

The Old Walls Crumble

by cearrae

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 19

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The Old Walls Crumble.

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Prologue.

Two dark-cloaked male figures appeared on the dark, deserted street corner leading to Spinner's End. One leaned heavily on the other, clearly injured.

"Which way?" asked Draco Malfoy, who was supporting the injured Severus Snape.

An arm raised and a finger pointed the way. The pair made their way slowly to the doorway of a dilapidated house. Pulling a wand from his cloak, Draco pointed it at the lock

"*Alohomora.*" He waited for the door to open.

"Stupid!" exclaimed Snape, through clenched teeth. "My pocket, there's a charmed key."

Trying not to jostle his companion too much, Malfoy found the key and used it to open the door. Once in, he closed the door behind them immediately. The injured wizard made his way down the narrow hall, leaning his weight against the wall. He turned into the front room and stumbled to a threadbare sofa where he finally collapsed. The younger man followed him, pulling out his wand once more.

"*Lumos,*" he called, lighting the candles and bathing the room in a yellow glow. He looked at his professor lying on the sofa and grimaced. He was still bleeding badly from the deep gashes along his ribcage and arms.

"You need help, sir. Who can I fetch to heal you?" he asked, feeling helpless.

The man on the sofa laughed mirthlessly. "Foolish little boy. Fetch help?" His laughter turned into a cough.

Pulling off his cloak, Draco moved to kneel beside his injured professor.

"Professor, tell me what I need to do, please?" he begged. "You'll die without help."

"Well, that would simplify matters greatly for everyone concerned, wouldn't it?" replied Snape in his characteristic acerbic tone. "Over there in the sideboard, bring me the orange potion," he ordered and then rested his head on the cushion behind him.

Draco went to the indicated cabinet and opened a drawer. Inside he found a multicoloured cache of potion-filled phials. Selecting an orange potion as instructed, he closed the drawer and went to kneel beside Snape again.

"Here you are, sir," said Draco, opening the cap of the phial before handing it over.

Snape took the potion and downed it in one. "Helps replenish blood faster... now... you must heal the wounds." He pointed to himself.

Draco looked at his Head of House, eyes wide in fear. "Sir, I... I don't know how. I could kill you."

Snape looked at the scared child before him, for that was all Draco was – a man-child. He was all Snape had for aid, however, and the boy had to perform.

"I have had enough of your cowardice today, Malfoy. You were the one who wanted to prove yourself. Why your mother wanted to save your pathetic arse, I'll never know," he spat.

Draco swallowed thickly. "Te-tell me what to do, sir."

Snape closed his eyes. "Your wand, Malfoy, like so." He demonstrated a scrolling motion gradually moving across a line. "Show me."

Snape watched as Draco practiced the wand movement and nodded his satisfaction.

"Now the incantation: *Sanosectum Iniuriam* repeated continuously as you move your wand over the injury. Try... go on," Snape instructed and lay back once more.

Draco peeled back the torn garments from the wounds and made sure there were no foreign bodies stuck to the tissue. He took a deep breath and concentrated.

"*Sanosectum Iniuriam*," he intoned as he waved his wand as he had practiced. The flesh began to knit together slowly as his wand passed over it. He heard his professor moan in pain and stopped.

"Why did you stop, you stupid child?" Snape demanded through a clenched jaw. Perspiration beaded on his brow betraying the pain he had just endured.

Draco wiped the sweat of fear from his upper lip. "You were in so much pain, sir."

Snape let his head drop back. "It's only physical discomfort, Malfoy. It is temporary. I can handle the pain, I'm not afraid of it. I'm not a coward. Continue... I'm not a coward... I'm not a coward."

Draco began the Healing Charm once more, listening to the strange mantra his professor and protector chanted to himself.

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Narcissa paced in her guilt reception room. Much of the Malfoy home had been closed as an economy, but she had insisted that her personal drawing room remain open. She had received the team of Aurors there with the dignity of her class. She had remained aloof as their search contaminated her home, and had endured their rude insinuations about her morals.

"You're making me dizzy, sister. Sit and take tea," Bellatrix said in a bored tone.

"I can't. You heard what they said." Narcissa turned and sat on the edge of her Queen Anne chair. "What has become of them?"

"Snape's no fool. He'll have taken Draco somewhere safe," the dark witch replied.

"But where, Bella; where?" She looked to her sister once more.

Bellatrix cocked her head to the side and asked, "What do little boys do when they get hurt or frightened?"

It dawned on Narcissa what her sister meant. "No, not there... would he?" she asked, even though she knew the answer. "Is it secure?"

Bellatrix smiled. "They always run home to Mummy. If I know Severus, he has made his home a fortress." She put her cup down and approached her sister. "We wait until the hounds are circling for a new scent and then we move."

Narcissa nodded her understanding, but in her heart, she wanted to be with her only son. She wanted to take him away from this place, this country, which had become a living hell for them both.

Bellatrix stood and turned her back to her sister. Her smile disappeared, as she mulled over the plans in her head. Her beloved Dark Lord was not best pleased at the final outcome. They would need to act soon to keep Draco safe.

## Bitter Lessons

### Chapter 2 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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First, a thank you to my new Beta, Laurabeth quick turnaround and great feed back.

On another note I know Karkaroff is dead. Please bear with me? I love feedback so please let me know what you think.

C.

Chapter 1 Bitter lessons.

Snape woke up and blinked in the dim light trickling through the grimy window. The old bed creaked as he shifted to find a less lumpy patch of ticking to lie on. It didn't work. With a sigh, he sat up and stretched, flinching at the catch in his side where his scar was still healing. The alarm said six o'clock. He laughed quietly at himself, such a creature of habit that even away from Hogwarts, his body rhythm still ticked to the tower clock of the school. Best not to think too much of that, he warned himself internally. Rising, he dressed quickly in the cool damp of the morning. The house never seemed to warm up properly, even in the heat of summer. He went downstairs and visited the loo before checking the larder.

"There's nothing in," moaned Draco, as he sidled into the kitchen and sat at the table.

"Put the kettle on; I'm going to shave," Snape instructed, turning away from the presence of the boy who had become a total irritant to him.

"There's no milk," Malfoy complained.

"Open a tin of evaporated," snarled Snape, holding up a warning finger, "and don't use magic."

Draco rounded on his teacher. "I'm not a bloody elf to do your bidding." Suddenly, he found himself nose to nose with an evilly smiling Death Eater.

"You don't like my hospitality? Well, don't let me keep you, Mr. Malfoy."

Snape grabbed Draco by the scruff of the neck and dragged him to the front door. He threw the terrified boy against it and pulled out his wand.

"Say the word, and I'll release the wards to let you leave. Never let it be said that Severus Snape held a Malfoy against his will." He waited as his threat penetrated the veneer of superiority Draco had assumed.

Draco slid to the floor, dragging flakes of peeling paint off the door panel with him. He began to cry. He sobbed uncontrollably, his tears streaming down his cheeks and soaking his collar.

"Please, sir, please. I'm sorry, so sorry. Please, don't throw me out. I don't know where to go. I... I can't go home. Please... I'm... Don't make me leave."

Snape looked at the child begging for mercy on the floor of his home. Draco sat cowering in the corner of the entryway, his hands raised as if to fend off a blow. A wave of misery passed over Snape as a scene from his childhood passed unbidden before him.

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"No, Dad! Please, I didn't do it on purpose, honest. It just happened. Ow! Ow! Ow!" Severus cried out as the blows of the switch hit the back of his bare legs. He had been cornered at the front door where he had tried to escape from his father's wrath.

"Tobias, stop it. He can't help it. Stop!" Eileen Snape covered her son with her own body and took two blows of the switch on her legs.

"Look at 'im, the little coward can't take 'is own punishment. 'E 'as to have 'is mummy protect 'im. Yer do 'im no favours, woman. 'E's a freak like you and your kind. If 'e can't take what I dish out, 'e'll never survive what 'e'll get in t'mill when 'e starts." Tobias wiped the sweat from his brow. He tossed the switch into the umbrella stand and went back to the front room. "Get yerselves back in here and clean this mess."

Mother and son entered the room slowly. They looked at the remains of the mirror that had shattered while Severus was being lectured about running away from bullies. The small boy kept close to his mother, holding the edge of her apron.

"I could repair it," whispered Eileen.

"You'll do no such thing!" Tobias yelled. "I see that cursed piece of wood once and I'll break it. I swear there'll be nowt of the goings on of the devil in my 'ouse." He reached over and pulled Severus from his mother's reach. "Just remember that, lad, or I'll lay the cane where you'll never forget." He shook the boy once then shoved him away. "I'm going for a walk. Make sure it's cleaned up afore I get back." He lifted his cap and jacket and stormed out of the house.

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Snape lowered his wand and leaned on the wall. "Get up, Malfoy," he told the boy in a muted tone.

Draco sobbed silently, his head leaning back against the door and his eyes closed. He hadn't really heard his professor.

"I said get up, Malfoy," he repeated. When he still got no reaction, Snape leaned down and grasped Draco's arm. The boy started and looked up expecting to be hurt. "Get up," instructed Snape once more, pulling on the arm at the same time.

When Draco stood, Snape released his arm and walked back to the kitchen. He filled the teakettle, set it on the gas cooker and lit a flame. The youth came in behind him, confused at the change in mood of the Dark wizard.

"Sir," he began, "I apologize. I was rude and I should be tha..."

"Shut up," said Snape without looking at him. Snape sighed and looked at the small mirror that hung over the sink. He saw a pathetic excuse for a man looking back at him. Not a wizard, just the pathetic man his father had always told him he would be. Coming to a decision, he opened the drawer in front of him and pulled out some scissors. He moved to the small table and sat down, beckoning to Draco to join him.

"I'd expected to hear from someone by now. Things must not have gone as we predicted. It appears we're on our own." He looked across the table seeking the boy's reaction. Draco looked back, expressionless. "We have no provisions left. I need to go out."

"But, sir, you'll be seen. They have your home address, don't they, you know, the Aurors?" asked Draco.

"No. I removed that piece of information from Hogwarts records some time ago, and a friend managed to lose it from Ministry files. The location of my house is known only

to those I trust."

He held up the scissors. "How are your barbering skills, Mr. Malfoy?"

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"Harry!" Petunia Dursley yelled up the stairs of her clinically pristine home.

"Yeah, what is it now?" Harry drawled, thinking he'd forgotten one of the tedious chores she had set for him.

Petunia looked over her shoulder at the petite young woman standing on her doorstep. Hermione shared her most ingenuous tooth-revealing smile.

"You have a visitor; a young lady," said Petunia. She turned back to Hermione and asked, "How did you come to know Harry?"

Hermione bit her lips coyly. "Harry saved my life. I've been his friend ever since. He's very special, but of course you know that." She touched Petunia's arm and giggled.

At that moment, Harry appeared. "Hermione!" he exclaimed and pulled her into a hug, lifting her and spinning her around once.

Petunia watched, looking down her nose at the pair. "So, you attend the same academy of freaks he does," she snarled. "I suppose your parents are freaks as well," she declared, sniffing imperiously.

Hermione merely turned back to face the sourpuss to share another brilliant smile. "Yes, I do attend Hogwarts, but my parents are dentists." She reached into her handbag and pulled out a business card. "Here you go; I'm sure they'd love to meet you. They can work wonders with any kind of teeth these days, even when they're really far gone."

Petunia took the card, too stunned at what the girl had said to react to the subtle insult behind the words.

"Are you ready, Harry? I have Mum's car. We can drive to their office. Dad has the afternoon off and wants to take us to lunch. Then he'll drop us off at the Leaky Cauldron. Mr. Weasley said he'd meet us there." Hermione bounced on her toes in excitement.

At that moment, Dudley Dursley decided to descend to the kitchen for food. He'd just risen from bed and was, fortunately, wearing pyjamas. As he reached the first floor, he noticed his cousin and a girl. A very pretty, put together girl.

"Hello there. Who're you?" he asked.

Hermione looked over and saw a corpulent boy leering at her.

"You must be Dudley," she declared, scowling at his dishevelled appearance.

"Yeah," he replied. "You just move in around here?"

"No," she replied in a dismissive tone.

Dudley still didn't take the hint.

"So you're just visiting." He offered Hermione his best vamping smirk. "I know all the hot clubs in this part of town."

Hermione sighed impatiently at Dudley's idea of hitting on a girl. "How nice; pity you don't visit them often. The dancing might have helped you lose a few stone. Come on, Harry, get your things. I'll meet you in the car." With a side glance to Dudley and his mother, Hermione returned to the car as Harry ran back to his room.

Harry packed his trunk with all his belongings and set Hedwig free to fly where she would. She would find him; she always did. He trundled his trunk and Hedwig's cage down the stairs. His aunt stood in the doorway with her arms crossed.

"Just where do you thing you're going?" she demanded.

"I'm going out to lunch with one of my best friends, and then I'm going to my other best friend's home, and then we're all going to a wedding. Should be fun." He made to pass her, only to feel her hand gripping his arm.

"You didn't say anything about this before. When will you be back?" she demanded.

Harry appeared to mull over what she asked and then turned back to face her.

"Frankly, I don't know nor do I care. If I'm lucky, I might never have to come back here again, ever. Now, let me go, Mrs. Dursley." He spat her married name out as an epithet. "You did your duty as a good little aunt and kept me alive ... just. Now, I have a duty to the people who care about me and love me. I know you don't fall into that category."

Harry turned and strode away without looking back. He truly had no intention of ever returning to Privet Drive voluntarily ever again. He had plans to make and plots to execute. He had a destiny to fulfil one way or another. He swung his trunk and the cage into the car boot that Hermione had opened for him, then slammed it shut. Finally, he looked back at the house that had been the only residence he could remember and found he couldn't call it home. His home had been Hogwarts and Dumbledore. His home had been torn asunder by a cruel curse uttered on a dark night by an evil wizard. A home was something Harry no longer possessed.

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Snape looked at himself in the shop window. He didn't recognise the man in the reflection. His hair had been shorn short and he'd forgone shaving. The Muggle clothes clung too close to his body for his comfort, but he didn't have the luxury of choice. This was his second trip out this week. The house wasn't connected to the electricity, hence the fridge was off. He wouldn't chance a Freezing Charm lest the strong magic be traced to a Muggle neighbourhood.

With a sigh, Snape resumed his walk down the street. He looked for the red and white striped pole of a barber. The hair was short, but it looked rough. He decided on a proper trim. Seeing his goal across the street, he gauged the traffic and jogged to the other side. The prices were posted on the front door. Pulling out his Muggle money, he calculated how much he needed for food and decided the haircut was in his budget. He entered and was seated immediately. Half an hour later, he left with a short back and side style and his beard shaped. At least he didn't look like a homeless person any more.

Walking back to the discount grocery, Snape had to pass a childhood memory, the primary school he had attended for six years. It looked as grey and miserable now as it had then. He stopped and looked over to where a group of boys were playing footy. He had attended class with thirty-plus other children, most of who came from poor working class families like his. The ones with picture perfect uniforms always came from the new housing scheme being built on the demolished cotton mill site. They didn't wear hand me downs or second hand clothes. Their socks weren't darned.

"Hasn't changed has it?" asked a voice to his left. He looked to the side and down. A short, non-descript woman was looking at the school much as he had. She appeared to be a few years younger than him.

"You spend hours and hours poring over books and doing lessons. What do you end up remembering best?" She looked up at him and grinned. "Last day of classes before holidays; you'd be sitting on the edge of your chair just waiting for that final bell. Remember?" she asked lightly.

"I prefer not to," he replied. "My time here was not the happiest."

"I remember you," she stated.

"Really? I can't imagine why." He had thought to walk away, when she said something that made him catch his breath.

"You were that funny kid that went away to some posh school on a scholarship or something. Our Amanda was in your class." She frowned, "You were from down Spinner's End, weren't you?"

"You have a remarkable memory, miss, but I..." he began, but she interrupted.

"Jenny, Jennifer Doulton." She held out her hand for him to shake.

He looked at her hand without taking it. "Doulton, I recall the name." He looked at her more closely and nodded. "You had an older brother as well," Snape said sourly, remembering his boyhood tormentor.

She dropped her hand. "Yeah, Tommy. He was a right one when he was at school, they say. He'd left here before I started," she admitted, jabbing her thumb at the school.

"He was a bully, plain and simple," he replied to her observation.

"Yeah, well, he grew up and moved to Canada to work in the oil industry. Haven't seen him since my dad died." Jenny looked at the sky as the sun moved behind a cloud. "Looks like it might rain. It was nice meeting you again... er..." She stumbled, realising she didn't know his name.

"Indeed, good day," he replied and quickly walked away, leaving her standing in front of the old building where they had shared part of a childhood.

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David Granger sat across the table from his beloved daughter and her friend in the private dining room of his club. He watched the easy banter and teasing. It did not seem to be pre-amorous testing, but rather the support of true friendship. It comforted him somewhat—Hermione was not following this boy out of some misplaced hero worship. They were friends with a bond of siblings, not of sex. This made his understanding of her loyalty clearer. It did not make it easier, for a parent's love for his child surpassed any other when it came down to life or death.

"Hermione, I had a meeting with Headmaster Dumbledore earlier this year," he told her during a lull in the conversation.

Hermione took a sip of her mineral water. "I see, and what did you speak about?" she asked.

Dr. Granger looked down and studied his glass of wine. "Hermione, you told us about what was happening in the world you live in during the school year only after your mother saw the scar on your torso." He paused and sipped. "You've hidden so much from us, abetted by your teachers. What are we to think?" he asked, opening the subject for her to respond to.

Hermione looked at Harry as she answered her father. "I don't know, Dad." She closed her eyes and ordered her argument in her mind. "If you and Mum had found out about what was happening since first year, you would have pulled me out of school."

"Of course we would have, Hermione!" her father exclaimed quietly. "Your mother and I love you. Why would we expose you to such danger?"

"It's not that simple," she replied. Hermione looked at Harry, who looked saddened at her father's outburst.

"It's my fault, Dr. Granger," Harry confessed. "I'm the one who's at fault for all the dangerous things that have happened to your daughter."

"No!" Hermione interjected. "Harry, you never asked anyone to risk themselves. We did what we did by choice, all of us. These are our lives, our futures. We made a choice; that's more than you were ever given," she insisted.

"Hermione," her father cut in sharply, thankful he'd asked for a private room, "I didn't come here to discuss history." He took a deep breath and began a speech he never thought he would make. "Your mother and I know what has been going on. Now that Professor Dumbledore is gone," he watched as the young adults reacted to his words, "and the school has been closed for the foreseeable future, we would like to know your plans."

"No, sir," said Harry with finality.

"I beg your pardon?" demanded Dr. Granger vehemently.

Harry was shaking his head, "Dr. Granger, Hermione is so lucky to have parents like you. You love her and want only the best for her." He paused to think for a moment about what he was about to say. "Your daughter is brilliant. I wouldn't be alive today without her. She might deny it, but I know it's true." He looked at his friend. "I have a destiny. I have no choice, but..." he paused to fight his emotions, "my friends, my true and loving friends, have always been with me. I can't imagine going forward without them, but they are free to choose their own path."

Harry turned and looked at the older man. "We cannot tell you anything, because you and your wife are targets, sir. Believe me when I say, our enemies would force any knowledge about us from you before you could take a breath. When we make plans, we can share them with no one else."

David Granger watched his little girl become a strong woman before his eyes and knew regardless of any plea he might make, her mind was made up. The urge to cry came upon him suddenly. "Excuse me." He stood and left the table to hide for a minute or two in the Gents.

"Oh, Harry, I've hurt them." Hermione used her napkin to wipe away the tears from her face. "I never wanted them to know what was going on because they would worry so. Now it's all come down on them," she sobbed.

Harry put his arm around her shoulders to let her rest her head against him. "Perhaps it's better they know, Hermione. You don't have to hide anything around them." He turned her to look at him. "What would they feel if something happened to you and they never saw you again? Don't you think that would be worse?"

Hermione nodded. "I suppose it would be."

"I know it would be," added her father from behind them. He returned to his seat. "Hermione, you'll be eighteen in September. You are already of age in... in your world. Your mother and I know there's nothing we can do to stop you from following your conscience." He smiled for a moment. "In fact, we'd have been disappointed in you if you'd shown anything other than that determination. It isn't the way we raised you." He looked at Harry. "Potter, I hope you have some common sense too. Don't be dragging your friends into foolish situations you haven't thought through."

Harry grinned. "That's what I have Hermione for. She's the one who talks sense." He sobered for a moment. "I promise that I'll do my best to keep Hermione safe, sir, but I have no more control over her stubbornness than you."

"Hermione, before you... before you begin your quest, please spend a day with us?" He watched his daughter's face for her reaction.

Hermione reached out and captured her father's hand. "I hope I can spend more than one day with you, Dad. Please, come to the wedding a week from Thursday. I know you were invited."

"I'll talk to Mum." He took a sip of wine to disguise his emotion. "We'll let Arthur know."

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Snape and Draco were in the front room of the house, reading silently while a battery powered radio played in the background. They'd fallen into a pattern of sorts over the past month. Draco had learned how not to irritate the older man and Snape didn't bark orders out as if Draco was a house-elf. It was a barren existence, but it was survival.

Both men started when four sharp knocks sounded from the front door. They looked at each other.

"Douse the lamps," whispered Snape as he approached the window. Draco turned down the wick in the oil lamp and snuffed out the candles. Pulling back the old blackout curtains, Snape peered out to see who was at the door. He sighed when he saw two cloaked women.

"*Lumos*." Snape lit the candles and took one to the door to admit Narcissa and Bellatrix. They entered wordlessly and went into the living room. Narcissa rushed to Draco and pulled him into her arms.

"Oh, Draco, I'm sorry I took so long to come," she sobbed, placing kisses on his brow and cheeks. She stood back a little and looked at him. "You've lost weight. Are you all right?" She stroked his hair, which had reached his shoulders, making him look even more like his father.

Draco nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay. Honest. I missed you, Mother." He pulled her into a hug and sobbed into her shoulder. Narcissa patted his back and cooed soothingly.

"Pathetic," muttered Bellatrix. "What do you have to drink around here? I need something to settle my stomach after seeing that." She pointed her chin at the mother and son then moved to the chair she'd sat on the last time she was there.

Snape pulled out a bottle of sherry and some glasses. He poured them each a glass, passed one to the dark-haired witch and sat on the chair opposite. "What took so long?" he demanded.

"Moody." Her one word answer was all that was required.

"He never trusted me," Snape replied. "Not even after Barty Crouch and the trunk escapade." He sipped the sherry and let the warmth trickle through him. "What now?"

"We need to get these two out of the country. Then, it's up to our master." She sipped her own sherry and looked over at her sister. "Do stop pawing the boy, sister. It's revolting to watch."

"Draco, pour your mother some sherry," Snape commanded. "You may have a small one yourself. Narcissa, please have a seat." He indicated the sofa.

"Severus, how can I express my gratitude to you? You saved my boy." She looked at the wizard with fervent admiration.

He looked at the pale face of the woman whose vow had driven him into exile and leered at her. She blanched and looked at her sister who had begun to laugh.

"I'm sure I could think of a number of ways you might show your gratitude, Narcissa." He let his words hang in the air while he took a drink. "Frankly, I'd rather just take cash; pounds not galleons."

"I see," said Narcissa, taking a sip from her glass. "I suppose I could manage something."

"Good, I'm sure you'll be generous. I have funds in Gringotts that I can't get to. I need someone to transfer them to a Muggle bank. I'll write the debit note, you will deliver it. The goblins will look after the rest." He looked at her and waited.

Narcissa nodded. "Of course, I'll do anything to help you, Severus."

"Where am I to go, Mother?" Draco asked anxiously.

"Tonight, we go home, son. For the next few days, we'll stay there until our plans are finalised." She looked at her sister.

"We've been in touch with Karkaroff. He said he'd give all of you shelter. He's sending a boat next week. We need to get to John O'Groats by Thursday next," she told him. Looking at her nephew, she asked, "Can you Apparate, boy?"

"Yes, Aunt Bella. I've not had much practise though," he replied cautiously.

"Well, you can practise when you get home. You'll need to anyway, if you want to get into the priest hole quickly when the Aurors arrive," she warned.

"Bella, don't scare the boy. We can do Side-Along-Apparition if need be. We'll be fine, Draco, don't worry." She patted her son's hand. Draco had the grace to look embarrassed.

"I'm not going," announced Snape.

"What?" gasped Bella. "And they call me mad. Do you realise the kind of search that is on for you?"

"Yes. They're all looking for a homicidal wizard with long, dark hair, clean shaven and a propensity for billowing black robes." He looked at the women. "Do you see anyone of that description here?"

"Come, Draco, we should go. We've taken advantage of your professor's hospitality long enough," decided Narcissa, standing up and adjusting her robes.

"I'll get my things." Draco left to get his small bag of belongings.

"Thank you again, Severus. There are no words to tell you, no way to thank you enough," Narcissa told the man before her.

Snape stood and faced her. "I know." He walked over and poured himself more sherry. "Believe me, if there were any way you could thank me, I'd have asked for it twice over just to get compensation for having to put up with your whelp for the past month. You've raised a mewling, craven man-child who baits his betters and runs crying when they bite back." Pulling out some parchment and a quill, Snape wrote the debit note and signed it. He passed it to Narcissa who was gaping at him.

"Severus, that's cruel!" cried Narcissa.

"Cruel?" Snape laughed, "No, cruel is having to know I was the one who saved his pathetic arse and gave up any semblance of a life I had. I can't even serve our master properly anymore, by being his eyes and ears in the Order. Moreover, I can't earn a living. Tell me, Narcissa, what do you suggest I do? What can you give me to compensate me for losing all of that?"

"Mother?" Draco had returned and heard the last of his professor's speech.

"Let's go, Draco." Narcissa led the way to the front door.

"Professor, I know I was a total idiot. You've been most patient with me. Thank you, sir, for everything. Perhaps, one day, I'll be able to return and repay you in some fashion." Draco held out his hand to his protector.

Snape took his hand and looked at the boy. "Malfoy, for the sake of everyone who matters to you, find a nice safe job, marry and have lots of babies. You're not your father. Look after your mother."

Draco nodded and followed his mother.

"So, you're all by yourself again," Bella purred in his ear.

"Why didn't the rat return with you?" He turned and faced her.

Bella smiled, "I didn't tell him I was coming." Stepping closer to him, she lifted her hand and stroked his beard. "I always liked a beard on a wizard. It makes them so much manlier."

"Are you about to thank me too?" he asked, quirked his brow at her as she pressed against him.

"No, but I could offer something you might thank me for... later... much later." She snaked her arms around his neck and kissed him. Snape responded by pulling her hair back roughly, making her gasp.

"On my terms, Bella." He grabbed her arm, led her upstairs to his room and shoved her onto his bed. She lay as she fell and looked back at him. "So, Bella, how do you like it? Perhaps you have one of the traits of your dear, departed cousin and prefer all fours?" he began to undress as she gazed hungrily at his groin.

"I'm not partial, Severus. What would you suggest?" she asked, in a teasing manner.

"I suggest you should start by paying off some of what your sister owes me." He placed one knee on the bed and leaned over her. "Then, we can start to build up some credit of our own." He stroked a finger down her cleavage making her arch her back. "My account is in a deficit balance for the want of your type of payment." He smiled and contemplated a lustful night of pleasure.

## Meetings and Consequences

### *Chapter 3 of 19*

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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Kudo's to Laurabeth, my beta, again I have a feeling she's going to make this story pretty good.

We continue on. Things don't get any happier... yet. There are always consequences for our actions regardless of how we try to escape.

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Meetings and Consequences.

The old bed rattled as Bella pulled against her bonds, struggling to free her hands. She growled in frustration and glared at the wizard who was causing her exasperation. The payment was not quite what she thought it would be.

"Enough, Severus, no more teasing," she bleated. "You've had your fun, now; tell me what it is you want." Bellatrix looked at the wizard who was lazily stroking her legs from his kneeling position between her thighs.

Severus offered her a sarcastic grin. "Come now, Bella, we're just catching up on old times. I remember well your tutoring sessions with newly marked brethren where we were tied in just such a way for your amusement; albeit a lot less comfortably." He slid his hands up her sides until he could cup her breasts and pinch the nipples. As she moaned and arched her back, he began to whisper his demands. "I need a job to keep me in his favour. I need ammunition to fight with, and that means information." He slid one hand down and began to tease her centre in a way that made her gasp.

"I taught you well," she hissed through clenched teeth. Bella had her eyes closed and was twisting her body in an effort to ease her arousal. "Please, Severus, you must let me have my release. Please..."

Severus laughed and bit her neck, leaving a mark. "I've learned far more from women who lectured with tender and skilled hands than you've ever shown me. Now, beautiful Bella, tell me, what is it in Borgin and Burkes that must be retrieved?" He paused and waited for her answer.

"Argh!" she cried. "Severus, you are cruel."

"I'll take that as a complement from the mistress who defines the word." He sat up and made to withdraw.

"WAIT!" Bella closed her eyes. "It's very ancient and it belonged to an ancestor of Ravenclaw. He was a Warlock of the Clan of the Raven. The object is a rod with the Ravenclaw eagle mounted on it."

Severus returned to rest between her legs once more. "Thank you Bella. Now for your just reward." He leaned down and with a hard thrust, entered her. Their coupling was rough and lasted at length before Severus finally allowed either of them any release.

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Severus woke the next morning with the witch's arms wrapped around his torso. In her sleep, Bellatrix could pretend to the hard beauty that had been hers before her time in Azkaban. Her striking eyes and full lips, along with her sinuous body, had left many a wizard stirred and desirous of her company.

Making no pretence of easing himself from her embrace, Severus rose and began pulling on his clothing. He would make a trip to the local public baths and shower later. The old house had a gas geyser mounted over the bathtub that provided hot water for ablutions, but he wanted to be purified after his night with the Dark Lord's favourite. Sitting in a bath never left him feeling clean. He felt the need for hot pulsing water to cleanse away her scent.

"Severus, what time is it?" Bella pushed herself up and rubbed her eyes.

Snape looked at his clock. "Just past eight o'clock," he replied, as he pulled on a dark blue jumper.

"Oh! What a ridiculous time to be awake." Bella lay back and opened her arms. "Come back to bed, Severus. We can have some fun before we greet the day." She smiled at him suggestively. "If you want, we could make this a habit. You always were my favourite pupil."

Severus rose from his seat. He picked up the robes Bella had discarded the night before and threw them at her. "Get your lazy arse out of my bed. You got your jollies and I got to scratch an itch."

"You ungrateful bast--" Bella was cut off in mid-declaration by Snape's hand wrapping around her throat.

"What did you expect, Bella? Grateful grovelling from a man who had gone too long without?" Snape laughed. "Don't flatter yourself."

"You... you never have women offering you their bodies freely. They take one look at you and run the other way, unless you're bent on raping them," she spat back at him.

"They don't know what they've missed." He reached over and pulled her out of the bed. "Now, get dressed and be on your way. I'm sure your husband has missed you."

Bella pulled back her hand to slap his face only to have it caught by Snape before it struck. "I don't think so, madam. I never give whores the upper hand." He pulled her after him as he made his way downstairs. Bella clutched her robes to her chest as he pushed her towards the hall.

"I need my shoes and my wand," she spat through clenched teeth.

Severus pulled out his own wand and summoned her belongings, throwing the shoes at her feet but keeping her wand. "You have two minutes," he told her and looked at his watch to time her.

"Our Lord will hear of this," she muttered as she struggled into her robes. Shoving the extraneous articles of underwear into the pockets of her cloak, Bella forced her feet into her shoes and threw the cloak over her shoulders. "My wand," she demanded.

"Let me show you out, my dear Bella." Snape pointed to the front door and followed behind her as she walked towards it. Severus un-warded the door and opened it, letting Bella exit.

"I look forward to hearing from our Lord; I expect that he shall call very soon." He passed her the wand. "Have a safe trip and do give my regards to Rodolphus." He smiled as he slammed the door in her face.

~~~~~

The kitchen of the Weasley household was bustling with activity. Two house-elves, Dobby and another Hogwarts' elf, were labouring under Molly's sharp eyes to produce a veritable feast. The twins had temporarily closed their shop and were busy erecting and decorating a marquee tent for the wedding reception with the help of Ron and Harry. Ginny and Hermione were gathering flowers to make decorative baskets and wreaths.

The wedding ceremony would take place under a night sky, so that all creation would witness the hand-fasting and binding of Bill and Fleur. The guests would stand in the sacred circle, and an elder would hear the oaths and make the binding.

Harry came into the kitchen to get a cold drink. He looked at the food filling the magically resized cold box as he reached for the pumpkin juice. "Wow, Mrs Weasley, this puts a Hogwarts' feast to shame," he complimented his surrogate mother.

Molly smiled at the flattery. "Well, it's not everyday your oldest son gets married. I'll not have it said the Weasleys stinted on a wedding. Dumbledore always enjoys... oh my." Molly suddenly realized what she was about to say. She sat at the table and dabbed at her eyes with a tea towel. "It's so hard to think of him as gone. He was going to officiate, you know."

Harry sat across from her. "Sometimes I wonder how I'll carry on. He always had something up his sleeve. It was as if he always had a giant secret he wanted us all to guess at. I never thought of him as being just... an old man." He looked into his glass of juice, not wanting Molly to see the tears threatening to fall.

"Harry, we're all just human beings. Even He Who Must Not Be Named had a mother, God rest her soul."

Molly stood suddenly. "Right, that's enough of that, come on." She reached over and tapped Harry on the shoulder. Harry finished his juice and stood as well.

"Harry, be a dear and fetch the boys from the field for some tea. Fleur is bringing her mother and sister later, and we'll all have a light supper then." Molly shooed Harry along and watched as he disappeared behind the hedges. She turned back to the kitchen and looked over the day's labours.

"Alright, you two," she called the elves, "enough for today. Put some preserving charms over this lot and move it out to the tent. After that you can go, but be back bright and early tomorrow."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Harry Potter's Friend, Dobby wonders if you know what tomorrow is?" asked Dobby.

Molly scowled. "Of course I do. It's my son's wedding day."

Dobby blushed and wrung his hands. "Of course, Mistress, but tomorrow is special for another reason."

Molly crossed her arms in front of her. "Don't worry, Dobby, I remember; Merlin knows you've dropped enough hints. We will celebrate Harry's birthday at lunch tomorrow." She thought for a moment and added, "If you are here, you may attend."

"Mrs. Harry Potter's Friend, you are too kind to Dobby. Dobby was rude to suggest that such a great mistress would forget." Suddenly, the elf grabbed a wooden spoon and began beating himself about the head.

Molly dashed forward and grabbed the spoon. "Stop it, you foolish little creature; I need you fit for tomorrow."

"Thank you, mistress; we shall be here early, as you have ordered." Dobby and the Hogwarts' elf began casting charms over the food and moving it out to the tent. As the table cleared, Molly set out soup and bread for her extended family. She was never more content than when she was providing for those she loved and cared for.

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Jenny Doulton, library clerk, recent divorcee and self-declared frumpy Manchester lass looked at herself in the mirror and pulled her hair up, then let it drop.

"Let's face it, girl, you have all the pizzazz of a day-old bread pudding," she said to her reflection. With a sigh, she picked up her handbag, a box of stuff for the jumble sale at the school and went out to shop. Maybe a little Victoria Sponge from Marks and Spencer would improve the day.

She made her way to her old primary school and walked through the gates to the doors leading to the School Hall.

"Hello, Mrs. Fraser," she called. "Here's the stuff for the jumble sale. Not much, just a few things of my mum's that nobody wanted."

"Thanks ever so, Jenny," replied the older woman, who was taking in the donations. "You must drop in on Saturday; we're having a nice Tea Room and bingo."

"I wish I could, Mrs. Fraser, but I've got to work. Saturday's one of the busiest days at the library." She smiled. "If you see something I might like, why don't you pick it up for me, and I'll pay you."

Mrs Fraser smiled back at her. "Dora Smedley is doing her homemade chutney; I'll get you a jar."

"You do that, thanks; must run, bye." With a smile and wave, Jenny left the hall.

Jenny looked down the corridor towards the school office and noticed some framed pictures. Curiosity got the better of her, and she walked over to browse the small gallery. She chewed on her nail as she gazed at the old photos taken of prize giving awardees and sports teams of previous years. She stopped when she came to a picture of the chess club that had won the inner city championship for their age group in 1971. There he was; the chap she'd met outside the school that day. Checking the names listed at the bottom of the picture against the faces, she found out who he was.

"Severus Snape. That's who you are." She looked once more at the picture then left through the front doors.

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Thursday, July 31st, 1997. Snape looked at the calendar hanging on his wall. He was finally alone, finally able to think. Away from the eyes of his Death Eater cronies and Order comrades, he could be Severus Snape, half-blood wizard, half-blood Muggle and emotionally exhausted man.

Rubbing his hands over his face once, he pulled himself up from the sofa and got ready to go out. An owl had arrived the evening before with a letter from Narcissa, telling him the money transfer had been made. Her donation had been sent to the Muggle bank as well.

Opening a drawer in the sideboard, he pulled out a wallet. It contained a driver's licence, credit card and bankcard. He chuckled to himself, imagining his Slytherin students' faces if they could see him like this. He pulled on a light jacket and made his way out.

Severus made his way to the closest bank that had an automatic teller. He pushed his card into the slot and keyed his secret number. A few keystrokes later, a small wad of pound notes were dispensed. He quickly put the money in his wallet and left.

Taking a deep breath, he looked up and down the street, deciding which way to go. He looked up and saw Marks and Spencer. He recalled they offered a good range of better than average food and decided that was the place to start.

As Severus looked around the large shop, he was struck by how bright everything was. He'd been so immersed in the wizarding world, he'd forgotten how open and airy the Muggle world could be. Wizards seemed to prefer the Victorian clutter of a bygone era and most of their shops were dusty and cramped.

He walked around with a hand basket and made a few selections, then moved to stand in line to pay. As he waited for his turn, he mulled over in his mind what to buy at the off-licence. His reverie was ended when a cart banged into the side of his leg, painfully.

"Sorry, I wasn't watching where I was going... Oh, it's you."

Severus turned, looking to see who had spoken. The woman he'd met outside the school.

"Indeed, it is I," he responded through gritted teeth as he rubbed his thigh.

"I'm really sorry. I got distracted by the signs." Jenny pointed to an overhead display. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Standing straight now, Severus sighed, "I'm fine; I've suffered worse."

"My mum always gave me grief over not watching where I was going," she continued, just to make conversation.

"Perhaps then you should bring her with you next time," he replied tartly.

"Wish I could," she replied quietly. Severus looked at her. "My mum passed away in May." Jenny shrugged and offered him a sad look.

Severus felt uncharacteristic regret at uttering such a discourteous comment; it had only been an accident. "I'm sorry, I was rude; my condolences on your loss."

"You couldn't know," she replied with a small smile on her face. "Listen, we didn't really meet properly at the school the other day. I was just so happy to see a familiar face after being away for so long. Let's start again. I'm Jenny Douulton and you are Severus Snape, right?" She held her hand out once more for him to shake.

He still didn't take her hand, "How did you come to know my name?" he asked, surprised at her discovery.

She dropped her hand for the second time at an attempted meeting with Snape. "Is it some deep dark secret? Do you have an aversion to shaking people's hands when they introduce themselves?" she asked tersely and then more evenly told him, "I saw your name on a picture when I dropped some stuff off at the school."

He nodded and extended his hand, "Indeed, I am Severus Snape, Miss Douulton."

She took his hand, finally and formally, meeting the tall dark man.

