

Black Roses Red

by severina

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 5

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A/N: I'm just having some fun with JKR's characters, but I'll give them back relatively unscathed. This story has absolutely nothing to do with the Alana Grace song of the same title. Also, if you're wondering where the character Polyxena came from (or, hey, even if you're not), please, please, please read my story 'Constant Vigilance' (and review it!) Review this one, too, by the way. Thanks!

At one minute 'til midnight on the night of July 25th, 1997, 12 Grimmauld Place was bathed in silent, peaceful shadows as its occupants, young and old alike, rested peacefully, giving themselves over to a blissful, innocent slumber. No one heard the clock begin to chime the hour of midnight except for Harry, who woke in a daze mumbling,

"Can't catch... 'til we're twenty points up..." He blinked twice, groped for his glasses, and sat up slowly. "Kreacher!" he called softly into the darkness. "Kreacher?" he ventured several moments later. Yet, no house-elf appeared. Tightening the sash on his night-robe, young Potter stole out of bed and into the gloomy hallway, hissing, "*Lumos!*" at his wand. In the weak beam of light, he found the mad, old elf snoozing away on a battered cushion and delivered a swift kick to the creature's bony rump.

"The filthy half-blood wants Kreacher," he croaked. "The half-blood makes Kreacher want to slit Kreacher's wrists."

Harry glowered and snapped, "Stand up, Kreacher!"

However, for the first time, the house-elf did not obey.

"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO LISTEN TO ME!" shouted Harry, promptly awakening the entire household to pander to his selfish needs and raging adolescent hormones. "WHY DOESN'T ANYONE LISTEN TO ME?"

"Harry, what in the name of Merlin is going on out here?" Hermione sprinted into the hallway from the room she shared with Ginny.

"KREACHER WON'T OBEY ME!" he cried childishly, completing the picture by pointing accusingly at the elf. "Tell me you didn't bloody free him or something. You've taken that spew shit too fucking far."

"It's S.P.E.W., and there's no need for vulgarity," Hermione informed him prissily. "Besides, I didn't free him because Dumbledore said he knows too much. And anyway, what are you talking about? He obeyed you this evening at supper."

"WELL, HE'S NOT OBEYING ME NOW! HE OBVIOUSLY DOESN'T BELONG TO ME ANYMORE!" Harry picked up a silver instrument from a table in the hallway and threw it against the wall.

"Haven't you ever read *Hogwarts, A History*?" snapped Hermione. "Sirius's will was airtight; he expressly said that since there was no male left with the last name of Black, the house would go to you, Harry Potter."

"I KNOW MY OWN NAME! WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH *HOGWARTS, A HISTORY*?"

Remus Lupin scurried into the hall, his bathrobe shabbier than ever and his hair as grey as it had always been. "Here, Harry, have a bit of chocolate. It'll help." He broke off a square of Honeydukes finest for the troubled teen.

Walking awkwardly in his too-small maroon pajamas, Ron came out into the corridor. "Whuzzgoingon?" Pulling a fat pack of sausages from his pocket, he stuffed seven of them into his mouth at once. "Whuzzarryellingbout?" Particles of meat flew from his bulging cheeks and sprayed the unfortunate onlookers.

Before anyone had a chance to decipher Ron's speech and respond to it, however, Snape came swooping into the hallway in a black silk dressing gown that showed just the right amount of muscular chest. "What is this infernal racket at all hours of the night? It's enough that I have struggled against my reputation as Dumbledore's killer, but to listen to you dunderheads and your foolish woes? Dunderheads! All dunderheads!"

"But, Professor..." began Hermione timidly.

"Five points from Gryffindor," interrupted the Potions master, "for being an insufferable know-it-all, Miss Granger."

"Please, sir," said the girl desperately. "Kreacher won't obey Harry any longer, and now look. This strange mist has completely filled the room."

"I see no difference," replied Snape coldly.

"Lily," sighed Lupin suddenly. "You have your mother's eyes, Harry. Her beautiful eyes, arresting eyes. I knew her, oh yes. I knew her. Her eyes were as green as a fresh pickled toad, her hair like the Gryffindor banner..." He was interrupted when a sleeve rotted and fell from his robe.

"We'd better do something," moaned Hermione urgently. "If Kreacher doesn't belong to Harry, he could go telling our secrets to the Death Eaters."

"HELLO? I'M STILL HERE!" Harry reminded them. "TRAGIC ORPHANED HERO? RING A BELL?"

"According to *Hogwarts, A History*, someone from the Order might be able to help us," suggested Hermione.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor, dunderheads!" Snape burst out. "I'll Floo Moody. He's on call tonight. Perhaps he'll have encountered this sort of thing in his Auror days." Striding to the fireplace, Snape took a pinch of Floo powder and cast it into the flame.

When he emerged in the other fire, taking a deep breath of the air in Moody's house, the urge to take as many points possible from Gryffindor began to subside. "Mad-Eye!" he called out, squinting through the emerald green flames at the ex-Auror's bed. What he saw there made him want to perform the Conjunctivitis Curse on himself.

"Oh, gods, Alastor, don't stop!" Heavy breathing was punctuated by the creaking of bedsprings. "Right there, yes, right... there!"

"MAD-EYE!" bellowed Snape, then ducked as jinx after jinx flew at him in many-colored bolts of light. "There's a bit of a problem at headquarters. Something to do with Potter and his elf, and I must admit, everyone seems a bit strange there this evening. I myself only cleared my head when I arrived in your fireplace. Although you saw fit to remedy that."

"Shove off, Snape. A good shag wouldn't do *you* any harm. We're busy now; can't Potter and his house-elf wait until morning? Or at least until I c..."

"We'll be right over," interrupted Moody grudgingly. "Could be Dark magic afoot." Groping for his nightshirt, he dragged it over his head, draped his traveling cloak over his shoulders, and reattached his wooden leg. He and his companion followed Snape into the fire, swirling wildly until they landed in the ash at Grimmauld Place.

Moody surveyed the scene warily. Potter had begun to smash everything within arm's reach while shouting about being ignored and ill-treated while Lupin chased him around the corridors with a bar of chocolate and waxed poetic about Lily Evans. Young Ron Weasley had begun to turn blue as an entire pack of sausages became lodged in his throat, and Hermione Granger was quoting *Hogwarts, A History* to anyone who would listen.

"Five, ten, fifteen, twenty points from Gryffindor!" shouted Snape. "Mr. Potter, our new celebrity. Clearly, fame isn't everything."

"YOU'RE A GREASY GIT!" countered Harry.

Moody took a deep breath, intending to perform the *Anapneo* on Weasley, but instead he shouted, "CONSTANT VIGILANCE! Sneakoscope, Dark Detector, Foe-Glass, CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

"*Finite Incantatum!*" A bolt of light suffused the whole of 12 Grimmauld Place with an eerie glow, then suddenly the mists cleared, leaving the house's occupants dazed and confused.

"My throat hurts," groaned Harry hoarsely as he rubbed at his Adam's apple.

Ron gasped for breath and hastily wiped bits of sausage from his face with the sleeve of his pajamas.

"What... what was that?" Hermione's face darkened with concern.

"Ambulans Stereotypicus," replied a dark-haired woman none of them had noticed. "Nasty bit of Dark magic, that," she continued crisply, "but, as it doesn't affect me, nothing for you lot to worry about any longer. Though I must say, the effects of the curse do become permanent after twenty minutes or so."

"Why doesn't it affect you?" inquired Harry.

She shrugged lightly. "Ambulans Stereotypicus takes certain character traits and plays them up in the most unflattering manner possible. For example, one could become capslock!Harry or snarkyfanon!Snape or, gods forbid, movie!Lupin. However, I consider myself something of an 'original character,' so the curse won't work as well with me."

"Well, thanks for that," said Ron. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Polyxena Moody," she answered him at once. "Alastor's wife. I met him this past fall when we were trying to find my..."

