

Resonare Mortis

by Laralee

Somewhere, in the midst of all the chaos following the end of the war, someone made an error.

Winner, Second place for Best Drama-Angst Fic in the Fall/Winter 2013 HPfanficfanpoll awards on LiveJournal

Delving

Chapter 1 of 4

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Resonare Mortis

Chapter I

Delving

The sound of the rain should have been soothing, and any other night it would have been, but not tonight. Tonight, as I lie wrapped in my blanket, the sound is maddening. It seems to assault my bedroom window with more force than necessary. Perhaps it is my lack of sleep or my perpetual state of annoyance, but I can't find the tiny droplets of water peaceful, nor can I understand how something so small and insignificant can grate so heavily on my patience.

I toss restlessly as I pull my flannel blanket up to my chin. *Everything* grates on my patience lately. Stress was never usually a problem for me but, since starting my latest project, it seems to have weaselled its way into every facet of my life. Closing my eyes, I allow my mind to wander to my newest obsession...something I never normally permit myself to do while in bed because sleep would never come if I did. With the endless pounding of the rain against the thin pane of glass above my head, it seems like the lesser of two evils. I can do nothing about the weather, but perhaps I can reach some great epiphany with my book.

Dead ends are something I loathe, and I have managed to find myself standing right in the middle of one. That was never the intention, of course, but I am there nonetheless. Following the war that seemed to swallow up most of my childhood and the lives of those close to me, I decided it was necessary to tell people the real story. Fabricated versions found their way to the media outlets, painting us all as these god-like creatures that could stare evil in the face without so much as a flinch. None of that was true. We were scared, we were running on fumes, and we fought out of necessity. Those who fought in the war, myself included, knew fear and we knew death. It seemed like a terrible crime to forget everything we went through for the sake of being a household name. From there, my idea was born. I was determined to tell the story as it should be told, grisly details and all, because that is simply the way war is. Once I put quill to parchment, I never looked back.

Thinking of those same sheets of parchment that litter my kitchen table just downstairs makes my stomach turn. I had stumbled into something without truly considering the measures I would have to go to get the information I needed. That is what irritates me the most. Although I always plan my endeavours thoroughly before beginning, this

particular undertaking has proven to be more daunting than I originally thought. I feel the twinge of tension roll over me as my face grows hot. I'm angry at myself for not really thinking this through. I feel that a lot lately. Mistakes with something as important as this are unacceptable, yet I can't seem to find a way to dig myself out of this hole without going deeper into the ground. It is infuriating. Realising that it is hopeless to dwell on the details of my book at such an hour, I haul myself out of bed. I need tea and a clear head.

As I make my way out of my darkened bedroom, my mind can't seem to steer clear of the current problem plaguing my writing. I need details, evidence, and primary sources. I need testimonies of people who gave the ultimate sacrifice to see the war end in our favour. There are only so many lengths a person can go to gather the information they require, especially when the primary source has been dead for nearly five years. Writing from my memory will only hold out for so long as I discovered just today while trying to finish the latest instalment. I step over a leather-bound notebook, remembering with a slight grin how I had hurled it down the hall just hours before out of agitation, then I stop before I can take another step. Throwing the book, in retrospect, was a silly thing to do, but it felt good to watch it fly end over end across the room. It was almost like throwing away a bit of my frustration, even if only for a moment. I turn and scoop the book off the floor and make my way into the kitchen. I've got work to do.

Thankfully, the pot of tea I had fixed not an hour before is still warm. I take it from the cooker and snatch a teacup from the drying rack near the kitchen sink as I make my way to the table. The remaining tea will most likely be finished off before the hour is up, and I don't know whether to laugh or cry at that thought. After pouring myself a cup, I start to thumb through the booklet of parchment to find the piece of information that offended me so deeply this past evening. It doesn't take long to find, and I immediately frown when I read the name written at the top of the page. It's none other than Severus Snape.

As I scan the parchment, carefully reviewing my notes, everything on the page seems to rush back into my mind, and I can picture myself standing at the gates of Hogwarts just this evening.

"Hermione!" I recognise the overly Scottish brogue of the Headmistress's voice. Turning on my heel, I spot her striding toward me with a welcome smile on her face. As she nears, Minerva flourishes her wand, and the heavy gates in front of me creak open. "It's good to see you, my dear."

"It's a pleasure to be back." The beginning of a ridiculous smile sweeps across my face, confirming my sentiment. I could never get enough of this place, and it's a welcome surprise to feel the magic of the grounds creep over me as I step across the threshold and onto the path. As asinine as it sounds, it almost feels like coming home. "Thank you, Professor, for meeting with me on such short notice."

Minerva nods sagely and takes my arm, intertwining it with hers as we start down the path toward the castle. "I have to admit when I received your letter I was a bit confused as to why you requested such a thing," the older witch explains. "No one has ever asked for such a privilege, and I am curious as to why you are the first."

Smilingly slightly, I use my free hand to fish my notes from my bag. Thankfully, I've rehearsed this in my mind several times. "I'm writing a book," I say as I hand her the small bound book of parchments. "A book that, when it's finished, will shed light of the sacrifices people made...their true sacrifices."

Minerva drops my arm and takes the book from my hand. I watch her face as she starts to leaf through it. "All of the fallen." Her tone is dripping with sorrow. It is unsettling to witness such strong emotion from her.

Nodding my head, I continue to explain myself. "I'm running out of options, Professor. My research has come to a standstill, and I need a first-hand account to finish this last section."

Minerva flips to the last item in the book, casting me a sceptical look. I wonder if she can detect the nervousness I am failing to contain at the thought of confronting Professor Snape. "You wish to speak to Severus, then?"

"That was what I was hoping for, if it can even be arranged." I shove my hands in the pockets of my denims to keep from fidgeting. There was no reason to be nervous, but that didn't stop me from trying.

"It can be arranged, Hermione," Minerva said with a solemn face. For a moment, I wonder why she looks upset, then she adds, "but I'm afraid you are going to be disappointed with what you find."

That was no surprise, of course. Severus Snape was never a wizard I would have had a casual conversation with. He was a difficult man and equally secretive when it came to his life. Now, given Minerva's statement, it appears as though that fact holds true even in his death.

Regardless, I was curious as to why she thought I would be disappointed. "I'm not sure what you mean, Professor. I know Professor Snape likes his privacy, but maybe once he sees what it is I'm doing, he will give me something of consequence. You've, no doubt, seen Snape: Scoundrel or Saint?"

"I've seen it," Minerva manages to grind out. Apparently she isn't a fan either. "The man in that book is not Severus, and Rita Skeeter should be ashamed of herself for claiming that it is."

"Exactly, and that is why I am doing this. People should know the truth and not just about Professor Snape, but everyone else as well. Lupin died a monster and Sirius a murderer."

Minerva smiles at me, although the gesture carries a touch of melancholy. I recognise the look because it was one I receive quite frequently when my book is the topic of discussion. "People should know the truth, but that doesn't mean they'll accept it easily, my dear."

"If they do not accept it, then they do not deserve it," I reply pointedly as we climb the stone steps leading to the castle. I haven't the slightest idea where that exclamation came from, though I suspect it is my annoyance with the entire situation trying to claw its way to the surface. Minerva casts a disbelieving look in my direction. "It's just I think people need to have access to the truth, is all," I say.

"You should tread with caution, Hermione. Telling people what they believe is wrong is a sure way to get the door slammed in your face or tarnish on your own reputation." For some reason, that seems like a warning of sorts. The Headmistress is right, of course, and the thought does cross my mind on occasion, but is it fair of me to hide the truth for the sake of what people would think of me? I struggle to answer that question on a daily basis.

"I am not going to force feed people," I clarify softly. "I'm only going to fill the dinner plate and sit it in front of them. Whether or not they choose to delve in is up to them."

Minerva's slight chuckle fills the air around me. "Then let us hope they eat their fill and ask for seconds."

When we enter the castle, a wave of nostalgia floods over me as I follow Minerva toward her office. I pass by row after row of the same portraits and hear the familiar sound of students heading to their classes. In a few moments, we have reached the Headmistress's office. Minerva utters a password and we are admitted entry. The office, I notice, is not much different than when Dumbledore inhabited it. I suspect that is no coincidence. The two of them are more alike than most people realise.

"Here it is," Minerva tells me in a voice that projects nervousness and frustration. The image of the man that I watched die in the Shrieking Shack is unmistakable. He sits in a chair motionless except for an occasional blinking of his cold, black eyes. I approach his portrait with caution. Passed through the Veil five years and two-dimensional to boot, the wizard still makes me skittish.

"H... Hello, Professor Snape. It's me, Hermione Granger, sir. I... I wondered if I could ask you a few questions. That is, if you're not busy." Cripes, how stupid I must sound. Busy? What on earth could he have to do? Nevertheless, I maintain eye contact, hoping to receive some answer from him. I wait several moments, but Snape says nothing. His eyes bore into mine. I have no idea whether he's trying to convey some message telepathically or merely intimidate me. Whatever his intention, it is the latter that he achieves.

I cast a look of utter confusion toward Minerva. She's sitting at her desk with her hands folded under her chin. Her eyes meet mine for an instant, but she looks away quickly. I turn back to Professor Snape's portrait to give it another try. "Professor, can you hear me? Do you remember me? Please say something." He does not oblige my request. He just keeps staring right through me.

I realise it is useless and take a seat across from Minerva. This isn't going as I had planned. "Maybe he doesn't remember me. I'm sure I look quite different than when he saw me last. It's been a few years." What a pathetic excuse that is, but that is the best I can come up with.

"He remembers you, dear. Severus was not the type of person to forget things. Why do you think he was such a keen potioneer?"

"What is wrong then? Why won't he answer me?"

"He never answers, Hermione," Minerva explains sympathetically. "That's what I was trying to tell you."

My eyes travel back to Professor Snape's portrait and I blink heavily, thinking my eyes are playing some cruel joke. He's not there. "Where did he go?"

"To another portrait I would imagine," Minerva says without taking her eyes off me. Obviously, this isn't news to her. "Severus doesn't stay in his frame for more than two days. I suspect he has found a portrait near his old classroom. It is obvious he feels more... at ease elsewhere than he does here, but his obligation as an advisor to the current Headmaster keeps him bound to that frame permanently. He can leave but only for a while."

I'm out of my seat before I can stop myself. Walking around Minerva's desk, I come to stand directly in front of the abandoned portrait. The leather chair painted near the corner looks familiar, and I recognise it is similar to one that sat in his classroom all those years ago. The rounded table next to the chair also sparks a memory. It used to belong in his office. It struck me as odd that he wouldn't be content surrounded by the things familiar to him, but then again, he is Severus Snape...an enigma in his own right.

"He doesn't speak to you or any of the other portraits?" I ask as I study the details of the canvas.

"Never to me, nor have I seen him speak with any of the other former Headmasters."

"That doesn't seem peculiar to you?" My brow furrows as I try to process everything I've seen. A portrait that refuses to accept itself as a portrait! It is bizarre but fascinating all the same. Could anything like that truly exist?

The closeness of Minerva's voice causes me to jump slightly, and I notice she's now standing by my side. "It does, and I've had his portrait checked multiple times for any anomalies. The artist swears by it. He is not frozen in place as you can clearly see. For whatever reason, Severus chooses not to converse of his own free will."

Reaching out, I touch the engraved frame of the portrait with the tip of my fingers. The wood grain is rough under my touch. Something is off, but what it is escapes me. "How long does he stay away?"

Minerva clears her throat. Is she trying not to cry? "Long enough to sort himself straight. Once Severus disappears, it's an hour or so before he returns. When he returns, he stays for a little under forty-eight hours before he vanishes again." I can tell she feels a bit sorry for him. Honestly, part of me feels the same way. To be trapped in a place you can't escape must be madness. I shake that thought from my mind before it manages to snake its way deeper into me and sink in its teeth. The last thing I need to do is paint Severus Snape in some pitiful light.

Minerva's hand is on my shoulder, and she pats me like a child. I suppose I should find it comforting, but it seems like a consolation prize, as if I've been defeated yet again. "I really am sorry that I couldn't help you, Hermione. Truly, what you are doing is an admirable thing, and I hope you find what you're looking for to make it a success."

"I'll just keep looking." The words taste bitter when they dance across my tongue. I feel like I should smile, but I can't seem to make the muscles in my face feign any semblance of contentedness. I am not happy, and I am no closer to the information I need than I was when I arrived. When did this book start to feel like a braided noose tied around my neck? "I'm going to check other sources," I lie, trying to sound like I'm not thinking about kicking the chair out from under myself to be done with it. I've exhausted every possible lead with regards to Severus Snape, forever trapping myself in my self-made dead end.

Minerva removes her glasses, folds them neatly, and places them in the pocket of her robes. She's still staring at Professor Snape's portrait when she speaks to me. "Have you seen his memories?"

Now I laugh. The premise is so absurd it's hard to believe I didn't think of it myself. "In all honesty, Professor, the thought never crossed my mind. It's an even deader end than this. After all, they are considered classified official Ministry business. Only those with access to them can view them."

My former professor shook her head, trying to conceal her amusement. "Hermione, you have an Auror living in your pocket! Make use of him!"

I wince inwardly when I realise she's talking about Harry. "I doubt Harry could even get me what I needed."

"Poppycock! Potter is practically head of the Auror's office, and I'm sure he does as he pleases."

In my head, going to Harry seems like a waste of time, because what happened at Hogwarts almost five years ago isn't something he likes to discuss at great length. Perhaps it's worth a shot. The odds might be in my favour given his current position. Although Gawain Robards was still officially the head of the Auror Office, Harry is in charge of most of the day-to-day duties and, therefore, enjoys a great number of privileges within the Ministry. He would almost certainly be able to get his hands on the information I needed, but would he be willing to hand them over to me for examination given his past reluctance?

"I suppose you're right," I say as I walk back to the chair to retrieve my satchel. "I'm just disappointed that I couldn't talk to the man himself."

"I am disappointed too," Minerva explains as she sees me to the door. "It would be nice to hear his voice, even if it is laced with some cynical comment."

"Thank you, Professor, for a moment of your time." I extend my hand to her, and she looks at it a moment before she wraps her arms around me instead.

"Call me, Minerva," the witch corrects as she loosens her hold. "And if you ever need anything, please don't hesitate to ask."

I smile as I feel my black mood vanish. It's difficult not to be in a pleasant frame of mind around Professor McGonagall because, somehow, she always knows what to say to me. "I'll be sure to let you know, Minerva."

The bound book of parchment drops from my hand, landing on the table with a dull thump. Sighing heavily, I settle myself into the kitchen chair but, in my agitation, I don't stay seated for long. I know what I have to do. Retreating to my study which, much to my chagrin, is in a far worse state than my kitchen with parchments and files covering the desk and tea table. I grab the first clean sheet of parchment I can find and a quill and inkpot. When I've procured what I need, I leave the room once more in search of a less cluttered and more comfortable place to pen my letter to Harry.

I decide on the settee in the sitting room. It's the least offending room in terms of cleanliness. I stare at the blank parchment for what feels like an eternity trying to gather my thoughts. Why is this so hard? Harry is my oldest and dearest friend; the words should come naturally. Finally, I conquer my nervousness and touch quill to parchment.

Harry,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am sorry to inconvenience you, but I have a favour to ask of you. As you know, I am writing a book about the Second Wizarding War. The problem is I've come to a dead end of sorts. I was wondering if you could help me find some information about Professor Snape's role in the war. I figure that many of the documents might be privileged, and I thought maybe you could help me gain access to them. Please let me know as soon as you can.

Yours,

Hermione

I read and reread the letter several times. It's not perfect, but it serves its purpose. I seal the letter in an envelope and retrieve my owl from her cage. After affixing the letter to her leg and opening the window, I realise how exhausted I am. I need sleep desperately. I don't bother putting away my tea things or writing supplies as I barely make it to my bed before I collapse with my face in my pillow.