~~~~~

Harry's birthday celebration had been brief, just a few presents and a cake with candles for pudding after lunch. Not that he minded much; it still far exceeded anything he'd received from the Dursleys. Besides, the wedding was the story of the day, and he was just as happy not to be the centre of attention.

"Molly, Molly," called Fleur's mother, "Ma chère fille, she 'as, 'ow you say, le hoquet." She gave up and demonstrated the hiccups.

"Not to worry, Iris; it's just nerves I expect. Here, a nice big glass of chilled juice." Molly poured the icy beverage into a glass and passed it over.

"Merci," the bride's mother replied, as she bustled back upstairs.

Arthur Weasley entered the kitchen, rubbing his hands together as he looked around excitedly at the chaos that was his home.

"Molly, dear, the guests have started to arrive," he told her, planting a kiss on her cheek. "You look a treat, Molly Weasley. Folk'll have a hard time deciding who the bride is," he teased.

Molly smacked his hands. "Behave yourself, you silly old flirt. Do I look nice?" she asked, shyly touching her new hat.

Arthur put his arm around her shoulder, "I couldn't think of a prettier witch who could be seeing her son wed. You look lovely, Molly." He kissed her once more before wading into the crowd of Weasleys to round them up. "Come on, you lot, we've got guests to greet."

Later that evening, Harry and Hermione stood in the Wedding Circle and watched as Arthur and Molly led in Bill while Fleur entered with her father and mother. When the parents joined the outer circle, everyone joined hands to form an unbroken chain. Harry looked up at the crescent moon and wondered if his parents had married like this. He paid little attention to the words being said and only noticed when the elder raised his wand, causing a magical glow to form around the hand-fastening couple. They were then declared husband and wife amid the triumphant cheers of the Weasley men.

"That was lovely," declared Hermione. "Come on, we should congratulate them." She grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him forward. They walked through the impromptu reception line, taking their turns embracing and wishing the married couple well.

"So, Harry, will we be brothers soon?" asked Bill, as he shook Harry's hand.

"Oh, uhm, I don't know about that, Bill," Harry answered hesitantly.

"I thought you and Ginny, you know, were together." Bill looked a little uncomfortable.

Harry nodded and looked at his feet. "We were for a bit, but we decided... no, I decided I couldn't have that between us until everything is over." He looked at the older man hoping for understanding. "You know what I mean."

"Harry, I know what you mean, but it doesn't have to be that way. Ginny understands what is going on better than most," Bill replied.

Harry then shook his head, "I won't risk it. I care for her far too much." With a final shake of the hands, Harry left the couple and headed off to see Remus.

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Severus sat in his living room after tea, reading a Muggle newspaper. If he was going to be in the Muggle environment for a while, he thought he should be caught up on current events. He didn't want to sound foolish if he should be asked a question. He was chuckling over a particularly vulgar comment made by a local politician regarding one of his peers, when he felt the tingling in his mark, which presaged the full burning of a call to the Dark Lord.

He knew it had been coming for weeks, but it was now mid-August. Why had it taken so long? Best not to dwell on it, he thought, as he prepared to leave for the Apparition to his Master's side. He'd either be back in business or crow's carriage by the end of the evening. It only mildly disturbed him that he actually considered the latter as slightly preferable.

He left his house and made his way to an alley running behind a deserted warehouse. Here, he donned his Death Eater robes and Apparated to the meeting place. As he appeared, Severus looked up at the sky, trying to gauge his location. The horizon was marginally brighter than it had been when he left, meaning he was further west of his home. There was a distinct sharpness to the air, which indicated proximity to the sea. Possibly the Isle of Man then, with all the ancient magic surrounding the area.

Joining the assembly, Severus dropped to his knee in the approved manner for greeting Voldemort. They waited silently for his appearance. Severus scanned the masked faces with his eyes, not moving his head. It was easy to pick out the Lestranges and Rookwood. They had always presumed superiority in the Dark Lord's eyes. He noted heads turning and bowing, indicating the approach of He Who Must Not Be Named.

Voldemort stood before the bonfire that had been erected in the centre of the circle. His skin glistened in the firelight, giving him an unearthly appearance. Not so odd, thought Snape to himself, since there was no other creature like this walking the earth.

"My loyal followers, we are come here tonight to bear witness to those who lack courage and conviction in our cause. Those who would seek to hide themselves from our displeasure." Voldemort signalled to unseen servants.

Severus gasped inwardly when he saw Narcissa and Draco dragged into the centre of the circle. They were haggard and bruised. He could only surmise they had been held in captivity for some time. He imagined he saw Bellatrix start as well.

"Those who seek my favour and then fail to achieve the simplest task set them should not think they can avoid my displeasure." He walked over to Draco and dragged him closer to the fire. "This boy thought himself worthy to be among my most favoured, taking the place of his father." He forced Draco to his knees. "Yet, he could not summon the Killing Curse."

Draco trembled in fear and looked up at his mother. She stood silently, tears streaming down her cheeks. She had tried to save him, but had instead thrown him into the path of the one they had tried to escape.

"A pity you didn't know Karkaroff had already been dealt with, isn't it, my dear?" Voldemort addressed Narcissa now. "But a mother's love for her child is a greater power than common sense, it appears." Whipping himself around, he addressed the gathering, "Bellatrix, Severus, approach me, NOW!"

Severus and the woman strode quickly to the centre of the circle and fell to their knees once more.

"Bella, I am most disappointed. Why did you seek to help these traitors?" he asked gently.

"My Lord, they are my family. I could not deny them my help. Truly, they meant no disloyalty to your cause. They only sought safety from the Aurors who might force information from the boy." Bella lowered her eyes deferentially. "I ask forgiveness for my presumption."

He turned to Snape, "And you, Severus, why did you make such a promise to them?"

"Honoured one, the task you set was important to our success. To his credit, the boy succeeded in allowing your servants to enter the castle. He is young and had not the experience needed to cast the curse required of him. The assassination needed to be carried out. I completed the task."

"Ever the politician, Snape. Nonetheless, I will brook no disobedience in the future." He approached Draco once more. "As for you, you snivelling young tadpole. *Crucio!*"

Draco fell over and writhed in agony as his mother watched, sobbing aloud now at her son's torture. The Dark Lord finally lifted the curse, leaving the boy sucking huge gasps of air to fill his lungs. Turning once more to Bellatrix and Severus, Voldemort cast the same curse on them. He held it longer on the experienced Death Eaters before releasing it.

"Now, let us give you a little more experience to help you obey in the future, young Master Malfoy." Voldemort signalled to two men who pulled Draco to his feet. "Watch and learn." He turned and looked at Narcissa who now stood alone. Her eyes widened in the realization of what was about to happen.

"I love you, Draco, never forget that," she shouted quickly.

Voldemort pointed his wand at the blonde witch who now stood proudly erect. *Avada Kedavra!*

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Mourning Choices

Chapter 4 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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With thanks once more to Laurabeth, my beta, and to the patience of the Admins who all seem to love comma's... hmmm.

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Snape paced the length of the hallway of the loft that the Lestranges used as a home. He paused in his course and looked over at Draco, who was sitting on a cot with his arms wrapped around his bent knees. His forehead still rested on his upturned legs, but he had stopped crying and now only rocked, as if trying to comfort himself. Taking a deep breath, Snape strode over to Bellatrix who was sitting at a table drinking Firewhisky with her husband and his brother.

"Did you know what he had planned?" he demanded in a quiet voice. He was ignored. Fisting a handful of her hair, he pulled Bella's head back. "DID YOU KNOW?" he shouted.

Her husband and brother stood and pointed their wands at the enraged man. "Unhand my wife, Snape. She knew nothing. None of us did," Rodolphus told Snape. "Now back off." He continued to hold his wand at Snape's neck, waiting for him to release Bella.

Snape released the woman with a jerk and stepped back. "Who else knew about your plans for them? Pettigrew, Avery...who?"

"Peter knew, but he was always supportive of me and my plans." Bellatrix looked up at Snape, blinking through bleary eyes. "He didn't trust you either, you bastard. We thought we had you with the Vow," she slurred before she turned back to pour more whisky in her glass. "We were always our Lord's favourites. There was nothing we wouldn't do for him." She sipped and choked. Her coughing turned into sobs. "My sister, my only sister," she wailed.

"You have another sister," Snape mentioned quietly, knowing how Bellatrix felt about her younger sister.

Bellatrix stood suddenly and threw her glass at him, only to miss. It shattered on the wall beside his head. "I have no other sister. I deny the existence of that loathsome creature, Andromeda. She's no relative of mine. She never existed," she shrieked. Bellatrix wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I... I am the last of the Black line," she declared, pounding her chest with a fist to emphasise her point. "It's all gone wrong... all wrong." She sank back onto her chair and rested her head upon her arms on the table.

Severus looked at the drunken woman, then looked away in disgust. "Take your wife in hand, Lestrangle, before she embarrasses you anymore."

"She grieves for her sister, Snape. What do you expect?" Rodolphus shot back.

"The only person she feels sorry for is herself," Snape retorted. "It's been so long since you've lain with her as a husband that you've forgotten what a selfish bitch she is."

Lestrangle pounded the table and stared at his unconscious wife. "You have no right to judge how we live, Snape. You know I can't function as a husband to her since Azkaban. You have no right to point fing..." He was about to rise from his chair when he felt a wand tip pressed into his neck.

"Don't you dare speak to me of rights. Your late sister-in-law and your wife have seen to it whatever rights I had have been buried in Dumbledore's tomb." He pushed the older man away and bent over Bella. "Did you hear me, woman?" He straightened and walked away. "I thought not."

Draco had looked up at the raised voices and was now staring at Snape. "Where can I go, sir?" he asked quietly, no trace of arrogance in his tone. "I really don't want to stay here."

"Unlike some, I do have contacts outside of the country that are reliable," Snape told him. "We'll go back to my house, and I will make arrangements with Durmstrang for this year." He turned his head towards the table. "I expect your family will have some funds available for your use."

Rodolphus looked at his wife then nodded.

Draco stood and took a deep breath. "Can we leave now, sir?" He looked up at Snape, who was still taller than him. His eyes had lost the look of childhood. They were mirror images of Snape's own, shielded and hard.

"Yes, I've heard enough." Snape turned to the table once more. "Tell Bella the plans. I want five hundred galleons, in cash, in two weeks." Snape pulled the boy with him and made his way outside, Apparating them both to Manchester and taking him home to Spinner's End.

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"You're not upset are you, Harry?" Tonks asked.

Harry shook his head, "No, not really. I just wish he'd told me ahead of time."

"He was under a lot of pressure to get everything in place before he... well, you know." Tonks trailed off, not sure of what else to say.

The young woman was still not her usual ebullient self. Tonks and Professor McGonagall had taken Harry aside to explain that Dumbledore had turned over the responsibility of being the house's Secret Keeper to Tonks. She had known for weeks that he was close to dying and that knowledge, along with the new duty, had weighed heavily upon her. In the mean time, Professor McGonagall and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix had taken to meeting at Grimmauld Place once more.

"How long would he have lasted if Snape hadn't cast the curse, Professor?" he asked.

"Not long, Potter," she replied. "Even less, after drinking the potion from the basin that held the false necklace." She looked at his frown and clarified. "He knew something

of what he would need to do before he took you on your quest."

Harry was surprised at her revelation. "You knew about what he was doing?"

McGonagall simply nodded.

"But it was a useless search, Professor." Harry stood up and went to play with the artefacts on the fireplace mantle. "We're no further ahead."

The elder woman looked at her tightly clasped hands before rising to approach him. "Harry, there was nothing that Albus did that was useless," she said with conviction. "It may not have been the result that you wanted or expected, but you do know you are looking for a necklace. Now, you have many people willing to help. We will find the horcruxes and we will destroy them." She patted the young man on the shoulder and turned to Tonks. She beckoned to the Auror to follow and left Harry alone in the front parlour.

Harry looked into the flames, letting his mind wander. He remembered seeing Dumbledore for the first time as he entered the Great Hall of Hogwarts at eleven years old. The revered wizard sat at the head table, as a monarch upon his throne. Only when his eyes turned to watch as Harry was sorted did the true Dumbledore shine through. As the cry of 'Griffindor' resounded through out the hall, Harry had turned to see the glinting blue eyes and warm smile of the old man. Harry felt his throat constrict as his despair threatened to overtake him.

"All right there, Harry?"

Harry turned his head and saw Remus looking at him curiously. He smiled as best he could.

"Yeah, I'm fine; really." He turned his back on the fire. "How are you, Remus? You look very tired."

Remus chuckled softly, "I'm not cut out for this werewolf life. I've had it soft, thanks to Snape and his Wolfsbane potion." He paused when he saw the look on Harry's face.

"Don't do it Harry, don't let your anger take over."

"How can I not," Harry replied through gritted teeth. "He killed the man who gave me a home. Snape murdered someone I looked upon as a grandfather. How can I not hate the person who took as much from me as Voldemort did?"

Remus shook his head, "You must not let those feelings rule you, Harry. That path is not one to be taken. You seek revenge when you should be pursuing justice. They are not the same thing, and the difference is what sets us apart from wild animals." He walked forward and placed a hand on each of Harry's shoulders. "You have friends and allies who deserve your respect and loyalty. You can't pursue a personal vendetta. Don't descend to the level of those you seek to punish."

Harry looked into the soft eyes of his father's friend and could no longer hold back the tears. As he wept silently, Harry felt Remus pull him into a fierce hug. He let himself be held as he wept for the passing of the people he loved and for losing the final vestiges of his youth.

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss

The night was mostly overcast with the moon glancing out occasionally from behind the clouds. Two wizards crossed the sandy causeway, revealed at low tide, to their destination of Holy Island.

"Are you sure of this, Professor?" asked Draco. "It's not another trap?"

Snape looked at the worried frown on Draco's face. "The Dark Lord knows of the need to remove you from England. He has made his point, in a disastrous way for you, of course. When He Who Must Not Be Named feels he has been gainsaid his rightful judgement, blood is usually spilt." He sighed deeply, feeling far older than his forty years. "It has been far worse this past year."

"May I ask a personal question, sir? I tried to ask my father when I was younger, but he always put me off." Draco clambered over a seawall and made his way down the rocky beach followed by Snape.

"That depends on how personal," Snape replied.

"When you made your decision to follow You-Know-Who, what brought you to that moment? What was it that made you think he was worth giving that kind of loyalty to?" Draco asked, and then fell silent. He thought Snape wouldn't answer.

"Would it were the answer was that simple, Draco." Snape stopped walking just where the waves stopped lapping on the shore and looked out at the dark horizon. "There's no one reason, more a set of circumstances. I suppose I wanted to prove I was as good as any pure-blooded wizard. Acceptance into his ranks put me on an equal footing they could not deny. Then there was the chance to delve more deeply into the Dark Arts. Magic so powerful and compelling it was outlawed. How could I resist the opportunity to increase my power, so as to exact revenge against my tormentors?" Snape looked back at Draco, who was now looking out over the North Sea.

"Why did you want to take the Dark Mark, Malfoy?" Snape asked.

Draco shrugged, "There was never a moment I thought I wouldn't take it. My father took it at my age, and his friends with him." He looked up at his former professor. "I am a Malfoy and we are... were among the elite of all Wizarding families in Britain." The youth shook his head. "The fact is, I didn't think about it. I was the heir to a family who expected me to become a champion of their cause. It was my duty."

"Duty." Snape snorted in derision. "Duty is a four letter word, Malfoy. It has caused more pain and created more mayhem in these past few years than the entire war with Grindelwald ever did."

"You sound bitter, sir. Do you question your choice now?" asked Draco.

The water began to surge in front of them as Snape replied. "I've asked myself 'why' every day since the Dark Lord rose again, and every day I have no good answer. Think on what I've said, Draco, and choose a path to freedom."

A smaller version of the Durmstrang ship appeared out of the water before them and came to rest on the shoal just off shore. As they watched, a gangway magically extended from the bow and ended at their feet.

Draco turned to Snape and extended his hand as he had when he had returned home with his mother. "It seems I'm always thanking you, Professor."

"I'm no longer your teacher, Draco. When next we meet, you may call me Severus." He shook Draco's hand and was only slightly surprised when the young man reached out and hugged him. He was more surprised at himself when he returned it. "Durmstrang teaches things you would never have learned at Hogwarts, Draco. Learn the lessons well, and return to England with knowledge to help your kind."

Draco stood back and took the shrunken trunk Severus had removed from his robes. "Be careful, sir. I want you here when I get back; we have work to do."

"Indeed; good luck, Malfoy. Remember you are a Slytherin. Be proud." Snape pushed Draco to the gangway, which began to fold up behind him as he climbed.

As he boarded the ship, Draco turned and waved before disappearing below decks. Snape watched as the ship submerged into the water and the waves settled until they bore no evidence there had ever been a visitor to the shore. He looked once at the moon, which had suddenly escaped the confines of the clouds, then Apparated back to Manchester to walk to his dreary house where he was alone once more.

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Jenny sat in the back of the taxi that was taking her home after leaving her sister's. September 30th; every year on this date, she looked after her niece and nephews. She'd spent the evening childminding, and her head was still pounding from the nonsense three kids could get up to in the space of four hours. She relaxed and closed her eyes, resting her head on the back of the seat.

"Miss, the road, it is blocked," said the cabbie in a strong South Asian accent. "I must go back and come around the other way."

Jenny sat up and looked out the front window of the taxi. There were flashing blue lights, which could only belong to police cars, blocking the road in every direction.

"Is it an accident?" she asked.

"I don't know, miss. Should I back up and go around?" he asked again.

Jenny looked around and saw she was close to home. "No," she replied, "I'll walk from here; it's not far." She fumbled in her handbag for her purse.

"It is not safe for a young woman to walk alone, miss."

"Are you going to turn the metre off?" she asked. His look was answer enough. "I thought not. Here is this enough?" She passed him ten pounds.

"Yes, yes, thank you, miss. Take care," he called as she got out of the cab.

Jenny looked around once more before setting off in the direction of her house. She remembered her mother had walked home all the time from her part time job at the pub, but those were different days. She'd be fine, she decided, and stepped up her pace. The darkest stretch of road passed the river; just a short jaunt.

Jenny's eyes kept looking around making sure she was alone. A sharp crack caused her to jump and cry out. She pulled her handbag closer to her body and sped up her pace once more. Then the sound of footsteps behind her was enough to make her break into a jog. The steps behind her kept pace.

"Miss Doulton."

She stopped; she knew that voice. She turned and saw Severus Snape behind her. "Shit, you frightened me!" she exclaimed. Her heart still thundered in her chest loud enough to be heard, she was convinced.

"Why are you walking alone in the dark so late in the evening? Surely you know how risky that is." He watched as she tried to compose herself.

Jenny took a deep breath to settle her nerves. "My taxi couldn't get past the road block. I didn't want to pay double for the trip," she admitted.

Snape nodded, "I see." He quarrelled internally with himself for a moment. "Perhaps I could escort you to your door?" he offered.

Jenny looked at him sideways. "How do I know you're not some weirdo belonging to a religious cult or something? Maybe you're a terrorist plotting to overthrow the government?" Jenny was teasing in a light tone, but frowned when she saw the look on his face. "I was just kidding, Severus."

He offered a short smile. "Of course you were. Did you want me to walk with you?"

"Sure," she replied and then with a look of surprise, accepted the elbow he offered.

"They must practise posh manners at that school you went to," she said to make conversation.

Snape snorted, "You wouldn't think so if you saw the students in action."

"I don't think we got away with as much as this generation does. When they come in the library, you can't take your eyes off them. They think it's fun to write stuff in books and then watch when someone else reacts to the rubbish they've written." She pulled him to turn into her street.

"You are a librarian, Miss Doulton?" he asked out of courtesy.

"I am actually, but I could only get a job as a clerk. Hopefully, if a place comes open, I can get first refusal. And it's Jenny, not Miss Doulton," she reminded him.

"Employment is still hard to come by these days, I take it."

"Yeah," she replied, "but it's getting a little better. Where do you work?" she asked.

"I was a teacher at the same school I attended," he replied.

"So, if it's a boarding school, how come you're not back there now? School has started," she asked.

Severus thought quickly. "The school has been closed for, ah, renovations. The students are attending elsewhere this year."

"So, you've been made redundant." Jenny stopped, as they'd reached her house.

Snape nodded, "Yes, something like that. This is your home?" he asked.

"Yeah, would you like to come in for a cuppa?" she asked.

"No, I think not. The hour is late. Have a good night, Miss..." he paused as she held up her finger. "Goodnight, Jenny."

"Goodnight, Severus, and thank you." She turned and opened her door, turning back to wave to him before closing and locking it behind her.

Snape turned back the way he had come, feeling uncomfortable at how close she had come to describing exactly what he was. As he walked the short distance home, he went over in his mind the list of potions required by his dark master. He would need to make a trip to Diagon Alley to get components he had run out of. Perhaps this was something his Muggle persona could help with. A haircut and beard trim were quite in order. What better way to obtain a sample of hair for the Polyjuice potion?

He made his way to the house on Spinner's End. Walking into the front room, he turned on the portable radio and tuned the dial to the BBC classical station. He toed off his dragonhide boots and padded into the kitchen to heat milk for hot cocoa. He sat at the small table listening to an aria by Maria Callas, thinking how much more pleasant it would have been to share a cup of tea with Jenny. The hissing of milk boiling over drove away his daydream and he rose to make the beverage.

Severus sat on the sofa and placed his mug on the rickety side table. The music, both melancholy and beautiful, wound its way around his senses. The emotion evoked by the melody suddenly overtook his stoic demeanour. The tears came unbidden to his eyes as his diaphragm clenched in an attempt to defeat his distress.

"Why, old man? Why did you so imprison my soul?"

Severus let his tears fall, for once and for all, mourning the loss of someone who had loved him, yet had demanded of him a most horrible task.

Sorcerer's list

Chapter 5 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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Laurabeth, my beta, improves my story once more. Special thanks to notsosaintly - you are the Goddess of Grammar! This is a bit more light-hearted. Do let me know if you are enjoying.

The Sorcerer's List

Hermione was making a list. That was how she worked. She made a list, and then she decided on what priority one, two or three to rate each item and then made a second modified list based on the ratings. The entire process was based on triage: one to do immediately, two to research and do as soon as possible and three do when you have a chance.

Ron and Harry found her in the front room looking as distressed as they'd ever seen her.

"What's wrong, 'Mione? Did something happen?" asked Ron, sitting beside her and putting his arm around her shoulders.

"It's horrible," she replied with a trembling chin. "Look, just look." She pointed at an item on her list near the bottom. "I had to give it a priority three... A THREE." She sniffed as her tears threatened to fall.

Ron pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to her. "It's alright, love. You wait and see; that will move right back up to number one very soon." He looked over at Harry who was frowning in confusion.

"Number three and number one, I don't understand. What do you mean?" he asked. It must be important to have her so upset.

"Oh, Harry, I had to put finishing school and sitting for NEWTs as a priority three on my list. It's almost too much. God, this war is horrible." Hermione sniffled again and blew her nose.

Harry shared a look with Ron, who was trying to stifle a smile. "Oh yeah, Hermione, I couldn't think of anything that might possibly be worse. No school and no exams; it's a terrible sacrifice, but I'm willing to make it." He nodded his head for emphasis.

Hermione looked up at his tone of voice and saw the grin threatening to break out. "Harry Potter, you're teasing me," she declared. She turned to see the same look on Ron's face and finally realized the absurdity of it all. She started to giggle, and in a few minutes the threesome were bent double in laughter.

In the kitchen, Molly listened to the unusual sound of laughter echoing around the old house. It was a good sound to hear, and she found herself smiling as she prepared dinner for the current residents.

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Snape made his way to the old abandoned railway tracks running beside the river and Apparated to the Dark Lord's house. He was bearing the first of the potions Voldemort had demanded. The trip to Diagon Alley had yet to be made, having been postponed due to a lack of Galleons following Draco's departure. While his family had provided the money Snape had requested, Durmstrang wanted additional fees to keep their new student's identity a secret. Draco was to be known as Drago Malakral, and palms had to be greased to make sure that happened.

He approached the house and waited until the wards recognized him. When he felt the wards drop, he continued on to the front door. Peter opened it and allowed him entrance. He led the way to Voldemort's chambers and had Snape wait while he announced his arrival.

"Our master will see you now," Peter announced, with the appropriate deference for his master's ears.

Snape passed Peter, sparing a moment to share a look of aversion with the rodent-like man, the distaste at being in the same room with Peter clearly evident. As he approached Voldemort, he dropped to one knee, waiting to be recognized.

"Severus, you may approach and sit down." Voldemort beckoned to Snape and indicated a chair to the side of his own.

"Thank you, my lord. You are most generous." Severus felt like choking on his own obsequious tone.

"Have you completed the potions so quickly?" asked Voldemort.

"Alas no, my lord; I am regrettably short on raw materials. I am also woefully lacking in available cash. A trip to Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley is required." Snape watched for a reaction from the Dark One.

"What are you asking, Severus?" inquired Voldemort.

"I am living as a Muggle, my lord, and as such, a large sum of my money has been changed to Sterling. Moreover, my funds were depleted following the departure of my burden from these shores. While his family did provide assistance, as was their responsibility, there were... other fees that had to be met. I have covered them for the well being of our security. If you could, for this once, consider funding the potions..." He left the rest unsaid and awaited punishment.

"I have excused you from paying tribute, Severus, since you are without gainful employment following your oath-begotten task. Do you now say I must pay you for what is my rightful due?" The serpent-like eyes turned to Snape, skewering him with a sideways glance. "I am not happy you seek to lighten my purse, but... I shall indulge you." Voldemort turned and called, "Pettigrew."

Peter shuffled in, his gait and demeanour dripping with sickening sycophancy. "Master, you require my assistance?" He averted his eyes and offered a snaggle-toothed smile.

"Severus is in need of a financial boon. Take sufficient funds from my purse and return home with my Potions master. He will tell you what he requires and you will provide the funds necessary." He waved his hand imperiously, sending Peter away.

"Master, you are, as ever, generous." Snape told him, again waiting for punishment, and again finding none inflicted.

"I have an additional task for you, Severus. I still need to know the location of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore was the Secret Keeper, but when he died, the location was still Unplottable. Why?" demanded Voldemort.

"My lord, it appears Dumbledore was more aware of his nearing mortality than any of us expected. He obviously switched the holder of the Fidelius Charm without informing anyone." To Snape, this was new information; useful information.

"I expect you to put some effort into finding the new Keeper, Severus. I expect results." Voldemort waved his hand slightly and watched the man across from him.

Severus had been musing on what the Dark Lord had said and didn't notice the slight hand motion made by the Dark One. He was taken unawares when the Strangling Curse hit him. He felt his neck and throat constrict, cutting off his breathing. His heart pounded loudly in his ears and his vision narrowed. As suddenly as it had been placed, the curse was removed, leaving Snape gasping for air.

"A small reminder, Severus; I require results." Voldemort dismissed him with a gesture.

Snape rose and bowed before making a hasty exit. When the door closed behind him, he leaned against the wall and took several deep breaths. When next he opened his eyes, he saw Pettigrew standing before him with a predatory smile.

"Are you ready to leave, Severus? I'm so looking forward to my visit."

"I doubt you will say that in the next few hours." Snape led the way out to the Apparation point where they both disappeared on cue.

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Harry and Ron were studying one of Hermione's lists, this one a collection of possible artefacts that might have been used for a Horcrux.

"Slytherin's locket and Hufflepuff's cup are two of the Horcruxes we know of, for sure. We just have to find them. Riddle's diary has been destroyed and Marvolo Gaunt's ring too. That makes four," Ron stated the obvious.

"Ron, let's not go over what we know. Let's try to put some stuff together to make a search plan." Harry was edgy and was trying to keep his impatience under control.

Hermione entered the room weighed down by a large book, which she was studying. "I think I might have something here." She dropped the tome on the table, releasing dust from within the pages. "We've been having a hard time figuring out where we might find Gryffindor's artefact, but I think we've been looking in the wrong places."

"Okay, what's your take on it?" asked Harry.

"Do you remember what the Sorting Hat said about where the four founders came from?" she asked, trying to jog their memories.

"Can't say I listened all that closely, Hermione, I was too interested in the upcoming feasts," replied Ron sheepishly.

"Alright; Slytherin was from the fens and Gryffindor was from the 'wild moor', so I went and did a little digging." She turned back to the book and flipped some pages. "I thought at first it might have been Exmoor, but that wouldn't have fit in with Godric and Salazar knowing each other. I think the Hat is talking about the Yorkshire moors."

She browsed through the book again. "Just here, the Gaunt family, the last known descendants of Slytherin, lived in Little Hangleton, which is in Yorkshire." She looked at Harry. "I checked, that's close to where the Riddle family lived too."

"Yeah, in a big house with a church and graveyard nearby; I'm quite familiar with it," he said bitterly.

"I think we need to look at places where Gryffindor would have been that might have artefacts used by him. Then we do the same for Riddle. We should be able to come up with a fairly short list." She looked at the boys for their reaction. There was none, just blank stares.

"What?" she asked and waited.

Ron sighed, "Hermione, we know you have brilliant mind, but isn't there any other way to do this other than another bloody list? Honestly, if we ever want to... you know... get together that way; will you make a list for that too?"

Hermione stood up suddenly and slammed the book shut. "I can see you are not in the frame of mind for research, so I will go to my room and continue... alone."

She picked up the book, made a quick about-face and marched to the door. She turned back before leaving. "As to the other matter, Ronald Weasley, I had already made a list, which I was going to share with you very soon. Given your reluctance to use my lists, I suppose we'd better postpone that matter a little longer as well." She opened the door, walked through, and slammed it behind her.

Ron stared at the door, stunned at her declaration. He pointed towards the exit as he looked at his friend. "Did you hear her, mate? She's interested... she wants to... you know."

Harry nodded, a mocking smile crossing his face. "Yeah, I heard her. I think you need to make your own list, mate." Harry picked up his quill and pulled a fresh parchment towards him. He began his missive, reading aloud as he wrote. "Task number one, buy a copy of *Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex, But Were Afraid to Ask*, priority... it depends I suppose. Task number two, buy condoms." He paused and looked at Ron. "I'll bet Hermione gives number two a priority one rating."

Ron looked back at Harry and asked earnestly, "Do condoms come in sizes?"

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Pettigrew was pressed up against the bookcases as Snape stood over him. "I warned you not to use your wand. There is a reason I choose to live as a Muggle; it's called survival. I removed my records from Hogwarts and paid good money to have the same done at the Ministry. I enjoy anonymity." Snape poked the end of his wand into Peter's neck. "If your use of magic should bring an Auror down on us, you'd best surrender to them first. You don't want to know what I'd do to you," he threatened.

"B-b-but Severus, I'm a wizard. I know nothing of how Muggles live. How am I to be your manservant?" Peter continued to cringe against the hidden door.

"Let me put it to you another way. Use that wand once more and I will take it, break it and stuff both pieces up your backside, splinter end first." Snape gave him one last glare and turned away.

"Of course, my dear Severus, this is your home. I shall certainly follow your restrictions." Peter edged away from the supporting door and turned to offer his subservient smile.

"Go and prepare the ingredients I have laid out according to the instructions beside them. I'll call you when our meal is ready."

Snape waited until the problematic houseguest left the room.

With a sigh, Snape went into the kitchen. If he made life miserable enough, the little rat would run home to the snake's nest sooner rather than later. Opening his pristine larder, he pulled out a large can of baked beans, two eggs and a stale loaf of bread. The fresh baguette was concealed from prying eyes. He smiled, thinking of what his visitor would make of their meagre repast this evening: poached egg with beans on toast. Well, if he didn't like that, he could always make do with cheese and biscuits.

Snape absently put together the meal and called Pettigrew.

"Ah, I see you didn't make it to the market, Severus." Peter eyed the food with barely hidden disdain.

"Indeed, nor will I make it there tomorrow. My funds are limited, and I must make do," he retorted.

Peter took a fork full of food. "I do believe our master thought you were bluffing."

"I save that energy for those who are too stupid to know better." Snape noticed with pleasure his jibe had been beyond the ken of the Vole in Wizards Robes. "More toast? I cut the corner off where it had started to go mouldy." He offered Peter the platter and added, "It's only margarine, I'm afraid; much cheaper than butter."

"Thank you, no, Severus. I have an adequate sufficiency here." He pointed to his plate with his knife. Peter continued to eat, inspecting each mouthful carefully.

"I shall of course wash up, Severus. I remember how to do that from the detentions in potions in the old days. Remember?" He wiped his mouth with a napkin and drank a large glass of water to wash down his dinner, which had been made less than palatable by Snape's comments on the food.

"I recall something of the like or other. Now, for afters, I can offer some biscuits and cheese." Severus rose and put the plates beside the sink. He opened the larder again and stepped in.

Peter jumped as loud banging and cursing was heard from within, followed by a clatter.

"Got you, you little bugger," said Snape, stepping out with a dead mouse dangling from one hand and a plate of cheese in the other. "He only nibbled the rind a little; water biscuits or cream crackers?"

Peter jumped up from the table. "I'm really quite full, old boy. What say I clean up and get back to work?"

Severus dropped the mouse into the rubbish bin. "As you wish; I'll be in my room. I have some correspondence to catch up on." He put the plate down and cut off a chunk of cheddar before leaving the kitchen.

Snape entered his room wearing a smile. He turned on the radio he had relocated away from the living room and pulled out a bottle of Merlot. He poured the wine, then opened the dresser to pull out some grapes and sweet meal biscuits to go with the cheese. Lucky find, that mouse. It always pays to look in the gutter, after all. Two days down, three to go, he estimated.

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Luck won out and Pettigrew ran back to Voldemort with the potions on the morning of the fourth day. Dressing in his now normal everyday Muggle clothing, Snape picked up a note pad and pen with the intention of making an afternoon trip to the Manchester Central Library. He was about to embark on a new adventure: using a computer. Muggle magazines had lauded this new research tool and he was willing to give it a try. It might expedite his quest.

Striding up the stairs to a portico crowned by Corinthian columns, Severus recalled his childhood when a trip to the library was a special treat. Now, he entered the majestic building and looked around, taking in the changes to the environment. He saw a directory ahead and consulted it. Following the directions, he headed for the Networks Centre and paused, unsure of how to proceed. He approached the reception desk and waited.

"May I help you?" asked a woman who could have been McGonagall's twin, save for the blonde hair and tasteless make-up.

"I was wondering if there was a computer I might use?" he opened.

"Did you book a time?" she asked sharply.

"Ah, no, I was not aware it was required," he replied. She even made him feel like McGonagall had when he was a student.

"Well, as you can see, we're full up." She looked over at her personal computer. "And by the looks of it, there are no openings at all today." She looked back at Severus, arching her eyebrow.

Taking a breath to keep his patience in line, Severus asked, "Perhaps tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "Tomorrow morning is reserved for community groups, and we're booked up in the afternoon; midterms, you see."

"Perhaps you could find a time that is open that I may book?" he snapped.

She sniffed disdainfully. "Your library card, please?" She held her palm out while looking at the monitor.

Severus sighed in defeat. "I don't have one."

"Well then, you cannot book a time. You may register downstairs." She then pointedly turned away from him as if he had never spoken.

Biting his lips to stop a cascade of vindictive comments from spewing forth, Severus walked away. He saw the stacks holding the Social Sciences division and made his way over. If nothing else, he could browse and make some notes. He paused as a familiar voice reached him and followed the sound.

"Here, you, put that down. Where do you think you are, a play park? Now, go on with you. Don't let me catch you at it again. Honestly, little buggers have no respect." The comments were followed by a world weary sigh offered on the tails of three pre-adolescent boys running away.

"Dunderheads, the lot of them," said Severus, as he leaned on the end of a table and watched Jenny Doulton repair a display of new publications.

She paused and turned. "Oh, hello. Fancy meeting you here." She turned back to finish her task. "What brings you to the library, Severus? Looking for some light reading?"

"I had hoped to do a little research on one of your computers, but I couldn't get past Sarasvati at the front desk," he told her acerbically.

Jenny started to laugh. "That's a good one. I've never heard Renita compared to the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge before."

"You read, Miss Doulton," he commented wryly at her display of knowledge.

Jenny made a small moue at his comment. "I'm a librarian, Severus, and it's still Jenny." She finished restoring the display and walked towards him. "What were you researching? Maybe I could point you in the right direction."

"A bit of local history, but from about the time of the Norman Invasion," he replied.

Jenny frowned. "Most of the good stuff would be in the archives and you need permission to use them. The newer books are, for the most part, compilations of the early works." She appeared to think for a moment.

"I do have an idea, but I'm not sure if you'd go for it, being such a gentleman and all." She looked up at him sideways.

"What would that be, Jenny?" he asked.

"Well, I have a computer sitting alone on my desk at home. I wouldn't mind if you used it... that is if you don't mind coming round to the house." She looked up at him, waiting for a reaction. "In fact, you could come for tea if you want. I've got a steak and kidney pudding ready."

He appeared to mull over the idea and then looked uneasy.

"Oh, I've done it again, haven't I?" Jenny frowned, annoyed at herself.

He looked at her in confusion. "Pardon?"

"My mum always said I was too pushy for my own good. You've barely known me two minutes and I'm asking you over to my house for a meal." She looked away, embarrassed.

Snape shook his head. "I wasn't thinking that at all. I would appreciate taking you up on your offer, but there's no need to entertain me. I merely..."

Jenny held up her hand to silence him. "Look, I'm off in half an hour. If you want to use the computer, meet me at the front doors then. If you're not there, well, no hard feelings." She smiled and made to leave him.

"Jenny." He reached out to stop her. "I accept your offer... both your offers, but I insist on bringing something." He waited for her reply.

"Alright, you bring some wine. I don't have anything like that in." She looked at him expectantly.

"Thirty minutes at the front doors; I shall be there." Snape nodded and then left to find the off-licence.

'Snape, old boy,' he thought, 'what the hell are you doing.' He'd not had a casual acquaintance with a woman in over ten years. That relationship had gone sour when he'd refused to kowtow to her family's desire for him to leave teaching and go into private business; their private business. What was it that let him be comfortable around this Muggle? He put off the thought as he perused the stock in the wine grocers.

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"You've never used a computer before?" asked Jenny incredulously.

"No, I have not," Severus admitted.

"But you're a teacher. Didn't you have computer studies at your school?" she asked.

Snape paused before dissembling. "Where I taught, they emphasized the basics. Students studied without modern technology." That has to be the ultimate in understatement, he thought to himself.

"Oh, alright then. Well, where to start?" She pulled up a chair beside him.

An hour and two glasses of wine later, Severus had caught on to 'surfing the World Wide Web'. He rather enjoyed it; the computer and the wine both.

