

Wrapped in a Mystery

by purpleygirl

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Chapter 1 of 1

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It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma;

but perhaps there is a key.

W. Churchill

Harry was soaked to the bone and colder than he'd ever been in his life. He spat out a mouthful of snow. A series of coughs nearby brought him around some more. In between them, he heard a muttering something that sounded like a drying spell.

It seemed the altruism of whoever had pulled him from the pool didn't extend to helping him up from the freezing snow. Harry was too knackered and cold to complain. He didn't even have the strength to lift his head to see whom his rescuer was. The coughs and voice were deep at least that ruled out Hermione.

Harry felt at his throat where the locket had nearly drowned him.

It was gone. Maybe his rescuer had torn it free.

"What the *devil* is this!"

A wave of shock hit Harry at the sound of that voice. He scraped a shin on a stone as he scrambled to his knees and scoured the dark ground for Hermione's wand. It was still lit, and he snatched it up. Grasping it in his freezing hands, he got up and pointed it at Dumbledore's killer.

Snape's expression as he looked back at him, the gold locket dangling from one pale, bony hand, his wand nowhere in sight, fired Harry's anger. Snape looked, not wild as Harry remembered from his last glimpse of the killer running from Hogwarts, but simply as cold as he'd always been before. "Put on some clothes," said Snape, vapour from his breath hanging in the air. "I did not just dive into that freezing pool so that you could die from cold."

Harry fought to keep his hands steady and his teeth from chattering, readying a curse on his lips. He tried to put visions of the night at the Tower to the back of his mind and focus on the questions that really mattered right now: How had Snape found them? Had he told Voldemort where they were? Why wasn't Snape fighting him? "Aren't you going to fight me, you coward?" He tried to ignore how weak his voice sounded from his near-strangulation.

Snape sneered. "Perhaps the water has affected your hearing? Go put on your clothes. Now. And then you may have your little lethal trinket back."

Harry stared at the locket in Snape's hand. What was Snape doing with the Horcrux? Harry blinked. Did the locket twitch just then?

A flash of light caught his eye. In Snape's other hand was the sword of Gryffindor, its rubies shining in the light from Hermione's wand. Harry's stomach reeled. How had Snape got the sword from the pool? Did he know he was holding the real one?

"Give me that."

Snape held up the broken chain and looked at it with scorn.

"Not that," said Harry. "Well ... that too. But ... the sword. Gimme the sword." His teeth still chattered. He sounded weak and pathetic the greasy bastard must really be enjoying this but right now it was getting the sword that mattered the most, and he wasn't about to let Snape take it from him now, not after they'd gone to so much trouble to keep it from his slimy grasp.

"You may have both as soon as you have put away your wand and put on some clothes."

"I don't think so." Dumbledore's killer was right here, with the real sword of Gryffindor in one hand and the locket Horcrux in the other. If Snape knew what he had hold of ... Though Snape's wand was out of sight, it was surely just within Snape's reach in his robes. Harry tightened his grip on Hermione's wand as it shook in his hands. "*Incarc...*"

But before he could finish the Body-Binding Spell, Snape had dropped the locket and drawn his wand, erecting an effective shield around himself. Harry's spell rebounded just as the shield went up.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione's wand flew from Harry's numb hands and landed in the undergrowth.

Snape remained several feet away as Harry, too cold now to care how it might look, wrapped his shaking arms around his body.

"Now," Snape said quietly as he lit his wandtip and kept it trained on Harry, "clothes, Potter."

Harry stood his ground and glared back. He felt himself growing warm with anger, though he knew he was as cold as ever on the outside. He let himself bask in the fury and hate that Snape was kindling in him.

"Your pig-headedness will one day be the death of you, Potter, just as it was for your father."

Snape stepped slowly toward him, the hem of his black cloak skimming the snow. "Take the sword and do with it whatever you intend to." He stopped a few feet away, his wand still raised. "Now, do I have to erase your memory of tonight, or are you going to pull your finger out and attempt some Occlumency for once in your arrogant life?"

Harry glanced at the sword that still dangled from Snape's hand. What the hell was he doing? Snape knew he had the real sword? And he was giving it him? "Well?" Snape demanded.

"You it was you who put it in the pool?"

Snape looked to be losing his patience. "Oh, well done, Potter. Now, do I have to use a memory charm? I'm waiting for your answer."

"But ... you only have the fake sword. You put it in Gringotts ..."