It feels like only a few minutes before a pounding at my door stirs me from my sleep. *Who in the world would be knocking at my door in the middle of the night!* I wonder before looking at the clock and realizing that it is seven in the morning. I get out of bed and glance in the mirror. Merlin, I look a mess. I try to tame my hair on the way to answer the door although I know there is no use. Looking through the peephole in the door, I see Harry standing on the other side.

"Harry," I say as I open the door. "Sorry I look like such a wreck. I haven't been getting much sleep, and you sort of woke me up." I give him an embarrassed smile.

"Did I?" Harry asks sarcastically. "I suppose I should have waited until two in the morning and sent an owl to peck on your window."

"Sorry about that," I say sheepishly. "I didn't realise how late it was."

Harry shakes his head. "No worries. Anyway, what kind of information do you need on Professor Snape?"

"I'm afraid it is a bit of a long story," I begin as I open the door for him to pass through. "We can talk over tea if you have a few moments to spare."

Harry brushes past me as he shrugs out of his coat. "I've got a few minutes, but only if you have those glazed lemon biscuits I like." He tosses his coat on the sofa and turns for the kitchen.

"It's seven in the morning, Harry," I call after him, trying to hide my amusement. "Don't you think it's a little early for sweets?"

"Of course I don't," Harry responds as he takes a seat at the kitchen table. I pull some biscuits from the cupboard and sit them on a plate in front of him. "So, what do you need?" he asks through a mouthful of biscuit.

"Well, as you know, I'm writing a book about the war. I feel like Snape played such a big role in the war that I have to include him. The trouble is I don't have any information about him. I thought some of his memories may be on file at the Ministry."

"Probably," Harry says as he stuffs another biscuit into his mouth. "But they're confidential. You know how I hate breaking rules, Hermione." I give him an incredulous look. Clearly, I haven't been awake long enough to detect sarcasm.

He takes a deep breath, scooting the empty saucer toward me. "You want the entire file?"

My mouth falls open, and for a second I think my sleep-deprived mind is playing a terrible joke on me. "Just like that?" I ask before I realise what I'm saying.

"Just like what?"

"You've never told me anything."

"I know, but I can see this is important to you," Harry says quietly. "Besides, it's time people knew the truth."

"You could just tell me," I suggest, trying to make it easier on him.

Harry removes his glasses and cleans them on the hem of his shirt. I seem to have finally managed to make him uncomfortable. "I'd rather not, Hermione."

"Fair enough, but can you get me the entire file, memories and all?"

For a moment, Harry looks offended, then his expression softens. "Can I get the file she says. Of course I can get the file! Question is, how bad do you want it?"

I fold my arms across my chest. "Harry, I don't really have time for all this. Can you get me what I need or not?"

"It's going to cost you, Hermione. I'm putting my stellar reputation at risk, you know." A grin crosses his face. He's being obstinate, determined to repay me for my early morning disturbance.

I stalk back to the cupboard and retrieve the tin of biscuits. I sit them in front of him. "Is this sufficient payment, Mister Potter?"

Harry opens the tin and sees that it is nearly full. "It'll do. I'll send a package over this afternoon... or perhaps around two tomorrow morning. I haven't decided yet. Either way, I need to get back to the office."

He gets up and puts on his coat. "Thank you, Harry," I say as I wrap my arms around him. "I really appreciate it."

"Don't mention it," he says as he returns my embrace. He shakes the tin I've given him. "And thanks for these." He turns and exits, leaving me alone with my thoughts and a mound of biscuit crumbs to clean off my kitchen table.

Author's Notes: While I hope you enjoy this story (and I believe you will), I should warn you that it is not for the faint of heart. This story is rated mature for a reason, as there are strong images of death throughout. That being said, it is not my intention to frighten anyone away, but to merely make you aware of the world you are about to step into. Also, I would like to extend a very special thank you to Meladara for her keen eye.

Revelations

Chapter 2 of 4

Somewhere, in the midst of all the chaos following the end of the war, someone made an error.

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Chapter II

Revelations

"The green eyes found the black, but after a second, something in the depths of the dark pair seemed to vanish, leaving them fixed, blank and empty. The hand holding Harry thudded to the floor and Snape moved no more." Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

My morning, following Harry's departure, seems to flash by in a blur. Something inside my head seems to click and I move around my tiny flat in whirlwind, readying everything for a night full of reading and, hopefully, writing. Tidying the place is done with a flick of my wrist as I cast a cleaning spell I learned from Molly Weasley. Even though objects whiz around the room finding their rightful spots on the shelves and in drawers, my subconscious remains a jumbled mess. The project that has consumed nearly all of my thoughts in the past few months continues to do so. Although the aroma from the freshly brewed pot of tea and the sight of an orderly kitchen and sitting room relaxes me, I can't help but reflect on how finishing this book will, with a bit of luck, change everything. Less than a year ago, I was struggling to come to terms with the light we were all painted in.

Harry may have been called the Chosen One but, in reality, the public never had a clue. The first few months following the war were especially dark for Harry. Voldemort had taken his entire family away from him, not to mention numerous close friends. Harry had spent so much time fighting Voldemort, desperate to avenge his loved ones, that he had never been allowed to grow up. He certainly was not ready for all the attention he would receive after the war. Sure, he had always been famous, but he had always been insulated by Hogwarts. The "real world" was a different story. Countless requests for interviews, public appearances, and authorized biographies poured in before Harry had even had the opportunity to properly say goodbye to those lost at the Battle of Hogwarts. Harry had declined all such requests and had tried to remain out of the public eye as much as he could. He spent many nights at home alone and shut himself off from the rest of the world, sometimes even to Ron and myself. It took a lot of urging from Arthur Weasley and a personal visit from Minister Shacklebolt to finally convince Harry to accept an Auror position at the Ministry. The position had done wonders for him. He seemed to genuinely enjoy life again. However, he rarely talked publicly about the war. He used his job as a way out of doing any interviews saying that he simply didn't have time. So, if anyone was going to tell the story of the Battle of Hogwarts, it would certainly not be Harry.

Ron was not a likely source of information either. The loss of Fred had taken an enormous toll on him. He too had been hounded for interviews, and he didn't handle being in the spotlight well. He tried working at George's shop in Diagon Alley but that endeavor didn't last long. George had battled depression after Fred's death, and he and Ron argued often. He moved back in with Arthur and Molly but, predictably, that didn't work out either. Tensions ran high and Ron's relationship with his parents was strained. Finally, something went right for Ron when his brother Charlie asked him to come to Romania and help him with his dragon breeding operation. Ron seized the opportunity to escape Britain and the media circus that followed the war with both hands. He wrote occasionally and had promised to be home for a couple of weeks for Christmas, but other than that he was rarely heard from.

If anyone was going to give a firsthand account of the Battle of Hogwarts and the Second Wizarding War, it would have to be me. And the truth has to be told. In addition to those who will not speak about the war, the ones who cannot give their accounts deserve to be heard. Remus and Tonks deserve for people to know of their bravery and commitment to one another. Their son deserves to know how brave his parents were. People need to know that underneath all the jokes and pranks, Fred Weasley was as courageous as anyone and never thought twice about putting his life on the line for what he knew was right. And people have to know the truth about Professor Snape. He died a disgraced traitor and murderer. I know that isn't a true picture of the man who died in front of my eyes on the Shrieking Shack floor, and everyone else should know his true story. The problem is that even I don't know his story; not all of it at least.

After the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry had taken Ron and me aside and told us what he had seen in the Pensieve. He told us that Snape had been working for Dumbledore the whole time and that he wasn't really a traitor at all. I got the sense that he had seen much more in those silver fragments of Professor Snape's mind but, for some unknown reason, Harry flatly refused to divulge the details. I had suspected that Harry's reluctance was out of respect for Professor Snape's privacy or perhaps something he saw in our professor's memories. Whatever the reason, every time I tried to painstakingly piece together the information from Harry's limited confession, it never seemed to come out right when ink was put to parchment.

"Well, that's all about to change," I say aloud. A slight smile sweeps across my face as I lean back onto the sofa with my tea cup. "It's all about to change." As those five words sink in I expect to feel relief, but instead a gnawing feeling of nervousness judders in the pit of my stomach. Change is good, right? Waiting with just my thoughts to keep me company will not bode well for any future productivity I hope to have. I stare down into my cup at the remaining tepid liquid and frown.

A surge of annoyance jolts through me as I sit the cup on the table. I blink a few times and look around the room, as though searching for an escape from my impatience. The sound of rain falling imperceptibly beyond the window seems to make me restless, and I soon find myself pacing the floors, clutching my notes in my hands. I must read over the various pages in the journal nearly half a dozen times before the words turn into a jumble of letters.

I've got to get out of this flat before I drive myself mad. Tossing the worn journal on the settee, I retrieve my jumper from the cupboard and head out into the streets. The rain, a grey drizzle that washes the colour from the London streets, is surprisingly calming. I pull my hood over my head to prevent my hair from becoming a disaster as I start off in the direction that will take me to my favourite café.

The streets aren't terribly crowded, but that is mostly because of the rain. Most people either huddle under umbrellas or race to get indoors, but not me. I need this time to clear my head. Besides, the soup I have set out to get will soon warm me sufficiently to counteract the cold raindrops that currently soak through my clothing. In mere minutes, I have reached my destination. I wait in the queue for about five minutes before ordering my soup and sandwich. I sit at a table in the corner of the café and gaze absently at the streams of water cascading down the window. The soup does its job in warming me up, and by the end of the meal, my mood has improved significantly. I had not noticed how hungry I was, but apparently, I had been neglecting myself more than I realised.

By the time I finish my meal, the rain has let up. Walking home from the café, I feel refreshed and relaxed for the first time in weeks. The time away from home and my research has done a world of good, but before I know it, I have made it around the block and am back home. As I walk up the pavement, I spot a piece of parchment stuck on my front door. Dread overtakes me. I've missed Harry. He must have left a note telling me he tried to drop off the materials and the door was locked. Now I'll have to wait even longer to get what I need. In my nervousness, I quicken my pace and only refrain from sprinting toward the door out of fear of appearing suspicious to onlookers. I rip the parchment from the door and read it:

H,

You really should work on your security around here. Any crazy sod could walk in, you know. Package is in the kitchen... where the biscuits should be.

...HP

Totally ambivalent to the fact that either my best friend has just broken into my home or I had forgotten to lock the door, I breathe a sigh of relief. I make my way to the kitchen and spot the package immediately. Upon opening it, I see that it contains several phials filled with a shiny, stringy, silver substance. I know that these contain the memories of Professor Snape. Under the phials is a folder full of documents. Opening the folder, however, is a bit of a shock. I stall for a moment, taken aback by the document that is at the front. I had expected some written transcripts of Snape's memories, perhaps some official Ministry press releases concerning his death. What I had not expected, and what was currently staring me in the face, was Professor Snape's autopsy report.

For some reason, I can't bring myself to read it. The events I witnessed that day in the Shrieking Shack are among the most gruesome I have ever seen, and I have no desire to relive them. Besides, I know exactly when and how Professor Snape died. I was there after all. Instead, I thumb through the rest of the papers in the file. They are just what I expect. Written accounts of Snape's memories; useless to me since I prefer to see them for myself. I quickly decide there is not much of value in the papers. What I really need is in those phials. I'll have to visit Minerva again soon to look at the memories in the Pensieve. As I stack the papers back into the file, something catches my eye. On the autopsy report, Professor Snape's date of death is incorrect. The document lists the date as May 4th, 1998 but I know for a fact that he died on the second of May. I am intrigued enough to put aside my prior reservations and give the document a thorough reading.

SUMMARY REPORT OF AUTOPSY

Name: Severus Tobias Snape

Species: Human

Gender: Male

Date of Birth: January 9th, 1960

Date of Death: May 4th, 1998

Body Identified by: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic and friend of the deceased.

Investigative Agency: The Ministry of Magic of the United Kingdom: Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Case number: 426513

Evidence of Treatment:

No treatment administered. Subject had expired prior to arrival.

External Examination:

The autopsy is begun at 9:17 A.M on May 5th, 1998. The body is received in an M.o.M standard-issue death shroud. The subject is wearing black teaching robes, a black, long sleeved frock coat, white cuffed dress shirt, and black trousers. The left sleeve of the frock coat had been torn completely from the garment and had been wrapped around the subject's neck. Smaller tears in the fabric of the frock coat were discovered as well as traces of blood residue. Subject is wearing black wool socks and black dragon-hide boots.

The body is that of a normally developed Caucasian male measuring 71 inches and weighing 170 pounds. The subject's appearance is consistent with the stated age as suggested by date of birth. The eyes were closed upon arrival, but further investigation revealed black irises and dilated pupils. The eyes had lost their lustre as indicated by the lack of a soul and magic. Subject's hair is black in colour and hangs straight. At its longest point, the hair is approximately nine inches. The fingernails are trimmed with dirt and blood under each fingernail. The nail beds are light blue in colour. On the right index finger, teeth marks, matching the placement of the subject's are visible and are contained to the metacarpal and proximal phalange. The skin is not broken, but bruising on the digit indicates bleeding under the skin as caused by applied pressure. The injury suggests the subject sustained the self-inflicted bite before death. There were scratches on the skin of the palms of both hands, measuring varied lengths and depths. These wounds are also self-inflicted as evidenced by subject's blood under the nails.

Removal of the sleeve of the frock coat revealed tears in the collar of the coat as well as the dress shirt. A severe laceration was found on the left side of the subject's neck as well as multiple small puncture wounds to the left side of the chest and upper body. Evidence suggests the injury was sustained prior to the subject's death.

Upon removal of the subject's garments, strong discolouration of the left side of the body was visible. Further and more in depth analysis of the afflicted are is needed to determine the exact cause. Six smaller puncture wounds were found on the torso and left side, measuring approximately one to two inches in depth and a quarter of an inch in diameter. There are residual scars of varying lengths covering the body, all of which appear to have been sustained prior to the subject's death. A single marking was found on the left forearm of the subject, the Dark Mark of Lord Voldemort. The Dark Mark is faded, having an appearance of bleeding off the subject's arm.

Internal Examination:

The internal examination began at 9:53 A.M on May 5th, 1998 under the direction of Healer Uriel Barns. During the examination, Mister Barns utilized a hawthorn wand with a thestral tail hair core in accordance with magical law as stated by the Ministry of Magic and regulations established by St. Mungo's.

The first full body wand scan was to determine the overall state of the central system of nerves. The subject's brain was within the normal limits of weight and size for a male aged thirty-eight years. Evidence also suggests the subject suffered a mild concussion due to slight swelling of the frontal lobe. No lesions were present.

A skeletal wand scan was then completed, resulting in the discovery of three cracked true ribs along the left side of the torso. Fractures in the bone suggest they are from unusual or repeated stress. Bruising along the left side of the torso supports evidence of the broken ribs. This injury was most likely sustained prior to the subject's death.

A respiratory scan revealed the throat structures were damaged by a lesion stretching from the left ear to the base of the throat. The gash is approximately an inch wide and varies in depth throughout. A wound of this nature would have produced significant blood loss if left untreated. Samples of blood and tissue have been collected for testing. There were no obstructions in the airway. Scan of the lungs shows slight build-up of fluid and possible haemorrhaging. Fluid samples were extracted for testing.

A cardiovascular wand scan suggests the heart is of normal weight and size for a male aged thirty-eight years. An anomaly, however, was detected in the configuration of the organ. It appears as though the heart had been sliced into two equal parts and reattached. There is no evidence to suggest foul play as the subject's chest cavity remains whole and intact. The size and colouration of the fissure suggests this wound was inflicted post-mortem. Evidence of substantial but prolonged blood loss is also detected.

Healer's Footnote: Include in official report to the Ministry of Magic the possible detection of Resonare Mortis.

