merely dying. It was a difference that could mean the world. He tore his gaze away as his staring did nothing to help.

Aside from Granger, who did not count, he and his Master were alone. The Dark Lord was sitting in an armchair by the fire, looking almost relaxed, indulgent, uncoiled.

Snape stepped over Granger's body and approached with caution.

"My Lord." He bent to kiss the edge of the Dark Lord's robe and took the opportunity of having his face hidden from view to regain his composure.

"Rise."

There was a faint rattling in the hiss of his Master's voice. He noted the small furrow on the Dark Lord's translucent brow, the glittery quality in His red eyes, and the almost imperceptible hardness of the top lip. All of this pointed to a less than ideal mood, and there was no one else in the room to share the blame. It was a poor position to be in. He wondered if he ought to have brought Nott along as diffusion.

Snape put all of this out of his mind, and applied himself to the official business. He reached into the folds of his robes and withdrew the vial.

"My Lord, I bring the elixir," he said, offering it forward with both hands.

The Dark Lord's took it with his delicate, skeletal grip. His cold fingers brushed Snape's own and he stifled a tremor. For a moment, the Dark Lord examined the potion, turning it over in the light. It was red as blood, as viscous as honey and swirled in a sluggish spiral within the bottle. It had been brewed perfectly. All the same, Snape felt his body grow tense. The Dark Lord was mercurial; who knew what standards He expected today.

"Perfect," pronounced the master.

The servant breathed again.

The Dark Lord placed the vial onto the table by the fire, and then fixed His red eyes upon Snape's black ones. The silence which followed him seemed to stretch on forever. To speak or not to speak. Everything was wagered on the answer.

"My Lord, you require another service of me?" Snape's mouth felt dry when at last he did break the silence.

"No need to look so nervous, Severus..." said the Dark Lord, smiling at him in a way that was anything but reassuring.

"I have called you tonight for another small matter... and to give you just reward in return for such excellent service as you have rendered, and for so long."

"A small matter, My Lord?" Snape paid no heed to the honeypot at the end. He paused, considered, and decided to risk it. "I gather it concerns the Undesirable Granger?"

"Astute," hissed the Dark Lord. "It could not have escaped your notice clever man that you are that I have had her for an unusually long time. I will admit that this friend of Potter, this base Mudblood, has proven difficult."

Snape swallowed. It was not one of the words that he preferred to hear from the Dark Lord's lips.

"Difficult, My Lord?"

"*Difficult*, Severus. Very difficult indeed. There is certain information I require from her... Potter's quest for Dumbledore, the secrets they kept..."

This was hardly news. The Dark Lord had been obsessed with the 'quest' since Potter's death. It took Snape several months to realise that he meant something other than the Horcruxes. It did not entirely surprise him; Dumbledore had always been the king of deception, and towards the end Snape had sensed something deeper himself, at times. The portrait had not spoken a single word since the final battle.

"I have questioned her, I have taken possession of her mind, and yet her secrets elude me."

Snape frowned at this. Could it mean that the girl had not broken, in all this time? Granger did not have a temperament for Occlumency, even if she had had the chance to learn it whilst on the run.

"Oh no, Severus. She has given me all she knows. She has yielded every inch of herself to me."

"Then... I'm not sure I understand, My Lord."

"It has been expunged."

The Dark Lord pronounced these four words slowly, with deliberate venom. A silence followed in which the chamber seemed to reverberate in the aftershock of the utterance.

Snape's mind began to work. Pieces he had long held, isolated and useless, began to slip into place, and the forms that grew from them raised more questions than he was comfortable with.

"Someone has erased her memories," postulated Snape in a close impression of an even voice.

"Sharp as ever, Severus. Yes, someone has stolen her secrets already. She has no memory even of the culprit. It was... elegantly done."

There was esteem even as the furrow on his brow deepened and his reptilian gaze grew hard with cold fury.

"I will find him and he will feel the wrath of Lord Voldemort. But that is not what concerns me tonight, Severus. No... What concerns me now is the girl. And so I seek your counsel. Tell me, would I be better served to give her death or to hold her for a little longer?"

The Dark Lord leaned back against the chair, his fingers intertwined, and let his gaze fall heavy upon Snape's shoulders.

Snape's mind was tumultuous now. Possibilities churned and foamed under the agitation of such a mass of new information all at once. Old doubts and new questions surfaced and connect briefly, and all the answers for the moment seemed to pivot upon Granger. A vague outline was beginning to sketch itself, and he could see in what direction he must try to steer, though the way was hardly smooth...