"Dinner's almost done. Are you hungry?" called Jenny from the kitchen. She received no response. With a sigh, she picked up her glass and walked back to the front room. There he was, the typical man thoroughly engrossed in the ever-worshipped monitor. At least it wasn't rugby or football. This man was a scholar, and that turned her on more than she liked to admit.

"Severus, are you ready to eat?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh yes, of course. It smells wonderful," he responded.

"I think I've created a monster." Jenny returned to her chair beside him. "I can't believe you've never used a computer before. You've taken to it like a fish to water."

Severus shrugged. "I've always been a fast learner."

"So, have you found what you're looking for?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not yet. I've tried different searches, but they all end up fruitless."

Jenny took his hand. "Come on, let's have dinner and then I'll help you." Severus looked at her askance. "You can stick that look, Severus Snape, I'm a qualified librarian. Research assistance is our bread and butter."

"I am all apologetic, marm; I am most humbled by your generosity." He rose to be led to the kitchen.

"Okay, Mr. Darcy, the steak and kidney pudding is ready. I'm glad you got two bottles of wine; I like this stuff." She pulled him into the kitchen and sat him at the table before pulling dishes from the oven. "Hope you like it. My ex said my cooking was naff, but I think he was just being a miserable sod, 'cause my mum loved my food."

Severus inhaled the aroma of rich gravy and savoury vegetables. They each served themselves and began to eat.

"Whoever your ex-husband was must have had his taste buds damaged, for your cooking is exemplary," Snape told her after a few mouthfuls.

"Thank you, Severus. I appreciate a man with good taste." She smiled and raised her wine glass to him.

"My compliments to the chef." Severus raised his glass in return.

After they ate, the couple returned to the computer. Jenny watched his search technique and wondered what he was trying to find. "Severus, what are you looking for?" she asked.

He sighed deeply. "I am researching a theory about one of the founders of our school. I, and others, have theorized he had many artefacts which have been removed from their rightful places over time."

"How old is this school? There weren't many around that weren't attached to churches or monasteries a thousand years ago." Jenny had reached for the keyboard.

"The school was founded at that time and has undergone many incarnations since then." He was hesitant to share more.

"Was he a knight or clergy?" she asked, suddenly all professional.

"A knight, definitely. He would have appeared in the Domesday book at one time." Severus watched as Jenny began to type; she actually used ten fingers, he noticed.

"Now, what kind of things did he leave behind you know of?" she asked.

"A hat, a sword, some writings, a brass door knocker... I'm sure there's more, but I'm not aware of them," he replied.

Jenny thought for a moment, then made a suggestion. "Let's do a little exercise, I'll say a word I know is related to the knighthood and you respond back with whatever comes to mind."

Snape nodded. He had no better ideas.

She began. "Castle."

"School," he replied. Seeing her look at him oddly, he explained, "The school I taught at was a castle."

Jenny nodded and tried again. "Axe."

Snape replied, "Weapon."

"Bow."

"Arrow."

"Armour."

"Helmet."

"Protection."

"Sword."

"Shield."

"Coat of arms."

Severus straightened in his chair after his last contribution. "Wait. Look for a shield with a Griffin in the coat of arms."

Jenny entered the search and waited. "There. Greater Drifffield and All Saints Church. They have griffins in the architecture as well." She looked at him. He was rubbing his thumb over his lips. "Penny for them?" she hinted.

"It makes sense. I must go there to see for myself." He looked at her and shared a rare smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She returned his smile.

Snape shook himself and stood. "I've taken up enough of your time, Jenny. I should head home."

Jenny stood as well. "You don't have to run off. It's not that late and I'm off tomorrow." She looked at him hopefully. Visitors were rare in her house. She sighed. "I'm sorry, I don't get many visitors. I must sound pathetic." She looked away not wanting to see his look of pity.

"You're single again; you must have a gentleman who's interested in you?" Why he asked, Snape would never understand, but it seemed necessary in the moment.

Jenny shared a rueful smile. "No. I'm not the sort blokes fall over themselves to get to."

"More fool they," Snape told her quietly.

"Thank you, that was kind," she replied in the same tone.

"Not kind, merely truthful. Perhaps I could enjoy one more glass of wine before I leave." He looked at her, hoping he had restored her smile and was rewarded when it returned.

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A/N Draco's new name Drago Malakral - translates from Bulgarian to Dragon Little King. Sort of fits our Draco I think.

Painful Loyalty

Chapter 6 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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Thank you to Laurabeth and LadySunflower, my betas. Their suggestions are invaluable.

Painful Loyalty

Using some hair he had garnered on his last trip to the barber's, Severus sprinkled the last required ingredient into the phial of Polyjuice Potion he had brought with him to London. He hid behind the large bins that stood outside the building facing The Leaky Cauldron and downed the vile concoction. He hated the moments of transformation and gritted his teeth as his stomach roiled while his body reshaped itself.

After an agonizing minute, Severus emerged as a middle-aged, balding man with a spreading waistline. He wore non-descript, old-fashioned Muggle clothing; his father's in fact. He enjoyed the irony that his sire's idea of fashion was quite acceptable in Wizarding society for those who were Muggle-born.

Snape checked the briefcase he had secreted behind one of the bins for one last time. Crossing the street in an ambling gait to establish his character, Severus entered the public house and made his way to the back to enter Diagon Alley. Using his wand, he touched the wall in the prescribed sequence and passed through the portal as it opened. The street appeared as it always had: quaint, bustling and unkempt. He walked forward to feel the ambiance, but instead he was almost overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety in the midst of the shoppers on the street.

Maintaining his unnatural gait, Severus made his way to Knockturn Alley for a visit to Borgin and Burkes. He was on the clock and had little time to waste. As he entered the dimly lit shop, he cast his gaze around the myriad of grotesque objects on display. The one item he sought was not in sight.

"May I help you?" The voice of the proprietor pulled Severus from his thoughts.

"Yes, I'm looking for something to add to my collection of ancient heirlooms. Would you have anything like that here?" he asked.

"Perhaps," Borgin replied. "How ancient an object are you considering?"

"Fairly early; prior to the Norman Invasion," he responded.

"I see." The oily looking man scratched his chin and looked at Snape thoughtfully. "Any particular reason you're looking for these things?"

"Personal history, whimsy, does it matter?" Snape asked.

"To some, my friend, to some." He turned and beckoned Snape to follow him. "I've a few items that might interest you. What is your fancy?"

"I particularly enjoy clan symbols. They hold much nostalgia for some who are so inclined."

"And you are not, I take it?" Borgin stopped and opened a glass case.

"I rarely dabble in nostalgia. I do, however, invest in possibilities." Snape listened to the wheezing laugh of the proprietor.

"Well said. We think alike, my friend." Reaching into the case, Borgin pulled out an inlaid goblet. "Behold, the wine cup of a Roman Veneficus or Lamia, one of our early ancestors."

"Indeed, however, I seek objects of indigenous design. I've found they are more eagerly sought by local collectors." Snape watched as the man before him re-thought what he was going to offer.

"I have a feeling you have a specific item in mind, sir." Borgin stood up and looked Snape in the eye. "Perhaps someone has suggested you visit and ask for a very particular piece. I've had some interesting artefacts passed to me for, shall we say, safe keeping. I was told the person who sought to purchase the item would describe it and I was sell it to them alone." He looked expectantly at Snape.

Snape nodded once. "A clan object; perhaps similar to a sceptre, with an avian surmount?" Snape suggested.

"Indeed, I have two or three items similar to what you seek." He walked to a chest of drawers, and opened the bottom to reveal three items lying on a velvet cushion. "Are any of these similar to what you're looking for?"

Snape stepped forward and saw the Clan of the Raven staff along with two others. "Indeed they are, Mr. Borgin." He listened to Borgin describe each item, only taking in every other word or so.

"What are you asking for them?" asked Snape.

"A mere one hundred Galleons... each," Borgin replied.

"You jest, sir. Where is their certificate of authenticity?" Snape retorted.

"If you had wanted authenticated antiques, you would not have visited my shop, sir." Borgin looked up at the taller wizard. "I'm sure you will authenticate it for yourself soon enough."

"Touché, sir. How much for just one?" he asked.

"Fifty Galleons," Borgin replied, lowering his price.

"Thirty five."

"Forty five," countered Borgin

"Thirty eight," said Snape.

"Forty," offered Borgin, "and not a Sickel less. I've guarded these well for several months."

"Agreed." Snape pulled out his money pouch and took out the requisite amount of coinage. "I shall take the one with the eagle on top. Please place it in a box."

Borgin withdrew the Ravenclaw relic from the drawer and took it to his counter to wrap.

"'Tis a fine artefact, sir; you've a keen eye. What did you say your name was?" asked Borgin.

"I didn't. Good day," Snape replied.

Taking up his purchase, Snape made his way out of the shop and back to Diagon Alley. Looking at his watch, he estimated there was a half an hour left before he reverted to his true form. He'd made better time than he'd expected to, and so decided to return to the Leaky Cauldron for a well-deserved Firewhisky. As he sipped, he looked around, taking in who was there. He noticed Moody sitting in the corner with another Auror, and almost flinched as the magical eye Moody wore passed over him. He finished his drink and left.

Returning to his spot behind the bins, Snape retrieved the briefcase and opened it. He pulled out a trench coat he had shrunk to fit and shrugged it on. Just at that moment,

he felt his body begin its transformation to its true form. When he'd recovered, he Apparated back to Manchester and returned home with his purchase.

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss

Kingsley Shackbolt arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place just after dinner, on a wet October evening. There was a meeting called to discuss recent Death Eater activity. Pulling off his wet outer robes, Kingsley retrieved a Muggle newspaper from an inner pocket before hanging them up on a hook to dry.

"Would you like some pudding, Kingsley? I've got a nice apple dumpling and custard," offered Molly.

"No thanks, Molly, but I'd murder a cup of tea. Foul weather outside," replied the Auror, pulling out a chair and sitting at the table. "So, Harry, how goes your search?"

"I'll know better after you tell me how your meeting went with Dung, in Azkaban."

Harry was finishing his pudding and preparing to clear the table. Shackbolt had been to the prison to speak to Mundungus Fletcher regarding his penchant for lifting and selling off items not belonging to him.

"Molly, can I steal Harry from you? We need to talk somewhere quiet," asked Kingsley.

"Course you can. Run along, Harry, the twins can pitch in," said Molly, placing a mug of steaming tea before the Auror. She turned and looked at her sons, who were scowling at their mother. "Can't you, boys; you're always willing to pitch in, right?"

"Right," they chorused in unison. George finished clearing the table and Fred began to sweep the floor.

Grabbing his mug of tea, Kingsley led the way to the library, checking to make sure it was empty. He closed the door and warded it behind Harry.

"I need to show you a couple of things, Harry. I'll share them with everyone later, but I thought you should see them first." Kingsley pulled out the Muggle newspaper and spread it on the table.

Harry looked at a picture appearing on page two. It had been rendered by an artist, but it was very life-like. He read the short sidebar, then stared back at the Auror.

"I recognize her. I saw her at the World Quidditch match fourth year. That's Narcissa Malfoy." Harry pulled out a chair and sat down. "They found her where?" he asked.

"Saltom Bay, just south of Whitehaven; her body was discovered floating in an area popular for dropping lobster pots. It looked like she'd been in the water for a while." He indicated the paper. "Muggle authorities had to call in a forensic artist to recreate what she looked like. The fish and whatnot had gotten to her."

Harry shook his head. "You said you had something else to show me."

Kingsley passed over a Wizarding photograph. "We got this from a sympathizer."

In the picture, Harry saw a group of youths wearing Durmstrang uniforms. In the background he noticed a boy about his age, wearing short-clipped blond hair. He was obviously avoiding attention, only looking at the camera occasionally out of the side of his eye.

"Malfoy," Harry guessed.

Kingsley nodded. "We think so, but there's no Malfoy registered at the school." He shrugged and added, "They don't release names of enrolled students at Durmstrang, at least not without a price."

"What does this mean?" asked Harry.

Kingsley shook his head. "Too many pieces of the puzzle missing, Harry. We'll just keep looking."

Harry nodded, then, taking a deep breath, asked, "What about Dung? Did he tell you anything?"

"Yeah, but you won't like it," Kingsley told him.

"He pawned it, didn't he," concluded Harry.

Kingsley nodded. "When Aberforth wouldn't do a deal, he took it to a pawn shop in Cheapside," he replied as he fumbled around in his pocket. "Here, his redemption ticket." He handed the numbered receipt to Harry.

"How much did he get?" asked Harry.

"Twenty pounds, he said." Kingsley stood and scratched his chin. "Just one small problem though. He can't remember the exact address of the shop."

"There's nothing on the ticket either," stated Harry.

"I know. You up for a challenge, Harry?" asked the Auror.

"I've had my fill of challenges, Kingsley." Harry sighed in resignation. "This is a job for Hermione and her bloody lists."

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss

Snape was making his way to see Jenny and her computer. He hadn't spoken to her, but he supposed she would likely be home. Hadn't she said there was no man in her life, that she had few visitors? He turned onto her street and noticed her door was open. Three small figures were holding open their bags to receive Halloween sweets. Just as he reached her path, two boys and a girl ran in front of him. Hallow-bloody-eeen.

"Scuse us, mister," called the oldest boy, as he passed.

Severus looked at their costumes. "What are you supposed to be?" he asked the girl, who was staring at him.

"I'm a fairy. Do you like my costume?" she asked, pirouetting before him.

"You don't look anything like a fairy," he told her honestly.

"How would you know?" she asked in petulant anger.

"I've met fairies. They're all rude, nasty little creatures who like to argue with everyone around them, just like you, but they certainly wouldn't wear what you've got on." He was amused by her angry glare.

At that moment, Jenny opened her door. "Sorry, kids, I'm all out." She looked up and saw him standing there. "Hello, Severus. This lot belong to you?" she asked, grinning at the look of disgust he gave her.

"I should hope not!" he spat back.

The girl pushed him and told him, "You're a mean man. I hate you." She turned and walked up the path followed by the boys. Suddenly, one boy turned back, and threw an egg at Jenny's windows.

"Adil Mendhi, you wait; I'll tell your granny what you did, ooof!" Jenny had followed the children after the egg had been thrown, but turned her ankle on an apple core that had been dropped on the path. She'd fallen before Snape could catch her.

"Rotten little buggers," she said as Severus helped her to her feet. She tried to walk, but couldn't put the weight on her injured ankle.

"Let me help you," said Snape, putting his arm around her waist to support her.

Severus got her into the house and seated on the sofa. Sitting beside her, he lifted her leg onto his lap, and removed the shoe and sock from the injured foot. Gently, he examined her ankle and saw it had started to swell.

"Just a sprain, but it's going to hurt. Do you have any ice?" he asked, getting to his feet and resting her leg on a pillow.

"I think there's a bag of frozen peas in the freezer. Teacher in a first aid course I took said they'd do in a pinch." Jenny winced as she tried to circle her ankle.

Severus brought out the bag of peas wrapped in a tea towel and gently placed the make-shift ice pack on her ankle. He looked up to see how she felt.

"Keep this on to stop the ankle swelling too much," he told her as he headed for the door.

"Are you leaving?" Jenny asked.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Just rest your ankle. Where is your key so I can let myself in?"

Jenny pointed at a small table in the hall. "Beside my handbag."

Severus picked up the keychain and left the house. He quickly looked around, making sure he was alone outside, before Apparating home to retrieve a salve of his own design. He walked back to Jenny's comfortable bungalow and entered to find her on the sofa where he had left her. He took off his jacket and knelt beside the sofa to look at her ankle again.

"That was fast," said Jenny, watching bemusedly as the tall, dark man ministered her ankle.

"It's not far and I walk quickly," he replied, opening the jar of salve, not revealing his mode of travel.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Old family remedy for sprains and strains. This should make your ankle feel better right away." Severus smoothed the salve over her ankle and instep, gently massaging the soothing paste into the skin.

Jenny felt the salve penetrate to where the pain was worst. First it numbed the pain and then, with a tingling, warmed her foot until it felt relaxed and pain-free.

"That stuff is magic," she told him, lying back and enjoying the sensation.

Severus gave a small laugh. "Yes, I've been told that before."

"Thank you, Severus. I'm glad you decided to visit tonight." Jenny smiled at him as he placed her foot back on the pillow. "Was there a special reason you stopped by?" she asked.

"Well, I had hoped to use your computer once again." He stood and put the salve on her side table.

"Help yourself," she told him. "What are you looking for now?"

"I'm looking for a dentist in Surrey. I know the name, but not where they're located," he replied.

"That's a long way to go for a check-up." Jenny stood up carefully and went to sit beside him at the computer.

"You should stay off your foot tonight. It still needs more time to heal." He looked over at her, feeling the warmth from her arm on his shoulder where she was leaning on the chair.

"It feels all right, thanks to you." She smiled at him, and watched as he shifted his gaze away from her.

"How would you suggest I begin?" he asked to change the subject.

"Let's try to find a directory," she suggested.

They spent the evening together, either searching the Internet or talking about their time in primary school. They'd both been outsiders at school, made to feel contemptible for their appearance and intelligence. They'd each been bullied and, as a result, had chosen paths that had left them unhappy.

Severus looked at the clock. "I didn't realize the time. You work on Saturday." He stood and started to pull on his jacket.

"It's alright; I don't start until noon. I only work a half day," she told him, rising to see him out. "Listen, why don't you take my phone number and call me when you want to come over to use the computer or just visit." She wrote her phone number on a slip of paper and passed it to him.

Severus looked at the paper. "I don't have a phone." He regarded her face that had fallen at his confession. "I am thinking about getting one of those mobile phones."

Jenny smiled once more. "Yeah, great, so take my number, if you want." She looked at him with uncertainty.

Severus took the paper and placed it in his pocket before he turned to leave. Jenny put her hand on his arm and stretched up to kiss his cheek to thank him for his kindness. Just as her lips were about to touch his cheek, Severus turned, letting his lips meet hers. They parted for a hairsbreadth. Then, cupping her cheek gently in his palm, Severus kissed her lips fully, just once.

"Severus," she whispered, "thank you."

"For the salve?" he asked softly.

"That, too." Jenny smiled at him as she gazed into eyes that were, to her, warm, dark and inviting.

He shook his head. "Thank you, Jenny, for... for being you and trusting me. Good night, Jenny." He opened the door and stepped out.

"Good night, Severus. Don't forget to call," she called to him, softly.

"I promise." With a wave, he walked away feeling something he'd not felt for a long time. He was happy and someone actually liked to be with him. He was not alone

computer and listening to music on Hermione's CD player, while her parents cooked up a feast of roast beef with all the trimmings. While they sat around the table after the meal, Hermione's mother told her about their new patient.

"He said he'd heard about the practise from someone who went to school with you," her mother told her. "If I'd known you were going to refer people, I would have sent along business cards."

Hermione frowned. "I don't recall ever suggesting you as a dentist." She saw her mother's smile falter. "That's not to say I don't think you're the best, Mum. It just never came up."

"Then, how did he know about us?" her mother asked.

"What was his name?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, let me think... Prince, that was it, Tobias Prince," replied her mother, "and he sent you this." She retrieved and passed over the thank-you card.

"Prince?" Harry looked at Hermione and Ron. "Wasn't that...?"

"Yeah," added Ron, "and didn't you say his father's name was..."

"Tobias." Hermione looked at the envelope and placed it on the table. She pulled out her wand and cast a Revealing Charm on the innocuous correspondence.

"Nothing he didn't curse it as far as I can tell." She looked at her friends. "Let's take it outside."

"Hermione, what's going on?" asked her father.

"We think this was given to you by a wizard. Mum, do you remember what he looked like?" she asked.

"He looked normal. By that I mean he wasn't dressed unconventionally." Mrs Granger added the latter for Ron's benefit.

"That's not surprising, since his father was a Muggle," said Ron.

"He paid by credit card, Hermione," her mother told her. Seeing the expressions on the youth's faces, she decided to give a description of Mr Prince. "He was tall and had dark hair."

"Shoulder length?" asked Harry.

"No, quite short," she replied.

"Was he clean shaven with a very pale complexion?" asked Hermione.

"He had a moustache and beard, so it was hard to tell," her mother responded once more.

Harry looked at his friends. "What do you think?"

"I think we need to open this." Hermione pointed to the envelope.

They all went out to the garden behind the Grangers' house, where Hermione placed the card on a concrete bench.

"*Aperio Litteratia*." Hermione cast a stronger Revealing Charm on the card. Nothing happened. She glanced back at her friends and parents before picking up the envelope and opening it to read the card within.

"What does it say?" asked Ron.

"Victoria Station, locker 171," replied Hermione, before passing the card to Harry. "He's still on our side."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know Hermione. It could be a trap."

Ron thought about it and added, "I don't think so Harry. If he'd wanted to lure you into a trap, there are a lot of other things he could have done. This is very specific. He wants you to make a move to recover something. Just ask yourself why Hermione's parents, and why a locker in a Muggle location?"

Harry nodded in agreement. "Okay, but I want the Order to back us up. That bastard killed Dumbledore. I doubt he'd give a second thought to AK'ing us."

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Christmas Revelations

Chapter 7 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

Christmas Revelations.

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Snape approached Malfoy Manor in the dark. He scanned the area around the house, looking for anyone else, but revealing charms showed nothing, not even an animal. The air was December chilled, and his breath fogged the air with each exhalation.

The Manor's location, in Wiltshire, was where the original Malfoys had settled sometime after the Norman Invasion. The Manor House was a traditional, Tudor-style country home, surrounded by a walled garden. From without the walls, for the benefit of Muggles, it looked like a crumbling ruin sitting amidst overgrown brambles.

Snape looked around. The normally manicured lawns and neatly clipped hedges were long gone. If they went unattended much longer, the grounds would begin to look like the magical illusion created for Muggles, Snape thought to himself. He cast his eyes over the windows of the house, looking for a light. They all remained dark, save for a flickering glimmer showing through a set of French doors on the first floor.

Looking around once more to ensure he had no company, Snape made his way to the front entrance. To his surprise, the door was unlocked and un-warded. He entered the house, illuminating the end of his wand before heading to where he'd seen the light. If he recalled the floor plan correctly, it had come from Narcissa's favourite drawing room. The door was ajar. Dousing the light, he peered through the open space, then stood to one side and nudged the door open with his wand. His effort was rewarded by several curses slicing through the air where he should have been standing.

"Reveal yourself, you bloody coward," demanded Lucius Malfoy.

"I'm no coward, Malfoy, neither am I a fool. Put up your wand, man. It's me," shouted Snape.

"Snape?" A sound of scraping chair legs and footfalls signalled Malfoy's approach to the door. "Snape, is that you?" he demanded. He held his wand in front of him as he searched the dark hallway for his visitor.

Snape grabbed Malfoy's arm and spun him around, pressing him into the wall. "Yes, old friend, it's me. Are you going to continue your attempts to hex me?" Snape stared at Malfoy, shocked at his appearance.

"Where is she?" whispered Malfoy. "Where has she gone? And the elves, I can't find the elves."

"They didn't tell you," said Severus quietly, realizing how cruel a life the Ministry had returned Malfoy to. As they sat in the dusty darkness of Malfoy Manor, Snape shared the history that had passed Lucius by while in prison.

An eternity later, Severus sat before the meagre fire he'd started in the hearth of the drawing room. He looked over at the once proud wizard, now reduced to a living wraith. The long blond hair had been hacked away to hang in tatters about his face. His patrician features were gaunt, his colour pallid. The robes he wore were barely fit for the Squib beggars that haunted Knockturn Alley.

"He was unable to complete the task assigned to him?" asked Malfoy after a long silence.

Snape sighed. "Lucius, your son was trying to live up to a man he regarded as his hero. He loved you and wanted to be just like you." He shook his head. "You never saw him at Hogwarts. He would strut about like Lord Muck, with his two lackeys following him around, tittering at every taunt he made to a Muggle-born." He hesitated, then added, "You never gave him much credit for his accomplishments at school."

"Why did she make you take the oath?" Malfoy asked for the third time.

"Lucius, Narcissa knew her son. She knew that, as much as he wanted to, he hadn't the instinct to become an assassin." Snape paused for a moment and considered what he would say next. "Draco was too well loved."

Malfoy shook his head decisively. "Our Lord took her from me," he said, more to himself than Snape.

"He was . . . displeased with his plans being thwarted," Snape continued. "I believe he wanted me to continue on as a spy in the ranks of the Order, but Draco's failure undid his plotting."

"Draco's fault?" Malfoy asked, an incredulous look crossing his face.

"No, Lucius, not a fault. The boy, Draco, was not the man his father was," Snape said decisively, trying to explain once more. "He was a child pretending to adulthood." Snape wanted to convince Malfoy of Draco's innocence.

Malfoy looked at him. "Who revealed their plans to our Lord?"

"I believe Bellatrix told Wormtail of the plans," he replied quietly and watched as Lucius digested the information.

"But Karkaroff..." Malfoy trailed off, seemingly confused.

"You knew he was dead," said Snape as he watched Malfoy's confusion grow. "That bit of information wasn't revealed to those not involved, obviously," he murmured more to himself than Malfoy.

Lucius nodded. "I was there, so was Pettigrew," he revealed bitterly, through a clenched jaw. "The pestilent bastard intended them to fail."

"You never told Narcissa," whispered Snape, realising the impact of his news.

Malfoy seemed to crumple into himself. "I never shared with her the measures we took to uphold our cause," he sobbed suddenly. "I loved her, Severus. I loved her." He shook his head as the tears flowed down his cheeks, words tumbling out in grief. He seemed unable to stop himself. "I never wanted her to suffer. I was a fool. I pushed her into this folly by my stupid, stupid pride." At this, Lucius began to cry in earnest, his hands fisting as he pressed them to his eyes. He cried, not the silent tears of grief, but the heart sore cries of a guilty soul repenting.

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Harry and Hermione walked along the main concourse of Victoria Station, looking like every other pair of youthful transients passing through a major hub of inner city transport. Hermione looked at the signs and found where the locker was located. Harry adjusted the rucksack he had over his shoulder and headed off in the direction Hermione indicated. Looking around, Harry saw Tonks and Shackbolt, along with two other Aurors, in close proximity to them.

"What was the number?" he asked, looking at the row of travel lockers.

"Number 171," replied Hermione as she scanned the opposite wall. "There." She pointed and led him over to the locker in question.

"The key is still in it." Harry reached out and tried to open the door. It held fast.

"It's been charmed, obviously," said Hermione. "Cover me," she instructed before pulling her wand from her sleeve and whispering, *Alohamora*."

The latch let go, and the door popped open. Harry opened the door wide and looked inside. "It's a briefcase," he revealed, pulling it out.

Hermione looked over at Shackbolt, who, with a jerk of his head, indicated they should get going. Harry put the case into the rucksack and hitched it onto his shoulder

once more. Watching the tall black man ahead of them, they followed him to a deserted area of the station.

"Where is everyone?" asked Hermione.

"This is the Apparition point for Victoria Station. We didn't risk coming in here, in case it was being watched, but we can leave from here." Shacklebolt pulled out a child's plastic bangle from his pocket. "Portkey," he identified. "Grab on; *Portus*." The Portkey pulled them away from the station with the familiar tug at the navel and dropped them into an open field.

"Where are we?" asked Harry, looking around.

"You should recognize it; you camped here for the World Quidditch Cup a few years ago," Kingsley revealed with a smile.

Harry cocked a crooked smile. "I'd rather forget the camping bit, thanks."

"Come on, Harry, let's look at what Snape has sent." Hermione pulled the rucksack off of Harry's back and opened it.

"Slowly, Hermione," warned Shacklebolt. "Let's examine it carefully."

Hermione sighed. "Honestly, don't you think if he'd wanted to harm us, he'd have done it as soon as we touched the case? I mean, a bomb in a railway station would be passed off as an IRA thing or a terrorist act, don't you think? That way there would be no ties to You Know Who." She stood with her arms crossed, impatient to discover the case's contents.

"Think like Moody for a while, girl. A few minutes of caution." Shacklebolt turned his attention to the case. Passing his wand over it several times to check for curses, he ended up poking it with his wand.

"For goodness sake, Kingsley," said Hermione, clearly exasperated.

"Alright, stand back," he instructed and backed up a few paces himself. "*Alohamora*."

The case popped open and revealed a cardboard box. Shacklebolt levitated the top off of the box, revealing the sceptre within.

Harry looked at what had been revealed. "Ravenclaw," he said, looking again at the Auror. "Is it a Horcrux?"

Shacklebolt used the same Revealing Charm Remus had over the gold locket. The same sickly glow emanated from it.

"I'd say that was a definite yes," stated Hermione.

Kingsley closed the case and picked it up. "Let's get this locked up somewhere safe. Up to Apparating?" he asked, looking at them expectantly.

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Jenny was wrapping her final gift when the phone rang. She picked up the cordless handset and looked at the incoming number. She didn't recognize it. She pushed the button to speak and said, "Hello?"

"Jenny, I promised to call you when I got a phone." The voice of Severus Snape came over the receiver.

"Severus, did you finally get your mobile?" she asked, her voice carrying her smile over the line.

"Yes, finally," he replied. They had gone out a few times since he'd healed her ankle, but in order to make arrangements, he'd met up with her at her library job.

"I'm glad," she told him. "I'm thinking about getting one too."

"You haven't one yet?" he asked.

"No," she replied.

Severus changed the subject. "I was wondering, are you busy for Christmas?"

"Yeah, I go to my sister's house," she replied. She heard silence on the other side of the phone. "Are you busy Christmas Eve?" she asked.

"No," he answered.

"Come for dinner?" she invited. "I can do that steak and kidney pudding you liked, and you could bring the wine again." She waited in anticipation for his answer.

"I couldn't possibly refuse your offer. I'll be there about five o'clock, if that's alright?" he replied.

Jenny jumped with joy. "I can hardly wait," she replied. "It'll be a great evening."

Jenny had only a small tree atop her sideboard, but that was more than Severus had. When he arrived, he placed the two presents he brought under the tiny boughs. They supped together and sat on the sofa to watch the obligatory Christmas television entertainment. Jenny sat against him with his arm holding her close. They were content in their own silent company.

As the Midnight Mass from Rome began, Jenny stood up. "I think that makes it official. It's Christmas and we can open our prezzies." She smiled gleefully as she skipped to her mini-tree to retrieve her gifts for him.

"Here, you open yours first," Jenny insisted. She passed him an oblong box. "I hope you like them." She knelt on the floor before him.

Severus opened his first gift and found a pair of fine leather gloves lined in fur. He tried them on to admire them. "They're wonderful, thank you." He turned to her second gift. It was a Muggle journal, bound in leather, and had his initials, S.S., embossed on the cover. Along with the journal, there was a fountain pen with his initials engraved on the cap.

"I wasn't sure what to get you, Severus. I don't know much about your professional or personal life. I just thought you were the type of man who would use a journal," she told him quietly.

Severus thought about what she had said. "I used to keep a diary regularly for years, but... I stopped for many reasons," he told her. He looked down at her soft features, seeing possibilities. "I think I have many more reasons to resume." He reached over and stroked her cheek. "Thank you; I've never had a more thoughtful present."

Walking over to the tree, he retrieved his gifts and passed them to her. "Please, open these?" he asked, sitting on the sofa once more.

Jenny took his presents. She opened the first gift. "Severus, a mobile?" she responded, surprised at the gift of a cellular phone.

"You said you wanted one. Here, it's prepaid." He handed her a set of gift cards.

"It's too much," she exclaimed.

"Not if I can speak to you, Jenny," he replied, softly. His earnest tone surprised her.

Jenny then opened the small, second gift and found a crystal phial that glittered in the light. "What is this?" she asked.

"Something special I made for you. Place a drop on your wrist," he instructed.

Jenny followed his direction, and then smelled her inner wrist. "Wow, it's like walking in the woods after a spring shower. A bit sweet, but a little bit musky too."

"Just as I'd planned it," he told her. "The scent will always be unique. It will never have the same result for anyone else. In fact, if anyone should try it, they will be disappointed."

"You made this?" she asked in surprise. "Thank you, Severus, I love your presents."

"This has been a wonderful Christmas for me, Jenny. I'd not had much reason to celebrate before," he told her. He knelt on the floor beside her and kissed her cheek.

"Neither had I, Severus. Thank you again." She leaned forward, looking into his dark eyes before kissing him.

Severus wrapped his arms about the gentle woman kissing him and felt her arms wrap about his shoulders. Her tender caress was so far from the heated kisses of his usual partners, he was shocked at his body's response.

"Jenny, I'd best go," he told her, pulling back.

"So soon?" she asked.

"Yes, I have to visit an old friend who got out of hospital just the other day. He expects me early in the morning," he told her.

"Severus?" she asked as he got to his feet.

"Yes?" he asked.

"New Year's Eve, just wondering if you're free?" she asked.

Snape looked at her kneeling on the living room floor. "I do have a miserable duty on New Year's Day, but New Year's Eve is free."

"Will you spend it with me... here?" she asked.

Severus smiled. "Indubitably, my fair maiden," he teased, pulling her hand to his lips and kissing her knuckles.

"Oooh! Such airs put on for a frumpy Manchester lass." Jenny looked away as she laughed at her self denigrating comment.

Severus sobered and pulled her to her feet. "Who told you that?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

Jenny shrugged. "I told you, I'm not the type that attracts men. I'm not what they look for; too short, too fat, boring, plain." She looked away once more after listing her perceived faults.

Severus turned her face back to him. "Is that what your former husband told you?" he asked, uncharacteristically annoyed at the unknown man for hurting her.

"Pretty much," she replied bitterly. "Just before he left with the blond, anorexic bimbo from Finland."

Severus shook his head. "You're none of those things, Jenny. You are kind and gentle. Your eyes sparkle when you laugh, and your smile brightens a room. I'd rather look at you than any fashion plate I could imagine. When I hold you close, you're soft and tender, not all bones and angles. There aren't many people I can have a decent conversation with, but I never tire of talking to you."

He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. He bent to whisper into her ear, sending shivers down her back. "I think you're a lovely 'Manchester lass'. There is nothing about you I would change; you're perfect just as you are. Never let anyone tell you otherwise."

Jenny pulled back and looked back into his eyes, her own vision blurred with tears. "Oh, Severus, no one's ever said such things to me before. That's the most wonderful Christmas present you could ever have given me. You even had a Manchester accent when you called me 'lass.'" She smiled through her tears.

Severus smiled back. "You can never really take the North out of a Manchester lad. Happy Christmas, Jenny, my lovely Manchester lass," he told her before kissing her more deeply than he ever had before.

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Christmas dawned dark and dreary, but in the hidden house on Grimmauld Place, merriment abounded. The sounds of laughter and tearing paper echoed through the rooms as the occupants opened their presents. When they heard Molly's shout, they all trundled down to the kitchen in the uniform of the day; Molly's magically knitted jumpers.

"Happy Christmas, everyone," announced Arthur, strolling into the kitchen with a large, gaily wrapped parcel in his arms. "Molly, dear, leave off what you're doing and come here. Girls, you finish getting breakfast out."

Molly looked at him, surprised at his request. She'd no idea what he wanted.

"Molly, you work so hard at keeping this old house liveable for us; making a home out of a shell. You never get much credit. All you ever hear is us complain when you make us pitch in." Arthur looked around the table at everyone. "Everyone here, especially Harry and Remus, wanted to say a huge thank you. So, from all of us, Happy Christmas, Molly Weasley." He held out the present to a shocked Molly.

"I don't know what to say," she said, taking the parcel and setting it on a chair to open it. As the paper gave way, Molly gasped. "Arthur, it's too much. I can't accept something like this."

"Course you can, Mum. Come on then, let's see," said George, his usual smile even wider than usual.

Molly held up a fur stole. Arthur took it from her and set it about her shoulders. "This is to go with the dress robes I got you for Christmas," he told her. "Everyone here gave something towards it. It really is a present from everyone."

Arthur didn't reveal Harry had paid a larger part than everyone else towards it. On Harry's part, he'd been the one to suggest a special present for Molly and had insisted on carrying the weight of the burden.

"Oh, it's too beautiful," Molly exclaimed as she stroked the fur. "I don't know when I'll ever be able to do it justice."

"You'll be surprised, Mum," said Ginny, passing a platter of sausages to Remus.

"I don't have the address, but I think we've found it." He looked out of his side window and saw a steeple tower soaring upwards to the sky. "I thought we might try something I always do when I'm looking for information and visit the hub of news about the town," he replied.

"The library," she stated with conviction.

"The local pub," he responded with a smile.

They found a pub after turning two corners. Severus parked the car down the street from the whitewashed building. He opened the door and helped Jenny out.

"This looks like a good place to start," he said, "and it appears to serve pub lunches. Hungry?" he asked, leading her to the doors.

"Biscuits and cheese with a shandy sounds good," she replied, entering the pub before him.

The interior was quiet, only a few older men and a group of women in one corner.

"Ow do folks, 'aving a day out, then?" greeted the landlord.

"Yes, we're just travelling around the area taking in historic sites," Snape told him.

He ushered Jenny to a table where they were joined by the jolly man.

"What can I get you?" asked their host.

"A Ploughman's lunch, a shandy for the lady and a pint of bitter for me," Snape ordered.

"Are you vegey?" he asked. "'Cause we've 'ad some that don't like to 'ave meat."

"No, we'll have a bit of everything," replied Snape.

"Coming right up." The landlord exited into what appeared to be a kitchen and then returned to pour their drinks.

"Why are you searching for this shield, Severus?" asked Jenny.

"There are some who would pay a great price to have it in their possession," Snape told her. "To others, the shield represents a way of life, a tradition begun by the original owner."

"Are you still talking about your old school?" she asked.

He cocked his head to the side. "Surely you know the kind of loyalty old schools have from their pupils."

"I never went to that kind of school, Severus. I couldn't wait to get out of the state system." They paused as their drinks arrived.

"Anything else?" asked the landlord.

"Yes, where can we find All Saints Church?" asked Snape.

"When you go out, go back up the hill and turn to your left at the first street. You'll see the old graveyard first. Just turn right when you see the main gate. You can't miss it." He stood aside to let a woman put a platter of food and two small plates on the table.

"Have there been any other people around asking about the church?" Snape kept the question innocent, but Jenny caught something in his tone.

The landlord shook his head. "Not since I've been the licensee, but I remember my old dad saying something about a man asking after the church quite a while ago."

Snape looked at him. "Why would that stick in your memory?"

The landlord stroked his chin. "My dad, 'e was a superstitious man, 'e was. Had the vicar come and bless this house after that bloke came. Said 'e thought we'd been visited by Satan 'imself. Lot 'o tripe of course, but me dad was funny that way. Enjoy." He nodded and returned to the bar.

Jenny helped herself to pork pie, Cheshire cheese and a slice of cob bread. "What are you not telling me, Severus?" she asked.

"Why would I be hiding anything?" he asked in return. He speared some pickled onions to go with his slice of pate.

"Severus Snape, don't play the innocent with me. There's something more going on here than just retrieving an old school heirloom." She sipped her shandy and waited.

Snape sighed. "Jenny, the whole matter is contentious. There are two sides fighting over the possession of certain artefacts. They both believe they are the rightful heirs."