PROFESSIONAL OPINION

In accordance with the findings, it is the professional and medical opinion of Mister Uriel Barns; Healer, that the subject, Severus Tobias Snape, passed through the Veil on Monday, May 4th, 1998, forty-eight hours after the suggested time of death given by witnesses. He was aged thirty-eight years and one hundred-fifteen days. The unofficial cause of death is severe trauma to the upper body and high toxicity levels in the blood stream. The toxin is unknown and samples of blood have been sent to St. Mungo's for additional testing.

Addendum One (added 05/05/98): During the autopsy investigation, evidence was found to suggest the possible presence of the magical phenomena known as Resonare Mortis. Ministry officials have been notified and wand scans of the heart have been kept for further evaluation.

Addendum Two (added 05/06/98): Evaluation of blood samples suggests the subject's blood was laced with venom belonging to that of a magical serpent, origin unknown. Traces of anti-venom were also found in the samples tested. Samples offer evidence that the venom itself did not cause the subject to expire, but rather the wound sustained. Final conclusion: Official cause of death is prolonged haemorrhaging and dehydration.

Addendum Three (added 06/01/98): Findings from the Ministry of Magic show no evidence of Resonare Mortis. The location, the tunnel leading from Hogsmeade Village to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has been secured and deemed clear by Ministry officials for permanent closure. Final conclusion: Case 426513 closed by The Ministry of Magic, June 1st, 1998.

Reporting Ministry Official: Augustus Strout; Senior Auror, Order of Merlin First Class.

Reporting Mediwizard: Uriel Barns; Healer, St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries

The parchment falls from my hand, and for a moment I'm paralysed from shock. I didn't watch Severus Snape die in the Shrieking Shack. "I didn't watch Snape die," I say aloud, as though it would make the statement any less true. I can feel the colour drain from my face as I stare at the autopsy report, the realisation of what I have just read sinking in.

We left him for dead.

My stomach lurches and I rush toward the sink before I am sick all over the floor. How long I stand over the basin, my mind reeling and my insides churning like butter, I don't know. It feels like ages before I can finally stand upright. This is impossible. I saw him lying in a puddle of his own blood, too much blood. There's no way he could have survived after losing that much. I saw the light vanish from his eyes and his body slump lifelessly on the floor. He didn't move. He didn't breathe. He was dead. He had to be.

My head snaps up to find the clock above the door and breathe a sigh of relief when I see it's only two in the afternoon. I have to speak with Harry immediately. I scrawl a note on a piece of parchment:

Harry, need to speak with you A.S.A.P.!

Hermione

I grab some Floo powder from the bucket on my mantle. "Harry Potter's office," I say as I toss in first the handful of powder followed by my hastily written note. The note vanishes, and I am left to wait until Harry responds. Mercifully, Harry responds in only a couple of minutes. Any longer and I'm afraid I would have bitten my fingernails completely off. I unfold the note that arrives. In it, Harry tells me that he can't get away from the office until this evening but that we can talk earlier if I want to come by. I waste little time getting ready. I slide the autopsy report inside my journal. I elect to leave the rest of the file at home. After all, I'm not supposed to have them, so walking into the Ministry with them would not be my smartest decision.

I decide that I absolutely cannot wait the amount of time it will take to walk to the Ministry, and Apparating to the middle of downtown London would be to risk being spotted by hundreds of Muggle onlookers. The Ministry's extensive security measures will not allow me to travel directly to Harry's office by Floo, but I can get to the Ministry itself. I make up my mind that this is the best way to get there quickly. I grab another handful of Floo powder and step into my recently enlarged fireplace. I throw the powder down and call out my destination. I feel a violent jerk downward, then sideways, and find myself in the lobby at the Ministry in a matter of seconds.

I make my way down the corridor that leads to the Auror Department. On my way, I pass several portraits of witches and wizards that were lost in the Second Wizarding War. Many of them stir up a lot of feelings, both pleasant and heartbreaking, as I pass them. Several of the people I considered close friends and trusted allies line the wall: Sirius, Dumbledore, Remus, Tonks, Mad-Eye, Fred. But one person conspicuous by his absence is Professor Snape. When Professor Snape died, everyone thought he was nothing more than a murderer and traitor, but people knew better now, especially the people at the Ministry. Snape was not the most likable person, far from it, but the fact remained that he gave his life fighting Voldemort in the war and to not include him in this memorial is inexcusable.

I finally reach the end of the long corridor and come to the large wooden doors that lead to the Auror Department. When I pass through the doors leading to the Auror's offices, there is only a single desk sitting in the foyer. Perched in the chair behind the desk is a middle-aged woman, wearing green...the sort of green best suited for a lizard...robes. She doesn't look up as I approach, but when I get close enough, I can see she is dutifully working on the latest crossword puzzle in the day's paper. I must clear my throat at least three times before she even realises she's not alone. Finally, the witch puts down her copy of the *Daily Prophet*, seemingly annoyed at my intrusion.

"Can I help you?" she almost growls.

I can't decide if it is the bright red lipstick smeared across her teeth or her acerbic tone that catches me off guard but, for a second, all I can do is gape at her. "I... Yes, I'm here to see Harry Potter."

The woman's mood, if such a thing were even possible, takes a nosedive before I can finish my sentence. She looks at me sourly, as though she has a bad taste in her mouth. Apparently, this sort of thing happens a lot. "Do you have an appointment, Miss..."

"Hermione Granger, and no," I answer as politely as I can manage. "However, he knows I'm coming to see him."

Thumbing through the planning book in front of her, the witch makes several agitating ticking noises with her tongue. Part of me wants to reach out and rip the book from her hand, but that won't gain me admittance into Harry's office. Instead, I wait obediently for her to finish whatever it is she's doing.

"I'm sorry, but Mister Potter does not have an appointment at this time," she says triumphantly before adding, "You can come back next week if it suits you."

Annoyance rises in me like vomit. *I don't have time for this*, I think as I stiffen. "Excuse me, madam..."

The black-haired witch frowns, elongating the deep lines in her face. "My name's Genevieve."

Somehow it escapes me that she and I are on a first name basis. I feign courtesy once more, though it is quite plain my tone is daring her to interrupt me again. "Forgive me, *Genevieve*, but as I was saying, I spoke with Harry by Floo not fifteen minutes ago."

The receptionist holds up her giant planner and shakes it at me, as though to make a point. "Be that as it may, Miss Granger," she says with a slight smile, "your name is not written in my book. If your name is not in my book, you don't have an appointment. If you don't have an appointment..."

"That will be all, Genevieve."

I turn to see Harry's head poking out of the nearest door. Genevieve's smile withers on her thin lips as Harry comes to stand in the corridor. "Sir, she is saying she has an appointment with you. Her name isn't..."

"And she does," he says pinching his nose, as though to relieve tension. He looks at me briefly before waving me forward. "Come on, Hermione."

I look to the receptionist, pleased to see that she doesn't have the slightest notion of what to say. "Perhaps you should pencil me in," I say through a clenched smile. Turning for Harry's office, I am intent on displaying every ounce of my amusement. It is childish and in poor taste, but I simply can't help myself when I call out, "And, by the way, number fourteen down on your crossword is 'Hungarian Horntail'."

When I close the door to Harry's modest office, he chuckles freely. "You are unbelievable, do you know that?"

A wide grin finds its way to my lips. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Fourteen down? Are you back at Hogwarts?"

"She was being ridiculous," I counter. "Not to mention rude. I couldn't very well thump her upside the head with her precious planner, now could I?"

"She's new. I haven't had time to properly train her yet. My apologies." Harry takes a deep breath, as if settling in for what I have to tell him. "Anyway, what was it you needed to speak to me about? It seemed quite urgent."

"Yes, it is," I say as I search for a way to broach the subject. Harry and Professor Snape never got along, but I know Harry has held him in high regard ever since that night in the Shrieking Shack and seeing his memories in the Pensieve. I have no idea how he'll react when I tell him that we left Professor Snape for dead that night. Nevertheless, I know I have to tell him. "Look at this," I say as I hand him the autopsy report. "It lists the date of death for Professor Snape as May 4th, 1998, not May 2nd."

Harry looks at the paper quizzically for a moment. "That is odd. I'm sure it's just a mistake. Things were hectic after the war, and the examiner probably just wrote the wrong date."

"Maybe," I say sceptically, "but you know how meticulous the examiners at St. Mungo's are. It is very uncharacteristic for them to be careless. Harry, do you think it's possible..."

"That Snape was alive when we left the Shrieking Shack? No. Absolutely not. I looked into his eyes. All the light had left them. He died clinging to my robes, Hermione. I am certain of that."

"How can you be certain?" I ask despite knowing that Harry wants this conversation to end. "We never checked for a pulse. I know it's an awful thing to think about, but it's at least worth investigating."

"For the last time, Hermione, there's no reason to investigate," Harry bites back, becoming visibly shaken as the suggestion sinks in. "Do you think I would have just left him there if I wasn't one hundred per cent sure that he was dead?"

I walk over to Harry and place a hand on his shoulder. "No, Harry, I don't think you would do that. That's not what I'm suggesting. I'm saying that it's at least possible that you were certain Snape was dead, as was I, but he really wasn't. It's unpleasant to think about, and believe me, I've beaten myself over the thought that we left him there to die. Neither of us would have left if we thought there was any chance he was alive, we both know that." Tears begin to well in my eyes as I force out the next sentence. "What I'm saying, Harry, is that maybe we were both wrong."

Harry shakes his head and sits down at his desk. He picks up the autopsy report and stares at it, rubbing his temple as if nursing a migraine. The two of us sit in silence for several moments as he flips through the pages, looking more and more confused. "This doesn't make any sense, Hermione. What are all these addendums about? And what the bloody hell is Re... Resonare Mortis?"

"That's the other thing I meant to ask you about. I've never heard of it. I thought maybe it was something you had run across or heard someone talking about," I explain. "I see that's not the case."

"No, I have no idea what it is. I can try to ask around, but it might seem suspicious." Harry hands me the document, and I tuck it neatly into the pages of my journal.

"Well we wouldn't want that. Hold off a bit on poking around for information. I'll check and see if I can find anything at..."

"The library," Harry interrupts. "Yes, I figured that would be your next stop."

I nod and turn to leave. Before I reach the door, however, I am reminded of something else. I turn back to Harry. "How come Professor Snape's picture isn't on the wall with everyone else's?"

"What? Oh, that. I tried to tell them to put it up, but they said he was still too controversial a figure. They said hanging his portrait could stir up bad memories, him being a former Death Eater, not to mention Dumbledore's killer. I told them that that was nonsense, but they still refused."

"*Controversial*," the word leaves a bad taste in my mouth as I repeat it. "What's controversial about a man who died bringing down Voldemort? Hopefully once my book is finished, he won't be so controversial anymore."

"I hope you're right, Hermione. I really do." He pops a lemon biscuit into his mouth "Good luck."

"Thanks, Harry," I say as I leave his office. As I exit the Ministry and make plans to go to Hogwarts,

I am now more resolved than ever to get to the bottom of Professor Snape's story and get rid of the nagging suspicions that everyone still seems to harbour against the man. I have to finish this book, and that means I have to start finding answers.

I go back to my flat only long enough to warn Minerva of my imminent arrival. Thankfully, it only takes minutes for her to respond to my request for help. Of course, the Headmistress agrees just as she had promised. Carefully stowing the journal and a blank booklet of parchments in my knapsack, I grab a handful of Floo powder from the canister on my mantel and fling the tiny particles into the firebox.

"Headmistress McGonagall's office, Hogwarts."

The swirling green flames overtake me and I feel myself being hurdled across hundreds of miles to Hogwarts. When I emerge from the flames, Minerva is sitting behind her desk, reading the note I had just sent. She looks up, removing her glasses. It's clear by the expression of concern on her face that my hastily scrawled letter caught her off her guard.

"I apologise for such late notice," I manage as I dust myself off. The excess soot and Floo powder stings my tear ducts, but I look through watery eyes to the portrait hanging behind Minerva. Snape sits, just as before, with an eerily blank look on his face, staring through everything in front of him. It is unsettling, and I blink heavily to tear myself away from his intense gaze.

"It's quite alright," the Headmistress says, her eyes following my gaze to the Snape's portrait. "I take it you have made headway with our Potions master?"

"Not quite, but I'm close."

Minerva smiles and extends the invitation for me to sit in one of the plush chairs in front of her. "What can I do for you?"

"While looking for what I needed, I came across a rather unusual term: Resonare Mortis. I haven't a clue what it means, and I was hoping to gain access to the Restricted Section of the library."

Minerva studies me for a moment, as though deep in thought. I can tell she's working out the Latin just as I did when I first recognised it. "Resonare Mortis?"

I move to reach for the autopsy report in my bag, but stop. "Yes, it was mentioned in a document that I was able to obtain from Harry. Have you heard of it?"

"Only in theory," Minerva replies. "I don't know if you will find any answers in the Restricted Section; however, I may have something of relevance in the Headmaster's library."

The Headmistress stands and makes her way to a bookshelf near the back of her office. I watch, bewildered, as she peruses a shelf containing several aged tomes. After a few moments, she returns with a dust-covered book. I can tell it is very old given the cracked binding and brittle pages. I don't notice any identifying marks on the cover or a title on the spine. When Minerva hands it to me, I open it to find the words: *Of Death and Dying*.

I flip through the book, noticing all of the text has been handwritten. It suddenly registers that I am reading someone's old journal. "I've never heard of the title."

"Not many people have. It was penned by Bertrand de Pensées-Profondes' lesser understudy, Soren Heidegger, sometime in the late eighteenth century. As you can see, it was never published."

"How did you get something like this?" I ask, enthralled by the authenticity of it all.

"Albus, naturally," Minerva answers. "Nicholas Flamel bequeathed it to him in his will. When Albus died, he donated all of his scholarly possessions to Hogwarts. I don't know if it will contain exactly what you need, but it is a start. Heidegger, in Albus's opinion, was far more realistic with the workings of death and the afterlife. He preferred him to Pensées-Profondes, though that is neither here nor there in terms of relevance."

I finally feel as though I may be on the right track, though I can't help but think this has been far too easy. I'm sure that will change once I drive into the gold-leafed pages. "Do you mind if I borrow this?"

"Not at all," she says before adding, "Keep it as long as you need. That was what Albus intended it for, after all. He'd be pleased to know it's no longer catching dust."

"I really appreciate all of your help, Minerva."

"Anytime, though I'm not sure how much I've helped you. If you do find you need access to the Restricted Section, I'll inform Madam Pince you've been given permission," Minerva continues. "Come and go as you'd like."

I stand, carefully tucking the journal in a side pocket of my bag. "I think I'd like to go there now, if that is alright. I've always done my best reading in the library."

"Then it's settled." Minerva removes a crisp sheet of parchment from a stack on her desk and writes my letter of permission to Madam Pince. "That should do it," she says, signing and dating the note. "She shouldn't hassle you too badly."

The Headmistress hands me the slip of parchment before walking me to the door. "I trust you can find your own way? I would escort you personally, but I'm afraid I have a prior engagement with the Board of Governors. You will have to forgive my rudeness."

"There's nothing to forgive. I'm the one who should be apologizing for disrupting your afternoon," I say as I step through the door and out into the hall. "I'll be alright from here."

I walk down the crowded hallway leading to the library. Some of the students are vaguely familiar to me, as they would have been in their first year when I was finishing up at Hogwarts. Even those that are unfamiliar stare at me as I pass and whisper to each other. I try to ignore it, but can't help but find it annoying. It's time like these that I understand why Ron moved to Romania. The constant attention from everyone borders on being downright creepy.

Thankfully, the library isn't far from Minerva's office. I walk in and find Madam Pince, the Hogwarts Librarian, perched behind the checkout counter like a vulture, looking as irritable as ever. She eyes me with predictable suspension as I approach. She has always made me somewhat uncomfortable given the way she stares down her hooked nose at patrons.