Moody made a repressive gesture. "Don't tell them everything now! Make them read 'Constant Vigilance.'"

"Fair point," agreed Polyxena. "But they might like to hear the part about getting captured by the..."

"OH, NO YOU DON'T, LASSIE!" Mad-Eye scowled. "How often do I get to be in the limelight? Half the time I feel like we're all nothing but supporting characters in the 'Harry Potter Series'."

Polyxena sent him a warning glance. "Keep your voice down! You don't want to wake anything up." She nodded meaningfully at one of the portraits lining the walls, and, almost as if on cue, the deep purple curtains flew open, and the corridor was filled with the cries of,

"Sunshine, Acid Pops, rainbows, LEMON DROPS, and everything that's wonderful..." Dumbledore twinkled merrily at them from his vantage point on the wall.

As Lupin struggled to close the hangings, the portrait on the opposite wall awoke as well, shrieking, "Vile, wretched traitors! A pox upon the house of my fathers! Werewolves, Mudbloods!"

"Please do not use that offensive word in front of me," Dumbledore's portrait shot back.

"Oh, now you've done it," sighed Hermione, turning to subdue Mrs. Black. When she had slammed the moth-eaten curtains closed, she shuffled off wearily toward the kitchen for a cup of tea. Not only had she just made a fool of herself under the influence of some obscure Dark spell, but when Snape went strutting around in his dressing gown, whether part of *Ambulans Stereotypicus* or not, she could only feel the urge to throw something. Preferably at his greasy, self-satisfied head. She knew it was childish, hating him this much, but it had been one bloody good snog last year. One bloody good snog, and then...

Tall and wiry Polyxena Moody strode into the kitchen just then, breaking into Hermione's train of self-pity. "Oh, hello." She smiled at the younger woman cautiously, even a bit coldly. "Your name's Hermione, isn't it? I have to say, you look a bit familiar."

Hermione shrugged slightly and regarded her with slightly narrowed eyes. "I don't see how. You were never at Hogwarts with us, were you? You're the same age as Tonks."

"Yes, but still..." Polyxena trailed off, picking up the kettle. "May I use this?" Without waiting for an answer, she dumped the entire contents, washed it out, and filled it with fresh water from her wand and teabags from the pocket of her robe. Humming slightly, she conjured a blue teacup and had just poured a measure of tea when Moody stumped in.

"There's something Dark in this house," he growled. "The house-elf, the *Ambulans Stereotypicus*. Ominous signs. I told Dumbledore the House of Black was no place to house the Order."

"Of course." Polyxena's eyes were grave. "But does it mean what we feared?" She and Moody held a low, muttered conversation then, leaving Hermione to sip quietly from her mug.

Finally, Moody swallowed the last of his tea, rose, and kissed the top of Polyxena's head. "I'll be in the library," he said as he limped away. "Just so you know."

Hermione felt a stab of jealousy that had nothing to do with wanting to be married to Mad-Eye Moody. That, she would probably never understand, but wanting to be, well, not *married* precisely, but to have that with someone was a thing she could certainly envy. After that episode with Severus last year, her spirits had been launched well above the stratosphere for a good week until she'd walked into his office and seen Narcissa Malfoy shagging the life out of him. On his desk. On top of a copy of *Moste Potente Potions*.

"Are you all right?" Polyxena was sounding a bit more solicitous now. "You look a bit peaky."

"I'm fine," tried Hermione, but it came out in a whisper. Clearing her throat, she said firmly, "Just fine. Lost in thought, you know. We'd better go see what the others are up to." She stood, and Polyxena followed her out of the kitchen.

"... have something to do with Bellatrix Lestrange?" Lupin was saying when Hermione and Polyxena regained the library.

"Dumbledore disproved that theory nearly a year ago," bit off Snape impatiently. "The house can only pass into the hands of a male named Black; however, the will specified Potter as its owner."

"And so he was," agreed Lupin, "but the situation seems to have changed. Someone must have entered this house and cast the *Ambulans Stereotypicus* tonight."

Polyxena snorted softly. "You don't just go in and 'cast' the *Ambulans Stereotypicus*," she interrupted. "It's an immensely complex spell that is placed on the building itself, generally to keep out people like us. It must have been a part of this house's magic since the place was built."

"We could always ask Dumbledore's portrait," put in Ron.

"It seems a bit early to bring in the *deus ex machina*," countered Hermione. "And Dumbledore's portrait can't possibly know why the spell was activated tonight or why Kreacher's stopped listening to Harry. No, I think we'll actually have to use our brains a bit and stop relying on Dumbledore to know everything."

"I agree with Hermione," spoke up Snape, though grudgingly. "Dumbledore is, well, Dumbledead."

"BECAUSE OF YOU!" Harry reminded him furiously.

At that, Polyxena frowned slightly. "Have I made a mistake with the countercurse? The effects of the *Ambulans* aren't supposed to linger so."

With a mirthless chuckle, Snape informed her, "No, Potter really is that way, and hopeless at Occlumency for it."

"When did you discover that the elf wouldn't obey you, Potter?" growled Moody.

"Midnight," replied Harry at once. "I woke up and tried to get him to get up and bring me a glass of water, but he wouldn't do it."

"That's when I found him," piped up Hermione. "He was yelling at the top of his lungs, more so than usual, I mean, and I guess I started quoting out *Hogwarts, A History*. Midnight. So that means that the ownership of this house passed out of Harry's hands today. Could another male with the last name of Black have just been born?"

Lupin bit his lip thoughtfully. "Impossible. Sirius was the last of his line, and he died more than a year ago. Regulus died sixteen years ago, and anyhow, neither of them were married."

"You don't have to be married to have a child, Lupin," Polyxena said with a smirk. "I recommend you read *The Sex Ed Challenge*."

Lupin's cheeks turned scarlet. "I know that. I merely meant that a child of either Black might have shown up on the tapestry. Then again, Nymphadora isn't on it; her mother was blasted off ages ago. Perhaps Sirius... But no, I would have known about it. Unless Sirius himself didn't know."

"Sirius would have known," said Harry stubbornly. "And he wouldn't just go off and leave his kid."

"Harry's right." Hermione jumped in. "Sirius would have stayed."

"Very *noble* qualities you're ascribing to Black," sneered Snape. "However, I think perhaps this idea has some merit."

Hermione's face flamed. "You would think that, wouldn't you? Someone going around shagging everything he sees, not really a stretch of the imagination for you, is it?"

One by one, mouths fell open: Polyxena's and Lupin's and Moody's diagonal gash, Harry's and Ron's, though for different reasons, but Snape coolly ignored her and replied,

"And yet, Sirius was the only one who was alive recently enough to have continued the Black line."

"But he wasn't really," growled Moody. "If that theory is correct, then this would have happened months ago. Our location is Secret, but maybe Dumbledore told someone... untrustworthy." He could not refrain himself from shooting a glance at Snape. Although the latter had been forced to abandon Voldemort completely to get the Aurors off his tail, Moody steadfastly refused to like him, if only for his vast knowledge of the Dark Arts. (Never mind that Polyxena knew just as much about them as Snape.)

"Alastor!" his wife reproved. "I had my doubts about Snape, too ...sorry, Snape... but he's proven that Dumbledore was right to trust him. Perhaps... perhaps a son of the Blacks can't take possession of the house until he comes of age."

"Now that," Mad-Eye said admiringly, "is a plausible theory."

"I think so, too." Hermione was reluctant to speak after her outburst, but had to say, "But that means it could have been either Sirius or Regulus."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 5

Snape and Hermione exchange barbs while trying to find R.A.B.'s locket in 12 Grimmauld Place.

A/N: Enjoy and please review! This won't belong to me until I can get JK Rowling liquored up and make her give me power of attorney.