"Whose side are you on?" she asked, putting a piece of pork pie in her mouth.

He smirked. "The side that is right of course."

When they finished, they left the pub and drove to the church. No one else was about as they approached the front doors which were open, much to Jenny's surprise. They entered the ancient church and looked about the nave. To one side, the nave opened into a small side chapel that held a burial crypt.

"Severus, look." Jenny pointed to a carved frieze above the low, buttressed entry to the chapel. The heraldic and holy symbols included stylized Griffins. Jenny walked towards the vault while Severus was several paces behind. As she passed under the buttress, he saw a glow emanate from around the wooden frame. Secretly, he dropped his wand into his palm. Turning to cover his action, Severus cast a Revealing Charm on the frame. As he had suspected, a ward to detect magic of any kind had been placed around the chapel. He tentatively reached out a hand only to snatch it back when it was given a nasty shock -- warded against magical folk as well then.

Jenny reached into her bag and pulled out a small camera. "Come closer and I'll take your picture with the dead knight."

Severus shook his head. "I've more respect for your camera lens than that. If you wouldn't mind, take a few snaps of the crypt itself."

"Shy, aren't you," she teased. "Okay, from what angles?"

"Do you see the shield?" he asked.

"Yeah, looks perfect from here." She lifted the camera and took pictures from every direction. At Severus' coaching, she took one closer shot of the shield.

"Why won't you come closer, Severus?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Old superstition only pretty young women may approach the knight with impunity."

"And here I thought you wanted to spend time with me when all the time you just needed me to get close to the dead old geezer," she mocked him teasingly.

Snape frowned. "I do want to spend time with you, Jenny."

Jenny shook her head. "I was just teasing you again. Here, take a picture of me pointing at the carvings above." She passed him the camera and took off her coat.

She posed, leaning on the wall with her arm outstretched pointing at the frieze.

Severus watched as she got ready for the picture, taking in the black velvet dress she wore. The neck was scooped low and the skirt hung loosely from her hips. It made her look utterly feminine and reminded him of something a witch would have worn.

"You look very pretty today, Jenny," he told her, as he pointed the camera at her and pressed the shutter release.

"Thanks, I... my sister said every woman should have a little black dress." Jenny blushed at his compliment.

"Hello, can I help you?" called a voice from the sanctuary.

"Hello," answered Jenny. "We were just admiring your wonderful frieze and crypt. We're not trespassing I hope."

A man approached them. "Not today you're not. We're having a service of Thanksgiving tonight, and the choir is due for practise anytime. I'm the lay-deacon here, Archie Phelps." He held his hand out in greeting. Jenny and Severus both shook it.

"My name is Tobias Prince, Mr Phelps," offered Snape, hoping Jenny wouldn't give away his subterfuge. "I was wondering if you've had any enquiries about the shield on the crypt. It seems remarkably well preserved."

"I've not had any questions from anyone, but there is a visitor every Easter that stops by and makes an anonymous offering to help in the upkeep." He chuckled to himself. "The old vicar said it must be a descendant of old Godric the Good."

"Godric the Good?" asked Jenny.

Phelps nodded. "Well, the story goes that the knight, Sir Godric, cast a magic spell upon the shield making it impervious to any weapon. It's said the spell is still in effect today, leaving the shield as perfect as the day it was cast." The man smiled. "The Sunday School kiddies love the story."

"Indeed, thank you, Mr Phelps, Happy New Year," said Snape, gathering Jenny up to leave.

"Happy New Year, sir," called Jenny over her shoulder, struggling to don her coat as Severus pulled her along.

"Tobias?" she asked as they approached the car.

"Later," he replied, making haste to leave.

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"Mum, sit still," Ginny insisted as she helped her mother primp for the Minister's Ball.

"Ginny, I'm quite capable of choosing make-up charms," snapped Molly.

Ginny rolled her eyes in frustration. "Fleur, are you there?" she shouted down the hall.

"Oui, wat is eet?" asked the Weasley daughter-in-law, entering the bedroom.

Ginny indicated her mother. "Please, tell my mother wearing blue eye shadow and heavy black eyeliner is out," she begged.

Fleur looked at Molly and gasped. "Mon Dieu, ma mere, vous etes ...pardon ...you are spoiling ze look of your beautiful robes and stole. Sil vous plait, laissez-moi faire votre maquillage? Let me 'elp you?" The witch from France smiled at her mother-in-law.

Molly huffed and started to pout.

"Mum, think of Dad? He just wants you to feel like the belle of the ball tonight. He's right smart in his new dress robes." Ginny knew her mother was a softy when it came to her father.

"Mais oui, mon Cher papa Weasley, il est magnifique, 'e is very dashing." Fleur looked at Ginny over Molly's head and winked.

Molly shrugged. "Go on then, do what you want. I'll put myself in your hands tonight, girls."

A short time later, Fleur declared Molly was, "Parfait."

Molly walked down stairs, following the younger girls, and into the front room. Arthur had been talking to Lupin while the twins, Ron and Harry played exploding snap. Hermione was curled up on the rug with Crookshanks, reading her ubiquitous book.

"Okay, Prince Arthur, Cinderella is ready to go to the ball," announced Ginny, smiling ear to ear.

Arthur turned and looked at his wife. Her transformation was complete. She wore dark green formal robes with gold filigree lace embellishing the bodice, cuffs and hem. Gold combs adorned her hair which had been styled into a regal chignon. Her gold locket, a wedding gift from Arthur, was the only other jewellery she wore.

"Molly," said Lupin, breaking the silence, "you've never looked lovelier."

Molly blushed and looked away. "Thank you, Remus. It was kind of you to say so."

"Wow, Mum, you'll knock'em dead at the dance," announced George. Ron and Harry nodded in agreement. Hermione smiled knowingly at the two girls who had wrought the new Mrs. Weasley.

Arthur finally approached her and took her hands in his. "Molly, my love, you've never looked more stunning. I'll be the envy of every wizard there tonight." He lifted her hand and kissed it.

"Stop it," said Molly. "You've got me all embarrassed."

Arthur took her stole and set it about her shoulders. "Nonsense, Molly. Every word they've said is true. Now, let's make our grand entrance to the ball, shall we?"

He started to lead her out, but stopped and turned. "Happy New Year, everyone." He pointed to his children. "And you lot behave."

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"Master, he is here," announced Pettigrew.

"Show our dear brother in, Wormtail. He has been too long gone from our fold." Voldemort lounged on his wing-back chair as if it were a throne. He petted his familiar, her serpentine head resting on his shoulder from where she had coiled over the chair-back.

Lucius Malfoy entered the presence of his Dark Lord for the first time since he'd fought at the Department of Mysteries. He'd found robes that had been in the laundry when his home had been plundered following his wife's murder. That, along with Death Eater attire supplied by Snape had made him at least look presentable.

Lucius limped into the room, leaning heavily on his cane. He stopped before Voldemort and with obvious difficulty, dropped to his knee in the approved manner. He bowed his head and said, "My lord, you are most kind to grant me an audience."

"Lucius, you must know of my affection for you. You have served me loyally for many years. Surely you didn't think I had forgotten you." Voldemort regarded the man before him. "You are recovering from your ordeal?"

"I am beginning to, my Lord," he answered, avoiding looking into Voldemort's eyes.

"Come and sit by me while we have some tea. Wormtail," he called.

Peter scurried into the room and bowed. "Master?"

"A proper tea for us and our guest. We have much to catch up on." Peter was dismissed with a serpent-like smile and a wave. As Voldemort turned to Lucius, now sitting on the arm chair opposite, his face had morphed into a look of pity.

"Ah, Lucius, when I think of your poor, poor, deluded wife." He shook his head. "How could she have thought to foil my plans? Surely you had told her of my need for obedience?"

"My Lord, she was a mother in fear for her son..." began Lucius cautiously, only to be cut off.

"She sought to escape my wrath," Voldemort snapped violently. He drew a deep breath and continued on in the calm tone he'd used before. "If she had approached us with an explanation or asked for an indulgence, we would have considered it. As it stands, stealing away in the dark of night, well, she left us no choice."

"Her intentions were never intended to be disloyal, my Lord. Draco..." Again, Lucius was cut off mid sentence.

"Is a failure, an embarrassment. He cost me my inside spy to the activities of my enemies." Voldemort stood and began pacing. "This fiasco of a feud has gone on long enough. It must end before the feast of Walpurgisnacht is over." He wheeled back to Malfoy, pointing a finger in his face. "And you, my dear, devoted Lucius, shall lead your brothers in the fray."

At that moment Peter entered, floating a large tray of tea time accoutrements before him.

Voldemort looked up, his expression lightening. "Excellent, Wormtail. Did you find the gammon I asked for? I do so enjoy a fine gammon sandwich for tea. Milk and sugar, Lucius?"

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Jenny sat curled against Severus watching the New Year's television broadcast from Scotland. She felt him laugh quietly.

"What?" she asked.

"I think I watched this show back in nineteen seventy-five, seventy-six and seventy seven. The dancers dance the same dances, they sing the same songs and recite the same bloody Burns poetry every year." He lifted his glass and sipped the brandy he'd bought on the return trip to Jenny's house.

"Well," began Jenny in the Scots defence, "they have their traditions. Good for them if they enjoy them." She sat up and looked at the clock. "Ten to twelve. Come on you." She pulled Snape to his feet.

"What?" he asked surprised at her actions.

"Out you go, I have my traditions too." She handed him his coat.

"You're throwing me out because I don't like bloody Scottish traditions?" he asked in surprise.

"No, silly, you've got to first foot. Come on, hurry, outside." She pulled him to the front door.

"Jenny," he whined, "they used to make me do this at the school in Scotland."

"It's your own fault," she told him as she opened the door and pushed him through.

"What did I do to deserve the miserable honour?" he asked petulantly.

"You were born a man with black hair. Now behave and you'll get back in at midnight." With that, she slammed the door on his face only to open it again to hand him his bottle of brandy before banging it shut once more.

"Bloody, northern superstitions," he muttered, then opened the brandy and took a swig.

"Can you spare some?" asked a male voice to his left.

Looking over, Severus saw a younger man, with dark hair, in the same predicament he was. "You don't have anything to first-foot with?" he asked.

"Just this." The other first-footer held up a lump of coal.

Severus snorted and passed over the brandy. "Did you bring a bottle?"

His neighbour took a long draught of liquor and passed the bottle back. "Yeah, but the father-in-law to be claimed it on sight."

Inside, Jenny was dashing around madly. She ran to the bedroom and removed her clothes, donning a black, silk nightgown adorned with a handkerchief hem. She dabbed Severus' perfume on and passed a brush through her hair. Then she dashed to the kitchen and pulled out a small bottle of champagne from the fridge. Grabbing two flutes, she went back into the living room and set everything on the small table by the door. She then lit several candles before turning out the lights. Turning once more to the bottle of champagne, she popped the cork and poured the sparkling wine into the flutes just as the clocks began to chime and the church bells began to ring. Lifting the flutes in one hand, Jenny went back to the front door and released the latch just as Severus knocked.

Severus saw the door open just as he tapped it. He pushed it open all the way and stepped inside to be presented with a vision he'd not expected.

"Jenny," he breathed, closing the door behind him. She had transformed herself into a voluptuous nymph. His senses were filled by her presence.

Jenny stepped close to him and handed him a flute of champagne. "Happy New Year, Severus." She touched her glass to his and sipped. Severus followed suit.

Jenny then took his glass and set both flutes aside. Stepping forward, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. He wrapped his arms about her, holding her softness to him as a drowning man to a lifejacket. The moment seemed to stretch into eternity. Only when they each needed to breathe did the embrace loosen.

"Oh, Severus, I've waited for this moment since the first time you kissed me," she whispered in his ear. She began to stroke his back and arse, only to feel him stiffen and move away.

"Jenny, my lovely Manchester lass, I can't believe you have done this for me." He pulled back from her and stroked her hair.

Jenny frowned and shook her head. "You don't understand, Severus. What do you mean, have done this for you? This is just as much for me as you," she exclaimed.

"Jenny, there are things you don't know about me; things that would make you see me in a different light." He didn't know what else to say.

"Are you gay or bi?" she asked bluntly.

"What?" he asked, incredulously. "No!"

She picked up her champagne and walked away. "I've told you more than once I had no illusions about how men saw me. You gave me the impression you saw me otherwise. If that's not the case, then don't lead me on and tease me, Severus."

Jenny bit her lips to stop herself from crying. "I've come to feel a great deal for you, Severus. Not just as someone I can actually have a decent conversation or debate with, but also as a woman for a man. I've dreamt of you holding me and making love to me. I've never met a man I could have that kind of relationship with before." She turned to face him as he sat on the chair beside the computer. "Be honest with me, Severus. I'd much rather keep you as a friend than lose you as a lover."

There had been few moments that Severus regretted his genetic inheritance of being a wizard, but this was probably the greatest of them. He inhaled deeply. A decision had to be made.

"Jenny, there are things happening in this world that very few people know about. Men, women and children are suffering," he began.

"I know this, Severus," she replied.

"I'm not talking about what you read in the newspapers, Jenny," he declared. "There are other parties who would seek to overthrow the government."

"This has everything to do with the research you've been doing, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Who is Tobias Prince?" she asked.

"My pseudonym," he replied quietly.

Jenny knelt before him on the floor. "What does all this have to do with us?"

"Jenny, people are being hurt and sometimes dying because of a ridiculous conflict. If you were to be counted among their number..." He couldn't voice any more.

"Whose side are you on, the ones that want to take over or the others?" She watched the guarded emotions pass over his face.

"There are times I'm not so sure any more. It's all gotten muddled somewhere in the middle. I'm trying to stop the mayhem." He felt her hands on his face.

"Do you want to hurt innocent people?" she asked, gazing into his eyes as though she could read the answer there.

"NO! You can't possibly think that, Jenny." Severus grabbed her hands in his.

Jenny pulled his hand to her mouth and kissed the knuckles. "Severus, I could step outside my front door and be murdered by a stranger. I could board a train destined to be derailed by an idiot making a political statement. Good lord, I work in a public building that shares information to all and sundry. It could be bombed by a religious zealot who decided we were blaspheming against his god." Jenny paused to gather herself. "In our world today, there are no guarantees, Severus. I will not be a prisoner to fear."

Snape reached out and cupped Jenny's face. "... I want you more than the air I breathe. You are perfect and pure and lovely. I am not worthy of your gift."

"Don't put me on a pedestal, Severus. Just give me my New Year's wish." Jenny waited for his answer.

"What is your wish, Jenny?" he whispered.

"Make love to me and let me wake in your arms tomorrow morning."

He rose and pulled her up with him. She took his hand and led him down the hall towards her room. Unseen by Jenny, Severus raised his hand in a gesture borne of habit and waved it behind him dousing the candles magically.

Discovery

Chapter 9 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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Morning silently tiptoed in, bringing slow awareness to the sleeping lovers. Jenny woke first, feeling herself cocooned in the warm arms of the man who had made love to her the night before. She smiled, remembering their discovery of each other. His tender caress and concern as he'd entered her. Jenny had been with only one other man since her husband had left, and self gratification was a poor substitute, in her opinion. She shifted gently, trying to move away to visit the bathroom, but Severus' arm pulled her closer to him.

"Severus, I've got to go," she hinted to the half-slumbering man.

"Mine," he mumbled, still in the realm between waking and sleeping.

"Yours with a wet mattress if you don't let go," she chirped, just before she jumped out of bed.

"Hmm? Jenny?" Severus looked at the alarm clock on the bedside table. It was nine o'clock. The door opened as Jenny returned to the bedroom. Severus looked at her nude body, revelling in her rounded curves.

"Come here, Jenny, it's still early," he told her, pulling back the covers on the bed.

Jenny crawled in beside him and wrapped her arms around him.

"Warm me up, Severus." She snuggled into his embrace, feeling the rasp of his chest hair on her cheek. Severus kissed the top of her head and pulled her closer.

"What are your plans today, Severus?" she asked.

"I think I told you I had an obligation," he replied, while he stroked her back.

"I remember," she responded. "What time are you expected?" she wondered.

Snape shrugged. "He usually calls around lunchtime."

"He just calls and you go?" she asked in surprise.

"Jenny, don't ask too many questions," he warned with a sigh.

"Okay, but what about now?" she asked as she kissed his chest and licked his male nipples. "I could make you breakfast?"

Severus moaned as Jenny teased him. "Jenny," he sighed and ran his fingers through her silky hair before pulling her face to his and kissing her. "Don't worry. I can enjoy whatever you have to offer. The menu is spectacular." His hands began to move, and Jenny was content to let them have their way. "You even taste good in the morning," he whispered. She began to giggle softly. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Just thinking of how you made my ex a liar as well as a cheat," she told him. Seeing him frown, she leaned up and kissed his furrowed brow. "He told me he was bigger than average. You've proved that to be a fib and a half."

"How did you ever get together with a fool like that in the first place, Jenny? It seems out of character for the woman I've come to know." He pulled himself up and leaned against the wall. Jenny sat up and reached out to take his hand.

"I was young. We were just out of school. He was my first there was only one other until you entered my life." She looked up at him and decided to tell the whole story. "I got pregnant the first time we did anything. It was stupid. We used a condom, but it must have broken."

"You didn't use the pill?" Severus asked, for he thought most of the girls he knew in their age group had used the pill as a rite of passage.

"I went to the same school you did 'cause my mum didn't like the sisters at the convent. I was raised a strict Catholic otherwise. So was he, so an abortion was out of the question. Our parents made us get married so the neighbours wouldn't talk." She shrugged. "I lost the baby at four and a half months." She shrugged once more. "We split before our seventh anniversary, when he found his blonde. Not that he hadn't had a piece on the side a few times before that," she added, bitterly. "The last bloke I ever had anything to do with turned out to be married, the berk."

"Why, Jenny? Why choose to be alone?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No one stuck around more than two dates. I wasn't... willing... to put out fast. I might have been lonely, but I was never desperate." She pulled his hand up and kissed his knuckles. "You stayed around long enough to get to know me." She rubbed her cheek against his knuckles.

Jenny looked down at his arm and saw an unusual tattoo. "I'll bet there's a story behind that."

Severus pulled his arm away and covered the tattoo with his right hand. "Youthful folly and stupid choices; a decision made, only to be almost immediately regretted."

Jenny wondered what could cause the look of bitterness and pain to cross his face. The more she got to know him, the bigger mystery he became. On a whim, she reached out and pulled his arm back. To his surprise, she bent and kissed the Dark Mark.

"Severus," she whispered, "if this is part of the person you are, I will accept it. I won't ask you why unless you want to tell me. You must have had your reasons at the time."

Pushing her back onto the pillows, Severus slipped his knee between her thighs and settled over her. "Sweet, gentle Jenny, how ever did I find such good fortune in my old haunts? Your pillock of an ex-husband doesn't know what he let go, much to my pleasure."

"Mmhh, no, my pleasure," she told him, pulling him into a kiss. "Make love to me Severus; you make me feel alive when you touch me that way. I want you again and again and..."

Severus chuckled. "And again, like this?"

Jenny gasped as she felt his hardness press into her again. "Oh yes, just like that," she breathed into his ear.

The outer world was forgotten as their reality became their entwined bodies and whispered endearments. There was no Dark Lord, no ex-husband. Nothing, but their reality together: perfectly, ecstatically and passionately together. It had all changed now. Everything had changed for them, but neither knew what consequences this would bring in the future.

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Severus drove Jenny to her boss's house where she'd been invited for a New Year's Day brunch. He returned home to his humble abode and changed into his Wizarding robes. It was just past noon, and he expected the call anytime. He'd just downed a Firewhiskey when his mark burned. It wasn't too painful today; Voldemort must be in a good mood. Casting a Disillusionment Charm, he made his way to the river bank and Apparated to the Dark Lord's lair. Several others, including Bella, had just arrived also.

"Severus, Happy New Year. I trust your holiday was pleasant?" she asked out of obligation.

"Tolerable," he replied. "Yours, at least what you remember of it?" he asked sarcastically.

"At least I didn't sit alone in a hovel," she retorted spitefully.

"Why ever would you think that I did?" he sneered and walked to the house.

The Faithful Brethren, as Voldemort had often addressed them, gathered in a once grand ballroom. The gilt decoration had faded and the air smelt of stale dissipation. A few sullen elves circulated the room, offering drinks and food.

Snape grabbed a goblet of wine off of a heavily laden tray carried by a burdened, bent elf. As he sipped, he looked around at those present. There were a few missing from the complement since the previous levee. He recalled when Narcissa had brought Draco for the first time. He'd held himself proudly, manifestly Malfoy, Snape remembered. Was it it really such a short time ago?

"Severus, welcome." Lucius limped up beside him. "We should find somewhere to talk. It's been a long time." He smiled and waited for Severus to take his cue.

"Indeed, old friend. Come, there's a divan in the alcove over there." Snape pointed and led the way.

As Lucius sat beside him, Snape quickly cast a Muffliato charm. "Well?" he asked.

"It's hidden in plain sight. I didn't find any discernable charms, even when I touched it with my finger," Lucius told him.

Snape snorted. "Arrogant bastard. Even when he knows people are looking for them, he leaves a Horcrux open to being filched."

"It could be a trick, Severus. He might have something else up his sleeve." Lucius looked around before bringing up the next subject. "I've had another revelation from our master. He called me yesterday and we saw in the New Year together. He's chosen a date Beltane."

Severus pondered what had been revealed. There was to be an end after all, a confrontation and resolution, one way or the other. It was time to suggest an itinerary be drawn up, and time to move towards pulling everything together.

"Can you transfigure a replacement?" asked Snape.

"Yes, it should be easy enough. Do you think it will work?" Lucius had not recovered his arrogant confidence upon his release. He needed reassurance to go forward.

Snape worried slightly at his companion's hesitance. "Lucius, you are a powerful wizard. You can make a difference."

"I only want the pain to end." He looked up at Snape and gave him a slight smile, reminiscent of the Lucius of old. "If it means I must be sacrificed, so be it. Just let my son live on after me."

Severus nodded and lifted the charm. "How lucky for you, old friend, to be able to spend more time with our Lord," he said for the benefit of those who would hear.

Lucius gave a wide smile. "Indeed, have I not always held a special place in his court? I am privileged to be so welcomed back."

At the back of the room, a set of double doors were flung open by Pettigrew. "Our Lord is ready to receive you now." He bowed dramatically as the first Death Eaters began to file past.

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February, 1999

Severus was back in Jenny's living room, sitting at the computer once again. Their relationship had moved forward, as evidenced by his copy of the front door key and the second toothbrush hanging in the bathroom.

"Making any headway?" asked Jenny from the bedroom, where she was changing.

"I have the office e-mail address, but not their home e-mail." He sighed in frustration. There were so many ways to look for something.

"Is it important who you contact?" she asked. "Maybe send an e-mail with a phone number for them to call you. Your mobile is pretty hard to trace." She walked into the living room, pulling a jumper over her head.

Severus looked at her. "It's not in the regular phone book?"

She shook her head. "No, that's for land lines. You've been in contact with this dentist before, and you'd told them it was a referral from their daughter, right?" He nodded his agreement.

"Well then, send an e-mail to the office and ask if they would pass your mobile on to their daughter." She grabbed his arm suddenly. "You're not a paedophile are you?"

"Madam, desist in your prodding into my past. I'm a teacher I loathe the little buggers. I'd sooner have had an affair with the school caretaker." He turned back to the computer. "And if you'd met him, you'd now be questioning my sanity."

"How much longer will you be?" she asked, checking the newspaper.

"What time does the picture start?" he asked. He wasn't enthusiastic about going, but she wanted him to accompany her.

"Let's see, here it is: six o'clock and a quarter to eight. Do you want to eat before or after?" she asked.

"Are we eating in or doing a carry out?" he asked.

"We could do a carry out after the early picture and come back here. Indian, Chinese or the chippie?" she asked.

Severus signed off from his e-mail. He'd improved his technique on the keyboard, using a teaching disk, to type with his forefingers and thumb on each hand.

"I'm a traditional man, but I'll forgo the vindaloo and have a carry out from the chippie. I prefer Haddock." He smirked at her frown.

"That's traditional, Indian?" she asked.

"That's all that was open after a long night's pub crawl when I indulged. What picture are we going to see anyway?" He pulled on his coat and helped her on with hers.

"Dogma, my favourite actors are in it." She opened the door and stepped out.

"And who might they be?" he asked, clueless to the current breed of movie stars around.

"Ben Affleck and Alan Rickman," she replied.

When the picture let out, Jenny and Severus boarded the bus, returning back to their neighbourhood. The local fish shop was busy, which meant the food would be hot and fresh, well worth waiting in line for.

"I'm starving," said Jenny. "I don't really like popcorn."

Severus was biting into a fragment of fish he'd torn from the filet in the packet. "I don't either. Do you have any more malt vinegar?"

They made their way to the play park and found a bench under a light. It was uncommonly mild for the end of February, and even more unusual, it was dry.

Jenny loved watching the usually fastidious man eat with his fingers. He obviously relished the common food and licked his fingers after every bite. It made him look younger somehow.

"I had fun tonight, Severus," she told him.

"Before, during or after drooling at your cinema idols?" he asked, teasing her at her reactions to the appearance of her favourites.

"I never drooled," she spat in mock annoyance.

"Then why, when that character... meta-something... spoke, did you moan?" he asked, only half serious.

"Cause he reminded me of you, you daft man." She ruffled his hair.

"You like my voice?" he asked innocently, sounding like a callow youth.

Jenny laughed. "Are you kidding? You taught upper sixth, and no girl ever had a crush on you?"

Severus only half heard her. He put his hand over her mouth to silence her chatter as he peered into the trees beyond.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"That crack? Probably a stray cat chasing something," she whispered back, concerned at his tone.

Severus grabbed the food wrapping from her and pulled her up. "Come on, hurry." He tossed the papers into the bin as he passed.

They jogged away from where the sound had come and hid in a copse of trees on the opposite side of the park. Severus allowed his wand to drop into his palm.

"What is it Severus?" Jenny asked in a whisper, suddenly frightened at his predatory look.

He turned to her and held his finger to his lips, begging her silence. She watched as four figures walked into the park they'd just left. They were dressed in strange clothes and appeared out of their element. Jenny looked at Severus, hoping for an explanation. He was focussed on the others.

"Are you sure, Mad-eye?" asked one of the men.

"I know the bastard came from around here," snarled Moody. "He's removed his records from the Ministry and the school. Check for Magical Signatures."

Jenny watched as the group broke up and began walking around. They appeared to be waving their arms around, but then she noticed they were holding sticks in their hands that looked as if they were leaving a trail of tiny sparks behind. They looked almost like the sparklers from Guy Fawkes Night.

Severus grabbed her around the waist and pulled her further into the cover of trees. It was then she noticed he had one of the sticks as well. They continued on until they'd reached the end of the park and were on the footpath again.

Severus looked around and saw a bus stop. Looking down the road, he saw the double-decker approaching and broke into a trot, pulling Jenny behind him. They reached the stop at the same time the bus did. Severus bundled her on and jumped up behind. The bus started up and passed the park as they took their seat. Severus watched the Aurors, led by Moody, continue their surveillance. His decree of no magic had proved its worth at least in this one instance.

Severus paid their fares and turned back to her. Jenny was trembling, her mind a whirling tumble of thoughts.

"Jenny... Jenny, look at me." He waited until she turned to face him. "There are things in this world that you do not know about, that millions of people don't know about." He spoke softly, that no one else might hear.

"What kind of things, Severus? Who... what were they?" she asked. "What were they using?"

Severus licked his lips, "Jenny, I told you once that there was a power struggle happening. These are some of the people involved."

"Are they the ones trying to take over?" she asked in the same hushed tones.

"No. In the terms of your Hollywood heroes, they were the good guys," he replied.

"If you want them to win, why are they after you? Why are you running from them?" she asked, her heart beating hard with anxiety.

Severus looked out of the window to see what was around. "Let's get off at the next stop and go to a pub. Give me a chance to explain, and I'll take you home in a taxi."

Of Myths and Magic

Chapter 10 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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"Did you pick anything up?" Moody asked. He peered around at the perimeter of the park as though he expected an attack at any moment.

"Nothing but a few Muggle repelling charms, just what we had found before. We told you about them, Alastor. We find them all the time in any big town. Do you plan to search every Wizarding home in the UK? You won't win any converts that way."

Mad-Eye growled in frustration. "He's here, I know he is. A rat always goes underground to its nest when it's chased. We've just got to find the bait to bring him to us."

"We're heading back to the Ministry to file our report," said Proudfoot. "Are you coming?"

Moody waived his wand about in an elaborate Revealing Charm once more. "Alright, but we'll be back here, sure as fate."

The foursome headed back into the cover of trees and apparated away from the park.

Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

Severus picked his drinks up from the bar top and made his way to the corner table in the back of the pub. It was a busy Saturday night and the room was filled to capacity.

"Here," he said, placing a gin and tonic in front of her.

"I thought I said diet lemonade," said Jenny, seeing the drink he'd brought.

Severus sat beside her and took a quaff from his pint of bitter. "You look like you are on the verge of shock. Drink that and then I'll call a taxi to get you home."

Jenny took a sip, grimacing at the liquor as it hit her throat. "I thought you were going to explain."

He looked around at the punters in the pub; they looked Muggle, but one never knew. "How to begin?" he asked rhetorically. "Jenny, some of the things I might tell you will sound unbelievable. Even after all these years, I am often amazed at the knowledge I have."

He stared into his glass, lost in his thoughts. With a sigh, he pulled out his mobile and dialled the number the bar maid had given him for a taxi. He finished the call with a promise from the dispatcher the cabbie would call when he arrived.

"What kind of things, Severus?" she asked. Jenny was confused yet curious about his strange behaviour.

Severus took a deep breath and looked at her. "What would you say if I told you all the fairy tales and myths you have heard are actually based on real historical fact?"

Jenny smiled. "Well, yes, the ancients had to explain away natural happenings they didn't understand and created... "

"No!" he snapped quietly. "I mean real, witnessed and documented history." He looked again into her eyes. He saw fear dawning in their depths.

"Jenny, what I will reveal to you is forbidden to most Muggles." He watched for her reaction.

"What the hell is a Muggle?" she asked.

"You and most likely everyone here in the pub are Muggles." He told her in a voice she had to lean in closer to discern.

Jenny wasn't sure she wanted to hear his reply, but she asked, "What does that make you and your mates back at the park?"

Severus gave a cheerless smile. "I am, and they are, wizards," he whispered.

Jenny looked at him and started to giggle. "Funny, Severus, very funny."

Severus reached into his sleeve and pulled out the end of his wand. He showed it to her. "Is this a joke? You recall you asked what they had in their hands. We use wands."

Jenny swallowed and looked around. Thankfully, they were still being ignored. "This is insane," she told him.

"On the contrary, this is the most sensible thing I've done in a long while." At that moment his mobile rang. He answered it then finished his drink. "The taxi's here."

Jenny took one last sip and left the rest of the drink behind. He led her out of the pub to the waiting cab. She hesitated as she felt his hand on her arm.

"Jenny, please tell me you know I'd never hurt you. Please, don't be afraid of me. I am the same man today I was yesterday." He opened the car door for her.

"Severus, you must know that isn't true," she replied, then hesitated. "I'll give you the chance to talk to me and explain more."

Jenny got in the taxi followed by Snape, who gave her address. They travelled in silence, too absorbed by their own thoughts for anything else. They stopped in front of her house and Severus paid the tariff. He followed her to the front door and, with trepidation, pulled out the door key, holding it in the palm of his hand.

"If you want me gone forever without further ado, I'll return this." He watched her painful rumination. She was clearly tormented, but Severus understood the choices she was making.

"I said you could have the chance to talk..." she began.

"No, Jenny, you must tell me; do you understand I would never hurt you and I would... will, do everything in my power to protect you." He watched for her reaction.

Jenny let the tears she'd held in abeyance fall. Her heart was torn.

"I don't know. Oh, Severus," she sobbed, "I need to know more, I need to understand," she gasped. "Who are you and what is going on?" Finally, she pulled out her key, leaving Severus holding his. She opened the door and burst into the familiarity of her home.

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Arthur Weasley entered the house on Grimmauld Place with a grim look on his face. He made his way to the kitchen and looked around.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked, without greeting his wife.

"That school you went to; it's for people like you, isn't it?" she asked.

"We're call witches and wizards, Jenny. Yes, it's called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I taught there." He waited for her next question, knowing what it would be.

"What can you do with magic? Can you show me?" she asked cautiously.

He shook his head. "No. You saw the Aurors in the park. They can trace magic to its source. I've been living as a Muggle as much as possible."

"You're in hiding," she concluded. "Why?"

"I was given a task," He swallowed thickly, feeling his emotion rising in front of this woman. "I worked as a spy against those who sought to take over the reigns of power in the Magical world. They are still trying to usurp the current leadership. I had once been one of them, but circumstances changed, and I realized what a stupid mistake I'd made." He poured himself his own tea to have time to think.

"So, you left them," she concluded.

He shook his head bleakly. "I was asked to remain within their fold to get information and give disinformation. I had to be one of them. It was my penance." His voice had faded to a whisper.

Jenny recognized the guilt and stopped her line of questioning. "What did you do to get the good guys chasing you?"

Severus' eyes snapped up to her face, causing her to immediately regret the question. The pain she saw in his black pupils was palpable until he looked away.

"I made two oaths, neither of which I could deny. One was to ensure the life of one of my students, the son of an old friend of sorts. The second was to ensure the death of my... of a man who was more dear to me than anyone alive at that point."

"Why?" she asked softly.

"He was already wasting away. He'd sacrificed himself to get leverage for... someone who will be very important shortly." Severus sighed, "Albus had been a very powerful wizard, but his actions had sealed a fate that would leave him vulnerable at best, a terrible burden on those fighting to keep our people free."

He looked back at her. "He made me promise not to allow him to become a yoke about our necks. He made me promise that when he said, 'Please, Severus,' that I would remove him from this world." He shook his head. "Please, Severus, as though I were granting him a boon."

"Who else knows?" she asked, suddenly aware of the awful weight of guilt Severus was carrying on his shoulders.

"Right now... You."

The impact of the declaration hit Jenny. He'd shared his greatest secret with her. Was he lying or telling the truth, she wondered. She closed her eyes, remembering all of the hints she'd had of the mysterious world he came from. She lifted the wand and stood up. She walked over to him and lifted his hand, pressing the handle to his palm.

"Severus," she whispered, "how... how can I help you?"

Severus looked up at her, amazed that she was still there, still listening. He pulled her down onto his lap, setting his wand aside. "Jenny, my lovely Manchester Lass, you've done more to help me than anyone has ever done before." As she wrapped her arms around him, he cradled her head as it rested on his shoulder and began to rock her gently.

"Stay with me, Severus, I don't want to be alone tonight," she whispered in his ear. "I don't want you to be alone tonight."

"I've been alone for a long time, Jenny. I'm not afraid of loneliness, I'm not a coward," he whispered back.

"I never thought you were, Severus. Why do you need to convince yourself?" she asked, not expecting an answer. "I'm going to bed."

With that she rose and left him alone in the kitchen. He sat quietly, thinking about what she'd said. How the truth hurt sometimes. With a sigh, Severus stood and looked around once before turning out the lights and going to bed. How could anyone fear loneliness when one was no longer alone?

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Hermione and the boys had gone into London to do some shopping. Harry especially, had grown over the past year and needed new clothes. Tailoring charms only allowed the threads to stretch so far before they tended to fray and fall apart.

Excusing herself from them, Hermione headed to the Ladies room and spent a penny. Pulling down the lid, she sat and pulled out her phone. The toilets were busy, so her conversation was not likely to be heard. She retrieved the number for Tobias Prince and dialed.

Miles away, Severus felt the vibration of his mobile going off in his back pocket. He pulled it out, expecting the call to be from Jenny but when he looked at the small screen, he didn't recognize the number.

Severus switched on the phone, "Hello?" He waited for a reply.

"Is this Tobias Prince?" asked a familiar girlish voice.

Severus grinned, he knew her curiosity would demand her to contact him. "Miss Granger, I presume?"

Hermione gasped, that she'd known it was him hadn't prepared her for the reality of speaking to Dumbledore's murderer.

"What are you playing at?" she spat. "Do you think we'll just let you fall into our good graces because you feel guilty over what you've done? You can't believe that sending us presents will convince us that you're on our side?" Her voice began to tremble as her emotions tried to overwhelm her.

Severus heard her emotion and felt his stomach tighten in response. She hit a couple of nerves with her comments.

"My feelings and beliefs have no bearing on my actions, Miss Granger. Please believe me, I am playing no game. It matters not what you think about my loyalty, for I don't answer to you or your bookend boyfriends." He waited for her to take the bait.

Hermione was incensed at his accusation, "They are not both my boyfriends, Professor!"

"I'm not your professor anymore, Granger. Best you'd remember that, for I'm not bound by the restraint I had to show while I was," he spat.

Hermione took a deep breath to regain her composure. He was right. He had nothing to lose and might just carry out some of the threats he'd given them while they were his students.

"Why did you want me to call you?" she asked, getting to the crux of the call at last.

"A warning and a date, Miss Granger," he told her. "Tom intends to end it one way or the other. He has decided on Beltane. I suggest you put your little, computerized brain into high gear and get wonder boy ready. You've got to come up with a solution that works to get rid of the fragments, and I'll give you a hint. If you hit on them one by one, he'll know."

"Beltane, are you sure?" she gasped.

"You know me better than that Granger. I deal in absolutes not abstractions." He was ready to end the call.

Hermione snorted, "Is that what you'd call your riddle-trap to protect the Philosopher's Stone, an absolute?"

Now Snape snorted, "There was no abstraction to the logical mind, was there Granger? You must agree you solved it with very little difficulty."

"Will you contact us again?" asked Hermione, realizing she'd actually been complimented.

"Give me your e-mail address and I'll send you information that way. Wizarding-kind likes paper, even if it's only a computer print-out."

Hermione cringed. "All right, but keep it to yourself. It's Densaugoeo101 at Yahoo dot com."

From deep in his chest, Severus felt a bubble of laughter burble up. Before he knew it, he found himself laughing harder than he had in years. At the other end of the phone, he heard Hermione curse him.

"Insufferable bastard," she spat into her phone before ending the call.

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The door bell rang. Jenny turned off the vacuum and answered the door. Severus stood there, leaning on the frame, a bouquet of roses in a rainbow of colours in his hands.

"Happy St Valentine's day, Jenny." He smiled and presented her with the flowers.

"Oh, Severus, how lovely," she exclaimed before inhaling their scent. "Come in, I was just tidying up."

"I know I hadn't asked, but would you like to go out for a meal?" he asked shyly.

Jenny smiled at him. Sometimes he seemed so young to her, while at other times, he was world weary and aged beyond his years.

"We've gone way past you being uncomfortable asking me something like that, Severus." She went to the kitchen for a vase. Severus followed her.

"I know; it's just this day-Valentines Day- is one I used to hate. All crepe paper hearts and sickly, sweet, poorly written poetry." He watched as she started to cut the flowers with scissors and stopped her. "Not that way. Do you have a sharp knife?"

Jenny handed him a sharp paring knife and watched as he deftly trimmed the stems with a special cut.