"Madam Pince, good aftern..."

"Shhhh!"

My free hand goes to my mouth as the other produces the note from the Headmistress. Madam Pince snatches it from my grasp, holding it inches from her pallid face, as though examining it for deception. After a few moments, she frowns but concedes the authenticity. "Very well. Follow me."

I fall into step a few paces behind her as she leads me to the section of the library I need. "It appears, Miss Granger, as though the Headmistress has granted you privilege to my library," she hisses.

"Yes," I whisper sheepishly, noticing her bony fingers clench around the parchment. It's obvious the thought of anyone touching her precious books makes her even more short-tempered than usual.

"Then I must allow you access," Madam Pince says with a touch of bitterness, "but I must also issue you a warning. I remember you from your time as a student here. I remember that you and your friends frequently engaged in mischief making and rule breaking. I am sorry to inform you, that in order to keep access to these books, you must follow my rules to the letter. You may have no more than two books off the shelf at one time. When you are finished with a book, you will return it to its proper spot. You are not to bend, damage, or deface the books in any way. If you do, there will be very serious repercussions. Is that understood, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be on my best behaviour." It annoys me that she talks to me like I am a child, but I know being conciliatory is the fastest route to ending this lecture and getting my research underway.

"I'm glad we understand each other," Madam Pince says with a forced smile and returns to her desk.

I take the ancient journal to a table in the Restricted Section and sit down. I carefully turn the pages one by one, hoping to come across some mention of Resonare Mortis. I trudge through page after page of Heidegger's writing, through countless accounts of deaths that he observed or read about and theories he extrapolated from these observations. He spared no grisly detail, and some of the stories cause my stomach to turn. It is two hours, maybe three, before I stumble upon the two words I've been searching for. I take a second look to make sure I'm not hallucinating. Sure enough, there they are, staring up at me.

They appear in Heidegger's account of the death of an English witch that was stabbed to death by a Muggle man *Rumors abound; the woman's spirit lingers in the house where she was murdered wailing in agony and begging for mercy. I plan to visit soon to see for myself if there are any signs of Resonare Mortis.*

Beside the words, Heidegger had placed a footnote. I find the corresponding symbol at the bottom of the page. The footnote read *The Magical Art of Dying, Fytherley Undercliffe, page 493*. I spring to my feet and head directly for the card catalog at the front of the Restricted Section. I quickly rifle through the 'U's and find what I'm looking for in a matter of moments. On my way back to the shelf, my knees actually begin to wobble. This could be the breakthrough I'm looking for. I find the book easily. It is a thick book bound in green leather with gold lettering on the cover. I take it back to my seat and turn as quickly as I can without damaging its ancient pages to the spot indicated in Heidegger's journal. What I find is an encyclopedic entry printed in ornate calligraphy:

Phenomena: Resonare Mortis

Resonare Mortis is an extraordinary phenomenon in which an expired magical being is forced to relive their untimely death...usually brought about by violent means...ad infinitum or until the loop is disrupted by an outside force. Unlike a true spectre or disembodied soul, an essence can be compelled into Resonare Mortis without fear of death or an unwavering, deep-seated connection to the location wherein the death occurred. The circumstances surrounding Resonare Mortis are widely considered as lore given the rarity. Conversely, recent discoveries by Wizarding philosopher, Potioneer, and author, Vindictus Viridian, propose that Resonare Mortis is, in actual fact, possible and is most generally a by-product of murder. Viridian postulates that it is not sudden death that will cause a spirit to become trapped, but rather delayed, agonizing passage through the Veil.

Characteristics:

Unlike ghosts which are translucent, spirits trapped in Resonare Mortis appear in visible form or corporal manifestation to the living. Descriptions of the manifestations vary widely. Forms can range from an invisible presence to life-like visions of the magical being they represent. The amount of time an essence is bound in Resonare Mortis can influence an observer's perception as well as the perception of the soul itself. For instance, a soul trapped for mere days will most likely behave in a confused manner whereas a soul trapped for years on end will start to believe themselves alive, taking on nearly all of the traits of the magical being they represent. It is this residual growth of self-awareness that makes Resonare Mortis highly dangerous. The longer Resonare Mortis is left unhindered, the stronger the influence will become...on both the soul in question and any outward observer.

Termination:

While exorcizing a soul under the effects of Resonare Mortis is not impossible, it is considered highly complex as simple extensions of exorcism will not put the spirit to rest. Cases documented by Viridian imply the soul may only be persuaded to pass through the Veil if they are made aware of the fact they are deceased, which becomes increasingly difficult the longer a soul remains bound in Resonare Mortis. Termination of Resonare Mortis may only occur when the spirit has reached the end of the cycle, but never before a new phase has started, which substantially decreases the window of successfulness. Furthermore, it is recommended by Viridian that proactive action be taken immediately if Resonare Mortis is suspected. Failure to promptly release the soul from its bonds will result in endless suffering and eventually the disintegration of the essence entirely.

I don't know how long I stare at the page trying to understand everything I've just read, but it was long enough that the sun has gone down and the library has emptied. The library is completely silent except for the sound of footsteps getting closer to me. Still, I can't take my eyes off the words in front of me. Suddenly, the words vanish and a loud thud jolts me from my trance. I look up to see Madam Pince standing across the table from me, the book I had been previously reading floating in the air beside her grey head.

"Your time is at its end, Miss Granger," she says with an air of smug satisfaction. "The library is closing."

Author's Notes: While I hope you enjoy this story (and I believe you will), I should warn you that it is not for the faint of heart. This story is rated mature for a reason, as there are strong images of death throughout. That being said, it is not my intention to frighten anyone away, but to merely make you aware of the world you are about to step into. Also, a very special thank you to Meladara for her keen eye. And to Anoesis who worked very quickly to Britpick this tale. As always, reviews are welcomed and greatly appreciated! Happy reading to all!

Perdition

Chapter 3 of 4

Somewhere, in the midst of all the chaos following the end of the war, someone made an error.

Winner, Second place for Best Drama-Angst Fic in the Fall/Winter 2013 HPfanficfanpoll awards on LiveJournal

Characters are property of J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter Universe. Thankfully, she allows me to borrow them for a bit of fun.

Resonare Mortis

Chapter III

Perdition

I see myself out of the castle, thankful that the evening meal has sequestered everyone in the Great Hall. Being tossed out of the library without time to properly process everything I have discovered has put me in a fetid mood, and the only thing on my mind is getting home to sort out details. Heidegger's journal feels heavy in my hand as I make my way to the front and out to the Apparition point, but I refuse myself the time to dwell on those thoughts. Splinching would put a damper on my already foul disposition. As soon as I exit the gates, I feel the familiar yet unsettling tugging that seems to come from every direction, and I'm gone without a trace.

The chilly evening air hits me and I know I've arrived. I have Apparated behind the building that houses my favourite Chinese takeaway restaurant, knowing I'll have neither the desire nor time to do any cooking when I finally get home. The alley behind the building is deserted, save for the stray grey tabby cat rummaging behind a nearby rubbish bin. The nameless animal I've seen countless times before pays me no mind as I make my way around to the entrance. I'll have to remember to leave his dinner before I start home.

The restaurant is almost empty which means minimal waiting time. I order my usual fare of sweet and sour chicken and a side of king prawn for the alley cat. He seems to prefer that to anything else I've ordered for him in the past. Once my order is placed, I take a seat near the door to wait. I retrieve Heidegger's journal from my pocket and run my fingers along the brittle edges of the paper. I wait a few moments, then, with great uncertainty, I open it to the page I've marked with a torn sheet of parchment and begin to read.

Rumors abound; the woman's spirit lingers in the house where she was murdered wailing in agony and begging for mercy. I plan to visit soon to see for myself if there are any signs of Resonare Mortis.

The thought of whether or not he ever visited flashes through my mind. Absently, I start to turn the pages, searching for any evidence or lack thereof of his encounter with the tortured English witch.

Ana

On the nineteenth of September of the year 1754 I arrived at the house just before sunset. It looked exactly the way my source had described it; uninhabited and in a state of moderate decay. Months had no doubt passed since anyone had lived here. Most of the shutters had fallen free from the siding and those that had not were in the process of turning to ruin. Admittance into the property was rather difficult as the door hinges were nearly rusted shut. More importantly, when I tried to dislodge the door, I had to resort to brute strength rather than magic. That fact alone was enough to prove my theory that magic cannot interfere with the area around a soul bound in Resonare Mortis.

Once inside I found no evidence of human life. The interior of the small home was in as poor a condition as the outside. Weeds grew through the floorboards and mice scurried to hide from my presence. When the scattering of their feet had subsided, I waited for any evidence of the damaged soul. Suspecting that I was not in the correct part of the home, I made my way through the house, carefully inspecting each room, but found nothing out of the ordinary.

The unsuccessful search left me flustered, and I returned to the sitting room and took to a chair that looked as if it might support my weight. While sitting in the chair, coolness seemed to envelope me the way a swaddling cloth blankets a babe. Though I was completely free to move about, the air felt constricted and heavy, as though something was descending upon the house. Knowing it would only be a matter of time, I sat, hardly breathing and my movements static. It was not the freezing air ambushing me from every angle that caused the gooseflesh to appear and the hairs on my arms and neck to stand on end, but the chilling scream that rang down through the planked floors above. The wailing continued, high-pitched and piercing and, for a moment, I felt as though I was trapped in the agony..."

"Order for Hermione Granger!" I start at the shrillness of the voice, slamming the book shut. Stowing the journal in my satchel, I look to the counter to spot a woman of short stature glaring at me from behind the till. She holds my food out at arm's length with a hand resting on her plump hip. Apparently, I've done something in the ten minutes that I've been here to offend her, as she doesn't respond when I say 'thank you' or leave a tip in the nearly empty jar on the counter.

As I leave the shop, I pull the container holding the steaming prawns from the bag and make my way toward the alley. The cat sits patiently on the edge of the rubbish bin, his dishevelled tail curled around his front paws. Giant, yellow eyes follow me with interest as I carefully place the clear, flimsy container on the ground. He makes no effort to come closer than his usual spot. He never does, but we understand each other all the same. "Enjoy your supper," I say, prying open the lid. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the cat has jumped down and is now eating. I can't help but smile as I start my short walk home.

My small, terraced flat isn't far, so I make it home before my food can become too chilled by the night air. I lay Heidegger's journal on the coffee table, far away from any stray bits of sweet and sour sauce that may try to defile it. Minerva would have my head if I brought it back in less than perfect condition. Despite being covered with parchments and pots of ink, the kitchen table is where I decide to eat my dinner. The sight of my work strewn about makes me anxious to start reading again, and before I know it, I'm scraping the last bit of sauce from the takeaway container with the tip of my chopstick. I'm sure the food was good, but I hardly remember tasting it. I never thought I would see the day when I could eat fast enough to rival Ron's best efforts in the Great Hall. Tossing the empty bowl in the rubbish bin, I waste as little time as possible cleaning the kitchen before going back to the sitting room and opening the journal. Once I find my place, I continue reading:

... I felt as though I was trapped in the agony. The screams seemed to encase the entire house, but it was clear the second floor was the epicentre of the activity. I half-ran, half-fell, my way up the dry rotted stairs in attempt to reach the soul, but once I was close enough to the second floor landing, it was painfully obvious the wretched sound was coming from the room at the end of the corridor...the room I had vacated not an hour before. With each step I took, the screams grew louder, more defined, and before I found myself standing near the entrance, I heard a call for help.

"Please...help me," a woman's shrill voice called out from beyond the closed door. The franticness of her tone made it seem as though she felt she was the only one left in the world. It was in that precise moment that my decision to merely investigate changed to that of intervention, though I knew nothing of what such a resolution would entail. After all, what a terrible evil it would have been to condemn her to such damnation.

In hindsight, knocking to make my presence known was a fruitless endeavour as the poor woman could not hear me above her hysterics. What I did next, in short, was hardly courteous - I pushed past the weathered door and into the room where the wailing sound was intensified. The room itself felt like ice, but it was the shock of seeing a pair of wide eyes staring back at me through the darkness that caused my sudden fright.

I could do nothing but stand stock still, petrified into utter senselessness. My will to speak left me as I was unable to form a coherent thought, unable to keep my jaw from falling to the floor. I know now, as I pen these words, that I will never forget her voice - the sound of it as it tore through the air, and then the heaviness I felt when it branded itself in my subconscious. Had I not known beforehand that powerful magic was afoot, I would have thought the person rather than the soul was sitting before me. Theories were, in actual fact, proved in that precise instant when I laid eyes upon her frame, but it will always be her voice that struck me above all else.

When the pitiable woman caught sight of me, everything in that ramshackle room shifted. In her eyes, I saw a spark, a will to overcome, so strong that it nearly brought me to my knees. It was remarkable that my powers of perception, having failed me until that point, came rushing back like a torrent, as I became dreadfully aware of her situation. Terror threatened to garrote the very life from me when she threw back her blankets, revealing the tragic sight of her silken nightdress, shredded no doubt by a blade that had stabbed through it repeatedly. The sheer gruesomeness of it all brought forth a surge of nausea so violent, so all-consuming that I had to turn away to prevent myself from retching.

I approached the ravaged woman with extreme prudence, knowing full-well that I should have been trying to bring a sense of hope to a situation that we both knew was gravely serious. Still, the unfamiliarity of the situation did not lend itself to casual behaviours or carelessness. Once I was within her reach, she seized hold of my robes with a sudden fierceness I did not expect. To say that I did not start would be an egregious lie, but, again, it was her tone that kept me from twisting myself free from her grasp. Directly this time, she asked for me aid, to which I obediently obliged by pressing the sheet to her wounds. How heinous the farce seems now, to make her believe I was trying to help! I knew with heaviness in my heart that there was no help for her, though she did not.

What happened next, and I can scarcely bring myself to put it to parchment, will be forever engrained in my mind. The woman began to offer to me freely the details of her assault as though she believed it would make a difference. Her assailant, unknown to her even to that instant, had caught her off her guard while she slept. She recounted the immense pain she felt when his dagger pierced through the bed linens and into her flesh and the harsh sting of his words when he called her names hardly suited for a mutt, let alone another human being. The masked murderer, I suspected, had then damned her to death by breaking her wand, her only way to save herself, before fleeing like a coward.

This act of bigotry so grievous that it had resulted in the loss of an innocent life seemed altogether unfathomable to me. Moreover, to think of how a self-righteous man could call an innocent an abomination and a pockmark to the human race, when he himself reverted to violence as a means to cope with his own ignorance angered me in a way that I had never experienced. I shuddered to think in that moment what I would have done if I found myself face to face with the barbarian bigot.

Soon after her testimony, she told me her name was Ana and confessed to having magical abilities. She seemed to find small comfort in the fact that I was not much unlike her in the gifts we possessed. The very second, however, that I informed her that I was in fact a wizard, Ana pleaded with me to spare her from death. How silly of me it was, now that I reflect back, that I had failed to realise she would ask this obvious favour of me. Nevertheless, she managed to catch me in a brash frame of mind, giving me little time to form a convincing lie, and before I knew it, the dire truthfulness of her situation fell from my tongue: that she had been dead for nearly six month' time.

I studied her as she pondered my words, mesmerised by her life-like expression, and noticed calmness descend upon her. She seemed to believe me and, more than that, she seemed relieved. Not soon after, Ana told me that she was not afraid, but asked if I would be so gracious as to oblige her in her final, dying request. I will never forget the earnestness in her words when she asked for my name. At first, such a request appeared a pitiful token until she explained to me that she wanted to the peace of knowing the kindness of a benevolent man would be the last thought to cross her mind instead of the horrible demon responsible for her affliction.

'Soren,' my given name, was the final word to escape her lips in the moment before she finally succumbed, leaving me alone with my own tumultuous thoughts. I sat for several moments unable to find the will to move until I felt a stillness about me that I could not deny. It crept in through floorboards, cracks in the window, and even through me until it settled over the room like a fog. My eyes, having been occupied with the sudden shifting in the room, looked once again to the bed where Ana lay. She was no longer there.