* * *

Severus Snape is no sex god. Hermione admitted this willingly to herself at least twenty-five times a day, but it wasn't enough to quell the images of him lying supine on his desk while Narcissa (or as Hermione had taken to calling her, 'The Malfoy Slut') straddled his narrow hips. She'd never counted on that; Snape was sallow-skinned, hook-nosed, and greasy-haired, with uneven teeth and a personality like a Hungarian Horntail. No, no, Hermione had seen sex god material, and it had looked nothing like Severus. *But yet, she argued with herself, he has a presence. When Severus Snape walks into a room, everyone knows about it. Snape doesn't invite arguments or criticism, doesn't waste time getting in touch with his feelings or going out of his way for anyone. That's just Snape.*

However, Hermione had seen a different side of him. He hadn't romanced her with violins and enchanted rosebushes, nor had he really been all that nice to her, but he hadn't been horrible, either. In the fall of last year, she'd gone to Snape for, of all things, extra Potions lessons. When Harry, under the auspices of the Half-Blood Prince's old book, had become Slughorn's star pupil in a subject he had previously abhorred, it had rankled. It was more than just wanting to win Felix Felicis or earn points for Gryffindor, however. Hermione had realized that there was more to the subject than just following instructions from a book, an activity that happened to be her specialty. For the first time, she had realized that perhaps her mind wasn't quite the analytical machine she'd thought it. *How does one know, she'd wondered in irritation, to add a clockwise stir or a spring of peppermint?* And her wounded pride had led her straight to Severus Snape.

"Hermione! Hermione? Ron's mum is here; she's made us breakfast." Harry's voice pierced into her thoughts. "Ron ate all the sausages, but there's still some eggs and toast."

Without thinking, she stumbled from bed and threw on an old terrycloth robe. Her bushy hair was sticking out in all directions, and her eyes were still crusted from sleep, but she wasn't bothered. At least, not until she got into the kitchen.

Ron and Harry were there, and assorted Weasleys. Lupin was there, nose in the Daily Prophet, as well as Tonks, who sat beside him. Moody was sniffing cautiously at his eggs and washing them down with whatever was in his flask, and Polyxena was browsing through *Wizards* magazine. And, naturally, there was Snape down at the end of the table, dark eyes on her as she walked in, unruly hair and all.

"There you are, dear." Mrs. Weasley smiled fondly at Hermione. "Come in and have your breakfast. You can sit beside Ron." Ever since the three friends had left Hogwarts and joined the Order, Molly had been playing a very transparent game of matchmaker with her son and an unfortunate, bushy-haired victim. "Here, take this." Fishing a hair elastic from the pocket of her apron, Mrs. Weasley mercifully tied back Hermione's mane.

Unwillingly, she slid into the place between Ron and Polyxena, which was, much to her chagrin, directly opposite Snape's. "Morning, Severus," she said pertly, chin at a challenging angle.

"Morning," returned the ex-Death Eater curtly. "Pass the pumpkin juice."

Hermione's grumbling reply was lost to the raucous morning chatter filling the kitchen:

"Oh, look! Gwenog Jones is pregnant by that bloke from *Sex and Hogsmeade!*" exclaimed Polyxena.

"No, I'm being serious now, Polyxena. What did you think I was? You said, 'I can't believe you're with Nymphadora, I thought you were... well, never mind.' What does that mean?" Remus whined in a very un-Lupin-like way.

"... thought I was going to catch Dolohov, but I knocked over the flower-vase... "

"... no match on a Comet Two-Sixty, though the Cleansweep Seven might do the trick."

"She thought you were gay, mate."

"... never know where a Dark wizard could be lurking. Last month, I was sure I'd found a basilisk in the garden. Turned out to be a garter snake, but still *always on your guard, Potter.*"

"Gay?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and began to eat. She'd long given up trying to get a word in around that lot, and now with Severus lurking about, she wasn't even sure that she wanted to. Ever since the Narcissa Incident, he'd been just as kindly and sympathetic to her as he'd always been. Part of it, she had admitted, was her fault. Perhaps it had been a bit rash of her to break so many of his things and, well, hexing him with those yellow Attack Birds may not have been the best idea, though they had worked well on Ron.

"This business with the house-elf," Snape said suddenly, his voice cutting across the din, "has anyone got a plan to deal with it? If a member of the Black family owns this house, the consequences to the Order could be dire."

"What are you suggesting?" Remus peered over the top of his paper.

"An investigation, you half-wit. We'll need to determine how and why this house passed from Potter's hands, who owns it, and what their motives are." Glaring steadily at him, Snape added, "Unless, of course, you have a better idea?"

"No, no," said Lupin mildly. "By all means, go ahead, Severus."

"Either Sirius or Regulus Black fathered an illegitimate child," he began, then surprised everyone by saying, "I'm inclined to think it was Regulus."

"Regulus?" repeated Hermione. "Don't tell me you're passing up the chance to besmirch Sirius' name?"

Looking slyly at Moody, Polyxena mouthed, "Besmirch?"

Mad-Eye hid a grin. "Seems more likely that it was Regulus," he growled. "Seeing as how Sirius and Lupin shared a flat, I think an illegitimate child would have been hard for him to hide. Regulus, on the other hand, a known Death Eater..."

"Who knows what he got up to," finished Polyxena. "Besides, wouldn't Sirius have left this house to his son?"

Tonks raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You know," she remarked calmly, "it's quite possible that the child of someone erased from the family tapestry doesn't figure into the Black family history at all. Sirius had been on it at one point; he could live here and give orders to Kreacher. My mum was blasted off, so in the tapestry's view, I don't even exist. Kreacher won't listen to me any more than he listens to Remus."

"Regulus, then," agreed Hermione with blushing cheeks. *I really must start fighting the urge to argue points with Snape in public* "He died nearly seventeen years ago, so Polyxena's 'coming of age' theory works out nicely."

"How did Regulus die?" queried Polyxena. "Was he killed by Aurors? Did you have anything to do with it?" she added, sneaking a glance at her husband.

Alastor shook his head. "Black turned traitor to the Death Eaters after he had taken the Mark."

"The Dark Lord killed him personally," Snape cut in. "I remember it well because the Death Eaters are usually the ones to do any dirty work. It made me wonder whether Black had committed a more serious transgression than cowardice."

"Cowardice? You call leaving the Death Eaters cowardice?" Moody's magical eye fixed itself dangerously on Snape.

"Alastor," sighed Polyxena, "we've bigger problems on our hands at the moment. It's in our best interest to find the boy as soon as we can, before he comes knocking at the door. Secret or no, this house could have any sort of Dark enchantment on it to help him find it. The *Ambulans Stereotypicus* was just a taster."

"I know!" Hermione said aloud and hurried out of the kitchen and into the library, where she seized the book *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. "Here," she said brusquely after returning to the table and audience of rather befuddled wizards. Wetting a finger...a gesture that was not lost on Snape...she flipped toward the end of the book and said, "Regulus Arcturus Black, son of Orion and Walburga Black, born in 1961... unmarried... no known children... damn. Well, it was worth a shot."

"Regulus Arcturus Black," muttered Harry. "R.A.B. R.A.B.! Hermione, it could be him."

"Merlin!" Hermione traced the scripted name with her index finger. "R.A.B. It fits: he knew Voldemort, he deserted Voldemort, Voldemort killed him personally... Bloody hell. Give me the locket."

Hesitantly, Harry withdrew it from the pocket of his bathrobe. "It's a cheap one; someone replaced the real Horcrux with it. Sirius told me that Regulus only lasted a few days after he turned traitor to Voldemort."

Snape cleared his throat delicately. "Is there something you haven't seen fit to mention to the rest of the Order? What are you on about, R.A.B.?"

"Here." Hermione thrust the gold necklace into his cauldron-scarred hand and waited until he had read the note. "Harry and Professor Dumbledore went to fetch this on the night Dumbledore died. Clearly, this note has posed a bit of difficulty since."