Snape lowered his wand in a vicious swipe. "I don't have time to spell everything out for you, Potter. This is very much the real one." He tossed the sword to Harry's feet, where it landed heavily in the soft snow. "If I discover you have told *anyone* about what has transpired tonight," Snape said in a low voice. "If I hear even *awhisper* of suspicion from the Dark Lord..." his eyes flashed dangerously "...I will personally do a great deal more than wipe your memory. Do you understand?"

Harry stared at Snape's face, sallow in the light from his wand, yellowed teeth bared.

"*I said do you understand!*"

Harry flinched. He gritted his teeth and glared back. "Yes."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Are you quite sure about that?" he said, his voice a whisper again.

"Yes."

Snape raised his wand to Harry, dazzling him with its light. "You had better for your sake, Potter," he said and turned away.

Harry watched him stride toward the trees. He looked down at the sword of Gryffindor, its blade a line of silver in the snow, the rubies at its hilt like drops of blood.

What had just happened?

If Snape had just brought the sword to him, put it in the pool ... But he had killed Dumbledore ... Harry curled his cold fingers around the band of his underwear.

But he hadn't fought him, wasn't taking him to Voldemort. And if Snape had jumped into the pool, that meant ... He looked across to Snape's departing figure.

Shit.

"Wait!"

Snape paused a foot away from a pair of gnarled trees. He turned slowly back around.

"You brought the sword out of the pool."

Snape made no sign that he understood. Fuck that greasy bastard.

"If you brought the sword out, that means you have to do it," Harry said. "It's Gryffindor's sword; that's how it works." Snape still didn't move, and Harry peered across the dark ground to where Snape had dropped the Horcrux. "You've got to destroy the locket." He looked back at Snape's stationary figure. "Only the person who retrieves the sword can use it properly. It has to be you."

Snape finally stirred. "I have better things to do than your dirty work, Potter." He began to turn again.

"No! It's got to be you, don't you understand? You're the only one who can do this."

Snape stared at him through the dark for a long time, his black hair framing his pale face, his hooked nose illuminated in the glare from his wand. Even without his glasses, Harry could sense the black eyes studying him.

Then he started forward. Harry's insides coiled instinctively in readiness.

"Hurry up then and find your damn locket."

Harry bit back his anger at Snape's assumption that the locket was his. He picked up the heavy sword and scoured the undergrowth where Snape had dropped the locket, a cluster of footprints muddying the moonlit snow that wove over exposed roots and had settled on mounds and small rocks.

"Well?" came Snape's impatient voice.

Harry nearly retorted that it was him who'd lost it, when a glint caught his eye amid a patch of rock-strewn snow. "Got it," he said, holding it up.

Snape strode over, illuminating the locket with his wand. "This better be why I brought the sword to this godforsaken forest." He sneered at the locket. "So that you could use it to destroy a piece of jewellery."

Harry's heart lurched. Snape didn't know what the sword was for? Of course he didn't. Dumbledore would never have trusted him with knowledge of the Horcruxes.

He saw Snape look at him, black eyes narrowing.

"Tell me, Potter. Why should I waste my time destroying a harmless piece of jewellery?"

"It's not all that harmless. It did nearly kill me back there in the water."

Snape's eyes seemed to gleam at that. "And this is your vengeance?" He held out his hand for the locket.

Harry held the eyes of Dumbledore's killer and forced himself to place the locket in his hand. As the broken chain slithered from Harry's fingers, he let out a breath at the familiar feeling of a weight being lifted hopefully for the last time.

Snape twisted the locket around and gazed at it. He glanced back at Harry and turned his lit wand to the ground. Harry thought he saw the locket twitch again. Perhaps it had sensed danger nearby in the sword that Harry still held. Snape, however, seemed either immune to or unaware of the locket's pull. He found a large rock nearby and laid the locket across it.

Snape took the sword, and Harry bent down to hold the locket in place. As Snape shifted into position, wielding the sword, Harry fought his instincts to back away. He could feel the contents of the locket quivering, and the cut around his neck still burned. Destroying the Horcrux had to come first then he would deal with Snape later. He looked to the undergrowth into which Hermione's wand had flown earlier.

Snape glanced across at him, his eyes narrowed again with distrust.

Harry wasn't going to wait for Snape to insist he tell him what the locket really was. "I'm going to open it with Parseltongue," Harry told him.

Snape's eyes narrowed further, but he didn't object.

Harry stared down at the green S, imagining a snake squirming as the locket continued to rattle. "On three."

"One ... two ..." After three, Harry hissed the locket to open, and its gold walls swung wide with a click.