"Roses are woody and need a lot of water. You need to expose the root end as much as possible. Boil and aerate the water to remove the chlorine as much as possible or use spring water."

Pouring what water was left in the kettle into a vase; Jenny refilled the kettle and set it on the stove. "How do you know so much about flowers?"

He raised his brows. "I had to learn about botany for my specialty. All things natural and growing must be understood to know magic. Everything in nature has a purpose and use. How you handle living things determine how they survive." He looked over at her. "I think Muggles are just learning that now."

"What did you teach in your school?" she asked, for up until now she'd thought magic was just magic.

"Potions," he replied. "You had the benefit of one last Halloween."

Jenny thought back. "The ointment for my ankle. I remember you told me you'd made it."

"Indeed, it's a very rudimentary formula taught to our younger students." He started to put the roses into the vase.

"You could make a fortune selling that in a chemist's shop," she told him, watching his hands arrange the flowers. When he came to the last one he stopped and turned to her.

Severus took the red rose and held it to his nose, inhaling the scent before holding it out to her. "Do you know the meaning of the colours of roses?" he asked.

"I'm sure I've heard somewhere, but I can't remember." She watched as he pointed to the different blossoms in the vase.

"Pink means grace, perfect happiness. Dark pink means gratitude. Light pink means admiration, sympathy. White means innocence, purity, secrecy, humility. Yellow means undying lover, platonic love, friendship. Orange means passion, desire. Blue means extraordinary, mystery. Red and White mean unity. Red means love, respect and courage."

He turned back to look at her. "I couldn't decide which colour fit you best, for you are all these things to me. I don't make declarations, but I hope that perhaps the flowers will speak for me."

"Wait here," said Jenny before returning to the living room. When she returned, she had a small box tied with a ribbon. "Here, I hope you like it."

Severus took her gift and opened it. Inside the box lay a variegated pink, cream and white water smoothed stone. On the surface, he saw his name and hers had been etched into the flat surface. He hadn't thought any Muggles would have known that tradition. Then he smiled, Jenny would have researched and found it.

"You understand the meaning of this, don't you?" he asked.

"Of course, I know about the tradition. I couldn't think of anything better to give you, even though the jeweller thought I was a bit daft." She reached up and touched his face. "Maybe one day we might complete the ritual."

He turned and kissed her palm. "We will one day, I promise."

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Lucius sat in the forlorn drawing room alone. He regarded the transformed goblet before him. He was sure it was an exact duplicate, having used a pensieve memory to ensure its authentic appearance.

"Such a benign object," he observed aloud to no one but himself. "Shall you be the guarantor of my revenge or my defeat? What should I incise upon you, to say I am your architect?" He picked up the shiny object and twisted it in the flickering candlelight.

"You shine and dazzle the beholder -- so practical, yet pleasing to the eye. Such refined delicacy that veils the strength of a giant within its gentle curves." He smiled and began to laugh. "So, my lovely doppelganger, you name yourself. You will be she who perished in my name. my beloved... my cherished treasure... Narcissa."

Lucius touched his wand to the base of the goblet causing the name Narcissa to be inscribed into the wrought metal. "It shall not be in vain, my love. Your death will be avenged in the blood of my master." He leaned back and picked up a goblet of elfin wine. "To you my beloved, my Narcissa, Happy Valentines Day."

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A/N

Jaffa cakes are biscuits (cookies) made up of a cakelike base topped with orange flavoured jelly which is then topped with chocolate. Yum!

The gift Jenny gives Snape is a Celtic Love stone. Tradition says if two people in love carve their names onto the stone and then cast it into the sea together, they will be reunited in the afterlife.

Gathering Clouds of War

Chapter 11 of 19

Our tale begins immediately following the tragic events on the night of Dumbledore's murder. Where did Severus Snape go? Who helped him? The story is an exploration into the many faces of an undercover spy. Who is this man? What is his true self? Can redemption be found in loving another? Travel a while with the Slytherin spy and see how his life evolves.

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Thanks to all who reviewed.

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This was a day Snape had dreaded a full blown revel leading up to the final confrontation. Followers had been summoned. The grounds around the old Riddle mansion were teeming with witches and wizards ready to fulfil the commands of their depraved leader. It was Ostara, the festival of the Vernal Equinox on the ancient calendar. In Severus' mind it was an excuse for excess and degeneracy

As he wandered around the grounds, Snape watched as the younger wizards traded tales of bravado over mugs of butterbeer. Nearer the house, the older, more experienced followers indulged in Firewhisky while perusing the available talent for a night's entertainment. He turned his back on a circle forming around a helpless young woman.

"Remember," said Rabastan, "Nothing mortal. This is for practise only." He looked around the circle once with a stern frown on his face, then gave a feral smile. "But that doesn't mean you can't have fun."

Snape listened as she screamed when the first curse was cast. He quickly made his way into the house, as much to escape the sound as to keep his appointed meeting. He made his way to the large front room.

"Severus, come closer. I must ask you something," Voldemort beckoned him forward. "Severus, the lovely Bellatrix revealed to me you had, for want of a better word, coaxed some information from her whilst she was favouring you."

Snape kept his mental shields tight against intrusion as he looked at the mutated man. "Indeed, My Lord, Bella is rather vocal whilst she shares her favours. I'm sure you know this."

"While with me? Vocal perhaps, but never coherent." Voldemort waved his hand for emphasis before returning to the point. "I speak of an artefact whose whereabouts she knew. Are you familiar with what I refer to?" Voldemort waited for Snape's reply.

Snape allowed a smile to grow on his face. "My lord, you have me. I had sought to gift it to you at the appropriate moment. The purchase was intended to offer safekeeping to your treasure. Have you not set a task for anyone to be a watch over your other special artefacts?"

"Such matters do not concern you, Severus," said Voldemort, his face a mask. "You should have told me, Severus.*Crucio!*" Severus suddenly found himself being tortured on the floor of the main drawing room.

"What was your intention, Severus?" he demanded. "Did you think to keep it from me? Barter for something? Speak!" Voldemort released the curse and watched as Severus fought to breathe from his foetal position on the floor.

Snape sucked in air as a drowning man would. He sought to rise to his knees, only to be kicked in the side by Pettigrew.

"Lord," he gasped, "my only wish was to bear your artefact to the place of confrontation. I had hoped you would grant me that honour." He still lay on his side on the floor when Voldemort approached him and crouched down near his head.

"Servants shouldn't be so presumptuous, should they, Severus?" Voldemort watched as Snape nodded. He stroked Severus' cheek. "Good boy, now do you still wish to have the honour?" Again, Snape nodded.

Voldemort stood and returned to his seat. "Get up, Severus," he ordered quietly.

Snape fought to stand. He finally rose unsteadily to his feet and noticed Lucius watching him. The man's face was blank, but his eyes betrayed the fury his soul was stoking ever higher.

"Severus, I have decided Lucius shall lead his brothers as we confront our enemies. You, my dark spy..." At this, Voldemort began to chuckle. "You will be the bait to pull

them in to the appointed place." The Dark Lord's mirth knew no bounds as he laughed at his own callous humour. "Yes indeed, they will all come to capture the murderer of Albus Dumbledore, may his soul rot in Hades, and we shall be waiting."

Later, Lucius found Snape alone in the dark, dank library of Riddle Manor, his body still racked by the aftereffects of the Cruciatus Curse.

"Come, old friend, we'll go to my house and rest. I've no appetite for revelry." Malfoy took Snape's arm and draped it over his shoulder as he helped him to stand.

Snape shook his head. "No, Lucius, I must go home. I have a potion."

Lucius supported him with difficulty, his lame leg threatening to give way. At that moment, Bellatrix entered the library and saw them.

"You're not staying for the festivities?" she asked, her eyebrow rose in suspicion of their actions.

"Bella, use your misbegotten eyes. Neither of us is in any shape to participate in a revel, let alone the type of entertainment planned for tonight," spat Lucius, struggling to support Snape. He was still trembling, and his muscles contracted involuntarily when he least expected it.

Bellatrix came forward and took Snape's other side. "Come on, you've been punished for your cruelty to me. I suppose I owe you for taking care of the problem of Draco."

Lucius grit his teeth at her comment. Ah yes, he thought, Voldemort, Pettigrew and Bellatrix --the trio who were responsible for his loss. They would all pay, one way or the other.

Snape felt the other man stiffen and glanced out of the side of his eye towards him. The look in Lucius' eyes spoke volumes about his feelings at that moment. He had to get him away from Bella.

"Just get me close to Spinner's End and then you can return, Bella. You've been there before. Lucius and I can make it to my house," said Severus in a voice laced with pain.

Bella nodded. "Alright, let's get to the Apparition point."

Bella took Severus with Side-Along Apparition while Lucius went alone. As soon as she had gotten him to Manchester, Bella released Severus and returned to Riddle Manor. Lucius once again steadied Severus as he walked.

Severus snorted. "We're fools, the pair of us. Remember Flitwick and the feather?"

Lucius laughed suddenly. "Of course." He pointed his wand at Snape and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa*." Severus was suddenly weight-free and actually helped Lucius to walk.

"I hope there're no Aurors about tonight," said Snape to himself as much as to Lucius. "Or any Muggle coppers, for that matter."

"Don't worry, old chap. They'd take us for a couple of old, drunken sots by the way we're staggering, not to mention by the way we're dressed." He turned them into Spinner's End, recognizing the 'Do Not Notice' Charm he'd passed through. The entire street was uninhabited, but for the only house without boards on the windows.

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Arthur sat back in his chair and patted his belly. "Molly, you've outdone yourself once again. That was a wonderful dinner," he told her.

"Yes indeed, Molly, a fine holiday repast; thank you." Minerva raised her glass of wine in a toast to the hostess of the house.

The people sitting around the table all joined in her toast, to Molly's embarrassment.

"As long as no one leaves the table hungry," Molly replied. As she started to clear the table with her wand, two elves suddenly appeared.

"I hope you don't mind, Molly," Minerva said, "but we need to get the meeting underway and the others will arrive soon. I brought along a little help." She indicated the two elves that had started to work on cleaning up.

Molly looked startled, but said, "Oh, all right then. Shall we?" She indicated the door to the upstairs. As the others made their way, Molly turned to the elves and warned, "I'll be checking everything when I come back down. Make sure it's done right." The two small creatures stared back at her and nodded their heads vigorously.

The Order was meeting in the library of Grimmauld Place. It was the first full meeting of the members since Hermione had spoken to Snape. She'd shared her information with McGonagall and Lupin. Remus had in turn spoken to Harry and Ron, deflecting their well worn objections with a warning.

"You can't afford not to believe it," Lupin had spat at the two boys. "We knew it would happen sooner or later. Apparently, it will be sooner. Now, you need to get to work." Remus Lupin, when he got angry, got very angry. They didn't argue.

"Well," said Minerva, "now that we have a date to focus on, we need to decide how to best use our resources. Remus is working with both Hermione and Harry. I do think Harry needs a coach who is dedicated to him alone, however. Perhaps, Alastor?"

McGonagall had discussed this with Harry prior to the meeting and had fought down all his objections. Mad-Eye Moody, as eccentric as he was, still had the most knowledge of the dark curses and counter-curses Harry might come in contact with.

Moody looked up at Minerva and Harry before nodding. "I can do that. Just be prepared to work, boy."

"Remus, you will work with Hermione on what you've been concentrating on." She looked at them both. Hermione and Remus looked at each other and nodded.

"As for the rest of us, we need to keep our ears to the ground and our wands at the ready. If you can, drill yourselves in the basic protective charms, but most of all, be prepared. Be as ready as you can be, my friends. We must prevail. We must for his sake." Minerva's voice faltered at the last as she looked at the picture of the dozing Dumbledore.

Hermione had looked at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore as McGonagall had spoken and had imagined that the sleeping figure had almost frowned. She shook her head, looking at it once more and saw there was no change to the picture.

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The time wore on as Snape waited for a sign. He'd divided his time between conducting personal research on Horcruxes and finding solace in Jenny's arms. At her gentle insistence, he'd finally rented a car and driven to Stonehenge with her, knowing the magic that flowed about the place drew witches and wizards from everywhere for special occasions. He could safely perform a few charms for her and settle her curiosity.

Jenny felt as though she'd entered Wonderland as Severus levitated, disappeared and transfigured things before her eyes. His final charm that caused her to lift into the air had laid to rest any doubt in her mind of his power. She knew there was no trick, no gimmickry involved in his spell.

Late on their afternoon out, they sat under a spreading tree and shared a picnic. Severus sat with his back against the tree trunk with Jenny leaning against him, his arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"Is there any limit to magic?" she asked.

Severus shook his head. "I don't honestly know. Some witches and wizards spend their entire lives in the study of magic, much like Muggle scientists."

"Do you?" she wondered.

"Once upon a time, I did," he answered sadly.

Jenny thought about what she wanted to ask next, but she was shy. Taking a deep breath she asked, "Do magic folk do special things when they have... wh-when they make love?" Her voice was quiet.

"There are things about the physical act that magic folk sometimes go about differently." He smiled behind her back. "Levitation above the bed, charms to increase sensation..." he began to list.

"Have you, you know, ever tried some of this stuff?" she asked, still nervous about the conversation.

He sighed. "I've borne the brunt of another's fantasy, if that's what you mean. Frankly, what I've shared with you outstrips any other experience I've had."

"Really?" she asked, surprised at his response.

He nodded. "Really. Making love is far superior to fornicating with an available partner." Severus was glad she didn't notice the word 'willing' had been omitted.

"You prefer what we have together?" She looked up into his dark eyes.

"Without question, there is nothing I desire more than to be with you." He kissed her softly and pulled her closer to his body.

As they sat together, they saw the sun disappear beneath a sudden formation of low-lying clouds. They gathered together their picnic supplies and headed back to the car. Severus had just started the engine when a mist seemed to descend, rapidly becoming a fog.

"We've got to get back, quickly," he told her, looking up at the sky.

Jenny looked at him, "What is it, Severus?"

"A sign," he replied cryptically.

They drove back to Manchester, mostly in silence. Severus saw her to her door and ushered her in.

"Don't go out tomorrow, Jenny," he told her, just before taking his leave.

"But, Severus, I'm working tomorrow." She was puzzled at his behaviour.

"Please, Jenny, for me, just stay home. I'll come if I can." He touched her face, hoping to convince her of his urgency.

"Okay, I've not called in sick for a while. I'll call now and say I'm poorly. They can get someone to cover me." She sensed his worry and felt it pass to her. There was something happening he was unwilling to share.

"Good, I'll call you. Don't answer the door unless someone you know is coming." He kissed her quickly and made his way out.

"Be careful, Severus," she called, as he jogged to the rented car. As he drove away, she locked the door behind her and leaned on it. An overwhelming sense of dread seemed to settle in her heart.

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Ron and Harry stared out of the window into the garden behind the old house. The fog swirled in unremitting ribbons of grey, causing depression to crowd in on anxiety and fear.

"It's them; the Dementors are breeding again," commented Ron, looking at the sky.

"Yeah, just makes my day," said Harry, turning away from the scene. "We've still not found them all. I don't know where else to look for a Horcrux."

"Maybe Hermione'll be able to get some information from Snape. I bet he knew where they all were to begin with." Ron walked over and slumped into chair beside the fire.

"He told us that if we destroy the Horcruxes one by one, Voldemort will know," said Harry.

"Do you believe him?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged. "Remus thought that the idea had merit. It does make sense." Harry joined Ron to sit by the fire.

"So we're just going to gather them all together and, boom, blow them all up at the same time," Ron said sarcastically.

"Indeed, we might just do that, Ron." Remus smiled at the look of chagrin on Ron's face as he entered the room.

Ron twisted his face into a lopsided grin. "How much can we trust him, Professor?"

"I'm not your professor any more Ron, but to answer your question, if he really wanted us to be defeated, he wouldn't have sent us the Ravenclaw sceptre." Remus sat on the divan facing the fire, "I don't know his motivation, except he was always driven to prove himself. To his teachers, his housemates, his peers at school and I believe to himself."

"Yeah, well he just about drove us around the bend," muttered Ron.

Remus chuckled. "I think that before the events of the confrontation are played out, we will have a lot revealed to us. In the meantime, we work and become as fully prepared as possible."

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Snape heard a knock on his door. Dousing the lights, he pulled aside the blackout curtain and looked out the window. The man at the door stood back and looked at the window, knowing he was under scrutiny. It was Lucius Malfoy.

Pulling his wand, Severus relit the candles and opened the door. Malfoy entered silently and went to the front room. He set a box down on the rickety side table.

"They're breeding again," stated Malfoy referring to the fog, knowing Snape would understand.

"That's it?" asked Severus, pointing to the box.

Malfoy nodded and sat on the side chair. "I don't think anyone's noticed. I switched them while both He and Wormtail had left for an hour. Nagini was asleep."

"Were you able to check the snake?" asked Snape hopefully.

"Yes," replied Lucius. "There was no trace of a soul fragment."

Snape sighed in relief. "Then I'm on the right track." He went to the sideboard, poured two fingers of brandy in a glass and handed it to Lucius. "I think you could use this."

"Thank you." Lucius took a sip and set the glass down. He looked at his hands and snorted. "Look at me, trembling like a mewling child."

"There's none of us the same man we were at the outset of this debacle, Lucius," Snape told him quietly.

"You saw the truth earlier than I." Lucius took up his glass and stared into its depths.

"I had nothing to offer, but my knowledge and skill, Lucius. I looked for prestige; it did not appear. You were seduced by the promise of power and wealth things you already had. You had the luxury of patience." Severus sat on the sofa and sipped his own brandy.

"I received this at the Manor today." Lucius held out a letter.

Snape read the parchment and frowned. "He's coming back in two days time." He looked at Lucius.

"Yes, and bringing someone." Lucius looked back at Snape, his face decisive. "I must meet him when he arrives."

"Lucius," began Snape

"He's all I have left," Lucius yelled.

Snape nodded. "All right, but we'll travel the Muggle way after we've ensured the delivery of the goblet."

"You have a plan?" Lucius asked.

"I hope so," Snape told him, "We'll find out tomorrow."

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"Hello? Severus? Oh, Severus, thank God you called. I was going to call you, but I thought you might be... involved in something." Jenny sank to her sofa, relieved to hear his voice.

"Of course you can...What? Is he a... you know... as well?" Hearing Snape's response, Jenny nodded. "All right, I'll be waiting." She hung the phone up and went to the mirror to check her hair. He was on his way over with a friend.

Looking out of her window, Jenny watched for the car to turn into her street. When she saw the grey car come round the corner and park in front of her house, she ran to the front door and unlocked it to let him in.

As soon as he entered, Severus smiled at the worried look on Jenny's face. He was almost bowled over when she launched herself into his arms.

"I've been so worried, Severus. The fog hasn't gone away, and the weather forecast can't explain it." She had buried her face into his shoulder and didn't notice the other man behind him.

Lucius took in the sight of Severus Snape comforting a Muggle with a bemused smile. It was, for want of a better word, diverting.

"It's alright, Jenny. I'm all right." Severus pulled her arms from his neck and kissed her hand. "Jenny, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Lucius Malfoy. Lucius, Miss Jenny Doulton."

"How do you do, Mr Malfoy," said Jenny, cautiously extending her hand.

Malfoy took her hand and bowed courteously over it. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Doulton, but please; no formalities, you must call me Lucius."

"Well, you must have gone to that same posh school Severus did," she teased.

Lucius looked at Snape with a raised eyebrow. "Indeed, Miss Doulton, though the word 'posh' is not one I would append to it."

"Please, call me Jenny. Miss Doulton makes me feel like an old schoolmistress. Come in and make yourselves comfortable." Jenny indicated her living room.

Lucius looked around the typically Muggle living room, realizing this was the first time he'd ever stood in one without the intention of overseeing its ruin. He took in the contents with poorly disguised contempt.

"Would you like some coffee?" asked Jenny, trying to put her thoughts in order. She watched as the one called Lucius looked down his nose at her home.

"Yes, thank you, Jenny," said Snape. He watched as she went into the kitchen and then sat at the computer. "Turn it off, old man. She's better off than either you or I for the moment."

Lucius sniffed in disdain. "I may not be as affluent as I once was, but I have standards which I hold to. They are my succour in my time of grief." He walked over to join Snape. "What are you doing?" asked Lucius. Severus logged in to his e-mail service.

"I'm contacting our new allies to let them know of a delivery." Snape relied. "This is my succour in my time of greatest need." He patted the computer screen and continued typing.

"And Jenny, of course," offered Lucius with a grin.

Snape nodded. "Of course," he admitted.

"You're telling them about the case, but you haven't asked her yet." said Lucius, watching his friend operate the Muggle machine confidently.

"I was speaking of your son in this missal." Snape continued to type. "And to let them know about the snake."

Jenny came out from the kitchen. "Severus Snape, I think I created a monster when I showed you how to use that thing. Sometimes I wonder if it's me or the computer you come to see."

"Come now, Jenny; this keyboard has none of your charms, and the screen doesn't show me anything I haven't asked it to." He glanced over at her. "You're always full of surprises."

"Yeah, well don't sell yourself short on that regard," she retorted sarcastically.

"Mr. Weasley, Mr. Weasley," cried Hermione as she ran into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. "You must read this." She passed him a sheet of paper with a printout from her parent's computer. "Remus and I Apparated to my house first thing, as usual. This came last night. Excuse me, I need to speak to Harry."

Hermione left the kitchen and hurried up the stairs.

"A delivery to be picked up at the London Euston station around ten o'clock. Arthur is expected to be the recipient. Expect a phone call at the Ministry. Another will arrive late in the evening, delivered to the front door. Note to Potter the snake has no soul." Arthur frowned over the e-mail message. "What in Merlin's name is he talking about?"

"I don't like the sounds of this, Arthur. You should take some precautions. Maybe Alastor could go with you," Molly suggested.

Arthur stood to leave. "Molly, Euston is totally Muggle, not a lick of Magical influence. I might as well take a house-elf to carry the delivery as soon as ask Mad-Eye to go." He pecked his wife on the cheek. "He's a smart one, Severus is. He's making sure he uses Muggle locations for contact points. It's safer for him and for us. Not to worry, I'll be fine. As for later, well, the Order will be here."

Molly watched her husband leave for work. Within moments, the clock she'd moved from the Burrow to Grimmauld Place showed him as travelling, then Mortal Peril. She would look at the clock every few minutes for the rest of the day until he was safely home.

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"Harry," called Hermione as she reached the landing outside Harry's room. "Harry, look, he's sent another message."

Hermione passed over a second copy of the e-mail to Harry, who'd just woken. He rubbed his eyes and pulled on his glasses. He took time to read the message twice.

"Dumbledore was wrong, Nagini isn't a Horcrux according to this." He fell back onto his pillows, sighing in frustration. "That sets us back even more," he groaned.

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Perhaps not, Harry. The deliveries he's talking about, perhaps they will help us."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, Hermione. It's becoming very confusing. Whose side is he really on?"

"I don't know either, Harry, but it seems he's willing to give us information. He did give us the Ravenclaw Horcrux."

"I still hate him," said Harry in a dark tone. "He's still a murderer."

Hermione thought for a moment and said, "Harry, if Dumbledore were still alive, if the night of the attack had never happened, how far along would we be in looking for the Horcruxes? Would we have found even one?"

Harry frowned and looked at his friend. "I don't know Hermione, I just don't know."

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Jenny sat and looked out of the window for most of the three hour trip to London. She'd tried to read a paper, but her mind would wander, and she'd read and re-read the same paragraph repeatedly before giving in. The fog hadn't lifted nor had it gotten heavier. A dreary gloom seemed to permeate the atmosphere, leaving everyone drawn and distant. There was little conversation in the carriage; a toddler cried intermittently throughout the trip. The journey felt more like they were accompanying a funeral bier than making a commuter's jaunt.

With a sigh, Jenny took more notice when they got to the outskirts of London. The train slowed through the many switches and finally glided into Euston Station at ten minutes before ten in the morning. She got off the train and looked around, wondering where she should go. Looking up at the signs, she decided to go to the centre of the station to call. Perhaps this Mr. Weasley would direct her from there. When Jenny got to the information hub, she stopped at a vacant seat and pulled out her mobile. She dialled the number Severus had given her and sat down.

"Ministry of Magic, Muggle Communications Office," announced a very typical sounding receptionist.

"Oh, uhm, may I speak to Arthur Weasley, please?" Jenny asked.

"Who may I say is calling?" asked the voice.

"He's not met me before. It's about a delivery he was expecting this morning. He received a letter about it yesterday." Jenny hoped that was enough.

"One moment please, while I contact Mr. Weasley." The call was obviously put on hold, as Jenny heard music. She didn't recognize the rock tune, but the lyrics were saying something about 'Dance like a Hippogriff,' whatever the hell that was.

"Hello?" A male voice came on the line.

"Is that you, Mr. Weasley?" asked Jenny.

"Yes, who am I speaking with?" he asked.

"Jenny Doulton. I have something you have been expecting, I believe," she told him, not wanting to reveal too much.

"Excellent. You are at the Euston railway station are you not?" He asked.

"Yes, at the information booth," she replied.

"Go to the Euston Road exit to the Tube and wait there. I'll be with you in a jiffy," said Arthur.

"Alright, I'll be there. Oh, I'm wearing a grey coloured raincoat, and I'm carrying a briefcase," she told him.

"So is everyone else in Muggle London, my dear. Don't worry, I'll find you." He hung up at that.

Jenny waited at the doors, looking around for someone who might be looking for her. She had started to consider calling Severus when a tall, thin man with balding red hair approached her.

"Are you Miss Doulton?" he asked.

"Yes and you'd be Mr. Weasley?" Jenny responded.

"Miss Doulton, why did you not just Floo to the Ministry and ask for me at the front desk? It's not uncommon for that to happen," asked Arthur, curious to know why they were meeting in the Muggle station.

Jenny frowned. "Flew? I'm not a pilot, Mr Weasley, and the train is far cheaper than an aeroplane."

Now Arthur was confused. "Miss Doulton, are you a witch?" he asked.

Jenny shook her head. "No, Mr Weasley, I'm as Muggle as they come." She waited for his reaction.

Arthur smiled and held out his hand. "Call me Arthur," he said, "Welcome to London. I'm sorry it was an inauspicious greeting, but given the way things are..." He left the rest unsaid.

"I understand. Now what?" she asked.

"Let's get you to a safe place. You'll get to meet everyone there. I'm sure you have lots to tell us, and my wife will be making lunch shortly." He opened the door and let Jenny precede him through, then offered his arm as he led her to the Tube station.

They exited the Kings Cross station and walked the rest of the way. When they stopped in front of some run-down houses, Mr. Weasley pulled out a scrap of paper and passed it to her. Jenny read the writing 'The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at 12 Grimmauld Place.'

"What does this me... Bloody hell!" Jenny watched as a house seemed to squeeze itself into being between two others.

"Come on then," said Arthur, pulling her along. "Now, be very quiet when you're in the front hall. There's a portrait that doesn't take kindly to Muggles." He opened the door and let her enter.

Jenny walked into an ancient house that had obviously seen better days. She could smell pine cleaner, lavender and mothballs that seemed to suit the place to a tee. Arthur indicated she should go upstairs. On the next landing, Arthur ushered her into a room that looked to be a library. Several people were there, and all looked up as they entered.

"Hello, everyone, I've just gotten the delivery from our accomplice," he told them as he rubbed his palms together.

Remus stood and came towards them. "Is this lady the delivery, Arthur?"

"Oh, uhm... Jenny?" He looked at her, embarrassed that he hadn't asked the obvious.

Jenny held out the briefcase. "I was asked to bring this to you."

Arthur took the briefcase and handed it off to Remus. "Let me introduce you to Miss Jenny Doulton, a Muggle. Jenny, this is Remus Lupin." He began to introduce her around.

"Miss Doulton," said Lupin, shaking her hand.

"And this is Hermione, Harry, Tonks, my son Ron and my daughter Ginny," he continued, pointing to everyone in turn.

"How do you do, Miss Doulton. Did you have to travel far?" Tonks asked the question nonchalantly, but had looked for information in the answer to the whereabouts of Snape.

"Please call me Jenny," she requested, and with a suspicious feeling in her gut, continued, "I travelled most of the night."

"You must be exhausted. Ginny, go and get some tea," instructed Arthur, leading Jenny to a chair.

"Are you working in Scotland, Jenny?" asked Tonks as Ginny left for the kitchen.

"No," replied Jenny.

"How did you come to know our mutual friend," asked Hermione, ignoring the sick look on Ron's face.

"I work in a library, and he was doing some research. I gave him a little assistance." Jenny smiled innocently.

"So, he had access to a computer at the library then?" asked Harry.

"No, he used my personal PC. Are you all witches and wizards?" Jenny asked finally.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, pretty much. Hermione's parents are Muggles. We've gotten the messages through them."

Jenny was surprised. "You mean your mum and dad don't have to be magic for you to be a witch?"

"Not necessarily, Jenny. Any combination of magic folk or Muggle will do." Lupin smiled kindly at her, fully aware she wasn't telling all. He also decided to let it go for now.

Ginny came back, floating a tea tray in front of her. "Good girl, Ginny. How do you take your tea, Jenny?" asked Arthur.

Jenny watched, bemused at the sight of a teapot being levitated and the milk and sugar floating towards her.

Remus, in the meantime, had called Harry over as he opened the brief case to reveal Hufflepuff's cup. "Go on, Harry, test it as I've shown you."

Harry pulled out his wand and passed it over the object, chanting, '*Revelo Fragmen Anima*.' They both watched as the sickly green glow emanated from it.

"Remus," asked Harry, "is he on our side or not?"

"For now, Harry, I'd say he's on his own side. We'll know very soon what is in his mind." Remus closed up the case and took it to store with the other Horcruxes.

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Snape and Malfoy stood on the same rocky beach that had seen the departure of Draco scant months before. The rental car was parked on the roadway on the mainland. The sun had barely set off Holy Island when the ship from Durmstrang appeared. As soon as the gangplank touched the shore, Draco and his companion descended to dry land.

"Father," began Draco, only to be pulled into a hug that smothered all other speech.

"Lucius, we must go now," said Snape.

"Of course, come," said Lucius, leaning on his son.

"Who is your companion, Draco?" asked Snape as he made a quick return to the car.

"You've already met, sir. It's Viktor Krum." Draco smiled at his revelation.

Severus glanced over at the other man who had the hood of his cloak drawn up.

"Krum, what the bloody hell are you doing here?" asked Severus.

Krum looked at Snape, "I haff my own reasons, Professor. I lost my High Master Karkaroff to Him. He vos my mentor and my friend."

They reached the car, which earned strange looks from the younger wizards.

"Ask no questions, just get in and shut up," ordered Snape.

The two Malfoys got in the back where they could speak, leaving Krum in the front.

One stop for refreshment and five and a half hours later, Severus pulled up in front of the hidden house on Grimmauld Place.

"Severus, why are we here?" asked Lucius, recognizing the neighbourhood.

"Hidden in plain sight, old friend," said Severus as he got out of the car and stretched. He pulled out a scrap of paper from his pants pocket and looked at it sadly. It was the last gift he'd ever received from Dumbledore, on the day before the old man had died. He thought once more about what he was about to reveal, but felt it was the only choice he had. Enemies became allies under the most extreme circumstances. He handed the paper to Draco. "You must all read this."

When they had each read the scrap, their heads looked up towards the appearing house.

"Fidelius," muttered Krum.

"Indeed." Snape turned to them. "This won't be easy. Except for Krum, we're basically persona non grata here. They'll take our wands at the very least."

Draco looked at his father, who nodded his understanding.

Krum frowned. "Vhy, professor? Are you not fighting vith them against Him?"

"They're not sure of that anymore. Had you not heard of the events of last May and June?"

"Only vot Drago told me. You are very brave," Krum told him.

Snape snorted. "That is not the popular opinion here."

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The Order's meeting had been convened in the library of Grimmauld Place. Theories had been passed around, and Jenny had been questioned ad nauseum about Snape. She had skirted around giving away too much, but she could see they were becoming annoyed with her. While her welcome had been genial when she'd first arrived, the rest of the group, calling themselves the Order of the Phoenix, were less than cordial in their reception.

Moody was becoming impatient. "What is the next delivery?" he demanded of Jenny.

"Sir, Severus didn't give me any information. I was to bring the briefcase and wait. That is all I know." Jenny was becoming annoyed at the deformed man's belligerent tone.

"Aye, well, I suppose he's not willing to give information to his mistress." Moody sniffed and pulled a handkerchief out to blow his nose.

Jenny looked around at the others sitting in the room. They avoided her eyes, and some looked embarrassed. The one called McGonagall looked more than a little angry.

"Mr. Moody, exactly what are you inferring?" asked Jenny, her temper beginning to rise.

Moody looked at her with his magical eye. "I think you're a little tart that Severus picked up in a pub and pulled into his slimy lair. He puts you on a pedestal, and you do his bidding, whatever that might be." He offered a lecherous sneer.

Jenny walked to him and yelled into his face. "You are nothing, but a filthy-minded old pervert. You know nothing about me. I have principles, and I don't bend them."

"Principles, you say? If that were true, you'd never have given a second look to the greasy git." Moody looked down his nose at her. "I think you became his little piece on the side out of desperation."

Jenny's hand connected with the side of his face so hard and fast that Moody's magical eye was dislodged and fell to the floor. Minerva got up and came to stand behind the Muggle.

"Alastor, that is quite enough. You have no right to malign Miss Doulton's character in such a manner. I object to your use of such language in front of our younger members," Minerva told him sternly.

Moody picked his eye up from the floor and wiped it with the handkerchief before replacing it. "I think we should just Obliviate her and send her back to her pathetic little life, without the memories of Snape and us. She looks the type to be a spinster anyways."

Just as Jenny was about to object, a tinkling bell sounded through the house.

"The next delivery," said Arthur Weasley. He stood and made his way to the door.

"Wait," said Remus. "We should have more of us there when you open the door. Better safe than sorry." He looked over his shoulder and nodded at Kingsley Shacklebolt and Bill Weasley. "We'll all answer the door."

The four men went to check on the delivery, leaving the others sitting in an uncomfortable silence. Several minutes later, Arthur opened the door with a stunned look on his face.

"You'd better get a hold of yourselves. Ron." He looked intently at his son and nodded towards Harry. "This isn't what we expected."

Ron stepped closer to his friend, who was staring intently at the door. Arthur stood to one side, admitting two blond haired men, one walking with a limp.

"Draco," gasped a surprised Ginny.

Tonks stood quickly. "Uncle Lucius, how..." She stopped as his condition made itself known.

"Say hello to your cousin, Nymphadora, Draco," said Lucius, his voice a pale echo of his renowned arrogance.

Several of the Order had pulled their wands at the sight of the Death Eater. The next figure through the door was an even greater surprise.

"Viktor!" exclaimed Hermione, walking over to take his hand.

"Herm-own-nniny, you look even more beautiful than I remembered," Krum told her gallantly while he bowed and kissed her hand.

A final figure, wearing short dark hair with a beard and moustache, walked through the door and stopped. Gasps of recognition passed around the room, and every wand was pointed at him except for Fred and Ron's. They were struggling to keep Harry under control.

"Geroff me. I'm going to kill the bastard!" he yelled. Fred had pulled Harry's wand hand up and allowed a burst of magic to be sent up to the ceiling, pulling down some plaster.

Jenny ran to Severus and wrapped her arms around him. "Severus, I was so worried. I thought you weren't coming."

Whatever reaction the Order members expected of the man, the sight of Snape holding and comforting a Muggle was pretty near the bottom of the list.

"It's all right, Jenny. I told you no one would hurt you." He held her close and stroked her hair. Jenny was shaking her head where it lay on his shoulder. "What happened? Did someone threaten you?" he asked, his voice becoming dark.

"The one called Moody he wants to do something to my mind to make me forget you. Oblivious or something." She looked up at him. He was staring at the man with the strange eye.

"So, Mad-Eye, you still get your thrills from intimidating those weaker than you. You lay a finger on her, and you'll find out what happens when my Muggle side gets angry." Severus glared at him.

"Big talk from a man about to have his soul sucked out!" spat Moody through gritted teeth.

"Enough!" shouted Lupin, who'd returned with Shackbolt and Bill. "Let's have everyone put their wands away before there's an accident." He strode over to where Ron and Fred were still restraining Harry. He plucked Harry's wand from Fred's hand and pocketed it. "You, Mr Potter, will get this back when learn to behave yourself."

Kingsley held up four wands. "They all surrendered their wands when they stepped through the door. They've agreed we can hold them in safe keeping for now."

"Viktor's not under suspicion," Hermione said in his defence.

"I don't know about that, girly. Look who he's keeping company with," said Moody, his magical eye never leaving Snape.

McGonagall decided to take control. "Enough of these accusations. Mr. Krum, why are you here?" she asked.

Viktor looked at Harry. "I haff lost people I respected to this monster. First vos Cedric, a proud Trivizard Champion. He vos a good and decent vizard, he should not haff died. I remember the one who looked like him," he pointed at Moody, "cursing me. It vos partly my fault. Then, Master Karkaroff vos taken. He vos my friend." He looked down at Hermione. "Ven Drago told me off vat he vas doing, it vas my duty to come it vas my honour as vell."

"Well said, Krum," offered Arthur as he extended his hand to Viktor. Hermione pulled Viktor over to the side where there was an empty chair.

"And you, Lucius Malfoy, why are you and your son here?" McGonagall had asked this in a far less amiable tone than what she had offered Viktor.

"For the same reason Krum is," Lucius replied. "You know, of course. He killed her with His own wand in front of Draco. She was betrayed by one who would call himself my friend," he spat at last. Finally, in a defeated tone he asked, "Do you know what happened to her body?"

"I identified her and claimed it, Uncle Lucius. We buried her in the Black Family tomb," Tonks told him quietly.

Lucius nodded. "Thank you, niece."

"Thank you, cousin. It was most generous of you, considering..." began Draco, but his voice trailed off.

"Considering you treated me and my family like shit all these years? Yeah, well, Aunty Cissy was still family. It was the right thing to do." Tonks stared at each of them straight in the eye. Neither could hold her gaze. "I suppose you want to do the right thing now, then." Tonks watched the two Malfoys look at each other.

"I think Albus would have agreed that it's never too late to do the right thing." Arthur looked at his personal nemesis and held out his hand. "We'll never be friends; I'll settle for not being enemies."

Lucius looked at the proffered hand before he took it and shook. "Indeed, Weasley, not enemies it is."

Minerva walked over to Severus and Jenny. "I hardly recognized you, Severus. You look so Mu..."

"Go ahead and say it, Minerva. I look like a Muggle. Is it such a shock I should know how?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I suppose not. Where have you been, how have you lived?" she asked.

Severus snorted. "You don't actually expect me to answer that, do you?"

"We'll be getting answers from you soon enough, Snape," snarled Moody.

"Minerva, I need to speak to you and Lupin alone," said Snape, ignoring the blustering Auror.

"Just the two of us, Severus?" Minerva had no idea what he wanted in the meeting.

"It is important, but we should limit those who know for now." He looked at Lupin, hoping the man would sense his urgency. "Time is of the essence."

