

Shades

by orm irian

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic .
Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

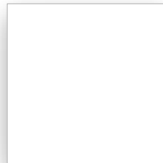
Searching

Chapter 1 of 25

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Author Note: Thanks to Larilee for beta reading this story. She keeps my canon terms correct and, incidentally, makes me look good!



Chapter 1: Searching

Sunshine poured down into the dingy square in front of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, scorching the sparse patch of grass and drooping, neglected bushes there. In a nearby alley, three soft popping sounds could be heard... if there had been anybody nearby to hear. At this time of day, nearly all the residents of the rundown neighborhood were at their jobs. Those actually at home were hiding in the shade of their squalid flats, trying to keep cool. Leaving the alley, the three figures moved purposefully across the square, up the front steps of number twelve and disappeared inside.

Across the square, a pair of eyes watched from the tangled bushes aside a dilapidated duplex. The watcher reached into a voluminous cloak and drew out a small brown owl. He affixed a yellow token to its leg and sent it off. Now he had only to wait; his backup would arrive soon.

Inside number twelve, Grimmauld Place, the door was quickly closed and magically warded. "Harry, we really shouldn't be here! You know what Remus said about coming here without an escort," Hermione said.

"I have to finish searching the house. I promise, this is the last time, okay?" he replied.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but was prevented by a sharp, "Leave it, Hermione!" from Ron. As Harry made his way up the stairs, Ron continued in an

undertone, "You know he doesn't want to be in this house at all. So, the sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can leave for good!"

"Yes, you're right," Hermione sighed. "Let's go help," she said with a small smile. Ron took her hand, and they followed Harry up to the third floor.

Two hours later, they were all sweaty, discouraged and covered with dust they had disturbed while rummaging through the long-uninhabited bedrooms. Ron was sneezing repeatedly as they retreated from the last bedroom at the end of the hall. Harry sank dispiritedly onto the top step.

"Ugh!" Hermione exclaimed. "The smell in there made me feel sick to my stomach. We don't have to go back, do we?"

Ron dropped down next to Harry. "Is that it, mate? Have we finished the entire house?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied softly.

"Too bad we didn't have a house-elf to do the dirty work," Ron said as he brushed off the dirt smeared on his sleeve. "This is one time I would have welcomed Kreacher's presence." Hermione gave him a disapproving look as she also tried to beat the grime from her clothes.

Suddenly, Harry's head snapped up. "Kreacher!" he exclaimed. "He used to hide in the attic when Sirius was alive!"

"The attic..." Hermione repeated in a whisper. "We never thought of it before."

"Is there anything up there? I thought Sirius cleared it out when the Order started meeting here," Ron said.

"He did. But Kreacher could have hidden stuff up there later," Harry replied. "Remember how he used to try and sneak off with things? Maybe he 'saved' some stuff from us. Come on. Let's go look."

So Ron and Hermione trooped dutifully up the narrow attic steps after Harry, half-hoping it was empty so they could leave, and half-hoping it wasn't. To their surprise, they saw a stack of boxes at the far end of the low-raftered space. None of them were surprised, however, to find a heap of absolute junk, tattered books, filthy trousers, broken china and the like, piled in a jumble behind the boxes. Presumably, the pile of rubbish was Kreacher's legacy.

Examining the boxes brought another surprise: they were neatly labeled with the date and room of origin, in Sirius' handwriting. They all recognized his writing after seeing the notes he had sent to Harry when he lived as Snuffles in the cave during their fourth year at Hogwarts. Harry became quite agitated, his hands shaking slightly as he reached for the box at the top of the stack. The boys immediately began unstacking the boxes, spreading them out in a single row for easy access.

Excellent!" Ron exclaimed, grinning at Harry, "Sirius would only have saved useful stuff! We're bound to find something!"

Hermione, however, was looking reluctantly at the boxes. "Um, Harry, do you mind if I don't stay up here? My stomach is still upset, and the heat up here is really unbearable. It's making me feel even worse."

"No problem, we'll handle this." Harry turned back and opened the box in front of him, which appeared to contain the personal belongings of a pre-adolescent boy. He could see several magical puzzles, some comic books (complete with moving pictures on the covers) and what looked like a rock collection. *Or maybe*, he thought, *Sirius just saved things that had sentimental value to him. Oh well, best get started.* He began to remove items from the box, then suddenly stopped and turned to Hermione, who was just making her way through the attic doorway. "Hermione," he called, "would you do me a favor?"

She turned and raised her eyebrows questioningly. "What is it?"

Harry shot Ron a sly smile, then said to her, "Would you mind looking through the Black family library for books that could be useful to us? You know...detection and revealing spells, spells to counter dark magic...things like that."

Hermione's face brightened instantly. "Sure, I'll get right to it then. See you in a bit." She turned and made her way down the steps.

Ron chuckled at Harry's ploy. "Does she mind.... The real question is whether we'll be able to carry all the books she chooses!" Laughing, both boys returned to their search.

The next hour passed quickly. Down in the library, Hermione was happily ensconced on the comfortable old sofa, a veritable tower of books on the end table next to her. Books she deemed useful were tossed on the cushions next to her; those she had rejected were stacked on the floor. Perusing a book on the rise of the dark wizard Grindelwald, Hermione's mind began to wander. She wondered if Ron and Harry were having any luck. That, in turn, brought her mind back to how their search had begun...

At the close of the school year, Harry had returned to the Dursley's for the last time. Mad-eye Moody and Remus Lupin had promised that they would retrieve him in two weeks, then take him to the Weasley's. Arriving at the Burrow, he had been surprised to see many of the Order members gathered in the small living room. Arthur Weasley had explained that it was no longer possible to use number twelve, Grimmauld Place as their headquarters because Albus Dumbledore's death had ended the Fidelius charm that kept its location secret. It was a foregone conclusion that Snape would have immediately revealed its location to Lord Voldemort. That evening it was decided that Moody would take up leadership of the Order. It was also decided, after some debate, that Harry, Ron and Hermione would become active members of the Order of the Phoenix. Harry's participation was at first opposed by Molly Weasley on the grounds that he was still underage. However, he pointed out that he was already deeply involved in the war by reason of being Voldemort's repeated target, he was widely acknowledged as the 'Chosen One' of the partially-revealed prophecy and he would be of age in a matter of weeks anyway. Any remaining opposition caved-in under the weight of his arguments. Indeed, most members of the Order considered him to be a vital player in the struggle to defeat Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Privately, Harry had long known that it was his fate to kill (or be killed by) Voldemort.

The three friends had held their own meeting the next day. Hermione and Ron were, of course, privy to all the details of Harry's lessons with Professor Dumbledore during the past school year. They had discussed all they knew or guessed about Horcruxes in general and had rehashed all the memories Harry had experienced from Voldemort's life. They had come up with some certainties and a number of unanswered questions. Hermione mentally reviewed what they knew. Fact: Over a number of years, Voldemort had split his soul into seven pieces, magically transferring the parts into objects of great significance to himself. Thus, he had made six Horcruxes. The final piece of his soul had remained with his corporeal body. Fact: As long as any of the Horcruxes were intact, he could not truly be killed. Fact: Three of the Horcruxes were presumed destroyed: Riddle's diary by Harry in the Chamber of Secrets, Slytherin's ring by Dumbledore and Slytherin's locket by a person whose initials were R.A.B. Fact: Dumbledore had believed that Voldemort's familiar, Nagini, was in possession of one of the pieces of his soul. He and Harry had also surmised that Voldemort had stolen and used an heirloom of Helga Hufflepuff, a cup, as yet another receptacle for a portion of his shattered soul. Fact: It was Harry's task to find and destroy the remaining Horcruxes, then confront and kill Lord Voldemort. Ron and Hermione intended to help him every step of the way.

"No problem. We can have it done by Christmas!" Ron had joked wryly.

As Hermione saw it, there were two important questions. First, what object had Voldemort used as the sixth Horcrux? And second, where were it and Hufflepuff's cup hidden? These led to a number of related issues and questions. After more discussion, she, Harry and Ron had decided to focus on the nebulous R.A.B., who had taken or destroyed Slytherin's locket and left a taunting note behind for Voldemort. They had concluded that R.A.B was: 1) probably dead, 2) had either known Voldemort well or had been in a position to learn information about him, and 3) had turned against Voldemort. Harry knew that although Voldemort considered his Death Eaters to be servants rather than friends, they were undoubtedly his closest associates, and were likely to know more about him than most others. So Harry had suggested that R.A.B could have been a former Death Eater. From there it was a short leap for Hermione to put together the facts and come up with a conclusion: Regulus Black.

Both boys had looked at her with dawning comprehension on their faces. "All the pieces fit," Hermione had rationalized. "He was a Death Eater, he's dead, he tried to leave Voldemort's service and at least two initials match." She still remembered the warm glow she had felt when Ron told her it was a brilliant idea.

It was Harry who had reasoned that Regulus would have been likely to leave some record of his search. Perhaps he had obtained information about the other Horcruxes or even had managed to destroy one or more of them before he was discovered and killed. Thus their search had begun.