I waited all through the day and even until the darkness came again to make sure the job was done. Much to my relief, the morning sun rose again with no more screams, no more pain. Ana had moved on from this world.

I have recounted the events, this twentieth day of September, of the case of Ana, the unfortunate soul lost in an insufferable act of prejudice, and support with absolute fact and conviction that Resonare Mortis exists.

I am certain of it.

And I am certain I've just read an excerpt from a horror novel rather than the experiences of a scholarly man. I close the journal and carefully sit it on the table, as though I might become trapped in its grotesque pages. Bringing myself to read any further is a lost cause, because a reasonable part of me finds it to be too incredibly far-fetched to believe. I cling miserably to that reasonable side as I turn off the table lamp and make my way to my bedroom, knowing full-well that I am ridiculous.

During the night, I wake no less than three times from half-remembered nightmares. Screeching witches and ghostly spectral images of Severus Snape haunt my dreams, making it impossible for me to rest. Every time I close my eyes, I'm transported to the rickety house somewhere in eighteenth century England that once played host to a trapped soul. If it isn't the house, it is Snape. I see him, quite plainly, coming back to life on the dirty floor of the Shrieking Shack, his clouded, half-dead eyes full of reproach. It is madness, and after lying awake for an hour or so, I finally untangle myself from between the blankets and go back downstairs.

With no particular destination in mind, I amble through the sitting room and into the kitchen, the thought of a fresh pot of tea suddenly sounding like a brilliant idea. I don't see the bag sitting on the floor that contains all of my work until it's too late. My foot catches the strap and sends parchments scattering all over the tile floor. Parchments belonging to me mix with ones from the Ministry, making a giant mess. I know I could easily wave my wand and sort it straight, but instead, I sit cross-legged in the middle of my kitchen and start sifting through the files. It is tedious work, but I find it oddly comforting. It keeps thoughts I have no desire to think from worming their way into my head. Of course, that is until I find the Auror's report detailing the investigation on Professor Snape's death. For a split second, I consider filing it the Ministry folder, because I know what it will say. However, my curiosity ultimately wins out and I start reading.

The report details the Auror and Unspeakable assigned to the case. Neither of them sound familiar and their work is cursory at best. I almost can't bring myself to finish it, but something near the bottom of the report nearly causes my heart to stop. The words 'Shrieking Shack' seem to come off the page like they have a mind of their own. I scan the page, fearing the worst.

On Thursday, May 28th 1998, at approximately 4:38 in the afternoon, Senior Auror Augustus Strout and Unspeakable Alistair Clagge travelled to Hogsmeade Village to investigate a possible magical disturbance at the abandoned home known as the Shrieking Shack. Unspeakable Clagge performed the necessary enchantments to detect the phenomena known as Resonare Mortis. Lack of sufficient evidence obtained by Unspeakable Clagge suggests the area is clear. Auror Strout deemed the home safe and ready for permanent closure. The Shrieking Shack was secured at approximately 4:53 P.M. and permanent closure will occur once findings have been approved and finalised.

The paper falls from my grasp, and I find I'm on my hands and knees frantically digging through parchments. "Where? Where? Where? Where is it?!" It's useless, like looking for a grain of sand in a bed of dirt. There must be at least two hundred sheets scattered across my floor. I pull my wand from the loose knot in my hair and wield it in a wide arc over my head. "Accio autopsy report."

The document erupts from somewhere near the bottom of the heap and nearly smacks me in the face as it rockets upward. I snatch it out of the air and turn to the last page, the page containing the addenda. No matter how many times I read it, it always says the same thing.

Addendum Three (added 06/01/98): Findings from the Ministry of Magic show no evidence of a Resonare Mortis. The location, the tunnel leading from Hogsmeade Village to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has been secured and deemed clear by Ministry officials for permanent closure. Final conclusion: Case 426513 closed by The Ministry of Magic, June 1st, 1998.

Somewhere, in the midst of all the chaos following the end of the war, someone made an error. The grievousness of said error remains to be seen, but it is an error just the same. My first instinct is to send for Harry, but considering the lateness of the hour, I decide against that idea. As much as I would like to talk to both the Auror and Unspeakable myself, I know I can't. The Healer assigned to Snape's case is out of the question as well. These files should have never left the Ministry, and they certainly shouldn't be scattered like confetti all over my floor. I make up my mind that the only solution is to investigate myself. The prospect of having an experience similar to Heidegger's sends shivers down my spine, but, I tell myself, there is really no other option. After I use my wand to sort all the papers into their proper folders, I head back to bed, hoping that by some miracle I can fall asleep and get a few hours of rest before I potentially face one of the most uncomfortable ordeals of my life.

At dawn I lie in bed, watching the first faint hints of the new day peek through the window above my head. As I study the tiny particles of dust floating in and out of the light, my mind wanders to Ana, the poor witch in Heidegger's journal entry. His account of Ana made her seem much more than a corporeal manifestation. She appeared to be fully alive and completely cognisant of the luridly violent situation unfolding around her. Heidegger carried on complete conversations with her, and when he reached out to touch her, he felt skin rather than air. If she had been trapped by the magical bond for only six months and carried such a vibrant illusion of life, how would a soul trapped for years appear? I shuddered at the thought. My only hope is that I won't have to find out.

As I go through my morning routine, my mind is largely absent from the clothes I select and the breakfast I eat. All I can think about is Snape. A sense of dread descends on me that I cannot shake. I gather my things, making sure to get Professor Snape's autopsy report. If I see him and can talk to him, I'll need some evidence that he has passed on or he'll find the notion preposterous. I check and double check to make sure I'm not forgetting anything and am prepared to Apparate when a thought occurs to me. I should probably tell someone where I'm going in case something goes amiss. I scribble a note to Harry. I use his home address so that he won't read it until late this evening. I want him to know where I'm going, but I do not want him to try and stop me, which I'm certain he'll do if he finds out soon enough. I send my owl on her way with the letter and gather my nerve to set out for the Shrieking Shack.

In an instant, I am standing right outside the building thought to be the most haunted in Britain. I am about to find out just how true that rumour is. The Shack is roped off and a sign forbids me entrance. Making as sure as I can that I am not being watched, I duck under the rope and cast a quick unlocking spell on the front door. As I step inside, I am confronted with a deluge of memories associated with this place. I remember coming here in my third year when we all thought Harry was being hunted by Sirius. Snape was here then, too, watching dutifully over Harry. The next time I saw him here was much darker. The day he died or at least the day I thought he died.

I make my way through the Shack to the place where the tunnel begins. I feel my knees begin to wobble and my heart begin to race. Every instinct I have tells me to leave this place, to get back to my flat where it is safe and away from this house where the dead live on. But I know I can't. I swallow my fear and open the door that leads to the underground passage where my Potions master lost his life.

The feeling I get when I walk into the concealed cavern is unHINGING. I find myself ill at ease in the claustrophobic yet eerily hallow tunnel. It's obvious no one has been in

here for quite some time. The smell is maddening; a sticky, astringent odour of rotted plant matter and stagnant water seems to assault every breath I take, causing my lungs to burn. It's slowly being returned to nature, but that does little to ease my apprehension. I regret the decision of coming down here alone, but it's much too late for that now. Pushing that thought aside, I charm the door back into place over the entrance before creeping down the narrow passageway.

The channel between the Shrieking Shack and Hogwarts is more treacherous than I remember, but I find myself making good time despite the rubble that occasionally catches underfoot. I spend my time concentrating on my steps rather than the fact that I can feel the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The moment I begin to contemplate turning back, my trainer catches on a jagged stone and I find myself sprawled facedown, staring into a puddle of partially congealed blood just inches from my face. A startled yelp sweeps past my lips as I realise it doesn't belong to me. The stench is overwhelming and I recoil immediately, feeling the rocks scrape my knees through my denims. Trying to control the shaking in my limbs, I press my back against the wall and close my eyes.

The words I read yesterday evening come flooding back through my addled mind, and I can make very little sense of them. This shouldn't seem this real to me. I push off the wall, refusing to give into this unexpected streak of cowardice. Approaching the puddle with a sense of loathing, I'm determined to prove it is nothing but a figment of my overly imaginative mind. I don't hesitate as I reach down and swipe my hand through it. It's not only wet but tepid on my skin. The urge to heave surges through me as a deep retching noise vibrates within my throat.

I draw my wand, pointing it toward my soiled hand and say the incantation that will wash it clean. The words fall from my mouth, rushed and shaky. For an instant I think I've cast the cleaning spell incorrectly. All I see is red. I swallow hard, trying to calm myself and try again. Just as before, nothing happens. Before panic can sink its fangs into me, I quickly rub my hand over the wall, watching in horror as the blood smears across the grey stone. All I can do is gape at it. Then, suddenly, the vague, chaotic thoughts I have churning in my mind are gone when I hear the faint sound of fabric being torn.

"Move." I whisper to myself as the ripping grows louder, more defined. I do as my voice bids and crouch down as close to the wall as I can get. Thankfully, part of the tunnel seems to have collapsed close by, and it offers some concealment. *What do I do now?*

The thought of running flashes across my mind for an instant, but my feet can't seem to find tread as a groan slashes through the air. The sound is close, too close, and I realise someone...possibly Professor Snape ...is no more than twenty feet from where I am. Taking deep steadying breathe, I force myself to regain some sense of the nightmare descending around me. The book mentioned something about not allowing yourself to be overcome should you find yourself in the presence of an echo. The thought seems to reassure me and, mustering up some of that renowned Gryffindor bravado, I peer around the slab of giant rock.

I stare at the man in front of me uncomprehendingly. Sure enough, it's Snape, and he looks real, solid even. Despite what I read in Heidegger's journal, part of me was expecting him to take on the appearance of a spectre, but he looks... human. Everything about him is just as I remember it. His hair...pitch black and to his shoulders...covers part of his face, but I can see his pained expression. A new kind of horror begins to rise up inside me as I edge closer to him, seeing the blood and sweat glistening on his face. There isn't a book in the entire world that could have prepared me for this. I clap my hand over my mouth, but my squeak of disbelief manages to slip through before I can contain it.

Professor Snape begins to stir at my voice, trying to determine who he shares the confined space with. The sudden movement, I notice, causes fresh blood to leak from the wound on his neck, discolouring his soiled undershirt even more. He says nothing as his dark eyes search the darkness in my direction. I don't dare move or breath. I sit stock still trying to be inconspicuous while my mind wrestles with the image in front of me. Not wanting to meet his cold gaze, I stare at the wand in my trembling hand before I carefully stow it inside my sock. Having it, I feel, will only cause more problems considering it can't help him.

Either I have forgotten what I thought I saw all those years ago in the Shrieking Shack, or this is the first time I've ever truly seen the wound he sustained. Nagini's fangs have pierced his neck just below his jaw, but the tear was anything but clean. The sight of the flayed flesh is nearly enough to cause me to faint. For a moment, I wonder how he is even able to function with such an injury, and then I see him down the contents of two small phials: Blood-Replenishing Potion possibly or an insanely powerful Invigorative Draught. He tosses the phials to the side, and the sound of the glass clattering on stone rings through the cavern. With a hiss, Snape yanks hard on the sleeve of his frock coat. The sleeve, partially torn, breaks free from the garment, and he slides his arm through to remove it. I watch, dumbstruck, as he ties the torn sleeve around his neck in an attempt to stop the bleeding. It surprises me how nimble his hands are despite the obvious shaking that plagues them.

Once he's finished with his makeshift bandage, Professor Snape's eyes shift, once again, in my direction. "Come to finish me off, have you?" Snape's voice is raspy, like he had just been roused from sleep. It takes me a few seconds to realise he's talking to me, but I don't answer. I can't make my mouth move. "Show yourself before I drag you out. Neither of us will enjoy it, I can assure you."

Now what? My mind races to recall the plan I had developed. The full impact of the situation hits me, and I realise I won't be able to wait in the wings for the cycle to end, especially if Snape knows he's not alone. I take a few seconds to calm myself, even going so far as attempting to tame the unruly curls caused by the dampness before I show myself.

Perhaps he was expecting a Death Eater or Lord Voldemort himself, but his wide-eyed expression tells me that I was the last person he thought to see stepping from behind the pile of rubble. "Granger..."

It feels as if my complexion is roughly the same as his as the colour drains from my face. He recognises me. "Professor Snape."

Snape's expression hardens for the briefest moment, and then a sneering grin appears on his face, as though he is trying to make me uncomfortable. "Going to give me over to the Order? Better yet the Ministry? Perhaps they'll give me the Dementor's kiss and be done with it." His voice is harsh, but I expected that much from him.

"I'm not here to turn you in." I notice his posture stiffen as I near. Does he truly not trust me?

"Why wouldn't you be? You've every reason to think me worthy of the kiss."

"You are no threat to me, and you need help." I point to my neck, seeing his black eyes narrow in disbelief or resentment. It's hard to tell.

"How could you possibly help me, Granger?" His voice is incredulous. "There isn't any magical remedy that you know of that I haven't already thought of and I highly doubt you have the strength to pull me out of this hole."

"You're right. I can't do that Professor," I admit, the hopelessness in my voice undoubtedly becoming conspicuous.

"Then stop wasting your time and get back to Potter." His voice tells me that he has had his fill of this conversation. He's clearly dismissing me.

"Harry can manage well enough on his own," I counter, fumbling for a believable lie. "Besides, he told me to stay with you while he looks at those memories you gave him."

"Did he now?" Professor Snape's voice has a sceptical note to it, but he says nothing else. Instead, he seems to get lost in his own mind. I take his silence as an invitation, deciding to sit some distance beside him so as to ease any duplicitous notions he may have. All I receive is a look filled with loathing, but I suppose it's as good a start as any.

When my hands hit the stone to support my weight, I feel the glass phials he had discarded only moments before. Thankful of the darkness, I allow the tip of my finger to graze the rim of the phial. The residual potion coating the glass is sticky and slightly viscous. I bring my hand to my face, as though wiping a stray hair from my eyes, but my every move is centred on finding out the contents of the phial.

"Blood Replenishing Potion," he says just as I deeply inhale the sickly metallic smell.

His words confirm what my senses tell me, but my hand freezes just under my nose, and I find myself staring into his half-closed eyes. "I'm sorry, what?"

"On your finger...it's Blood Replenishing Potion. You could simply have asked." He sounds irritated but, even in this weakened state, it is clear nothing slips his notice.

My tongue seems frozen to the roof of my mouth, but I know that can't be the case as I can hear my voice echoing down the tunnel. "I just wanted to be sure.*How convincing, Hermione. You'll have to do much better than that.*" I saw you drink the contents. I... I was curious."

A deep scathing noise, similar to that of a scoff, seeps from Professor Snape's lips. "She says I'm not a threat, though she treats me as one."

I can't deny his avowal, because it's true, albeit not in the way he believes. It's going to be difficult to keep the reality of the situation at bay until the time is right. I am going to have to win Professor Snape's trust, and I'll have to do it soon in order to break the bond when the time comes. At this rate, it is unlikely he'll believe a single word that comes out of my mouth. As I wipe the remaining potion on my denims, I decide the best course of action is to remain silent until the opportunity presents itself.

Professor Snape seems content with the arrangement and, for the longest time, all I can hear is sound of his shallow breathing and my heart thumping in my ears. To pass the time and silence, I study Severus Snape through the faint shafts of sunlight coming through the cracks in the stone. He looks much older than I remember, although I'm sure that has something to do with the magical bond his soul is currently trapped in. Despite looking generally worn into the ground and in a substantial amount of pain, Snape appears very much alive. The Blood Replenishing Potion has brought some, though very little, colour back to his face. Given the state of him, I decide his soul is in the very early stages of an entirely new loop. It's going to be a while, a very long while.