"Well, this is Regulus' handwriting," sneered Snape. "Having received his owls many times, I ought to know. The only question is..."

"Was he actually able to destroy the Horcrux before he was murdered?" finished Hermione, earning herself a look of grudging admiration from Snape. "And what the hell did he do with it if not? Would Voldemort have taken it back?"

"No, of course not," scoffed Polyxena. "A piece of his soul? He probably sold it for scrap."

"The Dark Lord," interrupted Snape, "could only have taken it back if he'd known where to find it. Regulus had a few days, after all. I'm certain his top priority would have been to hide the Horcrux."

Harry's eyes were downcast. "He couldn't have hidden it any better than Voldemort. It took Dumbledore ages to find it. Voldemort had it in this cave full of Inferi and a lake with a creepy boat."

Sweeping a lock of dark, shiny hair from her face, Polyxena said thoughtfully, "There's a Horcrux on the loose, and Vold... man is channeling Gerard Butler. Never anything straightforward with you people, is there? Maybe I'll go off and join Harz's lot."

"Harz's lot?" queried Severus.

"Never mind," Moody growled severely. "Well, we need to find the locket, that much is obvious. Any identifying features you can think of, Potter?"

"Slytherin's mark," replied Harry quickly. "It was Salazar Slytherin's locket."

Squeezing Mad-Eye's shoulder, Polyxena chuckled, "It's right up your alley, then, isn't it, Alastor?"

"Quiet, you." Moody scowled into his flask. "Slytherin's locket, was it? Typical You-Know-Who. Could Regulus have brought it back here?"

"Here?" echoed Harry stupidly. "We would have noticed it while we were cleaning. Unless Sirius threw it out..."

Snape glowered. "Just the sort of thoughtless behavior one should come to expect from Black."

Hermione was inclined to agree.

"And so, Potter," he continued in a sneer, "your dear godfather has given you quite a job of searching the rubbish heaps for a seventh of the Dark Lord's soul."

"Not necessarily." Struck by a sudden thought, Hermione had to argue with her former Potions master. "We found a large, heavy locket when we were going through the things in the drawing room. None of us could open it, remember? Perhaps Regulus put it with the things in there, but couldn't figure out how to destroy it until it was too late."

"Yeah, could be," growled Moody. "Very well could be. Go on and fetch it, then."

Hermione flushed. The rest of the Order *would* still insist on treating her, Ron, and Harry as children. "Er, right. I'll just be right back."

As soon as she was out of sight, Snape stood and muttered, "Perhaps I should look as well." With that, he swooped out of the kitchen and hurried down the hall to the drawing room, where Hermione had already upended several desk drawers.

"*Accio Horcrux! Accio Locket! Accio Slytherin's Locket!*" she tried over and over, wand raised in the air.

Snape waved his wand at a locked, black cabinet. "Need a bit of assistance, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "So we're back to that again, are we? 'Miss Granger' and 'Professor Snape,' very mature of you."

"Mature," Snape repeated with delicate emphasis, tasting the word on his lips. "Mature, indeed. I was merely hoping to put a bit of distance between us, as you so clearly cannot handle the thought of a mere snog six months in the past."

Bristling with indignation, she hissed through her teeth, "It wasn't a 'mere snog,' and you know it, *Severus*." It had been a hot, hazy, passionate interlude, the culmination of months of careful byplay and Slytherin-subtle chemistry. Or so she had thought, at least. "But then I come upon you shagging Narcissa Malfoy, of all people..."

"I didn't shag Narcissa Malfoy!" Snape cut in tersely. At Hermione's outraged squawk, he added, "She shagged me."

"I'm no expert," spat Hermione, seething, "but even I know that it takes more than one person to have shag."

Snape's greasy head nodded involuntarily. He'd never in the lifetime of a basilisk admit to feeling guilty as hell for letting Malfoy's wife have her wicked way with him not once, but two times. Just as well Granger never knew about the second fuck. "I had no idea that a kiss entraps one in an exclusive relationship," he remarked instead, continuing to rifle through the cabinets and drawers for the locket.

"Entraps!" gasped Hermione, apparently too overcome with outrage to speak properly. "I beg your pardon, Severus, but I was never looking *tæntap* you into anything! It was you who kissed me, after all."

Insufferable girl. "Be that as it may, Hermione, I was rather under the impression that you were emotionally mature enough for such a liaison. I was, as it seems, incorrect."

"Stop looking for the damned locket," she snapped. "It's not here anymore." Whirling around, she stomped toward the door and back into the kitchen. "The Horcrux locket is gone missing," she informed everyone tightly. "Someone's stolen it."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 5

The group receives information on Slytherin's locket and forms a search party... eventually.

A/N: Thanks to those who reviewed the previous chapters! Comments are always appreciated, but since the story's chief descriptor so far has been 'confusing,' I thought I should clear a few things up. This story is the second in a series of mystery/romances that involve the Moody/OC pairing. It's not necessary to read the first to understand this one, but the first hinted at an SS/HG relationship when Polyxena saw the two snogging in a corridor one evening. Moody later saw a 'tearful Hermione' and a 'brooding, angry Snape' in the Great Hall and caught Snape at Spinner's End with Narcissa. Severus and Hermione worked on Potions together that year, which the second chapter of this story flashes back to, but Snape was 'sexually ambushed' by Narcissa, a scene which Hermione walked in on. Now she's angry, and he's defensive. Whew... Hope that clears up the confusion. Sorry about that!

* * *

"*Stolen* it?" repeated Polyxena, aghast. "What sort of person would steal things from Order headquarters?"

"Why don't you ask Mundungus?" snarled Harry. "HE WAS NICKING SIRIUS' STUFF!" Harry still hadn't quite gotten over the indignity of having a member of the Order ransack his godfather's house.

Surprisingly to all of them, but especially to Potter, Polyxena and Moody both laughed. "Dung," growled Moody. "Of course. Well, then it shouldn't be too much trouble getting it back. Even if he's sold it, he would remember what happened to it."

"Dung," Polyxena repeated with a slight chuckle. "At least he's gotten himself out of Azkaban. He's lucky the Ministry have bigger fish to fry. Impersonating an Inferius, I ask you..."

"Gotta scrape a living, P'lyx'na," muttered Mad-Eye in what was really a very passable imitation. "Someone had better Floo him. Polyxena, you do it; he's taken quite a liking to you."

Polyxena nodded and hurried off to the fire they used for Floo communications. "Quite a liking, indeed," she tossed casually over her shoulder. "If I was a hag, you'd have some real competition."

With a confused look, Ron spoke around a mouthful of porridge. "What's so important about finding the locket Horcrux now? It hasn't got anything to do with Regulus' kid, has it?"

Snape and Hermione simultaneously fixed him with the same withering, condescending stare, but Severus was the first to speak:

"The locket represents a piece of the Dark Lord's soul. If we are unable to destroy it, he can't possibly be killed. Honestly, Weasley, where have you been for the past three months?"

"And besides that," Hermione broke in, "anything that brings us closer to details on Regulus is worth looking into, don't you agree? The more we investigate that period of his life, the more chance we have of discovering who his lover was."

Indignantly, Ron opened his full mouth, but before he could respond, Polyxena reentered the kitchen, trailed by the smell of stale spirits and acrid tobacco smoke that clung to Mundungus Fletcher. She had thrown a friendly arm over his tweed-clad shoulders and led him straight to a place beside Moody at the long table.

"Slytherin's locket," growled Alastor. "Any idea where it might be, Dung?"

"Slytherin's locket?" repeated Mundungus, the skin around his bloodshot eyes stretched wide. "I never saw nothin' like that." He took a swig from a bottle concealed within a brown paper bag. "Wish I 'ad, though. I'd've been fuckin' every hag in 'Ogmeade if I 'ad that kind of gold."

Harry glowered at him from behind his glasses. "You know where it is. You nicked all my stuff after Sirius died."