Minerva looked at Remus, who nodded once. "Alright then. Molly, can you get the others accommodated?" asked McGonagall.

"Of course, Professor." Molly bustled out to do her duty.

"Now, if everyone else would excuse us," instructed McGonagall, then watched as the Order filed out.

"You shouldn't be alone with him," said Moody, staring threateningly at Snape.

"We'll be fine. Kingsley has Severus' wand, and Lupin will be here." Minerva just wanted Mad-Eye to leave.

"Don't take your eyes off him for a second," said Moody before stomping off in search of the kitchen.

"Hermione, can you stay?" called Remus, as she was following Krum out. He looked at Severus for his agreement, which came with a sharp nod.

"If you need me, of course, Remus," she replied with uncertainty. As the last of the Order members filed out, Hermione closed the door. Lupin came forward to ward and soundproof the room.

Jenny still stood with Severus' arm around her shoulder. He pushed her to a chair and turned once more to McGonagall.

"Where is Albus' portrait?" he demanded.

"His portrait, Severus?" asked Minerva, confused at the request.

"I know he has one here, where is it?" he demanded.

Lupin brought a frame to the table in the centre of the room. "Here it is, Severus. Why do you need to see it?"

Severus pulled up a chair and sat before the picture of Albus Dumbledore, sleeping in his wingback chair.

"I'm finally here, old man. It's about time you set things straight," announced Snape.

The portrait began to stir, yawning deeply and stretching at length. With a sigh, Portrait Albus began to speak.

"It's about time, boy. I've been sitting here for a donkey's age. Even artwork can get a sore backside from sitting in one position for too long." Dumbledore's image became animated with his colourful robes moving with his gestures, and his renowned blue eyes twinkling brighter than any star in the night sky ever had.

Minerva sank into a chair beside Severus. "Albus, you woke up at last," she said, her voice sounding tremulous.

The portrait looked at her. "I have an awful secret to share, Minerva. I've been conscious for quite a while. Before my soul took flight, Severus and I had some long discussions. Keeping me uninvolved for a while after my passing was one of the topics."

"But why, Albus? We needed your wisdom many times," Minerva told him, confused at what she was hearing.

The portrait Albus smiled. "Minerva, have one of the Castle elves fetch the coffer contained beneath the Pensieve in my office. Remus, come where I can see you." Minerva left to do his bidding, flooding the Hogwarts kitchens.

Lupin stepped in front of the small portrait. "You're long overdue, Professor. Why did you make us wait?" he asked.

Dumbledore shared his ubiquitous smile. "Patience is a virtue." He tapped the side of his nose with his finger and reached out for a lemon drop from the dish of sweets in the picture. As he popped it in his mouth, they all imagined they could smell lemon in the air.

"Severus, I believe Miss Granger is there, and someone else." Dumbledore was peering out from the frame to look for the others.

Hermione stood behind McGonagall. "I thought I saw you almost frown before, Professor."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I've been hard put not to laugh out loud sometimes, Miss Granger. All those lists... tut, tut." He waved his index finger at her.

Hermione blushed, remembering what he was talking about.

Severus had summoned Jenny to stand beside him. "Albus, this is Jenny Doulton."

The blue eyes in the portrait passed between the man and woman. "Miss Doulton, I wish I'd had the pleasure of meeting you while I was alive. I see you and Severus have become close. I am pleased, my boy."

A sudden pop made Jenny jump. She turned to where the sound came from and saw the strangest creature she'd ever beheld.

"What's that?" she asked Snape.

"That is an elf," he replied, getting up to open a cabinet off to one side. "Albus, the Pensieve memories can be seen in the morning. For now, we must discuss the last Horcrux."

"You have discovered and recovered them all?" asked Dumbledore.

"All but one; it cannot be touched by anyone who is magic," Severus revealed.

"That would be Godric's object, wouldn't it Professor?" asked Hermione.

Severus looked at her. "I'm not your profes--" he snapped and was interrupted.

"You will always be my professor, Professor Snape. To say or think otherwise is just stupid." Hermione fixed him with a determined glare. "There is more to the Headmaster dying and you disappearing than any of us knows, isn't there? That's why you sent us the Horcruxes and why you're here now."

"Two words, Miss Granger curiosity and cat," Snape spat at her.

"It's up North, isn't it? It's a heraldic item emblazoned with a griffin, and it will be somewhere close to the Moors," Hermione stated with conviction. "I needed to get to the Domesday Book, I knew it." She began to chew her bottom lip in frustration.

"It wouldn't have helped you," said Jenny quietly. "I had to search through churches in the region and then enter unique criteria for separate searches. There were a number of hits, but they all pointed to one place."

"What is she talking about, Severus?" asked Minerva.

"We did our searches through a computer. It turns out Gryffindor's object is hidden in plain sight in a church in..."

"Great Driffield it turned out to be Great Driffield, didn't it?" exclaimed Hermione excitedly. "Was it a helmet, a spear?"

Severus looked at her and shook his head. "When do you stop, Granger. It's a shield, a knight's cavalry shield."

"If we can't touch it, Severus, how can we retrieve it?" asked Minerva.

Severus looked at Jenny, his unspoken question answered in her smile. "How are we getting there?" she asked.

"We need to make a copy first. You brought the photos?" Severus asked.

Jenny nodded and put her hand in her pocket. "Can you fix this?" she asked, pulling out a miniature canvas bag.

"Oh, perhaps, Minerva..." he said, looking at the older woman.

McGonagall took the bag from Jenny's hand and placed it on the table. Passing her wand over it, she returned the bag to its normal size.

"Thanks," said Jenny as she opened it and fished out an envelope containing the photographs Severus had asked her to bring.

"Can you transfigure something to duplicate it, Minerva? If you can't, perhaps I can ask Lucius..." Severus watched Minerva's face redden.

"Watch your mouth, boy, or you'll find yourself spending time as a potted Aspidistra," she told him archly. "When do you need it?"

"Tomorrow if at all possible, Minerva. I thought perhaps we could Portkey there." He waited for her assent to his plan. McGonagall was in charge now. "I'd prefer early in the morning."

"You'll take Tonks and Shackbolt with you," she told him. "Remus, create the Portkey. Get the location from the Wizard's atlas." She turned to Jenny. "You have no stake in this, Miss Doulton, and I won't ask you to go."

"You're quite mistaken, Professor. I have everything I hold dear at stake here. I will go, and I will help in every way I can. I can't leave knowing I could have done something to help," Jenny told the older woman, who recognized the conviction in her tone.

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Jenny and Severus were given a room together at her insistence. The door had been locked and warded to keep him in, she didn't care.

They lay without undressing upon the old four-poster bed, only dozing lightly with the expectation of the coming morning. While it was still dark, they heard someone first knock then enter the room. Severus had already risen and rinsed his face using water from the ewer sitting on the dry sink.

"Good morning," said Molly, entering with a breakfast tray with mugs of coffee and buttered muffins. "Professor McGonagall is explaining everything down in the kitchen to the others. Kingsley will be along presently."

After their breakfast and time in the bathroom, Jenny and Severus met the others in the library.

"Here you go, Jenny." Minerva handed a perfectly duplicated shield to Jenny. "Be careful."

Kingsley and Tonks accompanied Severus and Jenny on the journey. It was still dark when they appeared in the parking area beside the old church. Severus led them to the doors, which were locked. He still had no wand and stood aside to let Tonks open the door. The interior was dark, save for the exit signs and vigil lights in the sanctuary and crypt. The Aurors lit their wands and heard the sounds of mice skittering away to their holes.

When they came to the side chapel with the crypt, Kingsley reached out a finger and got a shock, much as Severus had. "Interesting and practical," he observed.

With a deep breath, Jenny entered to where the knight's tomb lay in the flickering light. Reaching out, she touched the shield carefully. She didn't know why she was worried for she'd done this before. When nothing happened, she lifted the shield from its niche and replaced it with the duplicate. Holding it to her chest, Jenny quickly left the crypt area and returned to the others.

"Can we get out of here? I feel like a bloody grave robber. This place gives me the willies," she told them.

They made their way back outside and, using the Portkey once more, returned to London. Jenny was still staggering from the Portkey travel as she put the Horcrux with the others for safe keeping.

"What now?" asked Remus of Severus.

"We wait until the summons. You continue your search for an answer to destroy them. Talk to Lucius or Krum, they may have some ideas," said Snape. "Me, I'm going to get some sleep."

"Severus, what about the memories?" asked McGonagall.

"They're not mine. I think he intends to share them with you. See for yourself. I don't need any reminders." He turned and indicated to Tonks he wanted to go to his assigned room.

Jenny walked over to him. "Want some company? I'm exhausted."

He looked at Tonks, who shrugged and said, "If you want, Jenny." They left together followed by the young Auror.

Lupin looked at Minerva and asked, "What do you make of that?"

"I would say our dour old Snape is happily smitten with that lady." She frowned suddenly. "It's a pity they'd not found each other before now."

"Sybill would say it was fate." He smiled at the thought.

"Sybill talks a lot of shite," announced McGonagall, being uncommonly profane. "I'll take the small Pensieve and the memories to my room." She patted his hand and left.

Lupin became thoughtful for a moment, and then returned to his research with Hermione.

Blood, Oaths and Promises

Chapter 13 of 19

The time creeps ever closer to when the Order will confront Voldemort. Will they be ready to defeat him? Can a Muggle actually make a difference?

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Severus woke up from his nap to find sunshine streaming through the windows. Rising, he stretched and looked out of the window to the back garden. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was just past one o'clock. On the bed, Jenny was still asleep, a quilt clutched to her breast like a favourite teddy bear. She turned on her back and sighed. Severus watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed. He took a minute to enjoy watching the outline of her nipples through the t-shirt she wore before letting his eyes wander to her lacy panties. Of all the seductions he'd been a part of and all the sensual stimuli he'd been offered, none compared to seeing Jenny this way. He

Lucius picked up where they had left off. "The fog that never had an explanation was caused by the Dementors breeding. I'm sure you felt the emotional depression."

Jenny nodded. "Yeah, I did; especially on the train coming down here. Have they killed people outside of performing executions?" She shuddered at the thought.

Harry thought back to his encounters with the maleficent creatures. "I'm pretty sure they're capable of doing that even if we have no evidence of it."

"Now, we were discussing how to destroy the souls released from the Horcruxes...", said Bill, trying to get back to the main subject.

"Could we pull them into another vessel and then destroy that?" asked Minerva.

Severus shook his head. "A sealing charm can hold a soul, but it will not destroy it. If you destroy the vessel, you will only release the soul once more." He became thoughtful. "For most of us, the moment of our death releases our soul to continue its natural journey to the afterlife. The abomination of splitting the soul by murdering another, then imprisoning that fragment, does not negate the natural desire of that piece to find its natural repose. It will escape."

"There has to be a way to get rid of them for once and for all," said Hermione, moving to the table, seeking comfort from the books and parchments strewn about.

Jenny thought about what they had told her about souls and Dementors. It was obvious to her. Why didn't they see it?

"You say these Dementors work with this wizard you're fighting against, and will be with him?" she asked for clarification.

"Yes, why?" asked Severus, knowing she often had leaps of logic in her thinking. The others looked back and forth between them.

"These Dementors consume souls, right? Why don't you use his forces against him? Let the Dementors suck up these soul things, it would probably piss him right off." She looked around at the faces of the witches and wizards who were staring at her. "Sorry, I should have kept my gob shut." She looked away in embarrassment.

"Miss Doulton Jenny, what did you say your occupation was?" asked Lucius.

"I am a Librarian, that is to say I have a BA in Information and Library Management. I am, or rather I was working as a clerk, for now. The job won't likely be mine when I get back." Jenny smiled at them and got up, intending to leave.

"Jenny," called Remus. "You are a certifiable genius. The solution was right in front of us and we couldn't see it." He looked around at the others. "All we need to do is drive the Dementors towards the Horcruxes and release the soul fragments. We'll have a veritable feeding frenzy."

Jenny turned back and saw them all smiling at her, especially Hermione who was walking towards her.

"Come on, Jenny, it looks like they can't do without Muggle know how after all. Uhm, could I talk to you about getting into Uni for Library Science later on?" She squeezed Jenny's arm and pulled her back to sit down.

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Arabella Figg was passing Privet Drive on her way home from shopping for cat food. She noticed the police cars in front of Harry's house and diverted from her walk to see what was happening. As she got closer, she saw Vernon Dursley gesticulating at the constable leaving his house.

"They took her, I tell you. Just grabbed her and disappeared. Why won't you listen?" he yelled.

"Mr. Dursley, please calm yourself; I'm sure your wife will be back shortly. We don't see any signs of a tussle. You must have just imagined that you saw her disappear." The constable pocketed his pen and notebook. "You say you'd just woken up from a sleep in front of the telly. Your imagination was just running riot, left over from a dream. Now, make yourself a cuppa and relax." He patted Dursley on the shoulder and walked down the path. As the constable entered the car, he motioned drinking from a bottle to his partner.

"They've kidnapped her, I tell you! Those freaks my nephew is mixed up with!" screamed Dursley as the police car pulled away. "Come back, come back, I say!"

He leaned on the doorframe and wiped his face with his hand. "Oh, Petunia, what am I to do? What am I to do?"

Mrs. Figg padded up the path to where the distraught man still stood. "Mr. Dursley, do you remember me?" she asked.

"What? Oh please go away; I've no time for you today," he spat at the doddering old woman.

"Mr. Dursley, I might be able to help you. I know someone to contact," she told him.

He looked at her as if she was insane. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"I know who might be able to help you find your wife." She stepped closer to him. "I think it was someone working for You Know Who that took her." She looked around to make sure no one else was about.

"How... how?" he asked, bewildered at how mad his world had become.

"Make yourself that cuppa and wait in your house," she told him, toddling away.

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"Professor Snape," said Harry, entering the library. "May I have a word?"

Severus raised his brow and asked, "Do you have your wand on your person? I'd like my anatomy left in one piece."

Harry offered a shrug. "I left it with Remus." He walked over and sat facing the older wizard.

"Professor McGonagall showed me Dumbledore's memory this morning, the one where he asked you... made you promise to kill him if he might become a danger to the Order."

"I see," said Snape quietly. "Then you also know I didn't want to ta..."

"I know, sir," said Harry quickly and then licked his lips before he continued. "I'd begun to hate you as much as Voldemort, you know."

Snape shrugged. "I care little about what you feel for me, Potter. You were an irritating reminder of my youth and an annoying child who flouted school rules with a regularity that would have sent another student packing. Dumbledore coddled you and, against my advice, allowed you to become involved in matters that should have been left to adults."

"I did what I thought was right, and I was always proved true in the end." Harry stood and faced the fire, leaning on the mantle. "As I remember it, you recommended that I be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament."

Snape nodded. "Yes, I did, but solely on the belief you would be knocked out in the first test." He snorted. "Your little Miss Know It All came through with a Summoning Charm to save your arse."

Harry spun and pointed his finger at Snape. "Don't ever talk about Hermione like that again. She's brilliant and you know it." He took a deep breath and turned away.

Snape smiled behind Harry's back. "Indeed I do, Potter. Why else would I choose her to make contact with the Order?"

Harry sat back down, surprised at the revelation. "What?" he asked.

"Your Miss Granger has the intellect and logic to understand when she is being given valid data as opposed to rubbish. Her deductive abilities have always served you well, haven't they?" He watched as Harry digested what he'd said.

"Yeah, she's always been the one to figure out things first." He looked back at his former professor. "Why were you always so cruel to her? You never had a decent word for her."

Snape looked back at him coolly. "What did you learn about me, Potter? What unexpected piece of information did Miss Granger dredge up from the library?"

Harry understood the question. "Your father was a Muggle. You're a half-blooded wizard."

Snape actually smiled at him. "And from my mother's old Potions text, Potter, how much did you learn?"

"You knew I had it all along?" he asked.

Snape shook his head. "No, but after listening to Slughorn's sickening praise of your potions skills, I realized you'd latched on to something. Your hex of Malfoy cemented my belief you'd been given my old book."

"So you were hard on her to prove you hated Muggle-born," said Harry.

"Especially one connected to Harry Potter." Snape watched the realization of what life was like when associated with the Dark Lord change Harry's expression.

Harry thought hard about what he wanted to say. The man before him had killed a wizard who had been a mentor and father figure to each of them. Hadn't Harry been in the same situation, when he had forced the potion protecting the pendant down Dumbledore's throat? He realized he had more in common with the man before him than he wanted to admit.

"I'm sorry for all the hardship you've had to go through since that night. It must have been difficult," said Harry, finally. "You've lived with Dumbledore's death without anyone to help you. Was it hard to give up magic?"

"At times, Potter, but I've also had some interesting consequences as a result. Discovering my Muggle half after all these years; it wasn't buried as deep as I'd thought." He looked into the fire thoughtfully.

"Meeting Jenny," offered Harry with a smile. "She seems to be a very nice lady and really smart too."

Severus nodded. "Yes, she is. Surprised someone would even think of wanting to be with me, Potter?"

"I suppose we all were, but Jenny seems to be happy with you, and that's all that matters," said Harry.

"Surprisingly mature of you, Potter," said Snape, just as the door opened to admit Shackbolt.

"Harry, come down to the kitchen. A situation has cropped up; you too, Snape." He turned away expecting them to follow, which they did.

Entering the crowded kitchen, Harry saw Moody with Proudfoot, the Auror. McGonagall shared a look of deep concern with him as he took a seat.

"Harry," she began, "there's been an incident that has come to light, and because of what we know about one of the Horcruxes, we can only assume one thing." Minerva looked over at Moody.

"Here it is in plain language, boy: your Aunt Petunia has been kidnapped by wizards. We think she's been taken by You Know Who to get the Horcrux from the church," Moody told him in a tone of finality.

"My aunt," said Harry, more to himself than anyone else. "Why would they take her?" He looked up at his adult supporters. "She doesn't even like me. She'd probably have volunteered if they'd asked."

"Harry, lad, your aunt is the one who protected you all these years. He Who Must Not Be Named doesn't care one way or the other about her feelings. He just wants revenge," said Remus. "He intends to use her against you, hoping it weakens you."

"Harry, your uncle wants to see you," said Proudfoot.

"What does he want to see me for? To make sure he tells me it's my fault and that my parents were perverted freaks and they're to blame too?" Harry yelled.

"Harry, that's quite enough. See your uncle, if only for a minute. Kingsley will go with you," said Remus in a stern voice.

Harry backed down; Remus was the one person to whom Harry would listen. He followed the Auror out, leaving the rest of the people in kitchen standing in silence.

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Friday morning Jenny had gone shopping with Molly, who took her to Diagon Alley. She walked around, agog at the sights she could never have imagined being real. Thinking upon it later, Jenny imagined that the people must have thought her addle-brained, as Molly had led her about, holding on to her arm. She returned to Grimmauld Place with some new clothes, courtesy of the Muggle shop down the street from the Leaky Cauldron.

Jenny went to her room to change, then came down looking for Severus. Ron told her he was in the back garden. Making her way out, Jenny stopped when she saw a man dressed completely in black, his style of dress early Victorian by her guess. His back was to her as he looked at flowering shrub growing near the fence.

"Hello," called Jenny.

The figure turned, and with a shock, Jenny realized it was Severus. Unconsciously, she brought her hand to her mouth as he walked towards her.

"Hello, Jenny," said Severus in his gentlest voice. "How was your morning out?"

"Severus," she whispered. "You... you look different." Jenny reached up, touched his face, now smooth and clean-shaven. "You're not my Severus. You belong to that other world again, don't you?"

Severus shook his head. "No, Jenny, I'm still the same man. The face you saw was not the real Severus; this is. I'm still your Severus... if you want me. I can't imagine my world without Jenny Doulton any more."

He took her hand and led her to a garden seat. "Before you were a part of my life, I was going through the motions of living. I had a mission to fulfil and beyond that...well

beyond that, I saw no life. At the time, it didn't matter; now..." He sighed, unusually lost for words.

Tears sprung to Jenny's eyes, for now more than ever the reality of Severus' world was weighing her down. "You think you're going to die, don't you? You don't expect to live through whatever it is that's going to happen," she blurted out through her emerging tears.

"Jenny, I..." Severus started.

"Well, I won't have it, do you hear? You will not die. You promised to bring me to London for the Millennium, remember? You promised," she insisted, "so you can't die." She fell into his embrace, sobbing into his shoulder.

"Oh, Jenny, my lovely Manchester lass, what have I pulled you into? I never ever wanted to hurt you," he whispered, as he held her close.

Taking her by the shoulders, Severus made her look at him. "Jenny, none of us knows when we will die or how, but I promise, I will do everything I can to stay alive, that's all I can do." He smoothed the hair from her face. "I've never wanted to live more than I do at this moment. I love you Jenny Doulton."

Unbeknownst to the couple in the garden, another couple watched them from a window above.

"If they can find love in all of this, why can't we?" Tonks turned to look at Remus who was leaning on the wall looking out at the garden below.

"There's just so much more for us to overcome, Nymphadora. You deserve better than a man like me," Remus told her sadly.

"I don't want better; I want the best, and that is you, Remus. Why do you keep pushing me away? I know you feel something for me." She looked at him with pleading eyes. "Don't let us go on this way."

Remus opened his arms and Tonks fell into his embrace. "Let's get through this moment in time, love. Let's get through this and then we can fight the new battles," he told her.

"I want to stay with you tonight, Remy. Please, don't say no." She pulled herself closer, wanting to feel his heart beat for her. He pulled her face up, looked into her eyes and smiled. Tonks leaned up ever so slightly and kissed the man she loved.

The Eighth Horcrux

Chapter 14 of 19

Harry finally confronts Voldemort. Who will reign supreme? Who will survive?

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Remus, Minerva and Snape were in the library, meeting with Dumbledore's portrait. Between them, Remus and Minerva had viewed the Headmaster's memories in their entirety and understood why many of the events of previous years had turned out the way they had.

"You must understand," said portrait Albus, "the knowledge had to be protected at all costs. If Tom had gotten an inkling... well, he didn't, so let's not tread down that path."

"But you did test your theory, Albus; you're absolutely positive?" asked Minerva, still coming to terms with this new knowledge.

"I checked it on many occasions, none of which Harry will remember." The Headmaster's portrait smiled at his friends. "Now that you and Remus know, as well as Severus, I'm sure we have safeguarded the prophecy even more."

Severus found it difficult to speak to the Headmaster this way; his grief was still raw within him. When Albus spoke to him, his insides knotted, and the vision of the old man falling from the tower flashed through his mind.

"Severus, my boy, you look uncommonly sad. Annoyed, conceited and arrogant I'm used to seeing in you, but never such a cheerless demeanour." Albus looked at him over the top of his glasses in his usual way of teasing.

"What have I to be happy about, sitting talking to your portrait instead of you, old man? You could have waited and given me a chance," said Severus, bitterly. He looked down at the floor, unable to look at the blue eyes any more.

Dumbledore shook his head. "You know that is not true, Severus. You had put a stopper in death for almost a year. The Draught of Delusion, in the vessel containing the necklace, was my undoing. It was only a matter of hours, perhaps less, until Tom's curse would have taken me."

Severus stood to leave, but stopped and turned back. "I'm sure that knowledge will give me great comfort when they grant me an endless sojourn in Azkaban. Thank you, Professor Dumbledore, my guilt has been assuaged." He turned and left, not trusting his chaotic emotions to remain at bay any longer.

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Harry lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. Ginny and Hermione sat on Ron's bed while he'd taken up a place on the floor, leaning back on his mattress.

"It's not like you could have done anything, mate," said Ron. "We only knew about the curse on the shield 'cause Snape and Jenny discovered it."

"Yeah, that much I know, but it's like." Harry paused and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "It's like anyone who tries to help me ends up snuffing it. My mum and dad, Sirius, Dumbledore and now..."

"Stop thinking like that, Harry," Hermione scolded. "You can't afford to let your emotions rule you now; a clear head and mental focus, that's the key."

"Well said, Miss Granger," offered a silky voice from the open door. "Potter, Lupin has requested I put in some time drilling you in defensive spells." The door opened wide

Lucius and Severus arrived outside Riddle Manor where a mass of Voldemort's followers were milling about, waiting for direction. They made their way into the house where they knew He Who Must Not Be Named would be waiting for them. Making a side trip, Lucius placed the cup he'd transfigured back into the spot the Horcrux had occupied. With so much commotion, there was little need for circumspection.

The leaders were assembled in the main drawing room, which was now a war room, with maps strewn upon tables around which they had all congregated. It was clear the others had been privy to information prior to their arrival, leaving Snape and Malfoy distinctly uncomfortable.

"Severus, Lucius, welcome my loyal ones," announced Voldemort in a loud voice.

"My Lord," began Lucius, "I cannot believe we were so late as to have missed your preliminary briefing."

His declaration was interrupted by Bellatrix entering the room. She looked around and drew the same conclusions as had her brother-in-law.

"My Lord, pray forgive my tardiness," said Bella, barely catching her breath as she dropped to her knees.

"My dearest children, you have not been unpunctual," said Voldemort in a jovial tone, ending in a laugh shared by his attendants. "Severus, Lucius and yourself have significant roles to play today, Bella. I was merely going over minor tactics prior to your arrival. Now, we may get to the meat of the matter."

Malfoy bowed his acquiescence and stepped back in line with Severus, as did Bella.

"Carrow, bring our little helper in. We must introduce her," instructed Voldemort. "It is so gratifying when one has the chance to tie up loose ends, especially when the one tying the knots was partly to blame for them fraying in the first place."

Carrow returned, pulling a complaining Petunia Dursley behind him. "Let go of me, you beastly man. How dare you man-handle me so," she complained, using her free hand to beat him on the shoulders. It was obvious she'd not met her true captor as yet. The introduction was made when she was thrown at the feet of Voldemort.

Momentarily stunned, Petunia took a moment to catch her breath as she stared at the booted feet in front of her. Slowly, she raised her eyes to look at the face of the figure before her. A look of horror passed over her face as the realization of what had befallen her set in.

"You," she wailed, her panic finally reaching her brain. "What do you want with me?"

"Now, now, Petunia; you were saddled with that pathetic excuse for a wizard to raise all this time. Don't you want to get some satisfaction in his... how shall I put it... his come-uppance?"

"Harry, you want me to hurt Harry," she realized in horror.

"No, no, Petunia. You are but a Muggle. No, Petunia, I just need you to get an item for me. Now, go with my servants and do as they say." Voldemort watched as she was dragged to her feet by Carrow once more. "Bella, take the Portkey and go with them," he ordered. "When you return, it will be time to move."

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Severus was becoming nervous. After ensuring he was carrying the Horcrux, Voldemort had ignored him as he had Lucius. No one was talking about their destination. Peter Pettigrew finally entered, his arms laden with Muggle newspapers.

"We are ready, Master. Bellatrix has returned." Peter began handing out the papers to the assembled witches and wizards in the room. When he came to Snape, he handed him the paper and told him, "This is for you alone, brother."

"Thank you, Peter," said Voldemort, his gaze fixed on Severus. "Now, Severus, as I advised you previously, you will be the bait to lure in those who oppose us. We shall give you a head start and follow you in five minutes. It shouldn't take longer than that for someone to recognize you."

Severus bowed and headed outside, followed by the others. As he stepped out, he realized the dawn had broken, and daylight was claiming the darkness. 'Well,' he thought, 'I am supposed to be bait. Daylight should make me an easier target.' The crowd parted to allow Voldemort to approach Snape.

"It is time," he announced, touching Snape's newspaper without warning.

Severus felt his body pulled by the Portkey. He knew the landing would be rough, as he'd not been prepared. Letting go of the Portkey, he tried to steady himself, but as he touched the ground, he fell. The Portkey landed beside him, but instead of becoming a harmless piece of rubbish, it burst into flames with a loud bang, ensuring someone would hear it.

Severus got to his feet quickly and looked around. He had only minutes at most to contact the Order. As he got his bearings, he realized exactly where he was. This was the Wizarding enclave in Godric's Hollow. He heard a dog barking and saw a man walking towards him with a large canine straining on a leash. The man looked at him and backed away, jogging back to his house. Severus jogged off in the opposite direction, getting out from under the magic wards over this part of town.

When he felt the wards weaken, Severus pulled out the mobile phone. As he did, he heard the unmistakable sound of others arriving by Portkey. He dialed a message and sent quickly, then returned to meet the assembling Death Eaters.

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Jenny and Minerva went out for the next attempt at getting a message, an exercise they'd undertaken every ten minutes since Snape had left. Jenny opened her phone and waited. There was one entry, which she quickly retrieved.

"It says 'HOLLOW,'" she told Minerva. "What ever does that mean?" she asked.

"Damn him," muttered the older woman as she rushed back into the house.

Jenny and Minerva went out to the marquee where everyone had gathered. McGonagall walked over to Moody and grabbed his arm.

"Godric's Hollow, that's where they've gone," she told him.

Moody nodded and went back into the house, followed by Shackbolt and Tonks. The elder Weasleys followed, taking Jenny with them. The latter group returned a few minutes later with the Horcruxes. Minutes after that found Moody and Tonks arriving with various pieces of Muggle detritus.

"These are Portkeys," announced Moody. "The Ministry was advised by someone who saw Snape this morning in Godric's Hollow. The Aurory has assembled, but they don't know it's the big event." He moved off to the back of the marquee and stepped out to the garden.

Minerva approached Luna and Ginny. "Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood, we have decided to have you both remain here. I have contacted Madam Pomfrey, and she will join you shortly." She raised her hands to silence their protests. "This will become a place for the casualties to come. Professor Moody even now is setting up an arrival point for Portkeys."

Molly was walking around with sticking plasters, putting one on everyone's wrist. "If you should become injured, or if you find someone who's hurt," she told them, "just touch your wand to the plaster, and you'll be sent here."

"You," he spat and then began sending hexes back at Snape. A slicing hex hit Snape, driving him to his knees, but a Stunner from Neville Longbottom hit Yaxley on the back, sending him crashing face first to the ground. Neville nodded at Snape and turned back to Harry.

Voldemort had stumbled suddenly as an Impedimenta caught him on the heel. From his kneeling position he finally cast, "Avada Kedavra!"

Simultaneously, Harry cast, "Avada Kedavra!" Two streaks of green light passed each other and to everyone's shock, hit their targets.

Voldemort fell with a look of surprise still etched on his face. Harry fell backwards and landed at the feet of his two best friends, who looked down at his peaceful face in shock. The fighting around them ceased, everyone overwhelmed at what had happened.

"Harry!" shrieked Hermione finally. "Harry, you won." She fell to her knees beside him. "Harry, look, you did it," she insisted, shaking his body. "Harry, wake up and see... Harry," she sobbed as the reality set in. "Harry, you won. He's dead..." Ron knelt beside her and pulled her gently away as Neville and Luna approached, tears streaming down their cheeks.

Jenny saw Severus on the ground, struggling to stand. She stepped out of her cover and ran to him.

"Jenny," he hissed through his pain, "I must get to Harry."

Jenny pulled his arm over her shoulder and helped him stand. Malfoy was suddenly at his other side. Between them, they guided Severus to Harry's body.

"Move away," ordered Lucius, pointing his wand at the youths around Harry's body. "Now!" he insisted. Draco had moved up behind them, his wand pointing at them as well.

Ron looked up and saw other Death Eaters targeting them. He pulled Hermione up and backed away as Snape fell to the ground and gathered Harry into his arms. Malfoy then set a protective shield around them, making them impervious to attack. Petunia had left her cover and stood beside Jenny. She looked down at her nephew, her face a confusion of emotion.

"Oh, Harry, I didn't want this to happen," whispered Petunia. She shook her head and closed her eyes, tears betraying her silent weeping.

Severus knew Voldemort's followers were expecting his resurrection when the final Horcrux was released. He watched them carry the body closer and wait in anticipation.

"Alright, Potter, let's pull this miracle off." Severus held his wand over Harry's head. "Laxos Fragmen Anima," he intoned, releasing the Horcrux from the scar on Harry's head. He watched as it floated upwards, brilliantly white as the brightest star and beautiful to behold. Those who could see were held entranced at the vision.

"Iugo Animas Bodhaigàsür Astaigh Siud." Severus circled the floating soul fragment once with his wand and stroked down towards Harry's mouth. The glowing orb descended and re-entered its body. With a sudden gasping inhalation, Harry's eyes snapped open. He panted and licked his lips, looking up at the person in whose arms he was being held.

"P-P-Professor?" he whispered.

Severus closed his eyes, suddenly exhausted. "I did it, old man, I kept my vow. For you, Lily, for you."

Safe within the shield, the odd couple were unaware of the fighting outside. It was short-lived, and the Aurors had moved in and begun picking up Voldemort's followers as soon as they'd realized their leader had died. Lucius finally lifted the shield, letting Hermione and Ron, with the rest of their friends, swoop down on their hero. Jenny knelt behind Severus and pulled him to lean on her.

"Is it over?" she asked, stroking the hair from his face.

"Yes," he whispered, letting tears flow unabashedly down his face. "It's over."

Healers arrived and took Harry away for examination. Several order members had been injured. Neither Lupin nor Minerva was still standing, but no one knew of their condition.

Severus was too tired to move and sat where he had been for a while. Jenny stayed with him. They became aware of three figures standing before them.

"Severus Snape?" asked one of the men.

"Yes," he replied.

"Severus Snape, you are under arrest on the charge of murder and of using an Unforgivable curse in the commission of the crime. Further, you are in breach of a peace order, guaranteed by one, Albus Dumbledore, by consorting with known criminals. Will you surrender peacefully?"

"You can't take him like this; he's injured," cried Jenny.

"He'll be seen to," said another as he bent down to pull Snape to his feet. They suddenly disappeared, leaving two men still in front of Jenny.

"Are you the Muggle, Jennifer Lynn Doulton?" asked the same wizard who'd queried Severus.

"Yes," she replied.

"Miss Doulton, you are under arrest on the charge of harbouring a known criminal and aiding and abetting said criminal in the commission of his crimes."

"What?" asked Jenny, confused at what was happening. "I didn't do anything of the sort. Severus isn't guilty of anything."

"You may make your statement at the Ministry," he told her, grasping her arm and Apparating.

Lucius watched the events transpire, even as his own son was arrested. For some reason, they left him alone. He wasn't sure whether that was not a greater punishment.

Just Rewards

After the battle is over, who is rewarded... or not?

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Percy Weasley waited impatiently for a lift in the corridor off the Atrium. He'd been trying to get away from the Minister since the conflict had first come to the attention of the Ministry, but Scrimgeour had passed one trivial job after another to him, tying up his time. Half of the lifts had been turned over to the Aurors and Hit Wizards bringing in captured Death Eaters. A special chamber for Apparition had been created for their arrival within the Ministry. Percy happened to be waiting for a lift when Snape was hauled in between two Hit Wizards. A minute later, a woman dressed in Muggle clothing was also delivered. She looked completely confused as they dragged her along into a different lift.

Finally, a free lift opened up, admitting Percy and the others waiting. He got off at the second level and went to the Aurors' office. He looked around for a familiar face, finally settling on Shackbolt.

"Auror Shackbolt, I believe you know my parents, Arthur and Molly Weasley," he stated as an opening.

Kingsley looked at him and not quite recognizing him asked, "Your name?"

"Percy Weasley. I was just wondering if you were aware of the condition of those who were involved in the conflict." Percy tried to keep this tone haughty, but his worry had slipped through.

"I'm not sure of anyone's condition, besides those who stood with me. Why are you so concerned now? The rest of your family was there," commented Shackbolt, leaving a question unspoken.

"I couldn't get away, and it's not like they told me anything," Percy snapped back.

Kingsley sighed. "I honestly don't know, but..." He thought for a moment and pulled off the sticking plaster on his wrist. "Take this and go somewhere you can get out by using a Portkey. This'll take you to where they are."

"Thanks." Percy took the plaster and nodded to the dark man before leaving.

Returning to the Atrium, he took the Floo to Diagon Alley. Upon reaching an open area, he touched his wand to the plaster. Moments later, he found himself standing in a garden where a huge white tent had been erected. As he passed through the flaps, he saw a number of people, some clearly injured. Ginny saw him first and called her father.

Arthur looked up as Ginny called and saw his son standing at the far end of the Marquee. He stood from his seat beside Remus and approached him.

"Percy, was there something you wanted?" he asked blandly, forgetting to wonder how Percy had gotten into the back garden.

"No, I just... is everyone alright? Where's Mother?" asked Percy, looking around.

"She's in the house. Why are you here?" Arthur was suspicious of why Percy had come and didn't want to get Molly's hopes up.

"Honestly, Father, I only wanted to find out how everyone was after the conflict. Is everyone else here?"

"Percy!" exclaimed Molly, setting an armload of potions down on a table. "Percy, have you heard anything at the Ministry? The twins and Charlie haven't come back yet."

Percy shook his head. "No, Mother, I've not heard anything at all about what happened. Did Harry succeed?" he asked humbly.

"Yes, somehow he did. He's at St. Mungo's," she told him, just as the sound of more people arriving by Portkey floated through the opening.

Arthur went out to look, followed by Molly and Percy. He saw his other three sons on the ground, Fred holding George in his arms, while Charlie had his arms around both of them.

"I had to find him, Dad," said Fred, sounding more like a miscreant child than the innovative wizard he was. "He took a hex and went down like a stone, but we had to get the Dementors there. I went back as soon as I could, but I... it was too late," he sobbed.

Charlie looked at his parents, who were in shock. "It was a Slicing Hex that caught him in the neck; probably got the jugular. It would have been fast."

Ron stepped out from the tent, looking at the scene before him. He understood almost immediately what had happened and went to join his brothers on the ground.

"Come on, we should take him inside for now," said Ron quietly, showing unusual maturity.

"No, Ron, it's just that horrible Boggart again, and here I thought we'd gotten rid of it," said Molly in a strange voice. She pulled her wand and approached the twins on the ground.

"*Riddikulus!*" she shouted, pointing her wand at George. "*Riddikulus, Riddikulus,*" she continued, now beginning to panic. Her breathing came in short gasps as she began to hyperventilate. "NO!" she wailed, falling to her knees. "No, it can't be."

Arthur fell to his knees beside his wife and pulled her into his arms. "He's gone, Molly. Our son has gone. We can't bring him back, love. He isn't suffering, and he died doing something he believed in. Come on, Molly. There's nothing you can do." He tried to pull his wife to her feet, but she refused to leave her child.

Unseen by the others, Ginny and Hermione had also left the tent. They had seen everything that had transpired. Hermione looked at her friend, expecting tears and sorrow, but saw a look of strong determination on the young girl's face. She pulled Hermione with her as she approached her mother.

"Mum," she said, but saw her mother took no notice. "MUM," she said louder. "We've got to get back to work. We've got injured people who need help. We can't help George, but we can make sure everyone else is all right. Come on, I need you to tell me what to do."

Molly looked at her daughter with tearful eyes, confused at the little girl suddenly grown up.

"Mum, we need you now more than ever. Please, come and help us. That's what George would do if he was still able."

Molly looked at her dead child one last time, taking a moment to push the hair from his eyes. She leaned forward and placed a kiss on his smooth brow, then stood up.