They had returned to the house three times prior to today, always in the company of Remus and Tonks. They had to be extremely careful not to be detected by agents of Lord Voldemort, who were now able to find the house as easily as them. Harry had not revealed to the older couple what, precisely, they were searching for (this was easy, as they didn't know themselves), but he implied it was something of Sirius' that he wanted as a keepsake. However, after the third trip, neither Lupin nor Tonks would agree to go back. So they had returned on their own to finish the search.

After the three of them had searched those last filthy bedrooms, Hermione had privately given up hope. *I suppose we'll have to try researching the last known locations of ancient wizarding artifacts or some such thing to get another lead*, she thought. *No matter, we will solve this puzzle. We've done it before.* Doggedly, she returned to her stack of books.

Up in the attic, the two searchers were nearing the end of their task. Ron lifted a large, metal strongbox from the bottom of the carton he was searching. It was not heavy, and shaking it lightly revealed that it was not empty either. "Harry," Ron said, "do you think this is worth the effort it will take to get it opened?"

"Sure. Try *Alohomora*."

Ron drew his wand. "*Alohomora!*" The box remained shut.

"Look, it has a keyhole," Harry noted. "Use *Demonstro Forma* to get the shape of the key; then we can transfigure one to open it."

Ron flourished his wand in a half circle then, with a sharp jab said, *Demonstro Forma*." A shadowy key began to appear in front of the box, but before it was fully formed, it faded away to a wisp and vanished.

Both boys scowled at the box. "What's going on? Why didn't the key take shape?" Harry wondered.

"Wait, I think I know what's going on," Ron said. With a sideways swish of his wand, he chanted, "*Aperio*." A red glow enveloped the box, glowing especially brightly around the lock. "It's got a key ward on it see the bright spot there, in front of the keyhole? You had better handle this, Harry, you're better at breaking wards than I am."

Harry stepped in front of the box and leveled his wand directly at the lock. "*Rumpo!*" The glow disappeared. Then, "*Alohomora!*" The latch fell forward. Harry lifted the metal lid and looked inside the strongbox. A small drawstring bag lay atop a leather-bound book. Removing these, Harry found a stack of papers beneath. He had begun to rifle through them when a loud expletive from Ron drew his attention.

"Shit! This is it!" He had opened the front cover of the book. There on the top left corner was printed: Regulus A. Black. Wide-eyed, he passed the book to Harry. "I think it's some sort of journal."

Harry sank onto the floor with the book in his lap. *Thank you, Sirius, for being sentimental enough to save this seemingly useless stuff from yours and your brother's rooms* he thought.

A shadow fell across the page Hermione was scanning. She looked up in surprise to find that the afternoon sun was now angled onto the side of the house. It was past four way past four according to her watch. She jumped up and went to the bottom of the attic stairwell. "Hey, you lot! I have to leave! I promised my Mum I would meet her for shopping at four o'clock," she called. "Oh, and the books you wanted are on the couch."

"Hold on, Hermione!" Ron called in return. "I'll walk you out to the Apparition point." He turned to Harry. "We really should get a move on too, mate."

Harry didn't look up, but said distractedly, "I'll meet you down in the square in five minutes. okay? We can come back with Bill or your dad to get those books later." As Ron descended the stairs, Harry smiled fondly and thought, *Ron will use any excuse to be alone with Hermione even if it's just for five minutes.*

Hermione watched as Ron took the steps two-at-a-time, landing with a final four-step leap in front of her. She grinned up at him. "You don't really need to walk me to the alleyway, it's only a few feet."

"Now, now," he said, sounding remarkably like Percy the Prat. "We must follow Remus' directions: no one is to wander about London alone, even for one minute!" Both teens burst out laughing. Hermione reached out to take Ron's hand, and they exited the house and walked toward the alley together.

The young couple, however, was not alone. Three pairs of eyes tracked their progress across the square.

"Two out of three," growled the first observer. "Where's the other brat that went in?"

A second whispered voice answered, "It doesn't matter. Any of those dammed Order of the Phoenix scum will be a great prize for us to bring to the Dark Lord."

The third observer suddenly sat up straight and swore softly. "I recognize her! That's one of the kids that was at the Ministry last year! Oh, I'm going to make that little bitch pay for that day," he hissed.

As Ron and Hermione entered the alley, Hermione heard the scrape of a boot on the pavement behind them. She whipped around, wand at the ready, as three cloaked and masked figures closed in on them. Ron, startled by her sudden movement, looked at Hermione questioningly. He instantly took in her startled expression and spun to face the intruders, drawing his wand. The Death Eaters, for what else could they be dressed in those masks and robes, spread out to partially encircle the teens. Almost instinctively, the young witch and wizard found themselves back-to-back in a defensive posture.

The attackers began firing hexes and Stunning Spells in rapid succession. Both Ron and Hermione reacted without thought, blocking them time and again. One of the men sent a searing-red Slicing Hex straight at Ron just as he was repelling a Stunning Spell. Unable to block fast enough, he threw himself to the side, catching the hex on his shoulder.

"Ron!" Hermione screamed. She dove toward him shouting the incantation for an encircling Shield Spell. She knew it would only last a few seconds, but it was enough time for him to regain his feet. He scrambled up and fired off a Stunning Spell. "*Stupefy!*" The nearest Death Eater staggered and fell to his knees, having been impacted only tangentially by the spell.

Suddenly, the rap of running feet was heard and a loud "*Tarantallegra*" rang out. A second Death Eater went down, his legs jerking in opposite directions from Harry's hex.

Before any of them could react, the remaining Death Eater surged forward to slam into Ron full force. Ron was propelled backwards into the wall at the side of the alley, landing in a heap on the ground. Simultaneously, the partially-stunned Death Eater regained his feet and began dueling with Harry fiercely.

Hermione flicked her wand towards Ron's attacker. "*Impedi--*"

But he parried her spell and in a lightning move, grabbed her arm, pulled her off balance and swung her in front of himself like a shield. His wand at her throat, he gloated, "Got you, little bitch." Hermione froze.

Ron was on his feet, wand trained on the two of them, but he didn't dare fire a hex for fear of hurting Hermione. "Let's go! Now!" Hermione's captor yelled to his companions. Still holding tightly to Hermione, he Disapparated.

"No! Hermione!" Ron's anguished screams echoed in the alley, completely obscuring the double cracks of Disapparition as the remaining Death Eaters fled. Harry stood immobile, a stunned expression on his face as he took in the nearly-empty alley.

Hermione was alive, but taken by the enemy.

Author Notes

1. R.A.B. = Regulus Black? When I wrote this chapter, I considered it a good guess--but now it almost seems to be taken for granted as fact. I hope that when book 7 comes out we won't all be proved spectacularly wrong!
2. Spells: Demonstratio Forma = show the shape; Aperio = reveal; Rumpo = shatter. Via an online English-Latin translator.
3. Snape is coming in the next chapter!
4. Lover's of The Lord of the Rings trilogy may recognize the last line of this chapter "Hermione was alive, but taken by the enemy." as a paraphrase of the final line in The Two Towers, wherein Frodo is captured and taken to the Tower of Cirith Ungol. (There will be more of these quotes from LOTR as the story progresses, so keep your eyes open to see if you can spot them!)

Rescue

Chapter 2 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

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* Thanks go out to my beta reader, Larilee!

Chapter 2: Rescue

Three cloaked and masked figures silently crossed the overgrown back garden of the old Riddle House. The largest of them grasped Hermione's upper arm, propelling her along before him, his wand at her throat. Entering the house at the back, they passed through the kitchen and into a small parlor where Hermione was roughly pushed to the floor. "*Incarcerous*," said her captor. Cords shot from his wand, binding her arms tightly to her body. She saw her own wand tucked into his belt. He turned away, stripping the mask from his face. "Pritchard! Caldwell! I have first rights to this chit. After I have paid her back, you can have your fun."

Hearing him speak, a cold fear shot up Hermione's spine. *I've heard that voice before*, she thought. He turned back to her and she gasped in recognition. "Dolohov," Hermione whispered.

He replied with a feral grin. Pritchard spoke up. "Just remember, Antonin, she has to be of use to the Dark Lord when we're finished."

Dolohov merely grunted in reply. "I think," he addressed Hermione with an evil smile, "that you should have a taste of your own medicine. *Silencio! Crucio!*"

Pain beyond anything she had imagined tore at her. She thought her skin must be on fire, and her head felt as if it would burst as the pain built behind her eyes. She screamed--but there was no sound. Paradoxically, she heard the men laughing derisively. The pain went on and on and she stopped being aware of anything else. She was rolling on the floor, oblivious to the sweat covering her body and the tears streaking her face, when the curse was finally lifted.

"Here," said Pritchard, pointing his wand at Hermione, "*Restituto Vox*." He turned to Dolohov. "You see, unlike you, I enjoy hearing the results of my efforts."

Hermione heard her own gasping breath once again. She was so relieved that the torture had stopped, she did not take in the significance of his words. Suddenly, he was upon her, straddling her thighs and running his hands up her hips. She let out a panicked scream and twisting her body sideways, tried to dislodge him. But he had the advantage of much greater weight, and only laughed at her efforts. He hooked his fingers under the waistband of her pants and gave a vicious tug, tearing open the light fabric. Hermione began to struggle frantically, yelling and lashing out wildly with her unbound legs. She unseated him and felt her right knee connect with his back. He grunted and rolled to the side, one hand grasping at his lower back. *Good*, she thought, realizing she had hit his kidney, *I hope the bastard pisses blood!*

But her reprieve was short-lived. "You little slut!" the third Death Eater spat. "I'm going to make sure you never use those legs again."