A pair of young, dark eyes that Harry recognised as once belonging to Riddle stared up from the small glass panes.

"Stab it!" Harry yelled, forgetting who he was shouting at, caught up in his determination to get rid of the locket once and for all.

"*Severus!*"

Snape froze, his eyes widening in recognition as his master's voice hissed from the locket.

"The boy is deceiving you. He is trying to fool you into destroying your master's possession. Your master will not let this go unpunished."

Snape was staring down in disbelief, the sword's point dangling over the locket.

"You've got to stab it now!"

Snape seemed to come to at the sound of Harry's voice. When Snape glanced across at him, there was surprise in his look. Then the distrust began to return as he held Harry's gaze.

"I have seen your heart as you stood with your defences lowered."

The hiss of Riddle's voice caught Snape's attention again. His face became a stony mask once more. But to Riddle, this seemed to come too late.

"I have seen that you profess to be mine yet have held another's life more dear. I have seen your deepest desires and fears as you stood with the body."

"Stab it! It's not him it's trying to trick you. You've got to stab it!"

But Snape didn't seem to hear Harry this time. Snape was transfixed on the dark eyes below, which now began to bleed into scarlet. His face remained completely impassive as he held the sword perfectly still above the locket.

"You deceive yourself believing the boy's life is of any value compared to hers. How could it be? Your heart tells you he has none of her qualities. He is nothing compared to her."

Snape's breathing grew shallower as he listened to Riddle's hissed words. The sword swayed in his hands. He raised it high.

The locket rattled and blazed white hot; Harry snatched his fingers away and jumped back.

Out of the glass panes where Riddle's red eyes had been, something began to emerge. It formed a figure that stood, legs rooted in the locket, before him and Snape. As Harry watched, the outline of a woman appeared, her long hair a radiant red. Harry looked up into his mother's face. She seemed more youthful and beautiful than he remembered from Snape's memory of her by the school lake. Harry was as captivated by her sudden appearance as by her strange eyes, as red as her hair.

"*Severus. Sev.*" She spoke in Voldemort's voice, but Snape stood mesmerised. His mask began to slip.

"You have given your life to the boy and Dumbledore, and they have used you for their own ends, the Riddle-Lily spoke. "Now you know what must be done. You must do it for me. The boy must die." Her words in Voldemort's voice were spoken angrily, as an order. But now she smiled and held out her arms to Snape. "Do this last thing for me as everything you have been doing all these years has been for me."

What was Riddle doing showing them his mother? Why was he speaking to Snape like this?

The sword swung in Snape's hands.

"Don't listen!"

Snape's black eyes flashed red from the rubies in the sword's hilt as he brought it down, his face taut with effort.

With a crash and clank of metal against metal, the Riddle-Lily vanished with an anguished scream.

Harry got to his feet and looked down at the smashed remains of the Horcrux. The panes of the locket had been broken. He stared at the smoke that rose from the mangled metal where the horrible replica of his mother had been. He tried to catch his breath; he felt as though he'd been running miles.

As he watched the slow swirl of the smoke, the events of tonight began to make some crazy kind of sense. Riddle had shown Snape his mother for a reason. His mother. Somehow it reminded him of when he'd seen what must have been Snape's Patronus. The silver doe. His mother: The silver doe. Was that why he'd seemed to recognise it and welcomed it so warmly, followed it blindly through the forest? Had he somehow seen in it a link to his mother, as he did now? But the impossibility of such a link existing through Snape cold, soulless Snape that was impossible. Wasn't it?

He became aware of Snape's presence still beside him. Snape was like a statue, the sword by his side.

But he wasn't watching the remains of the Horcrux as Harry had been.

His attention was on Harry.

As Harry held the dark, vacant gaze, his heart began to race. He knew that Snape was at his most unpredictable when so expressionless. But it was the speed of Snape's breaths more than anything that gave him a horrible feeling; whatever Snape was thinking, it wasn't good.

Before Harry had a chance to open his mouth, Snape was pointing his wand at Harry's head.

His look was wild for the first time that night. Suddenly Harry saw again the killer in the grounds of Hogwarts.

"You will tell no one." His voice was low, but it was the tremble in it that made Harry's caution give way to fear. "I should Obliviate you."

Harry backed away from Snape's advancing wand. Hermione's still lay in the undergrowth beyond Snape.

Harry hit a tree and winced, the trunk freezing cold against his back. A trickle of snow fell onto his head.

Snape stood a few feet away, close enough for Harry to see him more clearly now without his glasses. The intensity of Snape's gaze made his skin tingle.