Amazingly, Dung had the grace to blush. "Well, y' see, 'Arry, 's nothin' t' get all outta your cauldron about. Th' goblets an' that shit, Sirius 'ated it anyway. An' there was a locket, if I r'member, but I don't think *Slytherin's*. Dunno, never could manage t' pry it open."

"Yes, yes, but what *happened* to it?" interrupted Hermione impatiently. Unconsciously, she had leaned halfway over the table and was gripping the beech planks tightly in her hands.

"I'm gettin' t' that!" Dung waved a filthy, fingerless-gloved hand. "Sold it t' old Abe last fall. When I went down t' Knockturn t' see 'bout th' special Darks, them wands that gave P'lyx'na an' Mad-Eye all that trouble, an' th' son of a Bludger comes up t' me an' says 'Dung, that locket y' sold me last week's got a hex on it like a motherfucking Doxy in heat.' An' so I says t' him, I says, 'Go fuck a goat, Abe, it's what y' do best.' An' he's castin' th' Engorgement Charm left an' right an' center. Back then y' see, m' Healer wasn't too keen on my gettin' hit with that; I'd taken too many in a very sensitive area, y' see, but I went back last week, an' old Smethwyk says..."

"We get the picture," interrupted Polyxena hastily. "So Abe has the locket? Who the hell is he?"

Snape quirked a brow. "I assume he's referring to Aberforth Dumbledore, the barman of the Hog's Head. It's well known that he's possessed of a certain, shall we say, *fondness* for goats."

"A hex would make a lot of sense," interjected Harry. "When Dumbledore found Marvolo's ring, he nearly cursed his hand off destroying the Horcrux. So the locket definitely would have had a curse like a, um, 'motherfucking Doxy in heat.'"

"Does Abe still have the locket?" growled Moody.

"S far as I know," Dung grunted after a deep swig of Ogdens'. "But y' know we don't get along too well. 'E threw me outta 'is pub for a little indecent exposure twenty years back. An' when I say little," he added, "Don' think I'm talking 'bout m' privates on account of they're nothin' t' be ashamed of."

"Of course not," replied Polyxena with studied patience. "So. So. It looks as though we've a trip to Hogsmeade ahead of us."

"What do you mean by 'we' and 'us'?" Hermione queried with furrowed brow. "We can't all of us go."

Moody trained his magical eye on Polyxena. "No, we certainly can't," he put in sternly. "It ought to just be the ones trained for this sort of thing."

Snape arched a dark brow. "Indeed. I should go, knowing what I do about the Dark Lord, and Moody, of course. Any more of us would be rather too conspicuous."

At once, the table teetered dangerously as both Hermione and Polyxena leapt from their places, affronted. "I beg your bloody pardon, Alastor Moody?" snapped Polyxena. "The way I remember it, you were quite keen to drag me around the countryside last fall. You remember the time I was taken by Voldemort and lived, don't you?"

"You're not going," Moody growled gruffly. "End of story."

Edging away from Polyxena, who was about thirty seconds away from spitting fire, Hermione spoke up, "Don't be ridiculous. The pair of you--Moody and Snape, that is--can't stand each other, and, more to the point, I think we'd all like an equal chance at solving this. Harry has a right to go, being the one Dumbledore entrusted to find the Horcruxes and all. Polyxena ought to have a chance if she's used to this sort of thing. Tonks is an Auror; Remus is brilliant in Defense Against the Dark Arts; Moody is the best Auror the Ministry ever had; Ron and I are both experienced in solving things with Harry; and Severus knows Voldemort best. But I stand by what I said before: we can't all go. Why don't we just try a Random Selection Spell?"

Snape's thin lip curled at her. "This is a bit too important to be drawing names out of a hat. We're not selling raffle tickets; we're saving the Order from the Dark Lord."

"I'm going," hissed Polyxena in a low, dangerous, sibilant voice. "If Alastor's going, then I'm going to go *End of story*."

Taking a sip of his tea, Remus said placidly, "Well, I can't go. I'm still being hunted by Greyback. And, Severus, every Death Eater in the country is after you. Neither of us is able leave this house, much less go after Voldemort's soul."

"And I've got my duties at the Ministry," spoke up Tonks, much to Lupin's relief. "I've been reassigned to track Nott."

"Harry and I are set to go to Godric's Hollow," Ron reminded her. "It's better you and Moody and Polyxena go."

Polyxena beamed. "Very well. That's settled, then. When would you like to lea..."

"No," snarled Alastor. "You're staying here, at headquarters. I won't even have you going back to the house. Finding a wandmaker among a bunch of Squibs is one thing, but trying to destroy a fragment of You-Know-Who's soul and find an illegitimate Black is another. It's too damned dangerous."

"Your idiocy never fails to astound me, Remus," spoke up Snape. "Would you have me stay here and my knowledge of the Death Eaters be wasted? I, the half-blood Prince! No, you're forgetting how well I knew Regulus when he died."

"Too damned dangerous, indeed," Polyxena burst out, voice rising to a shriek. "You think I want to sit in this bloody house while you go off and get yourself killed? What sort of person do you take me for, Alastor? I'm already not a member of the Order; would you have me do nothing to help?"

"Yeah," agreed Moody. "Yeah, that sounds about right. You've done enough already."

"I'd better go," muttered Dung. "After all, I know who's got th' locket an' that."

Waving an idle hand, Snape replied distractedly, "Fine, fine, if you feel you must, but I shall also be accompanying you."

"Aren't you a bit worried about the Death Eaters?" replied Tonks with knitted brows. "After all, you betrayed You-Know-Who in the worst way possible. He'd like to kill you about as much he'd like to kill Harry."

Snape shrugged; Hermione tapped a finger against her chin. "Right then. So it'll be me, Severus, Mad-Eye, Mundungus, and Polyxena."

"*Not Polyx...*"

"I think that about covers it," replied Polyxena sweetly. "I'll go pack, shall I?"

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" A bolt of light shot from the end of Moody's wand and froze Polyxena in place.

"Oh, that's horrible!" exclaimed Tonks. "She'll kill you when that curse wears off."

"S'pect so," Dung concurred. "Y' know 'ow good she is with th' Cruciatus. Never saw anything like what she did with th' special Dark wands."

"Goddamn it, Dung," growled Moody. "That's 'Constant Vigilance.' Make them read it; stop giving away crucial plot points."

"I've got to, Mad-Eye," he replied uncomfortably. "People are gettin' confused."

Mercifully, Hermione had whispered the countercurse while Moody was distracted, and so Polyxena, filled with ire, sprang to her feet. "You bloody bastard!" she snapped. "Hexing your own wife on purpose. Merlin knows I get hexed every day if I come around a corner too fast. I'm going with you, and if you think differently, I'll curse the Sneakoscope tattoo right off your..." The rest of Polyxena's speech was drowned out by the heavy slamming of the kitchen door as she stalked off to one of the bedrooms.

Moody glowered, and Hermione's spine straightened. "I'll go see if she's all right," she threw out as she followed Polyxena's footsteps up the stairs.

Polyxena hadn't taken much care to hide herself; in fact, she was sulking in the room nearest the staircase and blushed deeply when she heard Hermione come in.

"Merlin," she said with a self-deprecating grimace, "that lot must think I'm fucking insane."

"Well..." Hermione arched a brow. "I personally liked hearing someone tell Moody where he can stick his Secrecy Sensor, but I couldn't speak for everyone. The good news is that he'll probably let you come now."

"Let me," snorted Polyxena. "Ha bloody ha. In my hormonal haze, I forgot the most important rule to dealing with Alastor when he's in his 'do as the crusty old Auror says' routine, and that's humor him."

"Humor him?" Hermione leaned forward eagerly, no stranger to the 'do as the greasy old Potions master says' routine. "That shuts him up, then, does it?"