Caldwell stood over her, his wand brandished menacingly as he shouted a severing hex. "*Abrump--*"

"Stop!" a new voice commanded. Caldwell's curse was unexpectedly blocked as a long, mahogany wand swung in front of him. "You idiots! Don't you realize who this is?" the newcomer hissed.

Hermione looked up in surprise at the familiar voice; there stood the dark form of Severus Snape. She had not thought it possible, but the sight of his long, sallow face twisted with anger provoked an even deeper terror within her.

It must have shown on her face, for when he turned to her, he sneered, "What's the matter Granger? Not happy to see me?" Hermione swallowed, but couldn't find her voice. "In any case, it is of no consequence," he continued. "Caldwell! Dolohov! Get him out of here," he said, gesturing toward Pritchard.

"I don't take orders from you, Snape!" Dolohov replied hotly.

"You had better listen to me," Snape retorted in his soft, menacing voice. Pointing at Hermione, he continued, "She is one of the Potter brat's closest friends. Do you think the Dark Lord would have rewarded you for throwing away the information she holds?" The men looked from Snape to the girl.

After a few moments consideration, Caldwell said, "I see." He turned to Dolohov, saying, "Come on, Antonin, help me with this pathetic slug." Bending, he grabbed Pritchard's arm and heaved him upright. Dolohov moved to support Pritchard's other side, but suddenly turned back to face Snape.

"What happens to her?" he asked with a scowl.

"I take her to see the Dark Lord."

Oh my God, thought Hermione inanely. Her brain seemed to freeze at his words, rendering her incapable of rational thought.

Snape looked down at her dispassionately but said nothing. Then without warning, he flicked his wand toward her. "*Stupefy*." Hermione collapsed in a boneless heap on the bare floor.

Hermione awoke to find a cool, tasteless liquid being poured down her throat. Snape tipped the glass upward, simultaneously holding her torso upright so she wouldn't reflexively choke. Her throat was raw from screaming, and the drink felt soothing. She drank until it was gone. He released her and she sat up on her own. With a quick glance, she tried to assess her surroundings: a makeshift lab of some sort, underground probably. She herself was seated on a cot that was shoved to the side, out of the work area. *His potions lab, then*. She looked up into Snape's eyes, thinking how strange it was that he should help her as she had a blurry memory of being stunned by him. Then coherent thought began to fade. *Drugged. He drugged me...*

She was relaxed, but still awake, if not in control of her body. Snape took hold of her chin and, making eye contact, said, "*Legilimens*."

Scenes flashed between them. He saw her and Weasley dueling with the Death Eaters.... She was sitting in number twelve, Grimmauld Place, reading.... Potter and Weasley were joking with her about Lavender Brown....

No! Snape impatiently broke off the spell. *Random access will take too long*, he thought. He reflected for a minute before a sudden idea came to him. *Perhaps if I try...* He placed his wand to her temple and chanted softly, "*Foco Mentis Potter*." He felt a jolt of energy pass from himself to the girl. He raised her chin, looked into her eyes and again said, "*Legilimens*."

...He saw Potter, telling Weasley and Granger what he had learned from Dumbledore regarding the young Tom Riddle.... The three of them were discussing Voldemort's Horcruxes.... Potter was revealing the note he found addressed to Voldemort.... Granger was excitedly saying that R.A.B., the writer of the note, must be Regulus Black....

Again and again, every lesson the boy had with Dumbledore was related to his friends. In detail, the entire story of Lord Voldemort's strategy to become immortal was unfolded before Snape's amazed mind. For many long minutes, he sat immobile, staring into Granger's eyes, seeing her recent memories of Potter. Finally, the scenes began to range back in time, and he broke the connection.

He felt stunned. He had intended to gather information about Potter's doings for the Dark Lord. The bearer of novel intelligence regarding Potter or the Order of the Phoenix would garner great favor with the Dark Lord. Besides, he had been a spy for so long that he habitually looked for any opportunity to gain an advantage in this dangerous game. And he needed it even, or perhaps especially, when it came to the Dark Lord's minions. *Those damned purebloods*, he thought resentfully. *They have always looked down on me because of my father*. And now that he had proved his loyalty to the Dark Lord beyond any doubt, now that he had the trust and approbation of their master, they fawned on him to his face and derided him behind his back! *Well, I've really got the advantage of them this time*, he thought with self-castigating sarcasm. This information was way, way, way beyond need-to-know. He put his head in his hands.

Damn! he thought. *Bloody stupid fool!* At this point, he bitterly regretted probing Granger's mind himself. He realized intuitively that his new knowledge regarding his master was certain to be fatal. The Dark Lord would instantly eliminate him, or indeed any of his servants that penetrated this secret. *If only I had left her to the Dark Lord. A futile wish at this point! But, how to proceed from here....*

He sat for some time in silence, considering. *I can still use this situation to my advantage. Yes, the girl can be used as bait for Potter. I have only to present the right facts to the Dark Lord.* Now to cover his tracks.

He had originally given Granger a muscle relaxer combined with a truth serum, not Veritaserum that was nearly impossible to get or make in his current situation but an effective potion nonetheless. He readied an antidote to the muscle relaxer; while it brewed, he set to work on the girl. Painstakingly, he called forth each of her memories regarding the Dark Lord, then Obliviated them with near-surgical precision. He trusted in his own ability to hide those memories from his master, but the girl wouldn't last a minute she would give him away. All of her more mundane knowledge about the Order of the Phoenix and Potter, he left intact. That would leave enough appropriate information to satisfy the Dark Lord.

When the antidote was finished, he administered it to her and waited until it took effect. Then he methodically asked her details about the Order's current plans and Potter's doings. When he was finished, he stunned her again and took her to the Dark Lord.

"Rise, Severus," Voldemort said in a cold, high voice. "What is it that you have brought me?"

"A prisoner," Snape replied. "Her name is Granger. She is very close to Potter and, I believe, will be extremely useful to us."

Voldemort eyed Hermione impersonally. "Rouse her," he commanded.

Snape directed his wand at her inert form and said, "*Enervate*." Hermione wakened slowly, blinking her eyes in the dim firelight. She sat up, but did not attempt to rise. Indeed, she did not appear to really see her surroundings at all.

The Dark Lord stared intently at her for a few moments, then turned to his servant. "She is damaged?" He inquired.

"Sedated, my lord. She was quite... agitated after her interaction with her captors. I recognized her and interrupted their 'play' before she was rendered useless." In fact, Snape knew that Hermione was exhibiting the classic symptoms that follow extensive memory modification: extreme disorientation and incomprehension. She would recover in several hours--if she left this room alive, that is.

"And have you had any 'interaction' with her, Severus?"

"I have questioned her, my lord," Snape said. He looked up to meet the Dark Lord's gaze, placing the memory of interrogating her in the front of his mind. He felt the lightest brush inside his psyche as the scene was replayed for his master's benefit. He let the Dark Lord view a few related thoughts about the girl as well, as groundwork for the plan he wanted to suggest. After a short time, he was released.

"You have done very well," Voldemort said. "I will consider how to act upon this new intelligence." He turned from Snape as if in dismissal, but Snape knew better than to leave without express permission. He waited. Abruptly, Lord Voldemort pivoted to face Snape and gestured toward Hermione. "You have a plan regarding this girl. I saw the

seeds of it in your mind. Tell me of it!" he commanded.

Snape looked at the girl. She was still sitting on the floor, dazed and apparently unaware of them. Nevertheless, he murmured, "*Muffliato*," to prevent her from hearing their discussion. "Master," he continued, "there are several possibilities. First, she could be used as a hostage to provide an immediate short-term gain. This has the advantage of simplicity as none of us would have to guard her for long. Second, she could be killed immediately. Potter and certain other Order members would be devastated. It would be exceedingly demoralizing if she were found, say, inside their former headquarters. However, I believe that she could be much more useful in the long term. I have a third plan: to turn her loyalties away from the Order. Again, this would be demoralizing in the extreme to Potter. In addition, she would be our bait to lure Potter into a trap when we are fully prepared."

The Dark Lord's red eyes assessed the girl at his feet for a moment. "An interesting idea. But can she be turned?"

"That is the beauty of it, my lord," Snape returned. "She need only appear to be helping us for the plan to work. If, indeed, she can be truly turned, then we gain an asset. If not, then she can be disposed of after Potter is dead."

Lord Voldemort paused, considering the plan's pitfalls and benefits. Finally, he commented, "For this plan to succeed, you will need to gain her trust. This can be done?"

"With sufficient time, yes. She is a true Gryffindor: trusting and gullible," Snape said with a sneer. "Besides, I was her teacher for the past six years. I am acquainted with her weaknesses and how to exploit them."

"Very well, Severus. You may proceed. I will inform the circle that she is under your authority. You will take Wormtail with you to insure that she does not escape." The Dark Lord flipped his hand in an odd twirling motion, conjuring a silvery bracelet. Placing his wand tip on it, he intoned, "*Impedio Defluo Totalis*." He flicked his wand and the bracelet appeared on Hermione's wrist. "This will prevent her from initiating Apparition. You will, however, be able to perform side-along Apparition with her if needed."