Sometime during the study of the unfamiliar gauntness of his face, Severus suddenly became aware of my scrutiny. His black eyes lock on mine, but I can't bring myself to look away. "We thought you died in the Shack," I say instead. The words, I hope, aren't too entirely telling, nor are they a farce. We truly thought he had died. *Slow and steady.* "That's why Harry sent me back for you or...for your body rather."

"So he could spit upon my corpse, or use me as an example?" The words seem to be an effort for him, but it's hardly difficult to miss the vitriol. "Your precious Potter thinks I am a murderer. I would imagine mercy would be hard to come by, even beyond the Veil. Tell me the truth," Snape demands with a guttural hiss. "Why are you here?"

Obviously I can't tell him the truth without risking the destruction of what's left of his mangled soul, yet his persistence is making that task a bit of a quandary. Could I really bring myself to lie to a dead man, albeit not just a dead man, but a dead man in immense suffering? I had struggled to answer that question before coming here, and it becomes painfully obvious as his hooded eyes search mine for deception that I am still doing just that.

"I came on my own accord," I say, hoping Snape can detect what little honesty coats the words.

"Why?"

"Because I could not leave you there, especially after what you said to Harry. Something didn't seem right." As soon as I hear the words leave me, I realise I have decided my angle. Lying, or rather strategically withholding bits of the truth will be the only thing that will work to my advantage and ultimately his. I don't like the thoughts of it, because I haven't the slightest idea of how long I will be able to do it convincingly. I am not a Slytherin after all. The most gnawing feeling is that it doesn't feel right, almost as if I am doing him some sort of injustice. *Relax*, I scold myself as I push that thought as far back in my mind as it will go.

By the look on Professor Snape's face, he remembers what he had said but he doesn't offer to speak it again. We both know he doesn't have to. Instead, he rests his dark head against the rough stone and sighs deeply. "Leave me be, Miss Granger. I am in no need of whatever you think it is you can offer me."

His tone suggests he is yielding to any notion that I've returned to betray him or turn him over. He still doesn't want to be bothered, and I can't blame him for wishing to be left alone. Still, Professor Snape isn't going to get his wish. "I can't leave you here alone. Not after what happened to you. You're lucky you made it this far with that wound."

"Idiot girl, I am hardly lucky. The venom," his surprisingly mellifluous voice says, "are you aware of what it does?"

"It prevents the wounds from healing." Fifth year, I remember, watching Arthur Weasley at St. Mungos, the bandages on his face and body becoming saturated with the slightest movement. Swallowing hard, I finally meet Professor Snape's gaze. "Without Blood Replenishing Potion or an antidote death is... imminent."

"Imminent is far too strong a word for my liking, Miss Granger." He scoots himself up the wall with a wince. His hand goes to his ribs...three broken according to his autopsy report...where it rests gingerly. "I have absolutely no intention of dying in this God forsaken rat hole."

His declaration startles me, and all I can do stare at him. I knew he wouldn't realise that he's already deceased, but to see that he is so adamant that he will survive is more than I expected. The thought baffles me and, for a moment, I'm speechless. "You've the antivenom, then?" I finally say, trying to hide my uneasiness. I know he had acquired it and that he has probably taken it already. I also know it won't be enough.

His eyes narrow and his thin lips press into a harsh line. "Do you really think *that* stupid?"

I look away, shaking my head. "No."

"Go on!" Snape barks suddenly. I jump, my mouth hanging open from the shock. Professor Snape's hand goes to the side of neck where he very delicately touches the fabric concealing the damage. When he pulls back his hand, I can see blood on the tips of his fingers. "No need to pussyfoot around the question you're trying very hard not to ask."

The calculated expression on his face makes me choose my words carefully. "I don't understand why it isn't working." My gaze travels to his blood on the stone beneath us and, as my eyes catch the smears of crimson, I realise the air is filled with its rusty stench. There is too much for the antidote to be working.

"It is working, but it is unfortunately not instantaneous. Have you thought of how I am able to speak? It has taken hours for my voice to return. The antivenom must become infused with the tainted blood that flows through my veins. It takes time."

I hear Snape's words, but they make very little sense to me. It seems like such a thing would never work, because his neck is still oozing as we speak. "How could that possibly work when you are wearing most of it?"

"As astute as ever," Snape snaps. "The Blood Replenishing Potion keeps me from bleeding out before the antivenom can close the wound. The blood is a vessel; it carries the antivenom to the lesion, or in my case lesions, and closes them by destroying the toxin that prevents healing."

"How long could it take?"

"Hours or days perhaps, depending on the nature of the injury sustained."

Hours. Days. It seems unfathomable. Now comes the real question that has been tormenting me since I found him. "Why are you waiting here? Why do you not get help?" The only response I get is silence, although I can tell by the glinting of his eyes that he has already answered the question in his thoughts.

"Do you know what happens when you exert your body in anyway?" Snape asks instead. I open my mouth, but he doesn't give me time to respond. "When you move around the heart starts to pump blood faster, harder. How far do you think I'd get before it starts to squirt out of the side of my head? I've only got so much of the potion, and it is not enough to get me through this damned tunnel let alone a battle at the castle."

"So you're just going to sit here and let yourself die?" Anger finds its way to my voice, and Professor Snape's frown tells me I've overstepped not only my bounds but his patience.

"I hardly see what I do with my own life is any of your concern, but to set your mind to rest, no. I value myself more than you think."

"You said that it could take days for the gash to heal itself. You have to..." I can't seem to finish the sentence, my desperate plea for him not to make this fatal mistake.

Calm down, I command myself. You cannot change this. This has already been decided.

"How many phials are left?" I squeeze my eyes shut, as though trying to wake from a bad dream. Part of me has no desire to hear his answer, but in order to finish this, I need to know. His count will help me determine how much time he has left, how much time I have.

"Six."

"Do you think that will be enough," I inquire, unsure of what to say. Of course it isn't, I know, but what else can I say to a dying man?

"If I didn't think it was enough, I would have brought more," Severus grinds out. "Besides, I've already taken eight."

"You must carry an entire apothecary in your cloak." A quick broken laugh tumbles out soon behind the words. It's a pitiful attempt at levity, but it's all I've got. "It's almost as if you knew you would be bitten."

Severus glares at me icily, clearly not amused. "That obvious, is it? I knew that once the Dark Lord went on his quest for the Elder Wand that my days were numbered. Once he figured out that he was not the true master of the wand, he would deduce that I was, and he would kill me without a second thought."

"But he thought you were one of his most loyal servants," I object, probing for more information, "and one of the most skilled as well. How could he just get rid of a valuable asset?"

"Once I killed Dumbledore, he had no more use of me. I became a pawn in his game, worthless and expendable. He knew that I could no longer spy for him, since the Order would kill me given half a chance." There was touch of melancholy in Snape's voice, which was unusual. I had never heard emotion of any kind in his voice before. "Dumbledore was the only one he feared. With him out of the way, he believes there is no one that can stand in his way."

I become aware of the shaking in my hands when I clasp them together in my lap. I had not expected his response to be so forthcoming, nor had I expected him to sound so much like a Death Eater. Why is he still playing this elaborate game I know nothing about? "Why...why are you telling me this?"

"Have I made you uncomfortable?" he asks. The familiar sting has returned to his voice, but that does little to help me relax. "Perhaps you should learn not to ask questions you don't want the answers to."

What an understatement that is. In fact, the longer I sit in this enclosed space with him, the more I realise that I don't want any part of this situation at all. My face stiffens and I fall silent, waiting for him to speak. He doesn't, of course. In fact, Professor Snape looks at me with a hint of muted fascination in his cold, reproachful gaze. It is almost like he is waiting for me to flee, and that's when I realise that fleeing is exactly what he wants me to do. We remain locked in this impasse of him staring at me, and me staring at the ceiling until he says something I do not quite catch or expect.

My head snaps up in his direction, and I see him studying the worn leather on the toe of his boot. "Excuse me?"

"I said, 'I told him to look at me,'" Snape tells his shoe, refusing to look at me.

My brows are tight and I bite my lip, afraid to ask any sort of question. If he feels like talking, I'm going shut my mouth and let him. "I remember."

"And those three words meant enough to you to prove my innocence," he says, still not looking in my direction, "enough to give you the inkling that something wasn't quite right?"

For the first time, I am thankful I don't truly know the contents of Professor Snape's memories. I doubt I could keep from talking about them which would not only prove that I'm terrible when it comes to lying, but also prevent me from doing what I came here to do. "It wasn't just that. I... we were there the whole time. You kept pleading for the Dark Lord to allow you to find Harry..."

It's clear that this was not something Snape was expecting me to say given the way his eyes finally locked on mine, unblinking. "Perhaps that was to save my own skin, to buy myself more time."

A weak smile slides across my lips, although fleeting. "Possibly, but I don't think so. It was almost as if you needed to get to him before he got to the Dark Lord. You proved it by giving him your memories," I add with a soft voice. "You were doing your duty to Professor Dumbledore, or that was the way it seemed at least."

Professor Snape's dark chuckle morphs into a violent cough. When he brings his hand from his mouth, a sticky spray of red is splattered across his palm. He tries to wipe away the evidence of his trauma, but it's too late because my eyes are trained on his hand. Snape, ignoring my look of shock, simply reaches into his robes and retrieves another phial of Blood-Replenishing potion. Popping the cork, he looks at me and raises the phial in the air, as if toasting some great achievement. "To duty," he growls, and then tosses the concoction back like a cheap shot, grimacing as the metallic tang assaults his taste buds.

"Enlighten me, Miss Granger, as to what exactly your duty has been through all this." His voice shifts from inquiry to accusation. It surprises me that he doesn't know, that Dumbledore never mentioned why Harry, Ron and I went into hiding after the Dark Lord's rise to power.

"I was helping Harry." Gauging his perplexed reaction to my response, it's obvious he hasn't the slightest clue as to what I was helping him with or why. "We were looking for pieces of the Dark Lord's soul. Horcruxes, they're called. Once we found them, we had to destroy them. Not any easy thing to do considering that the things seemed to have a mind of their own."

Professor Snape's nostrils flare as he listens in silence. As I recount our task of hunting down the six unknown items, he seems to be only vaguely present, offering stiff nods to show he's still paying attention. I start to think his mind is elsewhere until he holds up a single hand for me to stop.

"These Horcruxes," Snape says with a wince, "Dumbledore told Potter what they were and where to find them?"

I shake my head, remembering the endless days of searching with only whispers of leads and even less luck.

"Stolid man," he says, his voice dangerously guttural. I shrink back against the wall, hoping to melt into the cold stone. I watch him with anxious eyes, waiting for the explosion of vitriol I know is coming. With no warning, Professor Snape suddenly grasps my hand with brutal force and the look on his face tells me he is either about to faint or collapse, overtaken by some sort of wild fit. "The Dark Mark! Some...something is happening. Please..." His words never finish as they are choked out by a pained, animal-like howl that causes the fine hairs on my arms and neck to stand on end.

Adrenaline takes over and I clamber over him, trying to manoeuvre whilst still under his vice-like hold. With each passing second, his grip seems to strengthen, and I am fighting to keep myself composed while I wrestle the sleeve of his white shirt up his arm with my free hand. The sight that greets me is one I'm sure I will never be able to erase from my memory. The Mark is bleeding like saturated paint off his flesh. The ink, steaming and violent, runs down his forearm, eating away his skin like its acid. When the blackened liquid hits the stone floor beneath us, it sizzles, creating wisps of black smoke. The Dark magic seeping from Snape's body is almost too much to bear, and I feel my bones turn to ice, watching helpless, as he is slowly swallowed up by the agony the same way an ocean consumes a single grain of salt.

I sit by his side with his hand in mine, trying to control the panic that was boiling just beneath the surface. Aware, that if I gave into the nightmare around me, I would lose myself completely in this disaster. How easy it was to forget that this isn't real. It had been at one point, yes, but this precise, horrifying moment I find myself in is not real. Each time I try to tell myself that, however, Severus seems to squeeze my hand as another shudder rolls over him. It's hard to think of this as anything but real when I can hear him as he cries out or feel him growing colder under my touch.

Severus releases my hand without warning, and I watch as his breathing becomes laboured, every muscle in his body tensing. I fear this is it, but the ear-shattering scream that fills my ears seconds later tells me otherwise. For a split second, his entire writhing body seems to be lifted off the ground. That's when I notice the blood dripping

down his hands and between his fingers. I seize his hands in mine and force his balled fists apart, revealing the bleeding cuts caused by his own fingernails. My mind immediately travels to his autopsy report. *There are scratches on the skin of the palms of both hands, measuring varied lengths and depths. These wounds are also self-inflicted as evidenced by the subject's blood under the nails.* I won't let him hurt himself again because of this madness. Lacing my fingers through his, I can feel Professor Snape's blood, warm and slick, on my palms as I press his hands to mine. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I pull him toward me, hoping the closeness of another will provide him with some comfort.

When the final shuddering wave crashes over him, Snape rolls over on his side curling into the foetal position. His head is almost resting on my leg. I look down at him and a single tear escapes my eye. I wipe it away quickly before he can notice it. I don't want him to see me cry. Instead, I try to reassure us both by slowly running my hand over his lank hair.

"He's gone," he whispers finally, his voice hardly a wheeze. "The Dark Lord is done."

I bite my lip to keep from sobbing. He must mistake my sound of distress for that of relief because he squeezes my hand gently as if reassuring me. "Yes he is," I say once I find my voice. "And all because of you, Professor."

Snape makes a small noise of amusement but doesn't speak. He doesn't understand the role he has played and, for an instant, I want to tell him everything. I want to tell him about the Order of Merlin First Class he receives. I want to tell him about his portrait. I want to tell him how I plan to set the record straight in my book, but I can't seem to find the will to form the words. All of those material things turn trivial and asinine when it occurs to me that he will have no use for any of them.

So, instead, I sit with my back against the wall with his head resting in my lap. The placid expression on my face is forced, and I wonder for a moment if I look as uncomfortable as Severus undoubtedly feels. He doesn't seem to notice, but I can't seem to decide if that is for his sake or mine. After a while, he points weakly to the breast pocket of his frock coat... to the few remaining phials that will prolong his life a while longer.

Professor Snape lost more than the vile tattoo marring his arm when the Dark Lord met his end. The sudden spasms of pain had increased his heart rate enough to send what little blood that remained in his system rushing out. I am the furthest thing from a Mediwizard, but it doesn't take someone skilled in the medical arts to see the gleaming red evidence all over both of us. It seems, even in death, Lord Voldemort would find a way finish his most loyal after all. I find myself hating the red-eyed monster that had barefacedly called himself a great wizard more than I thought possible.

Severus tugs on his coat, fumbling for his liquid lifeline with little success. I do it for him instead, and he doesn't protest as I invade his personal space. We're well beyond that point at this juncture. My shaking hands remove the cork, and bring the crystal phial to his lips. I could cry, watching him as he drinks every last drop, and then drown myself in my tears. Pretending to help only serves to make me feel worse.

Soon enough, the grey, corpse-like colour of his face is replaced with slightly warmer tones. He feels warmer, though it could be my overly hopeful mind deceiving me. Severus Snape will never be warm again, no matter how much I wish it. His shivers only prove to drive that point home, and I find myself wiping the blood off my hands to keep from falling to pieces.

"I was always on his side. Potter's," Snape tells me unexpectedly. "I was always fighting for him because of her."

I remain silent, stunned that he would bring up something so terribly personal.

"It was like looking into her eyes every time I saw him. I hated him for it, but I fought for him anyway."

"People make mistakes," I say. "The point is that you did the right thing."

A withered smirk appears on his shallow face only to be replaced by a grimace. "Did I?"

"You did what you had to do. Harry will understand." I can't tell him that Harry now considers him one of the most courageous men to ever come into his life. I can't tell Professor Snape that Harry holds his memories with strict confidence, his only lasting tribute to the man he never truly knew, but admires all the same. "Harry always understands."