With a delicate shrug, the older woman agreed, "When I'm rational enough to do it, yes. Why, going to try it on Severus?" Narrowing her eyes at Hermione, she exclaimed, "That's where I know you from! You were snogging Snape in Hogwarts last year! Very thoroughly, I might add."

"I was there; I remember," bit off Hermione acerbically. "And clearly that's worked out so well. What do mean, anyway, 'hormonal haze'? You're not... are you?"

Polyxena gave her head an embarrassed tilt. "Indeed. Only... only don't tell Alastor. I really don't wish to see how far he's prepared to go in the name of constant fucking vigilance."

"Your secret's safe with me." Hermione smiled. "But... but maybe I'll try humoring Snape a bit. Kill with kindness and that."

"He'll probably just get suspicious."

"Severus doesn't really think like that," she demurred. "Couldn't hurt, I suppose. We were doing so well working together last year, but after the kiss he pulled away. Now that I think on it, that was long before I ever found him with Narcissa Malfoy. I'd only ever snogged Victor and Ron before that. Maybe I did... something... wrong."

"I very much doubt that. Give it time," Polyxena said easily. "Alastor and I hated each other at sight. I don't think Snape's done with you yet."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 5

Snape has a very masculine problem to deal with. Polyxena doles out relationship advice.

A/N: Ah, reviews. Is there any sweeter word in the English language (besides lemon, that is)?

* * *

In point of fact, Snape was in hell: a seething, roiling, walking-around-with-half-a-hard-on hell. The thing that worried Snape most about his torment was that he was using words like 'hard-on' and few choice others that had popped (no pun intended) into his seething, roiling mind. He was quite sure he hadn't uttered the term since his seventh year.

Now here he was, a man whose riper years were fast approaching, already going grey at the temples thanks to a life as a double-agent and a teacher of Neville Longbottom, and he was on a knife's edge like some sixteen year old dunderhead reading his first smutty magazine. Why was Snape in this den of iniquity? Hermione Granger, of course.

It was not without some trepidation that he had taken her under his proverbial wing the previous year. After all, she'd never proved herself to be anything other than average at Potions. True, she hadn't melted a single cauldron or blown anything up, and she had indeed helped Longbottom gain a passing grade most afternoons, but her work had lacked inspiration or any true knowledge of the field. However, he had found himself missing the subject he had taught for so many years and eventually agreed to tutor her.

Hermione had proved adept, willing, and thirsty for knowledge, and he had found himself allowing her to assist him with his experiments on a new Wolfsbane Potion. She'd come to his office as often as her overfull schedule would allow, and gradually, though Snape had been wont to blame the fumes from ground moonstone and bubotuber pus, he'd felt the grudging admiration for her intelligence shift into a sharp tug in his abdomen. A feeling which, though relatively inexperienced in that realm, he correctly identified as desire.

He'd let it go as far as a kiss in the corridor one evening. Hermione had been blathering about the magical properties of nightshade or some other such mind-numbing topic, and, partly from curiosity and partly to shut her up, he had leaned forward and pressed his lips into a mouth that was soft, ripe, and surprisingly sweet, and he hadn't stopped there. Hermione had proved so willing, so eager, that he'd anchored his hands against the small of her back (well, actually her arse, if one wanted to be technical about it) and snogged her until he'd felt himself grow hard beneath his robes. Not a good sign when one was snogging one's student.

Therefore, he'd run away like an imbecile and ignored her until she'd come to his office to demand a confrontation. Immature of him, but there you have it. She'd certainly gotten her confrontation, though, since the day she'd chosen to unleash her righteous anger was the day Narcissa chose to, ahem, *thank him properly* for making the Unbreakable Vow for her son's safety. Though he'd felt guilty about it, he hadn't sent Narcissa away. A week of unrelenting need that he hadn't successfully masturbated away had made him almost glad to see her. So glad that when she'd come to his home a few days later, he hadn't sent her away from there, either.

Things were over with Narcissa, though. His public allegiance to the Order had seen to that. Now he was forced to live in Grimmauld Place with Hermione, watch her walk around in her nightie with her hair rumpled from sleep, collaborate on projects with her, and not ravish her with his uncontrolled lust because she was just barely legal and still of school age. This, to Snape, seemed a task harder (again, no pun intended) than anything Voldemort had set to him, but then again, he tended to exaggerate under the influence of testosterone.

Bang, bang, bang...

A sudden sharp rapping jerked him from his reverie, and he leapt up, wand drawn, glancing around at the walls.

Bang, BANG, BANG...

"What the bloody hell?" he muttered to himself, eyes cutting sideways to the opposite wall.

Creeeeeaaaaak, creeeeeaaaaak...

"Another Dark spell," he grumbled. "We'll be forced to move our headquarters if this keeps up. What in Salazar's name could this possibly... " At once, his hand froze on the doorknob.

"Gods, gods, *gods*, yes! Gods, Alastor, please... "

Polyxena. The Moodys must have made up. Of course he would have to stand there and listen to them reenact *Young Frankenstein* for all the Order to hear. He stared down at his robes and helplessly watched them rise into a tent of black fabric as Polyxena carried on her very vocal approach to lovemaking. Great, just great.

The only thing he could come up with to cure what ailed him was a nice, long shower with icy jets of water pounding his skin. Yes, yes, a cold shower, but first... well, a few more minutes listening to Polyxena wouldn't kill him, as long as Mad-Eye remained quiet.

"Polyxena!"

Oh, sweet Merlin. Snape's robe deflated as rapidly as it had risen. Just as well, for he hadn't exactly relished the idea of drenching his aroused body in freezing water.

"You really know how to use your hands," came the woman's low, appreciative murmur.

The metaphorical wind was back in Snape's metaphorical sails, and he began to wonder whether he oughtn't to see his Healer about this. For now, though, he decided upon the shower. Trudging toward the bathroom just down the hall, he was so caught up in his bothersome, misdirected lust that he didn't register the sound of water rushing through the pipes and the fragrant steam filling the room until it was too late.

There stood Hermione, stark naked underneath the spray, body pleasantly pink from the warm water, her bushy hair (still not intending puns, although...) heavy with dampness. Her eyes were shut against the coursing stream of water, and she hadn't heard him come in.

The former Potions master's jaw was slack, his dark eyes unable to look away from her nubile young form, especially her nubile young breasts, but when he saw her move away from the shower spray, he scurried out into the hallway, where he bumped into Polyxena.

Polyxena's eyes were bright, and her mouth held the tiniest self-satisfied smirk. She wore a short little robe over her tall, slim frame and positively reeked of sex. "Severus." Running a hand through her hair to smooth the post-coital frizz, she nodded slightly at the greasy haired man. "What are you up to?" Her tone was more than a little suspicious, and he suspected that that husband of hers had been watching him through the wall all the while.

"Precious little, my *dear* Madam Moody," he said, trying in vain for his trademark sarcasm and instead getting a strangled, choking gasp.

Polyxena quirked a brow. "Little? Don't sell yourself short, Sev."

Sev? "I beg your pardon?"

With a snort and the tiniest of glances at his unfortunate tenting situation, she set off down the hall, the hem of her robe dancing against her thighs. To his right, the old pipes ceased groaning as the shower water was cut, and Hermione finished bathing. He could only imagine her stepping out of the tub nude... reaching for her towel...

Oh, yes. Severus Snape was a dead man.

* * *

"All right, we'd better head to Hogsmeade first and see what Aberforth has to say for himself. Snape, Hermione, Dung*Polyxena*." Mad-Eye couldn't quite keep the scowl from his scarred face.

Likewise, his wife couldn't keep the triumphant grin from hers. "We'll Apparate from Diagon Alley. The sound of five people Apparating from here would attract too much attention."

"Apparition?" queried Severus lazily. "Have you even got your license yet, Hermione?"

"Fuck you, Severus."

With a slow glance at her body, now concealed beneath a baggy old robe, he recalled the firm flesh of her wet, pink thighs. "Interesting suggestion." He folded his hands strategically over his problem area. "I'll keep it in mind for you eighteenth birthday party."