He wrapped his arms around his body for warmth. The sight of Snape's black eyes so close and fixed on his made him think of his mother's horrible figure emerging from the locket, her red eyes the red eyes that should have been as green as his.

As he held his gaze, Snape's wand seemed to drop a little. "You're shivering." Snape's wand was still lowering, almost imperceptibly, and so slowly that Harry had the impression that Snape was unaware of it.

Snape's eyes were still set on his. "You'll catch your death."

He'd stepped nearer so that the tip of his wand was only a centimetre from Harry's bare chest, and there he stopped.

Harry watched Snape's wispy breaths glide toward him through the cold air, silver grey against Snape's heavy black figure.

Would Snape really tear from him the memory of the silver doe, the startling warmth in its welcoming eyes, what was perhaps Harry's last remaining earthly link to his mother?

Snape's wandtip had dropped still further, allowing Snape to draw closer. Harry was almost breathing in the ashen wisps of his breath. Snape smelt of Hogwarts, that heavy, school smell, of old paper and potions and dark, dusty corners.

Harry wrapped his arms further around himself. Snape's dark, warm robes were only inches from his skin, so close that Harry could almost feel the man's heat.

Fabric brushed against his leg. Harry shivered.

"You're still cold." Snape's voice was quiet but steady, all trace of the trembling fury gone.

Though Snape's eyes, still fixed on Harry, were as cold and empty as ever, in them Harry thought he saw a glimmer of something else something that seemed to be reflected in Snape's voice. There was something almost but perhaps it was just wishful thinking something almost *warm* about his voice, his look. And Harry felt his own coldness acutely, standing against the snowy tree, only inches from the heat of Snape's body.

Harry felt the warmth transfer to him as the distance between him and Snape lessened, diminished, then all but vanished entirely.

Heat trickled down his legs as the hem of a robe swept across them. Snape leaned in further. Harry reached out with slackened fingers to grasp the thick wool, holding it to his middle.

He felt himself begin to thaw, the warmth easing its way through him as Snape drew closer. A hand brushed his side. Harry shivered at the hot touch.

He held Snape's gaze. Perhaps it was the fierce intensity in his gaze, but Harry feared that if he broke it, just for an instant, that glimmer he saw there would desert Snape's eyes and the cold return to fill the void.

Snape drew his fingers down Harry's hip, leaving sultry trails in their wake as they ran down and across his front, not stopping when they reached the band of fabric at his belly. They buried beneath the material, and Harry felt the keenness there bloom into a heat that did not come entirely from Snape.

His body was being soothed into life, a stirring eagerness that seemed to Harry to be matched in Snape's eyes as he held them.

The black eyes the dark pool that flickered in their depths grew closer, brighter ... and then the life was being pressed into Harry's numb lips, lightly nipped and kneaded as Snape watched him with a burning urgency.

Harry felt this need manifest within himself as Snape slid his hot tongue over his lips. Lament flames reached out from his belly to his groin. Snape stroked Harry's tender skin, stroking into it an almost scorching zeal, Snape's fingers like tendrils around his prick. Harry arched away from the tree, pushing into his hand, pressing himself tight against him.

He opened his mouth and let Snape's heat into him, let him curl his tongue around his.

It was a warmth that filled Harry perfectly. And its seat was in the black eyes that held him so securely. He was secure and safe as safe as he'd known he would be when

he'd followed the doe.

Snape's doe.

Snape. It was Snape's hooked nose brushing his skin. It was the taste of Snape, Snape's smell, a pungent, caustic scent. The taste of potions, both aromatic and bitter, mingled together. Sharp, corrosive, just like the man he knew.

But it also held a subtle fragrance of something else, something ardent and enveloping, something impassioned in Snape's coldness that toyed with Harry, that promised much if he was prepared to journey down this darkened road.

Could it be that Snape had once asked his mother to travel down this road? If the locket-Riddle had not been lying, his mother meant something to Snape enough for him to have given his life, as Riddle put it, to Dumbledore. Could it be true? Had Lily known? Harry remembered her self-assurance by the lake, her turning from Snape, leaving him to James's mercy. Had Snape asked her and had she refused him?

Whatever it was that she and Snape had said or done together, as sure as Harry knew all the warmth penetrating him came from Snape, he knew, as he looked into the black eyes *not empty, not cold, but full, heavy with something else* that Snape would walk with him down the same road that Harry had by birth already been set on, that Snape was asking him the same thing that he had asked his mother and that he, Harry, would not refuse.