"Thank you, my lord." Snape waited for his dismissal.

But his master was not quite finished. "Tell me, how is your research proceeding on the Impenetrable Potion?"

"I have recreated two key compounds that were named in the original Morganian Scrolls. I am confident that, given adequate time, I will isolate the remaining components," Snape assured him.

"Good," Lord Voldemort replied. "I believe that you will have all the time you require to accomplish both of your projects. My campaign will not be sufficiently advanced to confront Potter for many months." He turned away from Snape with an air of finality. "Leave me now!"

Awareness returned slowly, bit by bit, to Hermione's mind. The first thing she noticed was the dim lighting and drab, battered furniture nearby. *A chair, a bed, a wardrobe*, she catalogued mentally. Gradually, she realized that she was lying on a camp bed. *A bedroom*, she concluded. Her brain felt like it was filled with molasses. Next, she noticed a faint rustle in the otherwise quiet room. *So familiar*. And after a minute, another slight crackle. *There it is again...the page of a book being turned!* She was pleased with her successful deduction. It took a minute or two before she grasped what, in turn, that must mean. *Someone else is here, in the room with me*

She eased herself up to her elbows carefully, quietly. Peering across the room, she saw a man, his face in profile to her. He was seated in an old, overstuffed chair, a book in his lap and his booted feet propped-up on the desk in front of him. Black, lank hair fell past his shoulders, framing a pale face with a prominent, hooked nose. "Professor Snape!" she gasped in surprise.

His head turned sharply, "Aware at last?" Snape inquired shortly. He rose and paced toward her. She recoiled slightly. "There is no reason to be afraid," he said coldly. "I won't harm you. You are much more valuable to the Dark Lord alive than dead."

"A hostage..." she replied softly.

"Very astute, Granger. And I will be your... guardian," Snape drawled.

Jailor is closer to the truth, Hermione thought. But she said only, "Why you?"

"Perhaps it is due to my well-known love of children," he answered with heavy sarcasm. "And from now on," he continued, "you will address me as 'sir,' rather than 'professor.' I despised having to teach an unending stream of imbeciles for all those years; I have no wish to be reminded of it!"

"Yes, sir," she replied automatically as she rose from the cot.

Good, he thought. *Six years of ingrained obedience may actually pay off*. "Are you hungry?" he inquired, indicating a tray on the desk. "Wormtail is not a very accomplished cook, but it's better than nothing. Take whatever you want. I have already eaten." He returned to his chair and took up the book he was reading.

Wormtail, Hermione thought. *So, I have two jail wardens*. Reaching for the tray, she noticed a silver bracelet on her wrist. It was crafted from interlinked rings. "What's this?" she asked in surprise.

Snape smiled unpleasantly. "A present from the Dark Lord," he said.

Examining it, Hermione realized the links formed an unbroken circle. "But this has no clasp." She pushed it down, but found it was too small to slide over her hand. "I can't take it off!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"How very observant of you, Granger," was Snape's wry rejoinder. "It is an Anti-Apparition device. It is intended to stay in place. I recommend that you do not attempt to Apparate. I believe the effects are quite unpleasant, perhaps even painful."

Hermione sighed in frustration. *Damn, damn, damn!* Bending, she picked up the tray and retreated to the other chair to eat.

I need information, she reflected. Although Snape was not a likely source, he was currently her only option. So, when she had finished dinner, she began by politely asking questions. "Sir? Where are we?"

"My house," he answered shortly.

"Why are we here, sir?" she persisted.

"Because," he replied with some irritation, "it is easier to keep you safe here."

"Safe? From who?"

"Granger, use your brains! You are a Mudblood! The Riddle House is the Dark Lord's headquarters. As such, it is generally occupied by his followers nearly all of them purebloods! To them, you are barely human fully deserving of whatever abuse they choose to inflict!"

Hermione had a sudden memory of Dolohov's cruel smile as he shouted, *Crucio*.' She shivered.

Snape continued, "If not for my intervention, you would, at the very least, be unable to walk. The men who captured you are quite capable of killing for sport. I prevented them from finishing their activities. In fact, if not for my advice, the Dark Lord would have extracted all the information you could provide, then disposed of you. You should be grateful that I rescued you!"

"Rescued me!" she said incredulously. "Right. And your motives were purely altruistic, I'm sure!" she said mockingly.

He merely regarded her with a penetrating, unfathomable gaze.

Realizing that she was getting nowhere, Hermione changed tactics. "So, how long will I be a 'guest' in your home, sir?"

"That depends," he said with a smirk, "on how well-behaved you are and on the actions of your friends in the Order of the Phoenix. Those events, however, are outside your control." He paused for a moment, gave her a considering look, then advised her, "You should get some rest. It has been an unusually difficult day for you."

He turned back to his reading, but after a moment, noted that the girl was watching him expectantly. "What is it now?" he asked with some asperity.

"I'm to sleep in here?" she inquired. "Whose room is this?"

"It used to be my parent's bedroom. It is now mine," Snape answered.

"So, I've got the cot?" she asked nervously.

"Unless you wish to share the bed with me," he said sardonically.

She swallowed a sudden lump in her throat.

He saw her expression. "Oh, for Merlin's sake!" he said, rolling his eyes. "You are perfectly safe, Granger. I've no taste for rape--trust me!"

"Trust you," she said in a near-whisper. "Professor Dumbledore trusted you, and look where it got him."

He was on his feet in an instant, stalking toward her, a furious expression twisting his features. She backed away in fear. Snape halted in front of her, silent, but breathing hard. He noted her alarm and with a visible effort, mastered his anger, staring at Hermione with an inscrutable expression. When he finally spoke, it was in the soft, intimidating manner she was familiar with from six years in his classroom. "You know nothing of what passed between Dumbledore and me! So I suggest that you keep your judgments to yourself from this point on. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," she breathed.

"Good. Go to sleep," he ordered, then returned to his chair.

Giving up for the night, Hermione lay down on the cot. But sleep was elusive. Her mind reviewed all that had occurred today, but kept returning to the issue of Snape's motives. *Why had he helped her, after all?* She needed to decipher that if she was to understand her situation. *Rescued by Severus Snape! That's an ironic twist, isn't it? I suppose from his perspective, he's done a kind thing,* she mused. *I wonder if he thinks he's the hero or the villain?* Pondering that, she finally fell asleep.

Author Notes:

1. Spells: *Restituto Vox* = restore voice; *Abrumpo* = to sever (Caldwell didn't finish the incantation due to Snape); *Foco Mentis* = focus thoughts (I imagine that this is a highly illegal charm--seeing its applications to mind control); *Impedio Defluo Totalis* = completely prevent disappearance (possibly a variation of the Anti-Disapparation charm Dumbledore used in the Department of Mysteries). English-Latin translations are via an automated online translator.
2. The Impenetrable Potion: Made it up! Its applications are obvious, I think.
3. The Morganian Scrolls: I was thinking of Morgan la Fey, the villainess of Arthurian legend. She would have been devious enough to come up with the Impenetrable Potion.
4. Hermione's last thought before sleep: 'I wonder if he thinks he's the hero or the villain,' is a quote from the Lord of the Rings. In The Two Towers chapter entitled The Stairs of Cirith Ungol, Samwise says this in regards to Gollum.

Information

Chapter 3 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to J. K. Rowling. I'm not making any money from this.

*Special thanks to Larilee, my beta, for all her help.

Chapter 3: Information

Severus Snape woke early the next day. He always woke early. Looking over, he saw that the girl was still asleep. *Recovering yet,* he supposed. Actually, he was impressed by her resilience. Yesterday she had regained mental coherence remarkably quickly, especially considering the number of modifications he had made to her memory. *Then again,* he mused, *she has youth, health and native intelligence going for her, perhaps that accounts for her rapid adjustment.*

He lay in bed and considered where to start. This morning he would set the ground rules for her. One of her weaknesses was her belief in justice. It led her to expect that rules were fair and that those who followed them would benefit. *A typical Gryffindor failing,* he scoffed inwardly. *I shall be the one to benefit, in the long run.* The lynchpin of

his plans, however, was her true weakness: her desperate need for knowledge. It was not that he believed the quest to learn was a drawback in and of itself, but Granger was a classic overachiever, wound tight as a spring. She not only needed to know, but she felt she had to demonstrate her knowledge to win approval from others. It was her Achilles' heel, and he would use it to gain her trust.

Hermione woke with aching muscles and a sense of foreboding. Looking about, she discovered she was alone. Cautious exploration revealed that the window was sealed, apparently magically warded. There were also two doors, one leading to the loo and the other to a hallway. Neither was locked. After washing up a bit, Hermione ventured into the hall and following the faint sounds below, made her way through the house and into the kitchen.

Both Snape and Pettigrew were there. Pettigrew looked up at her entrance, his small, watery eyes flicking over her body before returning to his breakfast. He did not speak. Snape, who was making toast, merely nodded to her once and continued his task. She stood uncertainly for a moment, then sat at the table and waited; she was sure that instructions would be forthcoming. Snape brought his breakfast to the table and, true to form, scowled at her.