After that, I watch him as he drifts in and out of consciousness, either from exhaustion or blood loss. It's hard to tell at this point. Professor Snape's sleep is restless given the way his face shuffles through mixed expressions. I wonder briefly what's going on inside his head, if he is remembering things the way they were or as they are now. Dreams and nightmares, they plague the dead as well, only it is much more heartbreaking in this case. Snape will never wake, not truly.

I look away, shamefaced, thinking of how this could have all been prevented, how he could have been spared this horrible fate.

Author's Notes: The previous warnings still apply. This story is rated mature for a reason, as there are strong images of death throughout. Again, a very special thank you to Meladara and Anoesis! As always, reviews are welcomed and greatly appreciated!

Liberation

Chapter 4 of 4

Somewhere, in the midst of all the chaos following the end of the war, someone made an error.

Winner, Second place for Best Drama-Angst Fic in the Fall/Winter 2013 HPfanficfanpoll awards on LiveJournal

Characters are property of J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter Universe. Thankfully, she allows me to borrow them for a bit of fun.

Resonare Mortis

Chapter IV

Liberation

That night, I didn't sleep. It would have been impossible had I wanted to. Sitting wide-eyed with my former professor's head resting in my lap was hardly conducive to rest.

There was so much I wanted to ask him but, like he said, I need to learn to not ask questions I don't really want the answers to. The questions swirling in my mind are merely my shaky attempt to keep my stomach from twisting into knots over the grief and guilt of what I didn't do. I owe Severus Snape more than I can give him.

Slices of moonlight fill the cavern, casting shadows over Professor Snape's face. Blood stains his cheeks and neck...some of it dry, most of it fresh...but he looks peaceful, almost content. He appears vulnerable but hardly defeated as he wages this continuous war with the venom flowing through his veins. An unwinnable battle he can't see, and one I wish I didn't have to. I can't stop myself when I reach down to wipe away a smear of red. The scrap of stubble on his sallow cheek and wetness of the blood consumes the tips of my fingers, making it hard for me to move. Touching...feeling the solidness of him still shocks me after everything I've seen. Snape's dark eyes flutter open and he blinks to adjust to the darkness. He has been asleep for several hours.

I can feel the redness of a flush creep across my face as he slowly sits upright. The scowling wince on his face is hard to miss, and for an instant, I feel horrible for disturbing what little peace he had. "I didn't mean to wake you," I stammer, unsure of whether to help him or get out of the way.

He doesn't answer but shrugs and removes another phial of the Blood-Replenishing Potion from his pocket. When Professor Snape finishes draining the contents of the phial, he replaces the cork and sits it down between us. We are both thinking the same thing. There are only three phials left and his condition is not improving.

As if on cue, Snape starts to carefully touch the sleeve covering his neck. I watching silently, wringing my hands when his breathing becomes laboured and his movements forced. No matter how much he tries to hide it, he's in pain.

I move closer to him, carefully reaching out to touch the soiled white shirt covering his shoulder.

"Tell me what I can do. How can I help you?"

Professor Snape closes his eyes, bringing a single hand to cover his face. I can see shame flash across his features for an instant, followed soon after by annoyance. Receiving help is much harder for him than I had first realized. "You are not my keeper, Miss Granger. I..."

I draw his hand away from his face, taking it in mine. "Maybe I can help you, if you just tell me what to do." I wait expectantly for him to answer, noticing the sudden heaviness of his hand, or maybe it is just the weight of lying to him.

Snape's head sags back against the stone, the only sign of his acquiescence. "I need to see if the wound is closing, to see if it is healing."

I push the sleeves of my jumper up as I come to my knees in front of him, hoping the sweat and dust on my face hides the apprehension. "Do you want me to check for you?"

His hand goes to his side where it rests on his cracked ribs, and he tenses. Watching him work through the offer is vexing, but the determination behind those fathomless eyes is short-lived when the pain of even the simplest movement becomes too much. Severus Snape is the sort of man who would rather preserve his dignity, even in the most desperate of times, than appear broken. To him, weakness is almost as hurtful as the pain itself, and I wish I could form the words to tell him that his dignity won't be surrendered by accepting help.

"Professor?"

Black eyes find mine and then the floor. "It appears I have little choice in the matter," he answers with measured composure.

My nervous hands go to the cloth around his neck, but I can't bring myself to work the knot loose. "If I hurt you, tell me. Agreed?" I know he would never admit it, but it makes me less anxious to say it, and I get to work. The drawstring from my jumper works as a temporary tie to use in his hair so it doesn't get pulled or dirtied any further. Professor Snape casts a dark look in my direction when I sweep a stray strand behind his ear, but remains quiet.

"It's only for a moment, I promise," I tell him before turning my attention to the sleeve. It is tied tightly enough to impede some blood loss, but its thickness makes it impractical. It's sodden in places and dry in others making it sticky and difficult to manipulate. A bandage, even a conjured one, would have been better than what he used. Then it suddenly occurs to me that I haven't seen his wand since I found him.

"Why didn't you charm something for this?" The question escapes me before I can prevent it, and for a moment, I fear I've overstepped my bounds yet again.

"I haven't a wand," he answers with deep regret, as if he knows nearly all of his problems could be solved if he had it. "It was knocked from my hand when the Dark Lord ordered the snake to attack."

I finally manage to get the knot worked free and start unravelling it one small section at a time. "You couldn't find it?" *He obviously couldn't find it, you dolt. Otherwise, he would probably be alive right now.* Before my mind can scramble for a way to save me from my idiotic question, Snape answers.

"I did not think to look." He gestures meekly to his neck.

I swallow hard, trying not to imagine what it was like for him when he came to, battered and alone, concentrating instead on untangling the fabric from around his neck. Professor Snape's breath hitches in his throat as the sleeve comes free from the partially dried blood and reveals the gore beneath.

"Professor, I..." My voice dwindles. The gash, raw and oozing, shows signs of healing, but it is still vicious. The skin around the gaping hole is coloured dark from the bruising or possibly from the venom, and I can see severed tissue between the ribbons of flesh. It is as if I am sitting in the middle of a scene from a Muggle horror film, only I know this isn't makeup or special effects. My hand flies to my mouth, and I must decide whether to faint or look away. I choose the latter. It's far worse than I had feared.

"Well?" There is an edge of alarm in his voice that shakes me from my panicked state. I quickly rub my hands over my eyes as if such a gesture will erase the red that clouds my vision. Only when I feel the sting behind my eyelids do I gain the courage to even look at him.

Tears silently stream down my face, falling to the ground like rain. I watch his fingers run over the wetness, my mind hardly aware of my moving mouth. "Not good."

A sage expression settles over his crestfallen face, and my resolve threatens to shatter to pieces. He must know...he has to know...that he won't be able to walk away from this. Unable to look at his neck any longer, my hand presses the sleeve against the angered flesh. I start to replace his provisional compress, only to have him stop me.

"Do you have your wand?" His words freeze me like ice, but not before the bitter lie can slip from between my lips.

"No."

There is no way I can tell him the truth, because the truth is useless to him. Nothing can change this, not the sleeve I'm pressing to his neck, not the phials in his pocket, not even magic. My wand, concealed in my sock, stays hidden, and I force myself to remain silent as the last flicker of hope vanishes from his eyes. He doesn't press the issue as I feared he would, which only serves to make me feel worse rather than relieved. My aversion to the gore all but completely vanishes after that. If I can't tell him the truth, if I can't help him, I can at least push my reservations aside and clean him up.

The cleanest thing I'm wearing are my socks, so I pull my left shoe off only long enough to remove the sock. It seems hardly practical but it's the closest thing to a cloth that I have. Moreover, the black fibres put me at ease. At least I won't have to see the gore as it comes off. Using the garment, I warily wipe away the blood on his face and neck. Had it not been for the tiny streams of groundwater running down the side of the tunnel, I would have never managed to make it through the layers of caked blood. It still takes several agonizing minutes of me apologising profusely and him balling his hands into fists before most of the blood has been wiped away.

Even clean, the severity of the wound is enough to weigh heavily on my conscience. "I don't know how to fix you," I tell him gently, dabbing the last clean edge of the sock

along his dry lips. The slight dampness seems to breathe only a small bit of life into them before they begin to look shrunken and chapped again.

Snape looks straight ahead, seemingly unaware of my poorly stated declaration. "As I said, you are not my keeper." His voice falters, but it is the slight quivering of his jaw that drives the final blow of guilt straight through my chest. "Only time will... fix me."

Time which is steadily slipping through your fingers, I want to say, but don't. In lieu of my mouth turning me into a fool, my hands work on their own accord to return the sleeve that was once part of his finely tailored frock coat to his neck. It goes on much easier than it came off, but it doesn't make it any easier for Professor Snape. Twice, I see his hand go to his mouth where he bites hard on a knuckle to keep from crying out.

When I'm finished, I wipe my hands on my denims and sit back, allowing the millions of thoughts to run rampant through my head. It feels impossible to put into words what I will eventually have to tell Professor Snape, what I will have to do to convince him, to bring him peace. I can feel the thread of truth dangling in front of my face but I question if I have what it takes to pull it and watch as a broken man's spirit unravels like an old sweater.

The wrongness of it all seemed to crash down around me as I watch Professor Snape fighting to keep himself afloat as the darkness beckons to him like some syren. He gingerly pulls another phial from his pocket and downs it with a grimace. I try not to think of what will happen when the final two phials run dry. My mind refuses to grasp the permanency of his death once all of this is finished. Even though I know his fate has already been sealed, watching the last shattered piece of him leave this world right in front of my eyes is enough to make me physically sick.

Severus Snape sacrificed himself for a false idiot and an old man that left him alone on the cusp of chaos to carry the weight of the war by himself. After the smoke and dust had settled, we, the survivors, thanked him by forgetting him, by allowing him to fall victim to this hell. Even though I had nothing to do with his death, even though my hand played no part in the attack or the manipulation, my leaving him behind had been the card that indirectly sealed his fate. How could I possibly expect his forgiveness? Even more, how could I even think myself worthy enough to ask it of him, knowing I was one of the last people to see him alive? A lump catches in my throat that threatens to choke the life out of me. I won't dare ask him.

A cold feeling creeps over me as I watch Professor Snape close his eyes. I would have missed it had I not been looking at him so closely, but it is there nonetheless. A tear so small it hardly has the right to be called a tear, resting in the corner of his eye. It steals past his long, dark lashes like a thief and rolls silently across the bridge of his nose. It lingers there for the slightest moment before he wipes it away. I have to clench my hands together to keep from pulling him toward me, and comforting him. I don't know why, but pretending not to notice feels like the noblest thing I can do.

"Are you afraid of what's happening?" I hear the words coming out of my mouth, and before I have even finished speaking, I want to take them back. The question sounded much better in my head, and the look on his face tells me he is trying to decide if I'm being serious.

Severus pauses for a moment then looks away, as though thinking of an answer, or contemplating whether to tell me anything at all. It's hard to tell which by his bland expression. "Does it matter?" he answers finally. "I shall greet Death, that smirking bastard, all the same."

I look at him stone-faced out of fear of spilling every secret I know. Severus is, at the bottom of everything, a highly intelligent man, and he has just presented the acknowledgment we both need. Whether he truly understands the gravity of his words or not, he does, at least, accept the very real possibility of his death. *It's a start*, I reassure myself, trying to ignore the wrenching pang of grief that stabs through my chest.

It's a start.

"Everything has to die at some point." His voice is softer than I've ever heard it, almost as if he's having a private conversation with himself instead of me. "Some of us sooner than others, but everything and everyone withers away into nothingness eventually."

I take a deep, shuddering breath and touch the folded copy of his autopsy report in the pocket of my jumper. "Professor...Severus, there is something you should know, and I'm not sure how to tell you, or if I'm even the person that should. It's just that..." I force my mouth shut. Rambling will not make this any easier and neither will any excuse I try to use. *Tell him, you coward. Tell him before it's too late*, my subconscious screams, and I give in.

"Professor... You are already dead."

For a second, something seems to pass over his face. Confusion, maybe? Panic? Everything around us becomes hazy and slow, as if I am having another one of my nightmares. I can feel any common ground we had found during this whole ordeal slowly slipping away, but I delve deeper to find what little resolve I still possess. "You died in this tunnel nearly five years ago, two days after Voldemort was defeated." I watch the emotions play out in his eyes. He doesn't believe me; refusal churns in his dark eyes.

"Enough," he says severely. The vitriol in his words makes me want to recoil, but I don't. He can easily detect my determination to stay, and he tries to move away from me as if I'm an insidiously dark creature. He almost makes it to his knees, but comes crashing back down onto the stone next to me with a pained cry.

"Please..." My hands reach for his shoulders to help, but they never touch them. Severus's arm swings around with swift force, slamming me into the wall. I try to shrug out from underneath it, but he catches my wrist in his hand. His grip is surprisingly strong given his depleted state. I can't escape as he moves closer to me, agony etched deeply on his face.

"Get," he hisses, "Away... From... Me."

"I can't!" I don't realise I'm yelling until the sound of my own voice echoes through my head. My dirty hand runs over my face; a weak attempt to regain composure. "I will not leave you," I continue, softer, so that he can't detect the panic in my voice. "Do you understand me? I don't care what you want, because this is what you need! You just can't see it yet. Please..."

"Listen to yourself, you fool! You've gone mad!" His words provoke white-hot anger, and I can't help but blink back the stinging tears in my eyes. I think back to everything I've seen and ahead to things that have yet to come. I had expected resistance, but nothing of this magnitude. Heidegger made it sound simple, but now I see he hadn't the slightest clue. Death itself is easy; it's the coming to terms with it is the heavy burden. How can I possibly expect to break such terrible news to someone who has fought so hard and so long to keep it at bay? Looking to Severus, I see that the weight of the truth is starting to cause his steadfastness to bow. Unable to move, he slouches against the wall, hardly keeping himself upright. He can yell and spit insults at me all he likes, but he is going to let me help.

"Don't..." He sounds bitter and miserable, but he doesn't resist my efforts. Instead, Severus leans into my stomach, allowing me to support his weight as I haul him to the floor. I strip off my jumper, ignoring the chill in the air, and place it under his head. It's a meagre attempt to soothe him, but I hope he can detect the sincerity behind it. I want to do more, to make him comfortable, to end his suffering, but there is only one thing that can do that. As I watch him, I briefly think that it's too early to even discuss this. Then, a cough rips through the silence followed soon after by a haunting groan and more blood. It's then I know I'm running out of time.

"May I speak freely?" I ask as I sit beside his head, reaching out hesitantly to take one of his hands in mine. He says nothing, giving me my opportunity. "I know this seems preposterous, I didn't even believe it when I first learned of it..."

"You expect me to believe that I am dead," he says with great effort, "and yet I'm still here enduring this hell on earth?"

"I do," I tell him, carefully choosing the right words, "and I would hope you trust me enough to believe what I'm telling you. If you truly believe me, if you accept what I'm trying to tell you, then this will all end. For good."

Snape sighs deeply, and shivers. He is not handling this at all. "I am losing my mind," he says as I pull his robes around him to combat his chills. The movement jostles the autopsy report free from my jumper, and it lands on the stone beside Severus's head. Momentarily forgotten in our confrontation, it now sits gleaming like a beacon in the darkness. I had brought it with me for this very purpose, knowing full-well that he would think me insane. However, now that the moment finally presents itself, I find myself

filled with dread. How on earth will he react to seeing his own autopsy report?

"It seems that way, I understand, but this is not real, though you can feel every stab of the pain. I can prove it if you'll let me." It's as if the words don't belong to me as they echo down the cavern. I don't want to believe them anymore than he does, but before Professor Snape can argue, I reveal the chilling proof, holding his autopsy report above his face so he can see it for himself. "Part of your soul, when you died, attached itself here to this hole. Your soul has been trapped here all this time, reliving this nightmare. Each time it gets more real for you, each time it rips what's left of you a little more. It's called Resonare Mortis, and it prevents you from passing through the Veil."