Harry gave a jolt and gasped as he came, Snape's mouth still enveloping his. Snape held him tightly as he shuddered into his hand. He gentled his kiss, teasing the last drops from Harry's mouth just as he did from his prick.

Harry's skin was cooling again, damp this time from sweat, but his insides glowed; he leaned back against the tree and melted into it.

It took a moment after the warm embrace left him before he realised he'd shut his eyes.

He snapped them back open but too late the gaze had been broken. Snape was looking at him, a slight crease on the pale skin between his brows.

Their breaths were open to the air again, roaming freely, condensing there, white wisps on the dark, cold night. Ethereal, fragile things, clouds of nothing more than latency suspended between them.

Something was in Snape's eyes, some sense of him coming to. It seemed to Harry that the glimmer of something else had disappeared but not completely. Harry tried to hold onto it. He refused to let it fade entirely.

He stared into Snape's eyes as though the world depended on it and perhaps in some way it did. This, Harry seemed somehow to know because Snape had sent his doe to him for a reason. They had destroyed the locket together for a reason. Perhaps, then, it was up to him to show Snape what that reason was. Perhaps it was up to him to succeed where his mother had failed.

A light streaked past their heads in a *whoosh*. It seared the air, leaving a trail of white. Snape whipped his head around.

"Harry!"

It was Ron.

"Get the hell away!" Ron's voice rang out in fury. There was no mistaking who his anger was directed at.

Snape dropped to the ground, pulling Harry with him as another spell shot toward them. Snape swore as it missed them by inches.

Harry pushed himself up onto his elbow and squinted. He could just see Ron's figure now, pushing its way through the trees beyond Snape.

Harry looked at Snape. "Horcruxes," he gasped.

Snape turned his gaze on him, studying him for an instant with a frown. A blast of red shot by his head. It smacked into the tree above with a crack and a shower of splintered bark.

Snape whirled around and aimed a spell to Ron's left, sending Ron on a detour for cover. He began to push himself up and turned to Harry. "The portrait," he hissed. Then Snape was on his feet, aiming his wand at Ron again and trading one last spell before he vanished behind a tree, his black cloak whipping out of sight into the darkness. A second later, the crack of Disapparition rang out across the clearing.

Harry got to his feet.

"You ... coward!" gasped Ron as he stumbled toward Harry. He doubled over to catch his breath against Harry's tree. "Almost had him!"

Harry felt joy at seeing his friend again but it came in tides, washing over him for an instant before retreating again, a barrenness of something lost left in its wake.

He retrieved Hermione's wand and his clothes from the other side of the pool and listened to Ron's explanations of how he'd returned to the forest as he pulled on each sweater; then he deftly lied to Ron about how he'd found the sword and used it to destroy the Horcrux. Ron was full of relief on hearing this, but Harry suspected that most of it was at the easy acceptance of his return.

As they walked back together to Hermione, snow crunching under their feet, Harry kept imagining he saw the doe whenever the moonlight hit the floor through the trees.

Snape's doe.

He hadn't told Ron about it. He'd told him that he'd heard voices and decided to follow them, eventually coming across the sword in the pool. The people he'd followed must have thought it would be safely hidden there luckily for Harry, not so luckily for Voldemort.

Of course, Ron asked about Snape. It wasn't difficult to describe how he'd stumbled on him after destroying the Horcrux. Snape must have been following the same people Harry had heard earlier, perhaps discovering the sword that he'd put in Gringotts was fake and on the trail of the real one. Ron vowed that, next time, he'd make sure he finished the greasy git off.

Snape. What was it he'd said? The portrait. Phineas. It was probably Phineas who'd told Snape where to find them. Harry silently swore to have it out with that bloody portrait at its next earliest convenience. Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin apparently.

But then there was Snape was he really Dumbledore's man as Riddle suggested? Or had Harry just made the biggest mistake of his life in mentioning Horcruxes to him?

Bugger. Too late now for second thoughts. And there was still Phineas his link to Snape. Whatever happened next, perhaps he could find that part of Snape again, persuade him they could work together...

Was he *insane*?

Maybe. Probably. But it was still up to him in the end to save the world from the dark, no matter how crazy that idea had been from the start. And that meant the *whole* world. Surely it wasn't much crazier to include Snape in that, succeed where maybe his mother hadn't been able to?

It might even work.

Now Snape was back to his senses, he'd be after his blood for witnessing the Riddle-Lily. Cockroaches wouldn't cut it this time. And, thanks to him, Snape knew about the Horcruxes.

Hell, he'd bloody well *make* it work.