"We must get Remus to St. Mungo's. Minerva should be all right. You get down to the kitchen and warm up some of the Muggle tinned soup. People will need feeding," ordered Molly. She took a deep breath and patted her husbands' shoulder before returning to the tent.

"This court has heard testimony from the portrait of Albus Dumbledore which was corroborated by his Pensieve memories. You made an Unbreakable Vow to end the venerable Headmaster's life, if he should ask you. Rubeus Hagrid, who witnessed your meeting with Dumbledore in the forest, further corroborated this. He could not, however, remember the person who served as your bond witness strange. Obliviate, was it?" He looked at Snape again with a suspicious gleam in his eye. "Why did you not offer this in your own statement?"

Snape sighed. "I sincerely doubt that anyone would have believed me. Why waste the energy," he replied, dully.

"For someone who is accused of a capitol crime, you are uncommonly indifferent," Scrimgeour observed.

"I am not indifferent to the charges, merely resigned to the outcome. There is nothing I can say to mitigate my actions; my fate lies in the hands of the panel before me." As he spoke, Severus kept his eyes on the floor.

"Very well." Scrimgeour looked around at the other members of the Wizengamot. "After considering all of the evidence, the Wizengamot has reached a verdict. On the charge of murder, we find you... Not Guilty. On the charge of using an Unforgivable Curse, we find you... Guilty. On the charge of being a Death Eater... The charge has been dismissed."

Severus frowned; this was not what he had expected. Finally, he looked up at the court, realizing there was some slim hope. Scrimgeour was still speaking.

"Given all the testimony from your comrades who worked with you in the fight against Voldemort, this court has decided your use of the Unforgivable was mitigated by your actions in the Final Battle and before." He looked down at his parchment. "The sentence, to be carried out immediately, is imprisonment in Azkaban, reduced to time already served. Further, it is the decision of this court that you be banished from Wizarding society for a period of not less than one year and one day. During this period, you will neither communicate with nor receive communication from any witch or wizard. You will be banned from any Wizarding institution. It is hoped this exile will allow you to understand and appreciate the society you once thought to help subjugate. The hardships that you will endure during this time will cause you to pause and reflect upon your previous transgressions."

Scrimgeour looked up at Severus. "In short, you will live as a Muggle, among Muggles. Your funds in Gringotts are to be frozen. Therefore, you shall find work as a Muggle. Your activities will be monitored during this time. If the Wizengamot then deems it appropriate, you will be re-admitted to our society at the end of this period as a full and contributing member."

Severus was stunned. He was to live; the mechanics of it were yet to be worked out, but there was to be a tomorrow. Scrimgeour was still speaking; did the man never shut up!

"You have six hours left in our world to make arrangements and say good bye to your friends." He banged the gavel. "This court is no longer in session. All be upstanding."

Severus felt his arms and legs being freed. He looked around to see the others from the Order standing beside him.

"Come on, Severus. Let's get you cleaned up and changed. Then we'll get you something to eat," said Arthur Weasley. "We've got six hours before I have to take you out."

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Severus looked at himself in the mirror. His Muggle clothes hung on his thin frame; he had no idea how much weight he had lost in Azkaban. The shower and food had helped him, though. He could walk without shaking now, thanks to Molly's soup and sandwiches. He looked at his watch; half an hour. He had made his farewells to the Order, Harry Potter waiting until last.

"How did you know?" Harry asked. "How did it happen?"

Severus had known Potter would need an explanation. "The night your mother died, Voldemort had determined he would create another Horcrux. After some bizarre reasoning on his part, the idea of seven exterior segments of his soul seemed appealing. I've come to believe he was simply justifying the murder of your parents or succumbing to his particular kind of megalomania. Regardless, Lily knew his intentions. The Order knew there had been a leak about the prophecy, but Dumbledore had not shared the details with the rest of them. I had overheard part of the actual prophecy. I was the original informant. What I didn't know was that your parents, hence you, were the fulfillment of the prophecy in Voldemort's distorted vision." He paused before continuing. "When I discovered Voldemort's intent, I took the only... I told Dumbledore."

He looked into the green eyes Harry had inherited from his mother. "Your mother's gift used the same Horcrux Curse Voldemort cast to create your Horcrux, at the moment his Avada Kedavra rebounded back to him. The soul fragment he had created for himself was what had kept him alive at that time. He never knew about you. That was the power he knew not. The ancient Blood Magic she used had also made you bane to him from then on."

"My mother split my soul?" asked Harry, unsure about how he felt about the revelation.

Snape nodded. "Yes and no. She allowed you to try and remove Tom Riddle from this world, but not by any malicious intent on your part. A baby has no malice within the childish heart beating within his breast. Your mother bore that burden when she invoked the ancient magic. She wanted you to live, and this was all she could do."

"This was the same power that killed Quirrell, wasn't it?" Harry asked.

Severus nodded. "We couldn't tell you or Voldemort would have found out. The Horcrux Curse he had formed, that created your scar, connected him to you somehow. He was the author of his own demise."

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Arthur Weasley and Tonks escorted Severus to the telephone box lift. Tonks reached out and hugged Snape.

"See you next year, Severus. We'll have a party for you. Just like the ones at Hogwarts." She smiled at his frown.

"Spare me," he answered, but there was no bitterness behind it.

"Good luck, Severus," said Arthur, handing over a large manila envelope. "A few documents you'll need. The Ministry will be in touch before the year's up. Don't worry. It will come by a Muggle means." He stuck out his hand, which Snape took.

Severus shook Arthur's hand, then stepped into the lift. As the door closed, it began to ascend. It was still daylight when he got to the street level. He opened the telephone box door and stepped out to the Muggle world. Taking a deep breath, he turned around.

"Hello, Severus, ready to go home?"

"Jenny..."

Seven Weeks and a Millenium

Chapter 16 of 19

A year passes with new experiences and changes in everyone's life. The journey nears the end of the road.

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Seven weeks, that was all that had passed. Seven weeks to turn a world on its ear and set feet on paths to new destinies. Seven weeks to remove a legacy and begin history anew. Seven weeks, had that really been all the time elapsed since the walls had started to come down?

"Severus, you all right?" asked Jenny. She stood, watching him look at the new demolition site that had once been Spinner's End. "Are you sad or upset?"

Severus shook his head slowly. "No, not really. It was inevitable. I'd kept it hidden longer than I ever should have."

"How?" she asked.

Severus snorted. "It was a special charm that rendered the street invisible unless you knew where to look. Who brought them?" he asked, wondering how his secret had been revealed.

"Lucius brought Arthur Weasley and Tonks. They were looking for evidence for your case. It looks like someone followed. They went through the house and took possession of anything magical. Arthur said some property had been impounded by your Ministry."

He nodded his head. "Most likely Moody brought the wards down, the resentful git." He pulled her along as he left the site. "It's not that I have many good memories of the house; I don't. It's just the fact that the decision to let go was taken away from me."

"You've got to go to the building society. They're holding the money from the Council in escrow. The forms are in the envelope Arthur gave you. I have the rest of your stuff at my house."

She looked up at him, seeing him nod. He looked so different now. His hair was longer. He'd lost weight and looked as if he'd aged five years.

"Talk to me, Severus. I can see so many things just mucking around in your mind. Tell me what it is, if it's not the house?" she asked, wanting to help him move on.

Severus looked at the sky and took a deep breath. "Do you smell it, Jenny? Do you know what that heady fragrance is?" he asked mysteriously.

"Car exhaust, I should think," she teased, but then asked seriously, "Tell me?"

"Freedom --freedom to live where I want, speak to whomever I want about any subject. To work where I want at any job I please. That, Jenny, my love, is what I smell. It's just beyond my grasp, but perhaps one day."

"You have lots of opportunity now," she replied.

He shook his head. "Too many walls still standing."

Jenny cocked her head, indicating he should keep talking.

He shared a small smile and pulled her closer. "For years I have carefully erected walls about me to keep me safe, to keep people from getting too close. These past months, I have seen the bricks start to tumble to my feet. I was thinking how appropriate it was to see the old house demolished, the old walls crumbling away."

"The old walls come down, and a new building is built, strong and bright. They're building for the future, Severus, just as you are. The new structure will be better for all the lessons learned from the mistakes made in the old construction. The doors will be open to new ideas and the rooms more welcoming. The past is past, and now tomorrow is waiting. I think it's exciting."

"When did you become so wise?" he asked, amused at her metaphors.

"I spent a few hours talking to your Albus back in London. For some reason, he thought I had a lot of common sense; at least that's what he told me. He also told me he was a very smart man."

She leaned her head on his shoulder as they walked back to her house. As they entered, the phone was ringing. Jenny rushed to answer.

"Hello? Speaking...." Jenny looked at Severus, her face showing an anxious expectancy. "Of course, I understand." She bit her lips and clenched her left hand into a fist. "When ever you give the word, I'm ready... Monday, really? Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you ever so much for giving me this chance. I'll be there bright and early. Bye-bye."

"Well?" asked Severus.

"Library Tech two; I start work at my old Uni on Monday," she exclaimed in joy before jumping into his arms for a hug.

Severus was genuinely happy for her, but it left him feeling a little uncomfortable. Was he to become a burden to her? He'd never permit that. He had to find his own path and soon.

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"Draco, come along. It's time to leave.... Draco... Come on, son. You can go home."

Lucius looked at his only child standing in the corner under cover of a shadow. He understood why. It was best not to be noticed in Azkaban.

"It's over, Draco," said Lucius, trying to get his attention.

Draco shook his head. "Another trick... they hurt you when you get hopeful. Just wait."

Lucius looked back over his shoulder. Minerva McGonagall was standing at the door of the holding cell in the Ministry. She approached Lucius and patted his arm.

"Mr. Malfoy," she began in her best professorial voice. "You will cease your dilly-dallying and come along. We don't have all day to pander to the whims of a little boy. Now, step lively, Malfoy."

Draco frowned at the sound of her voice. It was familiar and far removed from his time in Azkaban.

"Professor, why are you here? You don't work for them, do you?" He peered out of his corner, seeing only his father and professor in the room.

"No, Draco. I'm still working at Hogwarts. That's why I'm here. Now, listen to your father and come along. We've no time to waste. We need to get to work on rebuilding."

Minerva gave him her patented McGonagall look-down-her nose glare before turning away. She showed Lucius her crossed fingers as she passed him, leaving the room.

Draco looked at his father finally. "Father... Dad... is it true?"

Lucius smiled. "Yes, son, it's true. We can go home now. It's over."

Draco's chin quivered as he stumbled forward into his father's arms. "I was afraid all the time. They said they were going to do things to me... They said I was pretty and that they could get money and they..."

Lucius pulled his son into his arms and held him tightly. "Come on, Draco. We can go home. Mrs Weasley has made a pot of soup and some Summer Pudding for you. Some of the elves came back, and your old room is being cleaned as we speak." He led his sobbing son out, half carrying him. They walked past the Aurors to the lifts. Tonks held one open for them. Lucius looked at no one as he left, his head held high, while his own tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

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Severus walked to the shops with the list Jenny had left with him. It had been almost a month since he'd returned to Manchester, but he'd still had no luck at finding a job. Standing in line at Tesco's, he recalled the conversation of a fortnight prior...

"What's wrong, Severus?" asked Jenny.

He threw aside the newspaper he was reading in disdain. "I visited two bed-sits and a bed and breakfast today. The B and B was taken, one flat had more vermin than Pettigrew at his worst and the other wouldn't accept me as I was not employed." He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Severus, don't take this the wrong way but..." Jenny was interrupted as Severus jumped up.

"I know, Jenny. I can't continue living like this. You've been more than generous. I'll see if there's a shelter or something. The YMCA used to have beds..."

"You're doing it again! Just stop and listen," she yelled. "Your bloody pride and snooty manners are mucking everything up. Now, SHUT UP AND LISTEN!"

Severus sat back down. Jenny had never spoken to him this way before.

"All right, Jenny, what is it?"

"I never asked you to move out. I never said you wouldn't have a place to stay as long as you needed or wanted to." She paused and sat facing him. "If you want to live somewhere else, I'll understand. I... I have no reason to think there might be more than what we had before all this started."

Looking up into the dark eyes that were her haven of peace, she decided to go for broke. "I'd hoped that, maybe, you'd want to stay with me; the weeks without you were impossibly lonely. If you want, that is. I mean, you could pay some of the bills if you want. Oh, Severus, don't go. I want you to stay!"

He knelt in front of her and lifted her head. "Jenny, I don't want to be a burden. I'll find a job, even if it's just sweeping floors. But if you want me to stay, there's nowhere I'd rather be." He shared one of his rare smiles with her. "I do recall making a declaration of love to you."

Jenny smiled back at him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "I love you too, you irritating snob." She pulled back and cupped his face. "A job will come. I know it will."

"Your confidence in an unemployed wizard is inspiring. Now, just one question. How does one learn how to jerk pork, without being obscene?" He watched as she broke into giggles.

...He sighed and took another step forward to unload the shopping for the cashier to tally. There had still been no hint of a job after another three weeks. The money from the house was helping, but it wasn't a fortune.

"Twenty pound, fourteen," announced the clerk.

He pulled out his wallet and paid the girl, then grabbed the two bags and left. His gloomy mood surrounded him like a cloud, such that he almost missed the small shop window with a position vacant sign. He stopped and looked at the shop sign above the window. The grandiose title of 'Ye Olde Apothecary Shoppe' was emblazoned on the old board. Curious, Severus peered through the window and saw what appeared to be an herbalist shop within. He sniffed and entered. A bell tinkled in the back, signalling his presence. An ancient man came out, wiping his mouth on a towel.

"How can I help you, sir? Is there something you are seeking?" he asked, looking at Snape over the rims of his glasses.

"Indeed, sir a job."

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September came in dry and mild. Jenny, who'd just returned from work, watched from the kitchen window as Severus paced the back garden back and forth, pausing occasionally to rub his chin. She pulled on a cardigan and joined him.

"What you up to then, Severus?" she asked.

"I want to put in some winter plants; there are a few concoctions that would sell well back at the shop." He began taking measured strides again.

"Are they legal?" Jenny asked.

He turned and glared at her. "As in magical?"

"No... Yes."

"They are perfectly legal, madam. Besides, old Archie said he'd give me a bonus if they sold."

Jenny snorted. "Old Archie's a cheap, old fart, if you ask me." She folded her arms.

Severus came towards her and tipped her face up for a kiss. "Old Archie gave me a job. Come. I've been waiting all day for you."

He turned her around and placed a sharp smack on her backside. Jenny jumped in shock, then felt his lips at her ear. "I've been waiting for a starter for my dinner. I think we should do something to work up an appetite, don't you?" He pulled her into the kitchen and closed the door before pulling her into his arms.

Jenny pulled back. "Severus Snape, you're never the man I met in Tesco's last year, are you?"

"No, not at all. He was an ugly, taciturn bastard. No woman would ever have looked twice at him." He took her hand and led her to the bedroom where he began undressing her.

"Now, for my appetizer I think I'll have a lovely Manchester Lass on a bed," he whispered into her ear.

"On a bed of what?" she asked, closing her eyes as he dropped kisses onto her neck.

He turned her around and pushed her back gently, making her lie down.

"Just on a bed." He leaned over her and kissed her deeply, wiping all other thoughts from their heads.

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September 30, 1999

Malfoy Manor A Hogwarts Annex.

"Did you ever wonder what was down here before?" whispered Ron to Hermione, who was fingering the necklace Ron had given her for Valentine's Day.

"Wine," answered a voice from behind them. "It was my father's wine cellar, Weasley. It was never a dungeon or a torture chamber." Draco sneered and shook his head.

"Well, it was generous of your father to let us have seventh-year classes here," Hermione told him.

Draco shrugged. "He needed some income, and the fees worked out just fine."

"Well, he could become a teacher at Hogwarts, you know..."

"Miss Granger, have you completed the assigned reading? Are you ready to begin?" Remus Lupin strode up beside her. He was currently teaching seventh-year Potions.

"Uhm, yes, sir." She smiled at him.

"Good, I want you to help Neville. He's having a dickens of a time dismembering his beetles." He strode away to another table.

"Snape would have had a fit if you'd have helped Neville with his potions," said Harry.

"I wish he was back," whispered Hermione.

"Hear, hear," said Draco, starting his Potions assignment practical.

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It had started out as a horrendous riot as her niece and nephews attempted to run roughshod over Jenny. When Severus stood and faced them, they stopped in shock.

"Your aunt has graciously agreed to be your caregiver this evening. She is, by nature, a kind and generous lady. I, however, am neither generous nor kind. What might be even more important to you is that I am not forgiving." He watched as the children tried to make sense of what they were hearing.

"Let me make it easy for you: if you behave, you can watch television, play on the computer or use the Game-thing to your hearts' content. If not, you will be in bed to stay." He watched for their reaction. They began to laugh.

"Very well." He pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

"What're you doin'," asked the oldest boy.

"I'm calling your father," he told them, calmly holding the phone to his ear.

"Severus, you can't do that; it's their anniversary," hissed Jenny.

He merely raised his eyebrow and shook his head.

The children looked at each other. "Sir," said the oldest again, "don't do that; my Dad hates when people do that."

"Someone called him before?" he asked, remembering what he'd been told by their father before he left.

"Our other childminder called him, and when he came home, he took away everything for a week. Said we had upset Mummy," said the youngest, her bottom lip trembling.

Severus sighed and disconnected. "Well?"

The children talked among themselves.

"They want to see *A Bug's Life*. I'll check out what's happening on the computer," said the oldest complacently.

"Very well, I will monitor your choices there will be no forbidden content viewed, understand?" He turned back to Jenny and shared a knowing smile.

The rest of the evening was peaceful.

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October 31, 1999 - Halloween

Severus answered the door to a familiar threesome.

"Oh, it's you lot again," he said disdainfully.

"You're still here?" asked the girl.

"Obviously," he replied, then sniffed, knowing he had to ask the inevitable question. "So, what are you supposed to be this year?" He looked at the little girl, who'd dressed

as a fairy the year before, with a jaundiced eye.

"I'm a beautiful mermaid. Look at my lovely hair and shiny scales. See, I can even make my tail move." She proudly spun to show off her costume, flipping a lock of artificial hair over her shoulder.

Severus guffawed disdainfully. "I've met a mermaid, and you look nothing like one. Your tail is pointing in the wrong direction; it's supposed to flap from side to side, not up and down. And your hair is blond. A mermaid's hair is green and her lips are not bright red, but shaped as a fish has and are usually a sickly shade of purple. They are just as disagreeable to be around as you are, however, so you get one point for that."

"You're still a mean man, and I still hate you," she declared.

"Ditto, and thank you, you've made my day," he told her.

"Severus," exclaimed Jenny, grabbing the bowl and dispensing sweets before sending the children away.

"She started it," he said petulantly.

"Just give out the sweets," Jenny told him, pushing his hair from his brow. She turned her back and didn't see the face Severus made behind her.

The doorbell rang once more. Severus opened it to a surly looking adolescent who was dressed in his everyday clothes.

"And you are supposed to be?" he asked.

"I am pretending to be a discontented youth, protesting the commercial exploitation of a traditional holiday to boost the profits of companies selling tripe to Britain's children."

"Pretending, hmm?" asked Severus. The boy nodded.

Severus scooped up a handful of air and directed it into the boy's bag.

"Oi, what you playing at?" exclaimed the youth.

"I'm supporting your protest by giving you pretend sweets, you pathetic, over-aged dunderhead. Goodnight." He slammed the door in the boy's face.

"Severus!" exclaimed Jenny. Hearing a noise coming from her window, she turned and looked. "Oh, great, we've been egged again."

"Bugger them all, let's keep the sweets for ourselves," he decided, popping a piece of chocolate into his mouth.

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November 5, 1999

"There has to be a change, I tell you. As long as the old guard holds all the power, we'll never progress beyond where we are."

Lucius was addressing the former members of the Order of the Phoenix and several other interested witches and wizards. He looked more like the Lucius of old as he stood before them, power fairly radiating from his presence.

"Who are you suggesting for Minister then, Malfoy, yourself?" asked a voice from the back.

"At one time, I would have jumped at the chance. Now, I want only peace and quiet, but I won't settle for a government that allows our children to be abused and put in danger. They ignored, nay, damn near encouraged the circumstances that led to the final conflict. If we don't have change, then we are doomed to repeat the same stupid mistakes. I for one know the cost of that idiocy." He paused and looked down. "I am paying for the cost of my tacit support every day. I was a fool once. I will not repeat the same stupid mistakes."

"How much change are you suggesting, Lucius?" asked Tonks, breaking a deafening silence.

"Parliamentary reform in the Ministry of Magic, free and open elections, equal representation of pure-blood, half-blood and Muggle-born. And a proper Assembly of equals," he stated.

"What will happen then?" asked Ginny in awe of the moment.

McGonagall stood and faced the audience. "Lucius and I have discussed this at length and have consulted others for their opinion." She paused and looked at Harry, Hermione and Ron. "I believe that within another generation, we will see the reunification of Magic and Muggle society. Muggles need not fear our power any longer, for theirs is as great as, if not greater, than ours is. We now must prepare ourselves to live in their world."

A loud murmur passed around the room, as the idea Minerva had sparked inflamed their imaginations.

Kingsley Shacklebolt stood. "I believe we should demand an election. I believe we should demand our rights as British subjects to choose our leaders." He paused as the group applauded. "I also believe we have a candidate worthy of our support in that election. I nominate Arthur Weasley for Minister of Magic."

Arthur sat dumbfounded at the declaration while everyone around him clapped and cheered.

Minerva and Lucius actually shared a secret high five, explained to them by Draco as a Muggle way of celebrating a well-executed plan. There was much to be done, but they had started, and if Lucius had his way, they would succeed.

Later, Arthur Weasley pulled Lucius aside. "I have to ask this, Malfoy what's in this for you?"

Lucius feigned a look of surprise. "Whatever do you mean, Arthur? My actions are quite genuine, I assure you."

"Pull the other one, Lucius. You may have changed some of your idea's after what happened to Narcissa any man would," said Arthur. "I've known you long enough to see that you have an ulterior motive behind your sudden and revolutionary conversion." He waited for Lucius' response.

Lucius cleared his throat and pulled Arthur further away from the rest of the group. "Let's just say that I have looked into possible investments within the Muggle community. If I don't have the support of Muggle-borns, I would be cutting off a huge part of my customer base." He took a sip of his drink. "After all, money is money. It all looks the same once it passes through Gringotts."

Arthur nodded. "Yes, that would make sense from your point of view."

Lucius smiled confidently. "Of course, Arthur, we would need to invest in our future by supporting our candidate for election, and we know that will require some financial backing, don't we?"

Arthur returned the smile. "That sounds like the Malfoy I know."

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December 25, 1999

Jenny flopped down on the sofa and kicked off her shoes. Severus sat beside her and rested his head on the back of the couch.

"What sins have you committed that you put yourself through that penance every year?" he asked solemnly.

Jenny giggled. "You were very sweet to wear the paper hat from the cracker, but really, losing a game of Electronic Battleship to an eight year old is hardly a reason to pout."

"I was not pouting. I thought offering a rematch was a sporting thing to do," he retorted.

"Severus, you lost all four times."

"He didn't place his ships logically."

"He's eight years old, for heaven's sake, and that's the point of the game anyways."

"He stuck his tongue out at me, horrid little brat."

"You put on a petted lip when he didn't want to play anymore. You look very sexy when you sulk."

"What would you do if I were to pout now?"

"Take you to bed and shag you senseless."

"Perhaps the trip to purgatory for Christmas dinner had some saving graces after all."

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December 31, 1999 Manchester

"Jenny, are you quite finished packing? We're only going for two days," Severus yelled down the hall.

"It's New Year's Eve; I want to make sure I've packed my special clothes so they won't get wrinkled."

Severus was about to say something, but paused. His unspoken offer to spell out the wrinkles when they arrived was a disturbing thought. Six months gone and he'd almost forgotten his sentence. "I'm calling the taxi to take us to the station," came out instead.

"Alright," said Jenny, coming out of the bedroom, case in hand. "Hope the hotel's nice."

Severus nodded. "It's near enough to the docks to walk. There'll be no chance of a taxi tonight."

"They say the Millennium Dome is pretty amazing, and that the fireworks on the Thames will be so bright, you'd be able to see the lights from outer space." She grinned like a schoolgirl at his frown.

"Do you ever stop researching, Jenny?" he asked rhetorically.

"Do you, Severus?" she retorted, then laughed at his disdainful sniff.

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December 31, 1999 - London

They arrived in London in time for a late lunch when they booked into their hotel. After the obligatory sightseeing, Jenny took them both to see a picture released around Christmastime *Galaxy Quest*. Jenny thought the story very funny and laughed her way through it. Severus snorted occasionally and coughed frequently.

"Who was that actor with the makeup on his head? Doctor Lazarus? What a pompous ass the character was," Severus opined.

"He was funny, Severus. That was Alan Rickman again, my favourite actor."

"You really must get over these schoolgirl fantasies, Jenny."

As midnight approached, Jenny and Severus stood among the crowd along the banks of the Thames to watch the fireworks display. When HRH Queen Elizabeth II stepped out of the Millennium Dome, the masses waited for the year 2000 to be rung in by Big Ben. The clock rung out true, and the world cheered around them.

"Happy New Year, Severus, love,"

"Happy New Year, Jenny; I love you," whispered Severus, pulling her into his arms for a New Year's kiss.

Severus stood behind Jenny, with his arms wrapped about her to keep her close, as they watched the fireworks explode overhead. At the conclusion, they strolled along the bank on their way back to the hotel. A crowd of boisterous young people were making their way in front of them. Their laughter and antics brought a scolding from an older woman.

"That's quite enough from you all. We only have half an hour to get to the Portkey, and we'll miss it if you keep mucking about. I have to get home and get started on the dinner for our guests tomorrow. They are staunch supporters of your father's campaign."

"We're coming, Mum. Keep your hair on," teased a familiar voice. "George would have loved this."

Molly Weasley stopped and turned to her son. "I know, Fred. I was thinking about him the entire time. Merlin!" she gasped, looking past Fred's shoulder.

Severus and Jenny stopped and looked back at Molly and the others who were now looking at them as well.

"Happy New Year," said Jenny, who was not restricted from speaking to them.

"Happy New Year," replied Harry for the others.

"Well, time goes by so quickly, it'll be summer before you know it," said Hermione, her voice offering a forced cheerfulness.

"Of course," said Molly. "The holidays just go by so fast; it's hard to keep up. It's always nice to meet old friends though, even if you have to wait for half a year."

"You had a Portkey to catch," said Jenny, holding Severus' arm tightly when she felt him trembling.

"Yes, Happy New Year to you both," called Molly, shepherding the others along.

"Happy New Year," whispered Severus to the wind.

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April 16, 2000, one week before Easter Sunday.

Severus had fallen into a second job when he complained about the quality of writing in current magazines he had read. While attending a reception for Information Specialists with Jenny, he was challenged to apply for and accept the position of proofreader for a local publisher. He was hired.

"Bloody awful writing, atrocious spelling," muttered Snape to himself. "Dunderheads the lot of them." He slashed at the page he was proofreading with a blue editing pencil.

"Severus, the bulbs are ready," called Jenny from the attic.

He rose and walked to the ladder leading up to the ceiling panel and climbed. He took the plant pots from Jenny and descended. Jenny followed him down with a box of children's books in her arms.

"I'll get these planted," he decided, going to change into work clothes.

"It'll be nice to have flowers for Easter," said Jenny as she sorted through the old annuals and picture books.

He walked outside with the garden tools and knelt in front of the flowerbed beneath the front window he'd prepared earlier. As he was planting the hyacinths, tulips and jonquils he'd forced in the attic, he heard a young girl's voice.

"Won't they die in the cold?" she asked.

He turned and saw it was his annual Halloween nemesis.

"These plants are meant to be planted in the cold. They like this weather. Haven't you ever planted tulips in your garden?" he asked.

"We don't got one. I live in the flats with me mum. My gran's garden, down there, is all paved over," she replied with a resigned voice.

"Would you like to see?" he asked, understanding what it was like to grow up without living things about you.

"Are you a mean man, really? Do you hurt little girls?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. I used to be a teacher. I was very strict and I could say mean things, but I never ever hurt my students."

The young girl approached him. "Okay then, what do I do?"

"Make a hole like this." He demonstrated. "Then place the bulb with the roots down into the hole." He showed her the entire process and watched as she repeated it. He was struck by a notion and stood up.

"I'll be back in a minute. Don't go away," he told her, before entering the house.

Severus returned with a large plant pot and a plastic shopping bag.

"Here, take the pot and put some stones from the path in the bottom." He watched as she obeyed. "Very good, now put some of the soil in the pot and then take this bulb and place it just like you did in the ground."

The girl did as she was told and covered the bulb with more soil.

"What are you going to do with this one, mister?" She pushed her hair off her face, streaking dirt across her brow.

"Ah, well, this hyacinth is very special. It has to be grown apart from the others and needs someone to look after it." He looked at her innocent face. "I don't suppose you would mind doing that, would you? I'm ever so busy with work."

"You want me to look after the flower?" she asked in amazement.

"Can you?" he asked, stifling a smile at her look of surprise.

She nodded vigorously.

"It needs sun and a small cup of water every day. Soon you'll have a lovely, pink hyacinth. Can you do that for me?"

She smiled and nodded again, standing and starting to walk away with her potted plant.

"Wait," called Severus. "This is for you." He passed her the shopping bag that held a chocolate Easter egg.

"Thanks. Maybe you're not so mean after all," she told him, smiling once more.

"What's your name?" he called to her back.

She turned to face him once more and smiled knowingly at him. "Lily."

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June 1, 2000

Severus poured tea while he waited for the toast to pop. He yawned as he reached for the milk.

"I'm getting the first post," called Jenny from the hall.

"Your tea's out," he called back, pulling the toast out to butter it.

He sat at the table, placing a plate of toast and his own tea upon it. Jenny came into the kitchen with the morning post. She flipped through the envelopes quickly, but paused when an unfamiliar return address caught her eye.

"Severus, we each have one of these." She passed over his letter.

The address in the corner read Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement. They were each called to the Ministry on June 14, 2000; an Auror would come to Manchester to escort them.

"Severus, what is it?" asked Jenny when she saw a look of uncertainty cross his face.

"Jenny, what would you say if I didn't want to go back to that world?"

"Severus, do you understand what you're saying? I know the things that happened after all you had sacrificed were unjust even to me, I think. Honestly though, can you just ignore that part of you?" She reached out and took his hand. "I love you, Severus. Not just the Muggle part, the wizard as well. If you hadn't experienced the things you had in your life, I would likely have never met you. I can't help but be grateful for that, regardless of the circumstances."

"Then we go once more to London to be judged," he said bitterly. "I may yet be banished for life."

"I think they know of your value, Severus. You have a role to play in that world."

He shook his head. "My old role will be forever an albatross about my neck. I know that. There are other hurdles to be jumped. I'm not sure I have the desire any longer."

Jenny smiled at him. "You are one of the strongest men I've ever met. You will succeed."

"I wish I had your confidence in me, Jenny. I'm not sure I do."

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June 8, 2000

The headlines in the Daily Prophet flashed in bold letters, WEASLEY WINS! LANDSLIDE VICTORY! A picture of Arthur being carried on the shoulders of his supporters showed the entire Weasley clan sporting Gryffindor colours, cheering their husband and father on.

"What do you think, Harry? Can we get things changed?" asked Hermione as she read the paper while eating breakfast.

"Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden were both elected along with Amos Diggory. I'd say their support would help move things through. People already trust them." He continued to shovel Owl Crunch cereal into his mouth.

"I can't believe how much the Malfoys and Weasleys have done to change things. They actually cooperated with each other. Who'd have thought it a year ago?" Hermione got up to pour more tea.

"A year ago... He's due to come back," realized Harry.

"Yeah, I wonder what he's going to do?" wondered Hermione, knowing he was speaking about Snape.

"We're still short staffed at the school, aren't we?" he asked, knowing how much work he had to do.

Several of the seventh-years had become assistant teachers at Hogwarts. The school had moved to a semester format for its school year to cope with the influx of the students starting after almost two years of no school. The number of students returning had increased as well. Only the elves seemed happier than ever, as they had year-round heavy duties to keep the school running. The staff members, though increased in number, were being pushed to their limits.

"He might not want to come back, what with the circumstances and all," said Hermione.

"We could use him," Harry admitted, though it galled him a little.

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June 14, 2000

"Severus Tobias Snape."

Severus stood in the hearing room he'd been brought to by the Auror that had come to Manchester to fetch him. He waited to hear his ultimate fate. His mouth was dry and his palms were wet.

"The Wizengamot has reviewed your case and we have noted a possible infraction..."

Tomorrow Without Walls

Chapter 17 of 19

Severus returns to the wizarding world leaving Jenny confused. What to do?

There is a part in this chapter which is entirely the creative genius of Jane Austin. I claim no part of that text as my creation.

June 14, 2000

"Severus Tobias Snape."

Severus stood in the hearing room he'd been brought to by the Auror that had come to Manchester to fetch him. He waited to hear his ultimate fate. His mouth was dry and his palms were wet.

"The Wizengamot has reviewed your case, and we have noted a possible infraction in your compliance with the conditions surrounding your banishment from wizarding society." Griselda Marchbanks looked at the slender wizard standing before the panel. "Do you know of the incident of which I speak?"

"I believe you are referring to the early morning hours of January 1st, 2000, when I, unintentionally, had the misfortune to be taking the same path as the Weasley family," he replied in a monotone.

This was it, he thought. They'd pull his wand from storage and snap it in front of him, before drumming his skinny arse out of the Ministry. He looked at the wall behind the

panel of elders, studiously avoiding their eyes.

"Why did you take a path that would lead you past the Wizarding enclave for the Millennium celebrations?" asked an ancient witch Severus didn't know.

"I was hardly privy to the Ministry's security provisions for witches and wizards to attend the event. That path, along the bank of the Thames, led to my hotel. It was but coincidence they were on the same path at the same time. There was no restriction to stay away from London." Again he kept his voice steady, already convinced of his fate.

"Your statement of events matches that given by Molly Weasley and the others. They further stated you made no effort to communicate with them." Elder Marchbanks again looked at him. "It must have been very tempting."

"On with it, Madam Marchbanks, I've a luncheon engagement," grumbled another elderly wizard Severus didn't recognize.

"Very well. Severus Tobias Snape, this panel has reviewed your files and we have found you have complied with all the requirements of your sentence. To wit, you are to be reinstated as a full practising wizard with all the rights and responsibilities that entails. You will be permitted to apply for and if qualified, receive all certifications and licences revoked due to the sentence aforementioned." Madam Marchbanks sat back in her chair and smiled at him.

"Welcome back, Mr. Snape. You'll find there have been a lot of changes since you've been gone," said Tiberius Ogden. "Now, there are a few people waiting to meet you through that door, I believe. There's someone there to get you organized." He pointed to a door to the side, different from the one through which Severus had entered.

"This panel is adjourned," said Madam Marchbanks, as she stood and left the room.

Severus stood dumbfounded. It was finally over. He was free to follow his own devices. He started when the Auror assigned to him touched his shoulder and pointed to the side door. Still in a haze, he walked in the direction indicated and opened the door. A bright flash momentarily blinded him, as someone took a picture. As his sight cleared, he saw a smiling Jenny in front of him. He walked towards her, oblivious to whoever else was around, and pulled her into his arms.

"Can you feel it, Jenny?" he whispered.

"Your arms around me?" she asked, knowing he meant something else.

"The walls have gone. All the old walls have crumbled away and I'm free." He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "It's over."

"Well, who's this charming lady, Severus? Is she the source and reason for your repentance and redemption? Or perhaps the balm that soothed the tortured soul of a double agent, seeking to find a way to survive, hmm?"

Severus looked up and found himself in the presence of none other than a beaming Rita Skeeter, her Quick Quotes Quill fluttering nearby.

"Madam, remove yourself from my presence. There is nothing that I could possibly have to say that would interest you." Severus turned his attention away from her and looked for who was to meet him.

"On the contrary, Severus, my readers are desperate to know all about your activities during your time with the vanquished Dark Lord. How did you come to have the skill to let Harry Potter live?" She paused and adopted a phoney look of compassion. "Was it a hard choice to decide who should survive, The Boy Who Lived or Lord Voldemort?"

Severus looked over at the quill jotting away on a note pad, quite unattended.

"What rubbish are you writing?"

He grabbed the note pad and read, 'Severus Snape emerged from his final hearing, utterly consumed by his unrelenting guilt and grief. His Muggle lover consoled him; as she must have while he lived in exile, banished from our world. Her plain features and dowdy...' Severus tore the paper from the pad and ripped it to shreds.

"I'll not be fodder for the rabble that reads the tripe you write, Rita. If I see one letter of this... this... "

"Severus, I'm so sorry, I was delayed." Arthur Weasley hurried to join Severus and Jenny, who both looked as if they might assault the reporter at any moment. He grabbed Snape's hand and shook it vigorously then repeated his action with Jenny.

"Arthur, what is she doing here?" Severus asked.

"Well, frankly, she came to cover your return to our society," Arthur replied. "She was not invited to do an exposé on your... Well let's just say you need answer no questions you choose not to." He looked at Skeeter, offering her a glare worthy of his wife, before turning back to Snape with a tight smile. He pulled both Severus and Jenny along to an office Severus recognized.

"I've no desire to meet with Scrimgeour," declared Snape.

Arthur smiled. "That shouldn't pose a problem," he said as he opened the door.

Severus looked at the nameplate declaring Arthur Weasley as Minister of Magic. He was barely aware of Skeeter and her photographer following them in. Arthur brought the couple up to date, finally presenting Severus with his wand, ceremoniously, for a picture. Arthur advised Rita he expected to see it on the front page in the morning and then dismissed her.

"Severus, I can't tell you how happy I am to have you back with us. We need you more than ever," said Arthur, sharing a genuine smile with both of them. A rap came to his door. He granted admittance to his son, Percy.

"Father, the timetable. Mr. Snape has several appointments," said Percy, in his usual snooty manner.

"Of course, of course," replied Arthur. "We'll talk later; go and get your life in order, Severus."

Jenny followed them out, walking beside her lover.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Doultton, you can't come with us," Percy told her. "It will take the better part of today to get things put to right."

"Oh," replied Jenny. "So, where should I go?"

"Come along, Jenny, Tonks is waiting for you," Arthur told her, offering his arm for her to take.

Jenny turned back to Severus and asked, "What happens now? Where will you go after everything's been sorted?"

Snape turned back to her, took her hands, and rested his forehead on hers. "I'm not sure, Jenny. The options are wide open. I can only tell you this: I will return to the world I belong in, and I will become whole again."

Jenny nodded and with a tight smile said, "Of course you will. That's only right. You need to be the man you were meant to be."

Severus smiled in return. "I knew you'd understand."

Jenny watched as Severus was hustled down the hall, Percy gesturing, as he explained what needed to be accomplished.

"Jenny, Tonks can see you home," said Arthur, pulling her along.

She looked back at his receding form. "Goodbye, Severus, my love," whispered Jenny. "I hope you'll be happy now."