"We're not going to serve you, girl!" he said abruptly. "Get yourself something to eat. Then we will talk." During breakfast, he informed her that attempts at escape were futile, as all the doors and windows leading outside were warded against both entry and exit. "I personally set those wards, and as you will discover, if you have not already, my wards are virtually unbreakable. Only Wormtail and I have the keywords for access. The Floo is disabled and, of course, you have your lovely bracelet to keep you in the here and now," he said with an amused twist of his lips.

The housekeeping arrangements were a bit of a surprise to Hermione. She had expected that, as a prisoner, the mundane, menial tasks like cleaning and cooking would be dumped on her. She was, after all, only a Mudblood in their eyes.

However, Snape was emphatic that they were all responsible for cleaning after themselves. "This is a Muggle house, in a Muggle neighborhood," he stated flatly. "There are no house-elves here. I also expect you to take your due turn in preparing dinner, as we will rotate this duty between the three of us." He shot a brief look in Pettigrew's direction, then addressing Hermione, continued with, "I can only hope that you're more proficient in the kitchen than Wormtail!"

Wormtail, who had remained silent to this point, stirred and murmured, "Now there's the pot calling the kettle black! Just make sure, Snape, that you never give up Potions to become a chef; not even a drunken Muggle would pay to eat what you cook."

To Hermione's amazement, Snape actually gave an amused sniff before returning to his toast. *Uh oh, he must be a really bad cook if he's not bothering to argue,* she thought. *If they're both hopeless, I'm going to be losing weight the hard way while I'm here!* Realizing how absurd that line of thought was, she nearly snorted in disgust at herself. *What am I thinking? Food is the least of my worries. I had better concentrate on staying in one piece and looking for an avenue of escape.*

Breakfast at the Burrow was a great deal more solemn than usual that morning. Both Ron and Harry were downright miserable, and looked it. Besides their distress and worry about Hermione's safety, they were nearly overwhelmed with feelings of guilt. Ginny was hardly better off than the boys. Her eyes were red and swollen from prolonged crying, which threatened to resume at any moment. The entire Weasley clan, excepting Percy, had arrived the previous evening after the news of Hermione's capture was brought by Harry. Ron had been barely able to talk, so deep was his shock from the afternoon's events. Molly Weasley had raised the alarm, summoning Mad-Eye Moody, Remus Lupin, Tonks and, of course, Arthur to consult about the best course of action. Agents had been sent out to scout certain locals in Knockturn Alley and Hogsmeade for any whisper of Hermione's fate. In addition, the family homes of known Death Eaters were under close surveillance, in hopes of catching any enemy movements that could bring a lead as to Hermione's whereabouts. So far, nothing had been heard or seen that could help them.

After spending breakfast-time pushing his food around on his plate, Ron turned to Harry. "Let's go up to my room." Harry nodded. Once in Ron's bedroom, the boys sank listlessly onto the bed, seemingly at a loss for what to do with themselves. A long silence ensued. Ron suddenly burst out, "This is all my fault! I should have been able to save her. I should have blasted that scumbag as soon as he grabbed her! Bloody, *effing* son-of-a-bitch! Harry, what if they've killed her..." He looked to be on the verge of tears, and Harry had absolutely no idea how to console him. But he knew one thing for sure Ron was not to blame.

"No way is this your fault, mate. We wouldn't have even been in London if I hadn't insisted on searching the house again," Harry said. "If only we had listened to Remus. If only I had left with you two, like you asked... If only...." he trailed off into a miserable silence.

Bang! The boys jumped as the door rebounded off the wall. "Well, I think the two of you are being selfish and ridiculous! Thinking only of yourselves and looking for somewhere to place the blame!" Ginny had burst into the room, apparently after overhearing their conversation from the hall. "Ron, I love Hermione too; she's like a sister to me. But wallowing in guilt won't help get her back. And what," she turned to Harry, "was so important at the old headquarters that you three would risk going there against Remus' advice?" The boys looked at her anxiously, but didn't answer. "Come on, give over," she demanded. "You two need to fill me in on what's been going on."

Harry shook his head ruefully. "No, Ginny. We can't tell you what we were doing. The fewer people who know, the more likely we are to succeed. And we have to succeed. Besides, I won't make you a target for the Death Eaters by getting you mixed up in this."

"In case you haven't noticed," Ginny retorted heatedly, "my whole family is already targeted. We're blood traitors, remember? Whatever's going on, you had better include me, or I swear, I'll go to Mum." She looked back-and-forth between them. "She'll get every last detail out of you two."

Harry and Ron exchanged a long, serious look. "She won't give up until she gets her way, you know," Ron said to Harry. Harry scowled, but said nothing. "And she's bang-on about one thing: blaming ourselves won't help Hermione. You said it yourself, Harry, we had to finish searching the house. That book is priceless! It could be the key to defeating Voldemort."

"Yeah," Harry replied slowly. "All three of us knew the risks involved in going there we're all of age. We made a choice and acted on it. Now we need some damage control." He turned to Ginny. "Lock the door. I'll cast an Imperturbable Charm on it. Ron, you do Muffliato. Let's make sure no one else in the house hears this."

Snape had gone out after breakfast, returning several hours later with a stack of books and a package wrapped in brown paper. Hermione had passed the time in the living room, reading a book she had selected from the shelves. Pettigrew had stayed in the room with her the entire time. His periodic scrutiny had made her extremely uncomfortable. *He's so creepy,* she had thought as his eyes slid over her form yet again. She almost welcomed Snape's return, as it sent Pettigrew scurrying from the room.

Her former professor tossed the package to her, and reacting reflexively, she caught it. "There are two pair of robes in there," he stated. "They should fit well enough. If not, you can alter them as needed."

"Thank you," she replied automatically. Then, considering what he had just told her, she asked, "You have sewing supplies here?"

He actually looked faintly amused. "No. But you won't need them." He reached into his left coat pocket and pulled out her wand. This, too, was tossed into her lap. "I am sure you are capable of fixing the garments magically, if necessary," he said.

Hermione eyes widened in astonishment. She lifted the wand, examining it as if to confirm that it was real.

With a gesture toward her wand, Snape continued, "It has been modified to prevent its use in certain types of magic. You cannot cast any spell on another person and you cannot use Concealment Charms of any sort on yourself. I have been told, however, that you can use defensive magic that affects only yourself. The wand also retains all its utility for Charms and Transfiguration involving objects and animals."

"The Virga Termino Charm," Hermione said slowly, still staring at her wand. She looked up at Snape. "I've read about that. I thought only Ministry officials were permitted to

perform it."

"That is correct," he smirked. "But one of my cohorts at the Riddle House is exceptionally talented at Charms. And Ministry limitations mean little to him."

"If you got my wand back, then you must have seen Dolohov..." she trailed off with a shudder.

"Actually, I spoke to all three of your former captors," he said with an expression of distaste. "You are under my authority exclusively, and I wished to make it clear to them that I would not allow any retaliation on their part."

Hermione's mind whirled. *Why is he doing this?* She couldn't make any sense of his motives. Something in her memory latched onto the names of the other men with Dolohov. "Caldwell, Pritchard. Are their children at Hogwarts?"

He merely nodded. After a moment she remembered. "Pritchard was a fourth year Slytherin, right? And Caldwell... his name's Owen, I think... wasn't he a sixth year Hufflepuff?" she said, surprise evident in her voice. "How can his father be a..." she stopped in embarrassment.

"Bastard? Thug? Vicious SOB?" he offered. "In other words, a Death Eater? Really, Granger, you don't honestly believe that all the Dark Lord's supporters are Slytherins, do you? Even noble Gryffindors have been known to join the ranks," he mocked. "Wormtail is not even the only current example!"

She was silent. *He's right*, she thought. *I have to stop thinking so predictably. Preconceptions are often useless, and in this situation they could be dangerous. Besides, I'll never figure out what's going on with Snape if I go by all my school prejudices. The man is nothing if not nebulous. So, what do I know so far?*

Snape sat down and watched the girl. Clearly, she was trying to work out the ramifications of what he'd said and done this morning. *How long*, he wondered, *until she gets to the logical endpoint? And will she take the next step, or will I need to prompt her?* Time stretched and Snape tilted his head back to relax and wait her out.

"Sir?" came her hesitant voice after a few minutes. "You mentioned before that I'll be able to use my wand for Charms and Transfigurations. What, specifically do you have in mind? You should know that I won't willingly participate in any of Lord Vol..." She stopped when she saw the look on his face. "Um, your leader's activities!" she finished. Suddenly, her voice became defiant. "You may think you can force me, but I know how to fight the Imperius Curse! We learned it in fourth year!"

Snape almost smiled. *Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for taking the next three steps.* In spite of his prior opinion of the girl, he was impressed with her deductive powers. On the other hand, he was not impressed by her bravado. He knew his own strength and judged hers to be inferior, as well as still developing. She would be no match for him in a true contest. No more than Potter had been.

He drew a breath and looked at her dispassionately. "I don't intend to force you into anything," he said levelly. "I intend to continue your education." He nodded toward the stack of books he had brought back with him. "Those are the relevant texts for seventh year studies in Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Herbology and Arithmancy. You will not, for obvious reasons, be able to continue in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and I will not degrade myself with such topics as Divination and History of Magic."