Eyes cutting sideways to meet Alastor's, Polyxena snorted into the folds of her copper colored cloak.

"I r'member my eighteenth birthday party," Mundungus broke in reflectively. "M' dad, 'e were a Muggle, 'e took me t' th' strip club an' then we stole some cars. 'E'd 'ad me 'otwirin' them since I were nine, before I was at 'Ogwarts, y' know."

"I started my job in advertising on my eighteenth birthday," Polyxena broke in smoothly, edging the others toward the door. "Not a good day at all. I was bloody glad to see the end of that career."

"What do you do now?" asked Hermione with interest.

"Bit of this, bit of that," she replied evasively. "Alastor likes to keep me close to home, don't you, dear?"

"Damn right I do," he growled, ignoring her slight sarcasm. "Death Eaters practically walk the streets these days, and I'm a known member of the Order. You-Know-Who's lot would think nothing of kidnapping you again."

"No, probably not." Polyxena pursed her lips. "I'm sure Severus exercises the same concern for Hermione's safety."

The ex-Death Eater's sallow face twisted angrily. "What are you on about, Ollivander?"

"It's Moody. And I'm sorry, but the way you two are always sniping at one another, I just assumed you were a couple. Well, that and the way your robes tend to billow up when someone says the words 'Hermione' and 'shower' in the same sentence."

Though he tried in vain to imagine Dung in the shower, the image of the scraggly drunk was quickly replaced by one of Hermione, wrapped in a fluffy, white towel. He felt his 'throbbing loins' jerk upward.

"Case in point." Polyxena smirked, winking at Hermione as they set off down Grimmauld Place.

* * *

How had that escaped her? That was Hermione's main thought as the quintet made their way through the Leaky Cauldron and into the empty street of Diagon Alley. She wasn't the most experienced girl at Hogwarts (that particular distinction going to Pansy Parkinson), but she'd done some things. It was inevitable at a small, coeducational boarding school filled with teenagers. She'd let Victor Krum touch her breasts at the Yule Ball, but he'd kind of *kneaded* them, and it had hurt a bit, actually. And there was that time with Ron in the prefects' bathroom when she'd let him talk her into sucking on Ron, Jr. That hadn't been pleasant, either. And Neville. She'd let him put his hand up her robe, but he'd been more terrified than she was and anyway, he hadn't found what she needed him to find. But they'd all had erections at the time, so how in the world didn't she notice it in Snape?

The five wizards Apparated to the outskirts of Hogsmeade and began to make their way through the mostly deserted town, all of them pausing to glance up at the now-empty Hogwarts Castle. Snape, Dung, and Moody ambled ahead, eager to reach the Hog's Head and question Abe, so Hermione seized Polyxena's wrist and held her back.

"Are you mad?" she hissed violently. "What are you playing at with Severus and his, erm, affliction?"

"Well, you wouldn't have believed me if I'd just told you," whispered Polyxena. "I said you didn't do anything wrong."

"You were right," sighed Hermione. "But how could I have missed something like that?"

Biting her lip, Polyxena said directly, "Are you a virgin?"

Hermione blushed deeply. "Well... yes. I've done things, I just haven't done *the* thing."

"Relax." Polyxena rested a sisterly hand on the younger woman's shoulder. "When I met Alastor, I'd only done 'the thing' once. It was with Bill Weasley, but he was really horrible at it."

"I think it runs in their family." Hermione grinned, thinking of Ron's minute long blowjob. "I actually feel sorry for Fleur and Lavender."

"What are you two whispering about?" growled Moody, his magical eye looking back at them. "Keep up, will you?"

"Sorry, darling." Polyxena and Hermione quickened their steps to fall in with Snape and Dung, who was eyeing them both a bit too appreciatively as he rolled up the string of his Extendable Ear.

"Not a word." Hermione glowered at him severely.

"If you're lookin' for someone t'..."

"Shut up, Dung," snapped Polyxena.

"Alls I'm sayin' is, I do a good Engorgement Charm. Jus' r'member that." He winked one of his bloodshot eyes suggestively at her. "An' I know my way 'round th' female body."

"*Silencio!*" Snape jabbed his wand at the ragged man beside him.

"Thanks for that." Hermione smiled shyly, not really wanting to provoke a certain reaction.

"Think nothing of it. Someone had to stop him. When he says 'female body,' he means 'hag body.' Mad-Eye, Polyxena, go with Dung to the Hog's Head and question Aberforth. I need to speak with Miss Granger privately."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 5

The gang searches Hogsmeade for answers and discovers an unexpected clue.

****WARNING: MINI-SPOILERS WITHIN****

A/N: Sorry for the, um, ten-month hiatus. *Blushes fiery red.* I got a new job with the government, started freelancing for the crappy local daily, then I got promoted, so time has been at a premium. *Deathly Hallows* has inspired me, too. This story doesn't give away major plot points, but may include smaller details from Book Seven (hence 'mini' spoilers). AU on the whole, though, because there are certain characters for whom I bawled my eyes out while reading their death scenes and then decided that my fic

would forever be AU.

"My breath is bated, Severus. Bated." Hermione reluctantly followed Snape to an empty space beneath the awning Madam Puddifoot's of all ironic places.

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Granger. Now," he began, glancing furtively around before continuing, "I'm not sure what sort of skewed idea of love and lust you picked up from Polyxena Ollivander...excuse me, *Moody*, but I'm here to tell you..."

A sharp snort issued from the girl's nose. "Severus, please. I might be missing a few key life experiences, but I assure you I'm not some delicate, Regency-novel innocent who fears rakish rogues above all else."

"Rakish rogues?" repeated Snape slowly, a decidedly evil smile appearing on his sallow face. "Whoever said anything about rakish rogues? I was talking about my unfortunate tendency to...erm...salute you at inopportune moments."

"*Salute* me?" Hermione burst into raucous laughter that drew stares from the patrons of the little tea shop. "Salute me; that's classic. If you're referring to getting a huge hard-on, you might as well just say so. Salute me," she chuckled appreciatively.

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Miss Granger, it's been rather a long time. 'Huge hard-on,' quite an interesting and dare I say flattering choice of words."

"Aye, aye." Raising her hand to her forehead, Hermione gave the former Potions master an insolent salute and walked off toward the Hog's Head as she sang (rather loudly) the first few bars of 'Soldier Boy.'

"Hermione, back so soon?" Polyxena waved from a corner table.

"Soldier boy/oh my little soldier boy/I'll be true to you!" she finished with a flourish. "All right, Polyxena? Mad-Eye? And...?"

"Yes, right, this is *Sugar-Quill*." Moody emphasized Dung's drag name.

"Hello, Dung," whispered Hermione, suddenly remembering where she had seen the black veiled witch previously. "I expect Severus will be arriving shortly," she continued in a normal tone. "And he's requested that we all salute him as he enters. Tell you later," she added at Polyxena's raised brow. "I think it would be good for his morale."

A moment or two later, Snape swooped into the pub and stomped toward the corner table. At once, the foursome stood and gave him a very respectful salute. Snape glowered at Hermione, not noticing that Aberforth was headed for the old, broken down piano until the older wizard struck up a rousing rendition of 'We Salute Ye, Noble Wizards' in which all the pub's patrons joined.

Witches and wizards, gather ye round

Salute, salute the brave souls a-marching today

Their wands are drawn; with billowing robes

They march the streets of Hogsmeade.

Their swords are sheathed right to the hilt

Oh, we salute the...

"Enough!" snapped Snape, so abruptly that Aberforth hit a false note and disappeared behind the counter once again. "We have serious work for the Order to accomplish," he said in a low, seething voice mostly directed at Hermione. "We're not vanquishing the Dark Lord by sitting in pubs singing bawdy songs and dressing as witches."