"I believe, My Lord, that she should be kept alive," he answered, at last.

"Oh?"

It was impossible to see whether the Dark Lord anticipated this answer, or how he judged the notion. He pressed on blindly.

"There might yet be a way to reverse the damage. It is nearly impossible to remove all traces of a memory. The smallest detail remaining might be enough to breed the whole again. If this...information...is of importance, then hope of its retrieval would die with her."

The Dark Lord regarded his most loyal servant over steepled fingers.

"True. Her secrets are of great value to me. And yet... It is of greater importance still that they remain secret to all but myself. I could not risk their discovery by my enemies..."

"But consider, My Lord, who now remains to oppose you? And who could hope to unlock her mind if you yourself could not?"

It occurred to Snape that this was in contradiction with what he had just said, but the blunder went unnoticed.

"Yet I fear I have kept her too long already. I fear that Theodore Nott already perceives an importance... Who could I hope to trust with her? Not all of my servants are as seasoned or as loyal as you."

And Snape knew the right course. He licked his dry lips and met his Master's gaze square on. He allowed his mind to linger over Granger's scrawny, insentient body, to graze over certain possibilities.

"My Lord, perhaps I might bring up the question of my reward..."

He had pitched the right tone. The Dark Lord's thin lips pulled back in his version of amusement. When he spoke, it was with a perverse indulgence and a little enjoyment, like watching the antics of an old, loyal dog.

"I had forgotten your tastes, Severus. How you must have starved all these years. Yes, I see the similarities now... The colour of the hair, the shape of the face... Though this one is less fine a creature, wouldn't you say?"

"One Mudblood is much the same as another in my experience, My Lord."

This remark earned him a rattle of a laugh. Nothing was more terrible than the Dark Lord's mirth. Except his rage, of course.

"Well said, Severus. Very well said. And yet even beasts may differ in their worth."

Then the Dark Lord took out his wand. Snape's instinct was to flinch, but the tip passed over his shoulder to point at Granger's body.

"She will die today, Severus, in her own manner."

The Elder Wand drew an elegant spiral. Snape watched, unable to look away, as the changes took effect. The red hair turned less lurid, straightened, and became smooth and soft. The limbs grew longer, more willowy, and under the short toga curves filled out...

With a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, Snape realised what was happening.

"No one must know, Severus. Only you. Remember that. I expect those who have served well to continue doing so."

The bile rose in his throat. But he swallowed it and thanked his master as he should.

The Dark Lord graced him with another hideous smile.

"Go now, Severus. Go and enjoy your reward."

Snape could not remember what grovelling things he had said, nor what bows he made, or even how he had managed to get Granger out without Nott witnessing. Only that he was suddenly at his own doorstep, with the girl floating in the air in front of him, his heart hammering, and his stomach absurdly churning to its own rhythm.

He tried hard not to see her, or at least not to look. It was difficult. He counted off the things he had to do tonight, the innumerable things he would have to do over the next few weeks, the permutations that this new event would bring to his already written and rewritten plans, and exactly how fine the tolerance was between success and dismal failure.

It was like a twisted dream, a nightmare borne out of an imagination that was so much darker than his own. Even his house seemed to mock him. He opened three doors

before finding a spare room that actually had a bed in it. It was a four-poster. He laid Granger's insentient body in it as carefully as he could manage, drew the curtains shut at once, and backed out on legs that barely obeyed him.

They carried him unthinkingly down into the bowels of the house, where with fumbling fingers he found a vial of something useful on the crammed shelves. He leaned against the cold basement wall, in the half-dark, with his eyes shut, waiting for the sweet-tasting draught to do its work.

It whispered such truths in his ear. The time for mourning the mistakes of the past was in the past. Wearing his heart on his sleeve like a Gryffindor would add nothing. He had been given a second chance, and a second chance was a debt to be repaid. He would find a way, as he had always done. He could not argue against its wisdom.

Coaxed by the draught's cool fingers, his mind came slowly back to life. He had beaten the odds which had been much against him. Despite everything, Granger was still a pivotal piece. *The* pivotal piece, and she was in his possession at last.

There would be no more mistakes. Tomorrow he would have make his first move on her. Already, it began to fill out in his mind. He had just the thing.

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Author's Note : For those that were looking forward to seeing Hermione again, ta da! The real HG SS interaction will be in the next chapter, which is both meaty and coming soon(pinky swear).

As always, any and all feedback is appreciated.

-Zhangers