For the second time in an hour, Hermione was stunned. The opportunity to finish her education was her most cherished desire. She had secretly decided that, once Voldemort was defeated, she would return to school. Her duty to help Harry and the wizarding world came first, but after that, she wanted to finish her NEWTs if it was still possible. She realized that she had been staring, probably open-mouthed, at Snape for several moments. She turned her eyes eagerly toward the books he had brought. *Well, if I can't help Harry and Ron right now, she thought, there's nothing I would rather do than study. Being a prisoner might not be as bad as I imagined last night.*

Gradually though, the elated feeling dimmed as other, less appealing thoughts occurred to her. *Hold on..., Snape hates teaching; he said as much last night. And he has never liked me, personally. In fact, as Harry's friend, he's been downright nasty toward me! Why would he offer to teach me? What could he possibly have to gain? Wait he's known me since I was eleven, he knows I love school, all the teachers knew it. He's trying to manipulate me... But why? Damn! I wish I had more facts. I can't solve this puzzle with only half the pieces. What should I do?* she deliberated mentally.

For his part, Severus Snape was quite satisfied with the way this conversation was proceeding. He watched in silence as the girl's emotions crossed her face, one-after-the-other: first amazement, then excitement, then serious consideration, and finally, suspicion. *Where would she end up*, he wondered, *anger and rejection, or cautious acceptance?* Personally, he was betting on acceptance. The lure of knowledge was a powerful inducement for someone like her. And, after all, what else did she have to do during her captivity?

After several long minutes, Hermione looked up at Snape. There was determination in her eyes and something else that Snape couldn't identify, but it reminded him of Minerva McGonagall, and that made him feel wary.

She began with a challenge. "Sooner or later, I'll figure out your game just as I figured out your riddle when I was twelve!" He regarded her with a flat stare, but didn't reply, so she continued. "So far, you've prevented three of your fellow Death Eaters and V... your 'Dark Lord' from killing me. You retrieved and returned my wand. Now you're offering to tutor me. Why go through all this trouble for a hostage?" she asked. "Won't I be released before long when your demands are met?"

"Your friends may not be so willing to give us what we want. It is possible your stay here will be... prolonged," he replied.

She thought that over for a minute, then said, "This isn't just about me. There's something much larger going on." She raised her eyebrows as if asking 'I'm right aren't I?'

This time, Snape did smile. But his answer, like his cold, expressionless eyes, was unenlightening. "That," he said, "is between the Dark Lord and I."

She sniffed and muttered, "About what I expected."

Enough! he thought. *It's time to see which way the bet falls out.* Aloud he said briskly, "Well, Granger, should I return those books and confiscate your wand for the duration of your stay?"

Looking in his eyes she took a deep breath answered softly, "No, sir. If you're willing to teach me, I want to learn."

Late that night, Mr. Weasley was contacted via the Floo. The sound of a male voice calling, "Arthur!" from the kitchen, triggered a veritable avalanche of redheads tumbling into the room. "Cronus' caprines!" exclaimed the head floating in the fireplace, "how many o' those are yours?"

"All of them, except Harry there," Arthur replied with a small smile. "Do you have news for us, Aberforth?"

"Yes! Two men came in the Hog's Head earlier tonight," Aberforth related. "They used some sort o' Dark charm to beat the Eavesdropping Spell I'd put on the tables. That made me suspicious, so I had 'em followed when they left."

"Which agent did you send?" Arthur inquired.

"Silas Bones. He's real keen to do them Death Eaters some major damage after what happened to his cousin."

"Yes, I imagine so," Arthur replied thoughtfully.

"Did he learn anything?" George cut in impatiently.

"Yes," Aberforth said. "The Granger girl is alive." At this, there was a collective gasp of relief throughout the kitchen. "Looks like they're goin' to use her as a hostage," he continued.

"Any clue as to where she's being held?" Arthur asked.

"None. Silas tailed 'em using an Invisibility Cloak. He only heard part o' what they were saying. The buggers ducked between the houses a couple o' blocks from the pub and Disapparated."

"Alright, thanks Aberforth," said Arthur.

"Be in touch," was his short reply, before his head disappeared with a pop.

Author's Notes:

1. Spells: Virga Termino = wand restriction
2. Silas Bones: I invented him. I was unhappy when Amelia Bones was knocked-off in canon (and offstage too!) and I figured she should have an avenger.

Adjustments

Chapter 4 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

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A big thanks to my Beta, Larilee, for her advice and editing.

Chapter 4: Adjustments

Hermione woke to her sixth day as a captive. Her days had fallen into a routine of sorts. Snape woke her in the morning, they had breakfast, and then a lesson for about two hours. Each day, they concentrated on one subject. The morning sessions were devoted to lecture, explanation and demonstration of that day's particular topic; then Snape left for his lab and Hermione practiced new spells and did the required reading. In the afternoon, he assessed her progress, corrected her technique if necessary and they discussed any questions she had come up with (typically a lengthy item of the agenda). During the first week, the men kept a close watch on her. When Snape was not present, she had to endure Pettigrew's presence. Sometimes it seemed that the only time she was alone was in the loo!

She felt restless this morning, had a difficult time concentrating on the Tracking and Signaling Charms and consequently, drew Snape's ire. "If you would PAY ATTENTION AND CONCENTRATE, Granger," he finally barked, "you would have no difficulty with this! Even the notoriously-short attention span of a teenager should be able to focus long enough to set a Tracking Spell!"

"Sorry, sir," she said. She was contrite but that didn't improve her state of mind. When Snape finally left her (in disgust) to work in his lab, she tried to analyze what was wrong. She felt both tired and full of nervous energy at the same time. She hadn't slept well the past two nights, so that could account for her lack of attentiveness, but then why was she feeling so jittery? She finally decided to go lie down for a bit and see if that didn't help.

Pettigrew followed her from the room. She felt his eyes crawl over her body like a physical presence, from her legs, to her hips and then up her back. Her skin began to prickle, and she wondered if he was actually using some sort of charm on her or if it was just her imagination. She spun around abruptly to confront him, found that he was closer than she had realized, and jumped backwards in surprise. "Why are you following me?" she asked, breathing deeply to recover her composure.

"Sorry to have startled you," he said in his squeaky, timid voice. "It's just that you usually stay in the sitting room all morning. When I saw you leave, I wondered if you were all right... Hermione. That is your first name, isn't it?"

"Um, yes it is. But I think I'd rather you called me Granger, like Snape does."

He took a step closer and replied softly, "There's no reason we can't be on more friendly terms, Hermione." His watery eyes were fixed on hers.

Oh my God, she thought, I have to get away from here. Aloud, she said, "Actually, I'm not feeling well. I was going to lie down in Snape's room," she said pointedly. She turned and fled up the stairs and into the master bedroom. Closing the door behind her, she sighed in relief. Pettigrew wouldn't dare intrude into Snape's personal room. She threw herself onto her cot, thinking, *That sodding pervert! If he touches me, I swear I'll kick him in the crotch!* Then, *As if being a prisoner isn't bad enough, I have a sleazy, rat-faced scumbag coming on to me!* That in turn made her realize how much she missed Ron, and a rush of self-pity and loneliness overpowered her. She cried bitterly into her pillow for a while.

Later, when she had calmed down, she tried to think rationally about her situation. It wasn't easy. What, indeed, could she do if Pettigrew became more aggressive? If he used magic, she would be at a great disadvantage, considering the limitations on her wand. That meant she had to either avoid him or preempt him by going to Snape. *Crap! Why do I have to depend on him for virtually everything?* By nature, she was a self-reliant person, so it really bothered her to be so dependent on someone else (*and Snape of all people!*). She finally decided that she would only ask Snape for help if she had no other alternative.

She stayed in the master bedroom practicing the charms from this morning, only venturing out around mid-afternoon when she was sure Snape would be ready for their next lesson. *Coward, she chided herself, you can't even face a rat!* But another small voice in her head replied, *A rat with a wand!*

The afternoon's class went much more smoothly than the morning's, giving Hermione her first positive feeling of the day. Since it was her turn to make dinner that night, she headed straight for the kitchen after her lesson to decide what to make. Hermione knew that she was very far from being a gourmet cook, but her meals were definitely better than those prepared by Snape or Pettigrew. Although neither of the men ever complimented her efforts, she had noticed that they always took second helpings a rare occurrence on other nights. It was a small satisfaction, but in this situation she would take whatever she could find to keep her spirits up.

Predictably, both men followed her into the kitchen. Hermione sighed, thinking, *I am soooo tired of them watching me like hawks!* She wondered how long she would be under such vigilant scrutiny. Her plan was to behave herself long enough for them to relax their watch over her; then she could explore the house and look for possible escape routes. *But not tonight*, she thought sourly.

"Arthur! Come down for breakfast now, or you'll be late for work!" Molly Weasley called. She turned to the three teens sitting at the kitchen table. "Well, I certainly hope you lot get your school letters today, or we'll never get all your supplies on time. It's only two weeks until the Autumn term starts!" Ron and Harry shared an uncomfortable look. They had yet to break the news that they were not planning to return to school.