"How do you propose I dress, then?" queried Polyxena, just as Hermione asked,

"Are you planning to dress as a witch, too, Severus?"

"Hate to say it, but Snape's right," Moody cut in tersely. "Here's what we learned from old Abe: the locket's got a hex on it, and it bloody well won't open." He held up Slytherin's most valuable artifact so that it caught the light.

Hermione's pulse quickened at the sight of the Horcrux, but naturally she didn't shout, 'Hey, it's a bit of Voldemort's soul!' "I don't think it will help us find Regulus or his illegitimate son," she said instead. "Why don't we keep it and let Harry have it for, er, inventory purposes. You know, it being part of his inheritance and all."

Snape eyed her suspiciously, but didn't speak. Raising a glass of Firewhisky to his lips, he drank a deep, burning draught and set the empty container down slowly. "It's no secret that the brothers Black were, shall I say, less than chaste."

Sugar Quill gave a roar of wheezing, coughing laughter until Aberforth eyed him suspiciously. "Chaste, eh? Y' know, Snape, if the pickins are slim over at 'Ogwarts, there's a lot of willin' hags down the Leaky Cauldron."

Shuddering, Snape signaled for another Firewhisky. Sexual euphemisms had never been his strong suit, and he had no wish for the entire bloody pub to start singing, 'There Was A Witch So Chaste And Pure.'

"I'd heard that about him," Hermione put in kindly, no doubt feeling guilty over the whole 'Soldier Boy' incident. "Apparently, after he left home, he was with a different witch every night in Knockturn Alley. This obviously complicates matters a great deal."

"And the Blacks didn't exactly merit an Order of Merlin for constant vigilance. Seems likely that he'd be inclined to forget a certain charm."

Polyxena turned beet red and took a sip of her pumpkin juice. "Y-yes. Although I'm sure that anyone could neglect that in the heat of the moment."

Moody squinted at her with his real eye and proffered his hip flask. "No one comes to the Hog's Head to drink pumpkin juice. Here, have a sip of Jack's. Found it in the Muggle off-license."

"Oh, no thank you, dear. I never drink before five. I read in...in *Witch Weekly* that it interferes with the...Patronus."

Moody arched a grizzled eyebrow. "If you say so."

"Can I get that in writing?"

"Back," Snape interrupted sternly, "to the matter at hand. There's no one left who could possibly tell us who or what Regulus slept with seventeen years ago, if in fact our theory is even correct."

"What about Madam Rosmerta? Or Madam Puddifoot?" Hermione suggested tentatively. "They're privy to all the romantic happenings at Hogwarts, given the lack of suitable dating venues in Hogsmeade. And as the stock character 'Town Gossip,' Rosmerta is a prime candidate for disseminating information."

"Good enough," growled Moody. "Let's go." Seizing his wife by the upper arm, he dragged her through the maze of tables and out into the July sunshine. "I'll deal with you later," he muttered darkly, out of earshot of the others.

Polyxena gulped. "Sugar Quill, you lot, are you coming?" she called quickly, nervously over her shoulder.

Hermione made a quick scramble for Polyxena. "He's going to murder you," she hissed. "And probably send you back to Grimmauld Place. *for the rest of your life*"

"Stop mixing metaphors," she replied. "What exactly did Snape say to you just now? Why did you have the entire pub singing ballads?"

"Nothing much, he just wanted to discuss his tendency to get hard whenever he sees me, but he called it 'saluting' me."

Polyxena chuckled heartily. "Brilliant. The poor sod fancies you, no matter what he says about 'school age' and 'ethics.' You'll have to seduce him, but how?"

"Tellin' 'im 'e's got th' biggest..."

"Dung, please! This is a sensitive issue." Polyxena held up a regal hand.

"Yeah, yeah, but r'member: I do a damn good Engorgement Charm." One of his bloodshot eyes winked suggestively at Hermione.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said politely as she hurried away down the pavement.

The Three Broomsticks was a great deal easier on the senses (and the sensibilities). The lunch crowd was a cheery lot, swigging butterbeers and eating sandwiches from pewter trays.

"Madam Rosmerta!" called Hermione cheerfully as the five wizards made their way to the bar. "All right?"

"Not so bad, aside from Death Eaters invading my pub every morning, and Dementors drifting down the street every night," replied the buxom witch sardonically. "What'll it be gents, ladies? I've got wine; I've got butterbeer; I've got whisky."

"A butterbeer," Hermione ordered. "And a pint of mulled mead for Severus."

"Polyxena Ollivander! Such a lovely girl! Will you have your usual elf-made white?" pressed Rosmerta. "I remember you always used to have that with your lunch."

"Er, no, I've got..." Blushing slightly, she held up a small sliver flask. "Pumpkin juice."

"And mine's not good enough for you, is that it?" The barkeep swelled like a bullfrog.

"I'm sure you've met my husband, Alastor Moody?" Placing a hand on Mad-Eye's sleeve, she smiled sheepishly.

With a knowing laugh, Rosmerta turned to Dung. "And Mundungus Fletcher, of course," she went on, slightly more coldly. "You'll not be harassing the hags among my customers today, Mundungus, or you're out for good."

"There's hags 'ere?" He looked about eagerly.

"Dung, no!" Gripping the thief's tweed-clad shoulders, Polyxena steered him into a seat. "Sit here. Have a sandwich. And no sexual harassment!"

"Speaking of sexual harassment," Snape cut in neatly, "we actually had a question for you. Do you perhaps remember Regulus Black?"

Eyes wide, Rosmerta nodded. "Indeed, I do, and a more reckless little rogue I never saw...aside from his brother, that is, and his brother's best friend, and his brother's best friend's son, and his..."

"Did he have a girlfriend while he was at Hogwarts?" Hermione leaned in eagerly.

"A girlfriend?" The witch was incredulous. "Try a hundred girlfriends. Quite the ladies' man was little Regulus, even after he joined the Death Eaters. He was only sixteen," she added sadly. "The poor little bloke. He was a haughty one, but I think he realized soon enough he'd made a mistake."

"He certainly had." Moody's magical eye spun for a minute before he drew the fold of his cloak around Polyxena. "Sit," he growled. "My wife will have a sandwich."

"Actually, I'm not hungry. There's no..." At his narrowed eyes, she trailed off. "Well, I could probably manage an egg and cress."

"You don't like egg and cress," Moody stated.

"Yes, I do. I've been cra...er, tastes change. Do you think you know *everything* about me?"

"Probably more than you realize. Now eat that," he barked gruffly.

"I saw a book you might enjoy in Flourish and Blotts. *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*, fascinating read."

"Go on about Regulus," encouraged Hermione. "Who was the last girl you remember him dating?"

Rosmerta's eyes squinted thoughtfully. "Well, in the fall there was that Posey Parkinson. Around Christmas, I saw him with the Greengrass girl, then in the spring, right before he joined up, there was that blonde girl. I think she was from Beauxbatons, though. Therese, her name was. Of course, he was in with his cousins a fair number of times, but I don't count those devious little cows."

At that, Snape choked on a large gulp of mead, and Hermione sent a swift kick to his shin. "Narcissa and Bellatrix?" he managed in a strangled voice.

"Well, yes. And that Alice Pritchard girl. He always told me she was his cousin, though I had my doubts. They used to fight like Quintupeds, and I distinctly remember them renting out a room from me one evening rather than walking back through the snow."

"Alice Pritchard," growled Moody slowly, turning the name over as he spoke. "Alice Pritchard."

Shooting a glance at Moody over Hermione's head, Snape added, "Of Gryffindor." He threw a handful of Sickles on the bar and led Hermione and the rest out the door.

"A definite dead end," grumbled Mad-Eye. "No good'll come of questioning Alice Pritchard, not even with Veritaserum."

"Who is Alice Pritchard?" queried Polyxena eagerly. "Do you know her, then?"

"She's in St. Mungo's," said Snape quietly, "with her husband, Frank Longbottom."