Tonks took Jenny in hand and Apparated her home. Jenny showered and changed before brewing some tea. She cleaned up the dishes they'd left from breakfast and then sat at the kitchen table. Her world was empty without Severus; his wit, sarcasm and snarling presence were gone, and she felt more alone than ever. The day passed into night before she realized it, leaving her sitting in the dark, staring at the chair he usually occupied.

"Please, my love, be happy. I'll love you forever," whispered Jenny into the darkness, just before climbing into bed alone. She pulled his pillow to her chest, burrowing her nose in the softness that held his scent.

"BUGGER!" exclaimed Severus, sitting up suddenly from his sleep. He'd just realized Jenny had thought he'd decided to return to the Wizarding World, leaving her behind. He had one last appointment, to get his Apparition license back, first thing in the morning. He was resolute on his path immediately after. Jenny might be at work but it didn't matter. He'd find her and she would know what he meant, in no uncertain terms.

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June 15, 2000

Jenny woke with the alarm and rose as usual. She made her ablutions and wandered to the kitchen. No tea was made, no lashings of toast decorated her table, but worst of all was the silence. She felt the beginnings of grief begin to settle in her chest, much as it had when her mother had passed. Determined to be in control, she found her handbag and keys, and then fled the kitchen. Grabbing her umbrella by habit, Jenny left the house for her job. She knew while there she could immerse herself in books and information, a temporary placebo for a breaking heart. It was her lifeline, her anchor to the world that seemed to want her to shrivel away.

Severus woke with a start. He had a mission and was anxious to be about it. Harry Potter had offered to let him stay at Grimmauld Place overnight so that he might be close to the Ministry for his test in the morning. He showered and made his way down to the kitchen. When he entered, he was greeted by a cook sporting sea foam green hair. She turned and smiled at him.

"Watcher, Severus? Have a good sleep then?" asked Tonks.

"You're doing the kitchen duties this morning?" he asked, thinking of his gastric wellbeing.

"Not like you'll find anyone else who's going to," she replied with a mischievous smile.

Severus cleared his throat. "Your pardon, Nymphadora, but one never had regarded you as a domestic goddess." Severus knew she hated her name.

"Ah, well then, you don't know about the latest addition to the kitchen, Sev," she replied, knowing he hated the abbreviation. "We've got ourselves a microwave."

Severus frowned. "It works here?" He approached the modern Muggle appliance, expecting an explosion.

"Yeah, Harry wants lecky installed in the house; says he hates gas light." Tonks laughed at his look of disgust. "Hermione made this work," said Tonks, pointing to the microwave oven.

Severus shook his head and asked, "Where's Percy? I've an appointment."

"I know, Sev. It's still early. You're to come with me," replied Tonks. "He'll meet up with us."

"My name is Severus or Snape. There is no contraction, as I believe I had told you several years ago, Miss Tonks."

"Up your arse, Snape," retorted Tonks, with a smile.

They ate microwave-cooked bacon on sandwiches and then Floo'd to the Ministry. Severus made his way through the security checks and waited for Percy in the Atrium. When they met, Percy handed him a leaflet to read.

"Sorry," he said, "I should have given this to you last night. I'm sure you're a quick study, though."

Severus frowned. "What the bloody hell is this, The Learners Apparition Manual? I don't need to learn, boy, I just need to re-take the test!"

Percy had the grace to look embarrassed. "Uhm, well you see, there's been some changes to the licensing procedures. You take a written test, then, if you pass, you can book the practical."

"Book the practical?" asked Snape, wearing a dangerous look in his eye. "There had better be a place in line for me for the practical test this morning or you'll find the toe of my boot up someone's arse. Guess whose?"

Percy edged away. "The test room is in the same area as the practical experience booths. I'm sure you remember where they're located. I'll just see if I can speed up the process, shall I?" He smiled and jogged away, thinking he needed his dad to pull some strings to keep a large, dragon-leather clad toe out of his arse.

At the end of it all, Severus found himself in line with a pack of pimply-faced teens and a pair of degenerate sots. All were waiting to take their Apparation Licensing exam.

"What in the name of Merlin are you doing here?" asked Snape of the foul smelling man before him.

"Not any choice, mate. New law fer those who Splinch themselves. Had a few too many and cut off me right arm. The Ministry bloke comes along and says, 'You've been Apparatin' under the influence, an' your licence is suspended,' he says." The man coughed and spat, causing Snape to grimace. He continued his tale. "Put a charm on me, they did, so's I couldn't Apparate again. Said I had to retake the test."

"Really," said Snape, watching as three others were taken from the front of the line. He now was in second place.

"So, what's your excuse then?" asked the same sot.

Severus looked at him and smiled. "Murder."

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Snape passed the practical exam with ease. He Floo'd to Diagon Alley and made his way to Gringotts. His vault had been released and his key was reissued. He rode down with his goblin escort and handed over the key. When the door opened, he entered and retrieved a few stacks of money and one jewellery case. Returning to the cart, he started to rehearse what he wanted to say when he next met Jenny.

He was about to return to the Leaky Cauldron when the sign for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes caught his eye. Without conscious thought, he found his feet carrying him towards the shop. When he entered, Severus found himself in a wonderland of mischief-making mania. He almost grinned, thinking of deducted Hogwarts House points versus the inventory in stock around him. Shaking his head to clear the thought away, Severus turned to look for the owner.

Severus stood and pulled out a small bag from an inside pocket. Opening it, he shook out a ring with three sparkling diamonds mounted on it. He took her hand and slipped the ring onto the appropriate finger of her left hand. Jenny gasped as it adjusted itself to fit her.

"It's magical," she whispered as Severus pulled her into his arms.

"Yes, love has a very special kind of magic." He smiled and kissed her, letting the crowd cheer on.

Love revealed

Chapter 18 of 19

The long awaited wedding.

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Sorry, this took a while to come. I've been a bit busy. I became a grandmother above all else.

We come to the end. I'll do a short epilogue but there are some hanging stories I might like to write about this pair. If you would like to read more about Jenny and Snape review and let me know.

A/N The hand fasting was created from a myriad of different forms and put together. I claim no originality.

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Severus used Apparation to travel from Manchester to the Ministry of Magic for his appointment with Arthur Weasley. His request was a simple one, but it was also revolutionary. He had been advised by his friends that Wizarding society was preparing to reintegrate with Muggle society at some point in the foreseeable future. In that context, his request was not untenable; in any case, it simply hadn't been done in generations.

"I don't want any bloody medals, Arthur. I want to have my hand-fasting at Hogwarts in front of Albus' tomb." Severus paced to and fro before the desk in the Minister of Magic's office.

"You must understand, Severus, the decision to keep the Magic and Muggle worlds separate is not one sided. You're asking for a policy change in the Home Office as well as our Ministry. There are formalities to be observed, policies to be reviewed..."

"Bugger the policies and fuck the formalities! I've given up most of my life to get our world to where it is today. I want one Muggle woman to be able to come to Hogwarts. That's all. Make it happen, Minister; your predecessors never had problems bending regulations to their whims."

Arthur sighed. "The very thing I want to avoid."

"Alright then, I'll take it to the people. I'm sure Skeeter could use a wartime love story that will not have a fairy tale ending," threatened Snape.

Arthur held his hands up in defeat. "Alright we'll figure out a loophole just give me a chance to work it out."

"Good. Now, I'm going home." Severus turned and left, returning to the atrium exit to Apparate. He heard his name called. Turning, he saw Lucius Malfoy striding towards him, still using his cane.

"Severus, old boy, I've not had a chance to speak to you since your return." He extended his hand and slapped Snape on the shoulder. "It's good to see you."

"And you, Lucius. How is Draco?"

Lucius frowned. "He had some bad moments when we got him back. They were less than gentle with him. That was part of the reason I moved for the reforms this past year."

"You? Moved for reform?" Snape snorted. "You've changed your tune."

He nodded in agreement. "Yes. It took some bitter lessons, but if I want any peace in my life, I have to change things so that no one else will go through what we did."

Snape nodded his agreement. "Well, I'd best be off. I promised a certain lady a special evening."

"Ah, Jenny." Lucius smiled at his friend. "You should propose."

"I did." Severus smirked at the wide-eyed look Lucius adopted.

"Well done. I must share the news." He smiled as Severus waved goodbye and left. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and set off on a mission.

Later that evening, Jenny and Severus sat on the sofa watching television. Coronation Street was playing. Severus had discovered the show over the past year and had become a fan. The closing theme played as he stroked Jenny's shoulder, making her turn to face him. They were both in dressing gowns, having shared a bath after dinner.

"How about an early night; we've both lost sleep recently," he whispered into her ear.

"I don't think sleep is on your mind," Jenny countered, slipping her hand inside his dressing gown to rest on his arousal.

He smirked down at her. "I'm up for a night-cap."

"I'll say," she retorted, only to start when a sharp rapping came from the front door.

"Who the blue blazes calls at this time?" he growled, rising to answer.

He opened the door to the beaming faces of Lucius and Draco Malfoy.

"Good evening, old chap. Up for a spot of congratulatory bubbly?" he asked of the annoyed Snape, shoving a bottle of champagne in his face and carrying in a second.

Severus stood aside to let them enter. "I was up for a celebration, but you weren't included in the equation," he muttered as the pair passed him.

Lucius took in Jenny's dress. "Jenny, my dear, I do hope we didn't interrupt anything?" he asked with a suggestive look in his eye.

"Oh no, we were just... relaxing," she replied, looking past him to Severus.

"Excellent, for Draco and I wanted to stop by and congratulate you on your engagement." Lucius paused and looked around. "Have you any champagne flutes?"

Jenny rose and went to her china cabinet to find the glasses. As she did, another knock came to her door. Severus answered again, admitting Lupin and Tonks. As he went to close the door, it was pushed open again.

"Hello, Professor. Draco said there was a party here tonight," said Ron, leading the rest of the DA from Grimmauld Place in. Minerva strolled in at the end, a knowing smile on her face.

Jenny watched as her house filled with witches and wizards. She walked over to stand beside Severus, a look of shock on her face. Suddenly, a loud knocking came from her back door. Lupin looked in the kitchen to see who was entering from the rear.

"It's the rest of the Weasleys," he announced, going to admit them.

"Trust that family to not know front from back," muttered Lucius to himself.

"Hey!" exclaimed Ron, offended by the remark he'd overheard.

"I'm going to get dressed, Severus," whispered Jenny. "It looks like we're having a party."

Severus grabbed her arm and pulled her to the bedroom. He closed and warded the door. "They won't miss us for a few minutes. Molly will be passing around food." He pulled her close and kissed her.

"Severus," Jenny hissed as he bit her neck gently and pushed her onto the bed. Before she could complain, Severus and Jenny had started their own private party. When they returned, they were met with toasts and cheers as if they hadn't been missed. Only Lucius smiled at Snape and slapped him on the back.

"At least one of the dark charms was worth remembering, eh old friend?" Lucius laughed quietly as Severus turned red.

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssss

"Where are we going?" Jenny asked as she watched the countryside pass by through the carriage windows. "Severus wouldn't tell me anything."

"Hogsmeade," replied Hermione. "It's the only totally Wizarding town in all of Britain."

"But why the train ride? I mean, you lot have much faster ways of getting around." Jenny continued to stare at the scenery which had changed considerably since they left London.

"Two reasons, I should think," offered Tonks. "This is the way the Muggle-born children are introduced to the world of magic. Just so's you know, we had a dickens of a time getting permission to let you through the barrier. The second reason is that Severus wanted to kill time."

"For what?" Jenny asked.

"He didn't say," said Hermione, remembering the Snape-ish nervous wreck that went about bullying people to 'Make It Perfect'. "I must say, I've never seen him so... bothered about things like this before."

Jenny smiled to herself, remembering the Registrar's office wedding her family had attended....

...Lucius and Draco walked into the registrar's office looking as dapper in their Muggle suits as they did in Wizarding gear.

"Over there," said Lucius, looking at the announcement board.

Severus, Lupin and Tonks entered the building together, having met outside. They saw the platinum haired pair standing off to the side and joined them.

"You have the Muggle ring?" asked Severus of Lucius, while nervously adjusting his jacket.

"Of course," he replied. "Did you bring a handkerchief?"

"What for?" asked Severus.

"You're beginning to sweat, sir," said Draco.

Snape pulled the white linen hanky from his pocket and mopped his brow. He looked at Lucius and Draco closely.

"Where did you get your suits?" he asked as he pushed at his hair, using the glass on the display as a mirror. He tightened the knot on his tie and looked around the foyer for his bride.

"The Muggle tailor said Armani was a prominent designer," Lucius replied as he fingered the lapel. "It fits well."

"Jenny's here," interrupted Tonks as Jenny, her sister, Amanda, and family entered the building. Her older sister bustled over and opened a box of boutonnieres.

"Here you go, Severus," said Amanda, pinning a white rose to his lapel. Everyone else had carnations.

Severus looked past her at Jenny, who was wearing a pale blue suit with matching flowers in her swept-up hair. He walked to meet her.

"Jenny, you look lovely. I wish I could do justice to the pictures today." He smiled as she looked down at the floor.

"You always make me feel special, Severus. I think you look very dashing. Now, let's get married... at least in the Muggle fashion," she told him, finally sharing a smile.

"We didn't need to, you know. Wizarding weddings are perfectly legal," he told her.

"But my family wouldn't be there, and as much of a pain in the arse they can be, they are my family."

go quickly. Be free in the giving of affection and warmth. Make love often, and be sensuous with one another. Have no fear and let not the ways or words of the unenlightened give you unease. For the goodness of all Creation is with you, now and forever."

The people in the circle responded by saying, "Blessed be."

Placing her wand on the small table, the elder then lifted the sacred athame a ritual blade. "Swear you now, on this sacred blade, that there is no reason known to you that this union should not proceed?"

Jenny and Severus answered in unison. "I do so swear."

Now looking around the circle, the elder asked, "Is there any reason known to you why this partnership should not be made?"

Those in the circle responded, "There is none."

The elder took Jenny's left hand and, using the athame, made a small cut in her palm. She followed suit with Severus, then joined their left hands together.

"As your joined hands now make the symbol of infinity, let us make the bonds of infinite love." The elder tied four cords about their joined hands. "Light blue for understanding and patience, Red for courage, strength and passion, White for peace, sincerity and devotion, Gold for unity, prosperity, and longevity."

"Is it your wish, Jennifer, to become one with this man?"

"It is my dearest wish," replied Jenny, looking into Severus' eyes.

"Is it your wish, Severus, to become one with this woman?"

"I wish most fervently to be one with her," he replied while watching Jenny with a fierce intensity.

"Do any say nay?"

"No," shouted the people forming the circle.

She passed her wand over their joined hands, causing a bright light to envelop them. Jenny felt warmth pass over and through her while at the same time, the only thing she could see was her Severus standing before her. As the light faded, Jenny noticed the tied cords had disappeared and then saw the cut on her hand was gone.

"Take these rings now blessed and place them on your heart's finger."

Jenny and Severus each took a ring and placed them on each other's ring finger.

Elder Marchbanks then raised her hands once more. "Then, before the infinite universe and all creation, who are witness to this rite together with this company, I now proclaim you husband and wife. Let the circle now break and join in celebration."

Jenny and Severus were immediately surrounded by their friends, but they took no notice of them. They only saw each other.

"I have something to show you." Severus whispered in her ear. He looked behind her at the people standing there. "Move aside and make a space. It's time to show her," he commanded, watching as the crowd parted.

"This is the place where we all truly belong. It is the place we grew up in. This is a home for us, where we are always welcome. Turn and see the magic of Hogwarts."

Jenny was gently turned in his arms. She gasped at the place where moments ago she saw ancient ruins. Now there stood an immense castle, lit as brightly as anything Walt Disney could have thought of.

"Severus," she breathed. "It's amazing. I could never have imagined anything like this."

"Hogwarts at night never loses its wonder," he agreed.

"Come along then, Madame Snape, your banquet awaits." Severus smiled at her and pulled her along. "Wait until you see the Great Hall."

Sssssssssssssssss

Jenny awoke to her neck being nuzzled by a very hot mouth. They were on their honeymoon; a present from everyone at the ceremony a world tour.

"Mmh, morning, Severus. Where are we exactly?" she asked as she stretched luxuriantly in the king sized bed.

"Let me think. It's Wednesday so we must be in Los Alcazares."

"Spain?"

"Yes, there's a large Magical community here. They live a rather bohemian lifestyle. Do you frequent nude beaches?" he asked, taking time to stroke her body for his amusement.

"With a body like mine?" she exclaimed. "Not bloody likely."

"Good, for I am a very possessive and jealous wizard. If another were to see this..." He leaned over her and kissed her nipple. "... or this..." He kissed the other nipple. "... or this..." He licked his way to her belly button. "... and most especially... this."

Jenny moaned as he started to pay attention to her clitoris. "No worries, Severus, no one will get to see any of them. I'll just keep you in bed and you can keep me, ohhh... happy."

"Where are we tomorrow?" she asked as they relaxed from another bout of love making.

"Morocco," he replied.

"Where the Sook is?" she wondered.

"Yes," he replied.

"You know, one day we should come back and actually do some sight seeing," she told him as she played with his chest hair.

"I thought we were," he murmured, only to be gently smacked. "Oh, you mean of the local tourist spots? Well, perhaps we shall. But for now, you along with a five star hotel and room service in each country are enough to make me happy."

"You are incorrigible, Severus Snape."

"I am in love, Jennifer Snape. I am merely fulfilling my wedding vows, and that my dear is the end of it."

"No it's not," she told him. "It's only the beginning, and I get the final word. I love you, Severus Snape."

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Epilogue

Chapter 19 of 19

This is it, the Epilogue. Sorry it took so long to get on this site. Life has taken some strange paths since I began writing this story.

Do let me know if you liked the story – my ego does like to be stroked.

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August, 2000

Lucius Malfoy sighed in frustration before trying his arguments on his old cohort once more. "Surely you can see that grinding and concocting herbal remedies for ignorant Muggles and editing poorly written Muggle drivel are a waste of your impeccable skills and superior knowledge. These... these... nobodies, for want of a better word, have no appreciation."

Severus smiled at the carpet before replying. "Lucius, I am quite content. In fact I've never felt more at peace in all my life," he explained.

Minerva McGonagall put down the glass of sherry she was sipping and leaned forward. "Severus, your contributions to the downfall of that monster were greater than any of us will ever know. Society has since understood what sacrifices you made and they know you and Jenny were poorly treated. You should never have been banished, let alone punished."

Severus snorted. "Poorly treated? Perhaps, Minerva, but they left me with the greatest gifts they ever could have; my wife and options."

"Options?" asked Malfoy.

"Yes, options, Lucius. Muggle or Wizard, which would I be? You see, after I began attending Hogwarts, my Muggle world shrank. I was rather pleased to see it go at the time. There were only ever shabby clothes, stale bread and misery for my mother and me." Severus paused and recalled the sullen woman who'd loved him, but had not loved enough to leave a bad situation. "This past year I lived solely as a Muggle adult for the first time. Lo and behold I discovered that I could live well and happily. I had Jenny, who knew all about me and loved me anyways. I was...content."

Lucius looked at his old friend. "Severus, you can't simply turn your back on a lifetime filled with magic."

Severus shrugged. "Why not? It turned its back on me."

Minerva shook her head. "No, Severus, you can't think that way. It was the policy makers in place at the time... the aftermath of the conflict..."

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Jenny opened the front door and walked in, unaware of the conversation taking place in her house. She opened her umbrella to dry, and set it aside. Kicking off her shoes, she opened the door, and walked into the living room.

"Oh, hello, I didn't know we had visitors." She smiled at her husband's friends.

"Hello, Jenny," greeted Minerva warmly.

"Madam Snape," said Lucius formally if a tad cold.

Jenny looked askance at Malfoy as she walked over to Severus. "Did you have a good day, love?"

"Tolerable," replied Severus, as she bent and kissed his cheek before walking to the kitchen.

"Oh," she huffed. "You didn't get to the dishes," said Jenny, in a disappointed voice.

Severus rose. "I'm sorry. Lucius and Minerva arrived just after I got home, Jenny." He looked at his visitors. "Excuse me for a moment." He walked to join Jenny in the kitchen.

A moment later, Jenny came back into the living room with a glass of wine. "Don't forget to close the curtains this time. The tomcat from next door keeps staring in the window trying to attack the dishes when they move around," she called over her shoulder.

Lucius gave her a look of disgust. "That's what you've reduced him to, petty household charms. One of the most powerful and talented wizards alive today, and you confine him to your insignificant, little, Muggle world. I hadn't thought you so selfish, Madam, as to keep a man from his true heritage."

Jenny put her glass down. "I beg your pardon, Lucius, what exactly do you mean?" She glowered at him, angry at his insinuation.

Lucius snorted. "Why are you stopping Severus from returning to claim his rightful place among his people? You've been educated in, and now pursue, your career of sorting and stacking library books. You can't possibly think he'd be happy living as a mere Muggle." He pronounced the last two words as though they soiled his mouth.

"There's a damn sight more than stacking books involved in my job, sir. You listen here, Lucius Malfoy," she began, angrily. "You've no right to plant your snobbish, skinny arse on my furniture and then insult me. You may be Severus' friend but I'm his wife, and I won't take any shite from the likes of you, ever. I don't make decisions for him..."

"No, she doesn't," interjected Snape, coming from the kitchen. "In fact, old friend, she is the reason I returned at all. I was seriously considering telling Wizarding society to go fuck itself." He stood beside Jenny, and put his arm around her. "Jenny convinced me otherwise. I don't suggest you continue in your present attitude towards her." He cocked an eyebrow in warning to Lucius, who nodded in assent.

"You can't mean that, Severus," gasped Minerva.

Severus nodded. "Yes I do. My Muggle life wasn't perfect, and at first I wanted nothing more than to just shut myself away. Unfortunately, or I should say, luckily, Jenny was here." He smiled and looked at his wife. "I fell in love with a woman possessing uncommon good sense, and a good pair of boots to kick me in my arse when I needed it."

Minerva tried a different tactic. "Severus... Jenny, please consider this; we are having a huge influx of youngsters, some of whom have never attended Hogwarts or any other school. Their parents kept them away because of the troubles. We need people like Severus. His knowledge and abilities are... well, few can match him." Minerva stood and approached her former colleague. "Please, Severus, we need you now more than ever. Good teachers are hard to find."

"We propose you teach at the Annex; that is to say Malfoy Manor. Only seventh years, and you can teach Potions, DADA and Arithmancy," offered Malfoy. "I know you won't admit it, but you had a keen mind for the calculations."

Severus shook his head. "I don't know."

"Say you'll at least think about it? Talk it over with Jenny?" pleaded Minerva.

Jenny looked at her husband. "We should talk about it, Severus. You had a distinguished career before. Don't discard your options before we talk them through, Severus. Don't throw them away because of the past." She looked at the older woman. "We will talk about it, Minerva; no promises."

Minerva nodded. "I think I can promise you, remuneration will be generous, Severus."

"If you should teach at the Annex, the classes are held for day students who Apparate in.

"No house master duties. No detentions we levy small cash fines for major infractions. House points are in effect however; you can still have fun that way," added Malfoy. "You can Apparate to work daily and return home to your loving wife in the evening."

"We said we would discuss it," said Snape with some asperity. "Now, I'm sure you've some place else to be," he said, inviting them to leave.

"I look forward to hearing from you soon," said Minerva, as she took her leave.

"Jenny, I meant no offence at what I said..." began Lucius.

"Yes you did, you poncy prat. You thought you were defending your friend," said Jenny, not unkindly. "It's just that you lot, you rich snooty buggers, who never split a nail working, don't look at us like we're normal. It's the same for Muggle snobs as it is for Magic snobs. Now, bugger off so I can snog my husband senseless."

Lucius bowed and stepped into the Apparation spot created in the front hall of the house to leave. Minerva kissed each of them on the cheek and left as well.

"Lucius isn't rich anymore," said Severus.

"He was putting on airs, Severus. His type always does. Mark my words; he'll regain the money he lost. It seems cash is attracted to his type and they don't have to work at it," said Jenny, giving her working class convictions free vent.

Severus sighed. "Jenny Snape, you are incorrigible."

Jenny wrapped her arms around his waist. "No, my love, I'm insatiable and you're to blame."

"Ah, lead me on to my punishment," he retorted as they headed to the bedroom.

September 2000

"Very intimidating," said Jenny, seeing her husband in full teaching regalia. "The youngest kids must have been frightened."

"That was the idea," he replied, with a sinister smile.

"I'll see you tonight then?" Jenny rose and walked to him. She smoothed the front of his robes before reaching up for a kiss.

Severus sighed. "I much prefer the start of a teaching day this way than any of the others I had at Hogwarts."

Jenny smiled. "Just don't be too much of a tyrant; these aren't young children."

Severus sniffed and looked down his nose. "Madam, I am the master of my classroom, and I demand respect and obedience, or else."

"Or else Lucius gets some money from the fine you will levy. A contribution made towards the renovation of Hogwarts Annex. In other words, the money goes to his bloody house. I told you his type found ways to make money without working."

Severus shrugged. "Well, we shall be a little better off soon, and then you shall have your car."

"Really?" she exclaimed in surprise. "But licenses and taxes and petrol..."

He silenced her with a quick peck on the lips. "Minerva said remuneration would generous. I'll earn more doing this for a week than I did working for a month at the other jobs." One last, quick kiss and he headed to the hallway to Apparate. "Besides, I did rather miss baiting the little buggers. I hope I'm not too out of practise."

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Ginny, Luna and Colin Creevey sat in the room, waiting for the first class of Seventh year DADA to begin. Rumour had it there was a new teacher.

"Seems strange to have come from home to class," said Colin. "It's almost like you're breaking rules or something."

"I miss all the students piling in to the Great Hall," said Luna. "It was like being part of a big family."

"We'll get used to it," said Ginny. "We can go to Hogwarts for dinner anytime we need to use the library. Professor McGonagall said they plan to open some extra rooms so we can book a bed to sleep over when we get close to NEWTs."

"Teacher's here," hissed Collin, noticing the door open. "Bloody hell," he exclaimed, seeing who appeared.

"Good morning," drawled Snape in his customary manner. "So you've all decided to subject yourselves to Seventh year Defence against the Dark Arts." He smiled, sending shivers down the spines of the students present. "Well, well, well... This will be an interesting year... if you survive it." He finished the sentence with the final "T" echoing around the room.

He looked over the faces of the students. He knew them all. He allowed himself a moment to reflect on the faces he didn't see. They had gone, disgraced by their parents or worse, dead. Shaking off the moment, he turned to the blackboard and flicked his wand.

"Turn to page two hundred and twenty-four, hex repelling charms. Read the chapter and be ready to practise in twenty minutes." He settled in the chair behind his desk and looked at the homework assignment he planned to give. It felt right to be here. It felt like home.

July 2001

Lucius Malfoy sat drinking after dinner brandy in his refurbished dining room. Jenny and Severus sat on either side of him.

"It's a lucrative venture. There are businesses like it springing up all over. I simply want to open the market in the North. It is a tourist area, after all."

Jenny looked at her husband then asked, "Why are you offering it to us, Lucius? We both have jobs."

"Ah, there you see you have jobs where you work for others. I'm offering you a venture where you will be your own employer. You did say your librarian training offered more than advanced book stacking, as I recall?" Lucius cocked an eyebrow at her, and waited for her reactions.

"Stop being a smart arse, Lucius," said Snape. "What would be our involvement?"

"Well, actually, it would involve Jenny and Draco. I propose to open an internet café, come coffee shop, come book shop in both Braemar and Stonehaven. The tourist industry, both Muggle and Magical, is thriving quite well in both locations." He sat back and sipped his brandy waiting for a response.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Jenny, already figuring out his plan in her mind.

"Offer your expertise of course, my dear. You know computers and books; I've trained Draco in business and money management. Between you and my son, with my business acumen, and your husband's abilities in magical warding, we can run two lucrative locations offering services to both communities." He smiled at his own prowess.

"Exactly how will this prove beneficial to us, Lucius? Jenny and I are pursuing careers of our choosing. What would prompt us to change?" Severus asked.

"Profit, old friend; I'm not asking you to put forward any money, only Jenny's brilliant abilities."

"You've changed your tune," said Jenny.

"Come now, Jenny, surely you can see the possibilities." Lucius looked at her, knowing he had touched a spot in her heart.

"They are all the go in some of the bigger cities I don't know, maybe..." Jenny sat pondering the idea of being her own boss, choosing books and helping people on the internet. That's what brought her and Severus together.

"You would have a bisected café, magic and Muggle?" asked Snape.

"Of course," Lucius replied, "In fact, we've already scouted out locations. Would you like to visit them?" He had her and he knew it...

August 2001

"You sneaky bugger, Lucius, you never even hinted you were going to use elves," said Severus, looking over the modern establishment that had undergone an amazing renovation.

"Yes, and they all have clothes too, thanks to Miss Granger. She will be working for us shortly, after finishing her last year at University. We will open the second shop then."

Lucius looked around with a satisfied smirk on his face.

"Are you ready, Father? You should be on the other side," said Draco.

"Of course, Draco, let's welcome our friends. Severus, Jenny, shall we begin?" He smiled and moved through the portal to the side of the shop Muggles wouldn't see.

Jenny took a deep breath. "Well, here we go," she said, indicating the young squib girl who'd been hired as a server should open the door.

A small group of people entered the shop; having been given tokens for free coffee from several of Braemar's tourist spots. A similar scene took place on the Magical side, albeit that the customers were far more flamboyant and had arrived by Floo as well as by foot.

June 2002

"I'm looking into opening a special search engine for Magic folk called Goaccio," said Hermione. She was sitting with Jenny in the new shop they had just opened in Stonehaven, Scotland. Hermione would be taking this one under her wing, while Draco would commute between both.

"Goaccio?" asked Jenny, "Why that name?"

"Accio is a summoning charm, so Go and Accio, Goaccio," she explained.

"How do you know Muggles wouldn't stumble across it?" asked Jenny, amused at the brilliant young woman.

"You'd have to have a password to use it, and you'd need to answer some questions to qualify for membership, of course. That means even squibs could use it." Hermione smiled in quiet confidence.

Looking past Hermione's shoulder, Jenny noticed Severus coming from the portal to the magic side of the shop. He approached their table.

"Miss Granger, if you wouldn't mind, I need to speak to my wife privately," he said without preamble.

"Of course, I'll just check next door." Hermione rose and left. Severus slipped into her seat.

Jenny frowned at his unusual behaviour. "Severus, what is it?"

"Jenny, a situation has arisen at Hogwarts. It was unforeseen, but not really unexpected," he began.

Jenny reached out and took his hand, "What happened? Is someone hurt?" she asked.

He shook his head and looked away. "Not exactly, it's..." he faded off and sighed.

"Professor Vector has been acting as Deputy Headmistress for the past two years. She has decided to get married to a professor from Durmstrang and has accepted a position there. Minerva is looking for a replacement. Flitwick has declined as did Sprout they said they were too old. There are other possibilities but..." Again Severus

faltered.

"Minerva offered you the position and you'd need to move back to Hogwarts if you accept," finished Jenny.

"Yes," he confirmed. "There hasn't been a married staff member in half a century let alone a married Deputy."

"How would it work, Severus?" wondered Jenny, thinking of the news she wanted to share.

"I'm not sure," he told her honestly. "Why don't we go home and talk about it. I've invited Minerva for tea so we can ask questions.

Jenny told Hermione she would be leaving for the day and Apparated with Severus to Manchester.

"Severus, I need to tell you something too." Jenny sat on the sofa and stared into space.

Severus frowned. "What is it, Jenny?"

"I know we never discussed this before we were married, but knowing how you feel, well perhaps we could just end it before it goes any further..." She trailed off.

"End it!" exclaimed Snape, thinking she was talking of their marriage. "We'll work it out Jenny, why do you want to end it? I won't take the job, if that's all it is. I don't want to end our marriage, Jenny. I love you... unless you've changed your mind about us." He knelt in front of her, taking her face in his hands.

Jenny looked at his distressed face, "What are you talking about, Severus? I wasn't talking about US, at least not directly."

Severus watched as tears formed and fell from her eyes.

"What is it, Jenny love? Whatever it is, it can't be that bad," he told her gently.

"I'm pregnant, Severus. Two months gone." She closed her eyes, convinced he'd be upset.

"I meant I could get an abortion. It's still early enough. I know you hate kids."

"You'd get rid of my child?" he asked, a strange brew of emotions surging in his mind.

"I don't want to be rid of it," she admitted finally. "I'm not sure I can carry it to term, and I don't know if you want it, even if I can. You might never love it and you might stop loving me," she told him through her ever increasing sobs.

"Oh, Jenny, why did you keep this to yourself?" He tipped up her chin and used his thumbs to wipe away her tears. "I've never thought about being a father because I never thought I'd find a woman who loved me enough to give me a child."

"Do you want this baby?" she asked innocently.

He gently touched her belly, thinking about the tiny flicker of life kindled there, "I created a life with you." he said in wonder. "We created a life with our love. How could I not want this child?"

"I lost my first one, Severus. Maybe I can't carry a baby to term."

Severus sat beside her and pulled her into his arms. "That was a long time ago Jenny. Things have changed in the medical world. Have you seen a doctor yet?" he asked suddenly.

"No," she admitted, "I just did one of the home kits to test.

"Do you want to go to a Muggle clinic or do you want to go to our hospital?"

"A magical hospital?" she asked.

"Well, yes. We do get sick and injured, you know. Somehow I doubt Manchester Royal would know how to deal with someone sprouting a fresh growth of canary feathers or had chicken wings instead of arms, from a charm gone wrong."

Jenny chuckled in spite of her tears. "So they have midwives too."

"Yes, and if necessary, they probably have ways to help you carry to term if there are any problems." He found himself suddenly thinking of a baby in his future; it was not unpleasant.

"Now, what about the job offer?" she asked.

"Oh yes, there is that," he muttered, wondering how his life got so complicated so quickly.

September 2002

Deputy Headmaster Severus Snape met the new crop of first-years climbing the stairs to reach the Great Hall. He looked them over trying to figure out who would end up in his House of Slytherin. A couple of them seemed obvious, but the others were not.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," he began. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory and spend free time in your house common room."

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history, and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honour. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours."

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all tidy yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

His eyes wandered over the youngsters once more, coming to stop on one young girl, who was smiling and staring at him. She pushed her way forward and stood in front of him.

"You," he stated, repressing a smile. "Why am I not surprised? When did you turn eleven?"

Lily from Manchester smiled up at the face of her Halloween adversary for several years.

"My birthday was yesterday, and I'm not surprised either."

"Really, how so?"

"You knew all about mermaids and fairies, and you could make flowers grow in grotty old high flats. Will you show me the mermaids and fairies and help me learn how to make plants grow?" she asked.

"That, and much, much more, Lily. Now, back into line," he told her sternly, frowning at her, as she smirked back at him.

Placing the old hat on her head, he watched as she was sorted into Slytherin. He shook his head, thinking universe had a perverse sense of humour.

December 15, 2002

Severus was in the middle of a third year DADA class giving a lecture on Grindylows, when he heard a knock on the classroom door. He indicated a boy at the back of the class should answer it. When the door opened, Minerva McGonagall entered, her face flushed from her haste.

"Professor, a moment please, quickly." She beckoned him to the doorway.

"Everyone, remain in your seats, quietly," he instructed, as he joined the older woman outside.

"What is it, Headmistress?" he asked, concerned at her demeanour.

"I got a fire-call from St Mungo's. Jenny's been taken there in labour. Hermione and Molly are with her."

Severus felt his heart begin to pound. "It's too early; she's not due until January."

"What are you standing here for man, go," ordered McGonagall. "I'll take your classes. Go on." She fairly shoved him down the hall. She watched as he broke into a sprint and ran down the stairs. She hoped he took a moment to get a winter cloak; it was snowing outside.

Severus arrived via the Floo at the Casualty Ward of St. Mungo's. He approached reception and waited until a man, sprouting an elephant's trunk for a nose, was directed to the proper floor.

"Next," called the Mediwitch behind the desk.

"My wife was brought in experiencing premature labour. She's a Muggle."

"You're in the wrong area; you need the maternity annex," said the woman impatiently.

"I know. How do I get there from here?" he asked in the same tone.

She sighed, "Go down this hall and look for the picture of the Nanny Elf and follow the pink and blue braided stripes to the Nanny Elf statue. Make sure you have your Father's ID card, or you won't get in," she called to his back, as he jogged away.

"Yes, alright," he muttered to himself, dodging staff and patients in his rush. He pulled his card from his inside pocket and flashed it at a small statue of a Nanny Elf. The doors to the Maternity annex opened and admitted him. He saw Hermione and Molly Weasley standing in the hall.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Room five down there, Severus, but are you sure you want to be there?" Molly watched as he slid to a stop in front of the door bearing a large number 5. He took a deep breath and opened the door. Molly and Hermione heard a loud yell just before the door closed. "Let's go to the tearoom, Hermione. This could be a long wait." Molly took Hermione's arm and led her to a lift.

"He's so tiny," said Jenny wearily, as she looked at her new son in her husband's arms.

"He's perfect," Severus assured her, feeling strangely comfortable holding his child, though he'd never held a baby before. "Almost six pounds."

"He needs a name," said Jenny. She watched as her stern husband stroked their son's cheek with a forefinger. "We never talked about names, did we?"

"For all the talking we do, we never seem to get to the more mundane, practical things, do we?" he teased.

"What would you like to name him, Severus?" she asked, knowing he'd already chosen one in his own mind.

"I have to admit, I've looked for names," he admitted sheepishly.

"I know you did, you silly man. I saw your search when I was checking the site history on the computer. That's why I'm asking."

"Well, for traditional wizards, the old Latin names are used, like mine. It's about the only tradition my mother kept. I thought perhaps Darrius Albus Peter Snape." He looked at her for a reaction.

"What does Darrius mean?" she asked.

"Spelled with two R's, it means 'He who upholds the good'. And then, Albus is obvious and Peter, after your father."

Jenny smiled, "I like it very much. Now, why don't you introduce him to our friends? I really want to sleep."

He stood and looked at the midwife, who said, "Jenny is fine and so is your son. She's very tired. Why don't you do as she suggests; there's a small committee of people waiting for you."

Minerva and Lucius turned when they heard footsteps behind them only to be stunned by the sight of Severus Snape wearing lime green sterile robes.

"There's something you're never likely to see again," muttered Draco in his father's ear.

"Hush, Draco, he couldn't give a damn how he looks right now," replied Lucius, recalling his own son's birth.

"How is Jenny, Severus?" asked Minerva.

"She's fine, just very tired," he replied. He looked around at who was present: Lupin, Tonks, Hermione and Ron, Harry and Ginny, The Malfoys and Minerva along with half of the Weasley clan. He'd not realized how many people had become more than mere acquaintances to him, and thanked providence again for Jenny and her influence.

"I came to introduce someone to you," he began in a steady voice. "I'd like you to meet my son, Darrius Albus Peter Snape; all six pounds of him. He's perfect." His voice suddenly broke, and for the first time since he was a child, he didn't care who saw him weep. For the first time in his life, Severus Snape, cried tears of joy.

The End... maybe.