Ron cleared his throat, preparing to speak, but Harry kicked him under the table and mouthed, "Later. After the letters come." Ron shrugged his assent. Harry knew that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had no real say in his decision, but as he was living in their house, he felt awkward doing things he knew they would disapprove of. Ron, for his part, was quite willing to postpone the eruption that would follow his announcement. Both boys were nonetheless determined to stick to their plan. No school. Search and destroy mission: Voldemort's Horcruxes.

Toward the end of breakfast there was a sharp rapping sound at the window. Three handsome brown owls were perched on the ledge waiting to be let in. Molly said, "Well, it looks like your letters are here at last, kids. Ron, will you please get those?" Ron retrieved the letters, offering some toast to each of the owls.

"Here, one for each of us," he said, tossing one envelope to Ginny and another to Harry. He tore his own open and read. After only a few lines, he stopped and looked up at his mother, an expression of incredulity plastered on his face. "Mum, they've closed Hogwarts..." he whispered, trailing off into silence.

Molly leaped to her feet and snatched the letter from his hand, reading rapidly. Her face became pale as she read. "Arthur, it's true! Hogwarts will be closed until further notice. Apparently, between the war and parents' safety concerns, enrollment is terribly low. The school staff and Board of Governors have decided it's best to close."

Arthur took Ginny's letter and calmly read it. "I believe this has more to do with Dumbledore's death than it does with the enrollment rate," he said with a grim expression.

Molly looked put out. "Why didn't Minerva McGonagall let us know this was going to happen?"

"I imagine the decision was just made, Molly. The last time Minerva was here, she wouldn't have known for certain," Arthur answered. "Did you see this notice from the Ministry that's included? They've waived the prohibition against underage magic outside Hogwarts so that parents can home-school their children in magical subjects. Advanced classes are going to be offered at the Ministry. Yes," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose many parents won't have had the same Newt-level courses that their children are taking."

Ginny looked as if Christmas had come early. "This is great!" she crowed. "Fred and George won't know what hit them!"

"Ginny!" her mother said warningly, "you're only to use magic for your lessons and practice times."

Ginny rolled her eyes saying, "Sure, Mum." Harry and Ron exchanged an amused look, knowing that Ginny's acquiescence would last for about as long as she remained in the kitchen.

"If you two are done eating, let's go upstairs," Ron said. Harry and Ginny nodded.

The three teens went up to Ron's room to consider how the new situation would affect their plans. "Well, right off, I'd say we were bloody lucky to avoid one of my Mum's explosions," Ron said to Harry with evident relief.

Ginny gave her brother a look of disgust. "Ron, you are so shallow," she said. "Don't you see that this will allow us to search for the..."

"No!" interrupted Harry. "Don't talk about that here!"

"...objects we need to locate," Ginny finished, talking over Harry and giving him a significant glare.

"I'm not a moron, Ginny!" Ron said angrily. "I can see the advantages of Hogwarts being closed as easily as you! Just because I don't want to have my ears boxed or worse, end up in a fight like the one Mum and Dad had with Percy, doesn't make me some kind of superficial berk!"

"Will you two cut it out?" Harry said. He turned to Ginny. "And what do you mean 'we'? You're not going with Ron and me on our 'missions!'"

"Well, why not? If Hermione were here, she'd be going with you! You're going to need all the help you can get!" Ginny replied hotly.

"Hermione's different," Harry said flatly.

Ginny looked outraged. "Listen," she began, "I may not have memorized half the library like Hermione, but what I lack in I.Q., I make up for in cunning. And I've proved I can handle myself under pressure or have you forgotten our fights with the Death Eaters at the Ministry and Hogwarts?"

"Ginny, you're still underage," said Ron. "You'll be lucky if Mum lets you out of her sight! Me and Harry are just going to have a lot less restrictions than you." He put his hand on her arm. "This isn't about how smart you are or how good you are in a duel, Ginny," he continued in a quiet voice. "You know I'm right about Mum, don't you?" he asked.

Ginny seemed to deflate. She sank onto Ron's bed despondently and answered, "Yeah, I guess I do." After a minute though, she looked up at the boys with determination. "I can still help you two decipher that journal and I can help you plan. I've learned a bit from the Twin Masters of Deception, after all," she said with a mischievous grin.

Privately, Harry thought that in some ways, Fred and George could learn from Ginny. Aloud he said, "Okay. Let's take another look at Black's journal."

* * * * *

A little less than an hour later, Harry looked up from the entry he had been reading. They were going through Regulus Black's journal methodically, making notes about the events and people mentioned. It had been Ginny's suggestion that writing down things this way would help them to spot patterns and keep track of names, especially names that were mentioned repeatedly. Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Let's review our notes from this part," he suggested. The others nodded.

Ron read aloud, "January 16: He went to Hogsmeade with WM and RL. There was trouble, mission incomplete, DL unhappy. February 2. He went to KA alone to talk to CB and EB. New info: #2 at Hogwarts? February 12: DL suspects traitors among DE. Two killed. February 19: He heard that CB was dead. February 23: He went home. He doubts he will see his parents again." Ron stopped reading. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "From that last entry, it seems like Black was thinking of doing a runner, and he knew he wouldn't be able to come home for a long time, if ever."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Harry agreed. "But what do all these initials mean? Do you think they always stand for a person?"

"No, I don't think so," Ginny said slowly. She pointed to their notes from the second entry. "In this one, KA can't be a person, because he went there to talk to two other people. I think Black was being purposely inconsistent with his entries for the sake of secrecy. So that means that initials can be either people or places depending on the context."

"These two people CB and EB they could be related. Maybe they were brothers," Ron said.

"Or a married couple," Ginny added. Both boys nodded in agreement.

Harry sighed. "I wish Hermione were here," he said softly. "She's always so good with logic puzzles and she doesn't get confused by an excess of information."

"Yeah. She'd have this solved in half the time it will take all three of us," Ron added. "I wonder what she's doing right now."

Ginny turned her head away and took an unsteady breath. Ron and Harry, it seemed, were able to derive comfort from talking about Hermione. It was as if they were reassuring one another that she would be okay, that she would eventually be back with them. But Ginny couldn't help but feel scared of what might be happening to Hermione. Sometimes, when the boys talked about her, Ginny felt tears well up in her eyes. To keep from crying, she forced herself to talk. "It's been fifteen days since she was captured. I keep wondering why there haven't been any ransom demands or anything. When I ask Mum and Dad, they just tell me, 'We'll hear something soon.' I hate when they act like I'm three years old or something!" she finished in a low mutter of complaint.

Ron threw his arm around Ginny's shoulder in a comforting gesture. She gave him a shaky smile and taking a deep breath said, "I'm okay. Don't worry, I won't start bawling."

After a thoughtful silence, all three of the young people made a determined effort to get back to work.

Harry was mumbling under his breath, apparently going through all the combinations of names and places that fit the initials in their notes. Suddenly, he sat up and said triumphantly, "KA is a place: Knockturn Alley!"

Ron's eyes lit up. Ginny gave Harry a genuinely happy smile, saying, "Excellent! That's one down. Unfortunately, I've never been in Knockturn Alley so I don't know anyone there, not to mention who CB or EB might be."

Ron became excited. "Harry," he said, "we have been there! Remember when we tailed Malfoy? What if CB and EB stand for Borgin and Burke?"

"Bugger!" Harry exclaimed. "I should have seen it before! Dumbledore told me that Voldemort worked for Borgin and Burke after he finished school!" Harry dropped his head into his hands; he appeared to be thinking hard. After a minute he said, "Dumbledore showed me a memory of Burke gloating over how he cheated Voldemort's mother he only gave her a few Galleons for Slytherin's locket. What was the name Professor Dumbledore used?" he asked rhetorically. A moment later he snapped his fingers, saying, "Caractacus Burke! It fits!"

"That means EB must be Borgin," Ginny said.

"Well," Harry said with satisfaction, "I think our next move should be a visit to Knockturn Alley."

Hermione had finally pinned down the source of her restlessness: physical inactivity. Although she'd never been athletic, she was used to frequent walks around the school grounds or in her parent's neighborhood. The forced confinement of the past couple of weeks (combined with a good deal of stress) was, apparently, wreaking havoc with her nerves. Hence the jittery feeling and lack of sleep she'd been experiencing. The solution was simple: exercise. She began spending about an hour at midday working out upstairs. After the incident with Pettigrew, she always went up to her and Snape's bedroom when the morning class was finished, anyway. She noticed an immediate improvement in her sleep and that, in turn, made it much easier to concentrate during the day.

She was relieved that Snape and Pettigrew had, after about ten days of 'constant vigilance,' relaxed their guard a bit. They no longer followed her everywhere. They also began to leave the house periodically, although never at the same time and never allowing Hermione to go out. As she had planned, Hermione began a cautious exploration of the house. Snape always stayed in his laboratory between their morning and afternoon lessons, relying on Pettigrew to keep tabs on her. So, with him out of the way, she had only to avoid being detected by Pettigrew. This turned out to be quite easy, since he seemed to regard her as being in a 'safe' location and never checked up on her when she was in her and Snape's bedroom. She usually practiced spells for about an hour and then crept out to explore the other upstairs rooms.

Her forays were not, however, very productive. After four sessions of ferreting around the upstairs rooms, she concluded that Snape had been correct. All the possible escape routes had been sealed, and she was not able to break a single one of his wards. She resolved to try the downstairs rooms next. *Perhaps, she thought, if Pettigrew goes out while Snape is in his lab, I can try then.* Unfortunately, the opportunity did not arise.