I watch as Severus's expression becomes distant, and I can tell he is fighting to see past the hard evidence, searching for some way to prove me wrong. Soon, it becomes clear that he can no longer take the weight of the world that has been dropped on his shoulders, though he tries with little avail. After several agonising, silent seconds, Snape finally gives in, allowing everything to crash down around him. He averts his eyes from mine as the silent tears come. There is no more pretending, no wiping them away. "Read it to me."

My stomach twists into an unbearable knot, making the autopsy report feel like a lead weight in my hand. Why did he have to ask me to do that? I stare straight ahead, trying to think past the droning roar in my ears, trying to figure out how escape this request.

I'm vaguely aware of his hand resting on mine. Only when he tightens his grip do I rally up the courage to look at him.

"Why are you here?"

My eyes start to well up once again, but I refuse to cry. "To help you," I reply breathlessly. My head is spinning. I know what is coming next, the bitter deed I can no longer avoid.

"Then... help me," he says, almost pleading. "Read it."

The tunnel around us suddenly seems so still, as if all of the air has been sucked out, leaving pure emptiness in its absence. I can think of nothing else but how much I want a hole to open right under my body and pull me down into its depths. That is until I feel Severus's freezing hand glide across my face to draw my gaze to his.

His expression is frantic, but his voice is the most serene I that have ever heard it. "Miss Granger..." Without another word, he reaches into his pocket and retrieves the last two phials. He doesn't drink them after slowly popping the corks, but rather turns them up, allowing the crimson potion splash to the grey stone beneath us. "Please."

One word is all it took. It is the single word that I never thought I would hear him say to me, but it causes me to cave. Denying him any longer feels like a much greater crime than reading the words that will show him the truth. I hold the parchment out at arm's length so Severus can follow along as I read. I finally understand. This is not about me. It is about Severus accepting his fate. If he can be brave enough to do that, I must be brave enough to help him get there.

My hands shake so badly at first that I cannot read the parchment. I do my best to steady them and begin to recount to Professor Snape the details contained in the autopsy report. Each word is a struggle to get out. Monitoring his expression, it's clear that each sentence I read brings him closer to accepting the truth. Mercifully, I reach the end of the parchment. Snape says nothing for several moments, and after a while, the silence becomes too much to bear.

"Do you know what this parchment fails to mention," I ask without expecting an answer. "It lists every horrible thing about your death down to the colour of the socks you had on your feet when your heart stopped beating, but it pays so little justice to your life, your sacrifices, and your achievements."

"Silly girl..."

I place a single finger to his cracked lips, and he quiets. "You are Severus Snape, the proud recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class. Your portrait hangs on the wall of the Hogwarts Headmaster's Office, only it hasn't been able to provide Minerva with any counsel because you've been stuck here. Books have been written about you, not because of what you have done or what you were, but because people want to remember you. You are missed, Severus, so dearly missed, and your loss of life has not been in vain. Without you," I continue as the tears prick my eyes, "we wouldn't have had a foundation to stand on."

That was it. Probably a meaningless handful of words to him, but they ring true to me nonetheless. I half expect him to cast me away. In fact, it takes every scrap of composure I have to keep myself together as Professor Snape's quivering hand brushes against my face. He reaches up, sweeping my tangled hair out of my eyes before his head sags further into my jumper. I stare down at him, and he smiles. It's hardly noticeable, as if it is meant only for my eyes, but it is enough to make remorse rear its ugly head. A wayward tear slides down my cheek, and he shakes his head with considerable effort. "Miss...Hermione... I... "

I wait, but there is only silence.

Nothing but a terrible silence that lasts less than a minute, though it seems to stretch out years. It hits me that I'll never know the words Severus intended to say as his hand goes limp in mine. I sit, exhausted and emotionally drained, staring into the darkness in front of me. Feeling tremors start in the bottoms of my feet and slowly work their way up my body, I am attacked by a swift feeling of remorse so strong that it nearly pushes all the wind from my lungs. I bury my head in my hands and give myself over to the string of unrelenting, hopeless sobs I had somehow managed to keep contained.

I had never known true sorrow until this moment. The sheer intensity of it threatens to grind me to dust, and in my current state, I am tempted to lie down and let it. How naive I was to it all. I knew nothing of death or the paralysing fear that comes along with it. I had been an utter fool to claim that I did. To think that someone had been forced to relive the hell I had just witnessed for nearly five years felt catastrophic. Every time I try to wrap my mind around the vastness of such an idea, it is too much...as if my feeble, naive mind will burst at its seams.

Wiping my eyes, I look to where Professor Snape had lain sprawled and lifeless on the unforgiving stone. He is gone. I scramble over on my hands and knees to the spot where his body should be, feeling only the rough, dust-covered floor under my hands and the drawstring that held back his hair, the jumper I had given him for a pillow, and the sock I used to clean his wounds. Did I want to feel his cold body there? I don't know, and I will never be able to answer that truthfully. Perhaps I am yearning for evidence that everything I had just gone through was more than the residual twisting of a man's torn soul. I need proof that the fates are simply not that cruel. That's when I hear it.

The sound of soft footfalls ricochet down the narrow tunnel, telling me someone is coming. For a moment, I freeze, fearing it might be Severus' nightmare starting over. I listen, hardly breathing, for the sound of ripping threads or Professor Snape's muffled voice. The voice I hear isn't Severus's, but it is familiar.

It's Harry.

I hurl myself from the ground and take off toward the sound of his voice as fast as my feet can carry me. It doesn't take long before we meet, and he stops dead in his tracks when he sees me. I'm sure I look horrible, covered in dirt and a dead man's blood, but that doesn't stop him from scooping me up in his arms before I can fall to my knees.

"You shouldn't have come alone!" His voice is angry, loud and panicked. He hefts me to my feet, supporting my weight as we head toward the exit. "What's happened to you?"

I say nothing as a desperate sob erupts from deep within me, and Harry shakes me as if trying to rouse me from some trance. "Hermione, talk to me!"

"He's been here, Harry, all this time!" That's all I can say, and I'm sure it makes little sense to the wizard guiding me out of the tunnel. "Professor...Severus... His soul has been trapped here."

"What?" He seems stunned, as if he doesn't want to believe it. I can see the disbelief and refusal brewing in his eyes the same way they did in Severus's when I told him.

Wrenching my arm from Harry's hand, I push him away. He makes no effort to console me or to touch me, he simply looks at me. "He's been reliving his death for the last five years," I scream, "right under all of our noses!"

"How..."

"How what? How do I know?" I snap, interrupting him. I shouldn't be angry with Harry. None of this is his fault, but I can't mask my fury, my guilt. "I know it because I've been reliving it with him! I held his hand, helpless, as he bled to death all over me! I had to listen to him plead for relief, begging me to end it all, to put him out of his misery!"

Harry takes a step toward me cautiously, as though I might lash out at him like some wild animal. "I am sorry you had to be part of that. If I had any idea...if I knew it was even a possibility...God's truth, Hermione, I would've set it straight for him. I would have been down here the instant I got wind of it."

"But you didn't," I say, my voice hardly audible. "And neither did I. We didn't even bother to..."

I'm unable to finish my sentence. I have neither the strength nor desire to hear the cold sting of the truth. Harry waits for information that is hardly forthcoming. Something inside of me shuts down and all I am able to think about is getting to the castle.

"I need to see him. I need to see his portrait."

"You need to go home," Harry corrects. His hands are on my shoulders again, pushing me forward. "Let me take you home, please."

Somehow, I manage to escape his grip once again and start walking on my own accord through the tunnel. Only when he reaches out and snags my arm do I falter. "I can't! Don't you get it! This is least I could do for him after what he did for us."

The look I receive from Harry tells me how lost I sound, and for a moment, he seems to be fighting with himself, as though contemplating throwing me over his shoulder and taking me straight to St. Mungo's.

"Listen to me, please." Dread courses through my veins, and I lean against the wall for support. Why is this hard to explain? "I can end all of this today, and I know it seems ludicrous, but you're just going to have to trust me. After that, I'll go wherever you want."

"Fine, but you're not going alone. Do you understand?"

I realise that arguing with Harry is no use. He is much too stubborn and I much too tired to dissuade him from accompanying me. "Fine," I say with a hint of submission in my voice.

Harry climbs out of the tunnel and then turns and grabs my arm to help me up. Once free, Harry takes my hand in his and we Disapparate to the school gates. He waves his wand, opening the gateway, and we walk through. He doesn't let go of me as the two of us climb the path toward the castle in silence.

It's easy to see that Harry is fighting hard to keep his questions to himself. Part of him wants the details, but the other side doesn't seem quite as sure. I would never tell him even if he asked. I decided that the moment I found Severus. The truth would break Harry, and I couldn't stand to watch it. Squeezing his hand in mine slightly, I realise some things are better left unsaid.

When we near the grounds, a glistening silver stag erupts from the tip of Harry's wand, and flies through the early morning sky. It arches upward, moving quickly from where we stand. It curves around and around the turrets, and heads straight for the tallest of the towers...the Headmistress's personal chambers. My breath hitches in my throat when the stag dives through the window, leaving it perfectly intact, serving as Minerva's only notice that we were coming.

Harry tilts his head, watching as the Headmistress's window is bathed in a soft glow. "McGonagall doesn't know?"

"She knows I was looking for information," I say flatly, avoiding the real question hidden between the lines.

Harry stops in his tracks, looking at me pointedly. "That wasn't what I asked you."

"She does not know about Severus," I clarify, leaving him standing alone as I turn for castle. "And I know what you're thinking, Harry. The answer is no."

"You don't think she'd want to know what really happened?"

"Of course she would want to know!" I erupt, the ire in my voice rising. "But I'm not telling her because it doesn't matter what happened. Her knowing, you knowing, the whole bloody world knowing isn't going to change the fact that we left him the way we did. Why would I drop that horrible fact on her or anyone else?"

Harry shakes his head like I'm talking nonsense. "Keeping all of this to yourself isn't a smart idea. As your friend, Hermione, I'm telling you to think about it."

My foot kicks the gravel path hard, sending tiny pebbles flying in the air. "Do you want to know what I said to him after I read him his own autopsy report? I told him how little justice it really paid him. That still holds true. It doesn't matter how the man died, or when, or where. I absolutely refuse to let what happened to him cast a shadow over everything he did. Now you think on that."

Our conversation is over in good time, because seconds later, I spot Minerva standing in the opened doorway in her nightdress. Before she can get close enough to clearly see the mess I'm in, I pull the wand from my remaining sock and siphon off the blood and dirt on my clothes. My face is still covered with dust and specks of blood and my hair is a disaster when she hurries out to meet us.

"Hermione! Good gracious, child, what happened to you?" Before I can answer, she takes my face in both of her hands and checks me over as best as the early morning light will allow. When Minerva is satisfied that Harry and I are both in one piece, she looks at me, utterly perplexed and irritated. "Explain yourselves."

"It's a long story," I tell her. "And before you press, I can't tell you, and I'm sorry for that."

Minerva's eyes flash to Harry's for the slightest scrap of information, but all he can do is shake his head. "Have you lost your mind? You expect me to just take 'I can't tell you' as an acceptable answer when you waltz up to the castle at five in the morning looking the way you do?"

"I do," I say, taking both her hands in mine, "and you must trust me, Minerva. Consider this one of your final favours to me."

Her tired face twists with confusion. "Favours?"

"One of them, yes. I need access to your office one last time. I need to see Severus."

The Headmistress's eyes search mine for a brief moment. It's not hard to guess that she's considering sending for Poppy. Instead, she glides her wand down and across my face, and I can feel the filth and grime being stripped away by her silent spell. Satisfied, she turns for the castle. "Follow me."

As the three of us walk through the sleeping halls of Hogwarts, Minerva and Harry carry on a hushed conversation. The Headmistress must see that information will be anything but forthcoming from me, so she bombards Harry for details that he doesn't know. I almost feel sorry for both of them. Almost. Keeping them in the dark isn't an idea I like, but it is what's best. Minerva shouldn't have to look at Severus's portrait day in and day out and feel guilty. Nor should Harry, who knows more about the man's sacrifices and his personal life than most, have to carry any more of the burden than he already does. What we wish we had done and what we really did will never

change, but there is no point in dwelling on that hard fact. In the end, Minerva is better off in the dark and Harry is better off with the limited confession I gave him.

We arrive at the stone gargoyle outside the Headmistress's office. Minerva draws her wand and points it at the statue but suddenly stops. Her expression is not much different from the first time I asked to see Professor Snape's portrait, but it's her eyes that give away the frustration and sorrow. "I don't understand what you're trying to prove," she tells me. "Severus never answers, Hermione. Never. Just this afternoon, as I sat in that very office, I tried to get him to speak, even if it was only a single word. It's always the same response...silence."

"You are going to have to trust me," I say, my voice heavy with hope.

"Suit yourself, but this will only end in more silence," she says, casting a quick glance between Harry and me. "Just as it's been since the day Mister Potter hung Severus's portrait himself."

As Minerva utters the password and the Gargoyle leaps aside to allow us passage, all I can think about is how much I am dreading this moment. The uncertainty of it, not knowing if I have truly helped him, stirs the nervousness in the pit of my stomach. If that wasn't enough, chaotic thoughts about what I will say to him if I have broken the chains of his imprisonment come together to form the perfect storm of uneasiness in my scattered mind.

Stepping into the room that holds the portraits of the Headmasters, it's a relief to see that most of the other portraits are sleeping. Those awake are, thankfully, not in their frames. I don't know why, but as I get closer to his portrait, this task feels much too personal to share with several dozen pairs of eyes.

Leaving Minerva and Harry standing near the corner of her desk, I find myself studying the portrait in the dim lighting, fully aware of their watchful eyes. I don't have to turn around to know that Minerva's are filled with uncertainty and Harry's with confusion. Forgetting my audience, I run my hand across the engraved wood of the portrait's frame, and the feeling of agony briefly finds its way to my fingertips. Flexing my hand to relieve the discomfort, I look at the empty setting painted on the canvas. There isn't a trace of him. I place my hand over the portrait and close my eyes. "Severus." My voice cracks, but I don't stop. I couldn't stop if my life depended on it. "If you're there, please..."

A deep shuddering breath escapes my lips as I drop my hand and step back to watch the portrait. Nothing happens, and my heart sinks to the soles of my feet. I can feel the panic starting to work its way through my body, spreading to my limbs, but something catches my eye near the bottom of the frame. It's almost like liquid light, if such a thing could ever exist. It is coming from a crevice near the base of the portrait and fills the cracks between the designs like shimmering water. As it pools, the light seems to climb the side of the frame, inching its way inward toward the canvas. I stare at it, realising that the portrait is waking up, and I am unable to keep the tears from spilling from my eyes. The gasps coming from behind me tell me that Minerva shares the sentiment.

Like a withered plant being rehydrated by a passing shower, the light seems to seep into the portrait, causing it to swell faintly. The colours of the pallet grow vibrant until the glow intensifies, blocking the scene from view. When the glow subsides, I see in its place an image of the Severus Snape I've come to admire standing behind the armchair with a look of knowing on his face. He nods to me before both of his hands rub across his face. He's struggling to hold himself together, and that thought carves away at me like a knife through soft butter. There is so much I want to say to him, but the only thing I can do is offering him a pained smile.

It will never feel like enough to me, and I'm sure I'll go through the rest of my days feeling as though I could have done or said something differently, but in the end, there is only one thing that matters above all the rest.

Severus Snape is free.

Author's Notes:

We've reached the end of this tale and, for the final time, I would like to thank the two ladies that helped me sort all of this straight, Meladara and Anoesis. And finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all of you who not only took the time to read this tale but also review.