One morning, sixteen days after her capture, she noticed that Snape was preparing to go out. She sighed, resigning herself to spending the time upstairs. *Maybe, she thought hopefully, I could convince him to let me go out too.* "Sir, could I go with you?" Hermione asked.

"No. That is not possible," Snape said. "Unless you are eager to meet more of the Dark Lord's followers?" Seeing her expression, he flashed an ironic smirk and continued, "Actually, I have prepared some basic medicinal potions on the Dark Lord's orders. I want you and Wormtail to decant and bottle them while I am gone."

"Together?" she squeaked out.

"Yes, together! Odious as his company is, he is at least capable of performing such a straightforward task," he said with a scoff. "I need the potions ready by the time I return; that will require both of you."

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat, then said, "Sir, I'm sure I could complete the job myself. I don't need Pettigrew's help."

He stopped buttoning his cloak to give her a penetrating look. Something in the tone of her voice had alerted him to her apprehension. "Granger, what is wrong?" he asked sharply.

"Well," she said hesitantly, "he makes me... uneasy, sir... very uneasy."

"Yes, most females have a similar reaction to the presence of vermin," he said, voice thick with scorn. She paled and fell silent. His eyes narrowed at her reaction. *The girl is clearly afraid,* he surmised. His anger flared. *What has that rat done now?* He stepped close to Hermione and looked directly into her eyes. "Stay still," he directed her. "This will not harm you." He pointed his wand at her and said clearly, "*Legilimens.*"

Snape saw the girl in his bedroom, dressed in her Muggle clothes, exercising... She was in Gryffindor Tower, laughing with her dorm mates, all dressed in their pajamas... She was leaving the sitting room of his house, Wormtail at her heels.... He watched the scene play out: she rebuffed Wormtail then fled to his room. *That must be it,* he concluded silently. *She's afraid that wanker will attack her!* He terminated the spell, his anger swelling to rage.

Seeing his face, Hermione cringed and stepped back. He took a breath and tamped down his anger, smoothing his features into an expressionless mask. "Granger," he said in a low voice, "I want you to go to my lab and take care of those potions. Wormtail will not be joining you. There," he said, pointing his wand at the usually locked door, which promptly unlatched and swung open, "Go get started." As she made for the door, he spoke again, "Granger! Be assured that I will not allow anyone to harm you."

She nodded and disappeared into the lab. He, on the other hand, unclasped his cloak and went in search of Wormtail. *If he has destroyed the little trust that I have managed to build with the girl, I will hex his rat-tailed arse into the next century!*

* * * * *

Spinner's End was stagnant and quiet, blanketed in a mid-day haze of late summer heat, when Severus Snape returned several hours later. He found the girl still at the

task he had set her, methodically and carefully filling the bottles he had set ready for the cooled potions. She really is quite deft in the lab not one of those incompetent morons I used to have to teach. He silently watched as she worked. Keeping himself hidden in the shadow by the door, he was as good as invisible.

He let his mind drift over the possible ways to establish a better rapport with the girl. She, for all appearances, had accepted him as a tutor, but that was merely a continuation of their former teacher-student dynamic. And, he was aware that she harbored a healthy dose of skepticism and caution regarding his motives (as indeed, she should). He needed to find avenues through which to gradually secure her trust. Offering her knowledge would not be enough. It had to be done subtly, incrementally, so that her suspicions were not aroused. She was, after all, quite intelligent. Luckily, Wormtail had not tried to physically force himself on her that would have had disastrous repercussions on his chances of eventually turning her loyalties.

First, he decided, I must be vigilant, never allowing any harm to come to the girl. Then she will see me as her protector rather than her captor. Second, I should look for insignificant ways to make things more pleasant for her grand gestures will only make her wary. Granger was, after all, well-acquainted with the malevolent temperament he had displayed at Hogwarts. *Then, he thought, when those two steps are accomplished, I can move on to include her in my work, gradually drawing her in. My apparent trust in her will lead her to reciprocate.* He sighed in satisfaction, pleased with his plan.

Hearing the slight noise of his breath, Hermione spun around abruptly. Spotting him in the shadows, she exhaled in relief. "Oh, it's you, sir. I didn't hear the door open. I'm just about finished here there's only one more potion to decant and bottle."

Stepping forward, he nodded brusquely, saying, "Good. I see that you were correct; you did not need any assistance to complete this chore." She didn't smile or reply, but Snape noticed the slight straightening of her shoulders in reaction to his subtle praise. *Yes, he thought, small steps will suffice.*

* * * * *

That night, Hermione went to sleep in something other than the T-shirt and pants she'd been wearing when she was captured. In fact, she now had several Muggle outfits, including two sets of sleepwear, shorts and a T-shirt for exercising, and a pair of loose slacks with a matching blouse.

She had been reading after dinner, as was her habit, when Snape interrupted, quietly bidding her to follow him upstairs. Once they had reached their bedroom, he had indicated a dusty, cardboard box (apparently just taken out of storage), saying, "That contains items of women's clothing. Feel free to take whatever you want."

She regarded the box for a moment, a solemn expression on her face, then began slowly looking through it. Her lack of enthusiasm for the task was obvious to Snape, and he felt some irritation. After all, he was making an effort to promote the girl's comfort. *Damn it, don't all females enjoy clothing?* he thought. He decided to be diplomatic and explained, "I realize that most of the articles there are dissimilar to the clothes that girls your age currently wear. These have been in storage rather a long time. In any case, I am certain you will find a few items suitable for your use. Feel free to alter them magically," he finished stiffly.

She sighed and looked up to meet his gaze. "It doesn't matter what they look like. It's not as if I was ever known for being fashionable besides, who will see me while I'm locked up in this house anyway?" She turned her head away and taking a shaky breath said, "It will be good to have a change of clothes. Thank you," she finished, not sounding remotely sincere.

He was dumbfounded. *What is the matter with the girl?* he wondered.

As he turned to leave, she called out, "Sir? Does this mean that the Order is not willing to meet the Dark Lord's ransom demands for my release?"

Her face held a mixture of sadness and hope. Looking at her, Snape felt a twisting sensation in his gut, something remarkably similar to guilt. Not being familiar with sympathy, much less regret, he didn't try to identify his reaction for what it was. He simply suppressed it. "There has been no positive reply as of this time," he informed her in a flat voice. Compressing his lips into a thin line, he spun on his heel and left the room.

Son of a two-headed Kneazle! he fumed as he made his way to his lab. *That backfired rather spectacularly!* He should have known she would grasp the implications of the situation immediately. Now he had needed to lie to her. He was not averse to lying when necessary, but he knew she would trust him much more quickly if she believed him to be sincere. Every lie he had to tell her would be a weak point. He hoped that she wouldn't become depressed; he hated weepy females. *I suppose, he thought resignedly, I will just have to wait until she accepts her current circumstances before proceeding any further.*

My appreciation to all of you who have taken the time to review. It really helps to know what you all are thinking -- Keep sending me that feedback!

A Helping Hand

Chapter 5 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to JKR. I'm not making any money from this.

*Beta read by the terrific Larilee.

Chapter 5: A Helping Hand

Considering that it was the foremost wizarding shopping district in Britain, Diagon Alley was preternaturally subdued. The closing of Hogwarts had apparently decreased the already scant number of people willing to venture there. It seemed that many parents had opted to get their children's books and supplies via owl-order. The street was quiet and nearly deserted as Harry, Ron and Bill made their way along the empty walkways. In spite of the still-warm weather, they wore long, concealing cloaks with the hoods drawn up to overshadow their faces. Both Ron and Bill had hidden their signature Weasley-red hair and freckles beneath Glamour Charms, making them appear to be blond with smooth, fair skin. Harry had also made use of several charms to hide his scar and to change his eye and skin color. His eyes now appeared as black as his hair, while his complexion was quite swarthy. At Ginny's suggestion, he had used a magical potion to make his hair lie flat. He was nearly unrecognizable as The-Boy-Who-Lived.

After their brainstorming session with Black's journal four days earlier, Harry had decided to ask Bill to accompany them on their visit to Borgin and Burke's. The teens had learned a hard lesson in caution from their foray to number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Bill was a good choice for several reasons. First, he didn't ask too many questions, conveniently assuming that Ron and Harry wanted to purchase an item of which his mother would not approve. Second, he was now fully recovered from the injuries Fenrir Greyback had given him. With his features darkened by the shadow of his hood and the still-livid scars running down his cheeks, he looked quite threatening. Lastly, Bill was an experienced wizard, good at dueling and a rough-and-ready fighter if trouble found them.

Bill and Ron, who were somewhat taller than Harry, walked flanking him like two bodyguards. The three of them slipped into Knockturn Alley and made their way watchfully down the street to Borgin and Burke's. Hearing his front bell announce the presence of customers, Mr. Borgin appeared behind the counter. "How can I help you, sirs?" he said in his oily voice.

Harry stepped closer to the counter while the others closed in behind him, emphasizing the impression that they were hired strong-arms. "I am interested in acquiring certain artifacts," Harry began, deepening his voice to both disguise it and make himself sound older.

"I have many types of magical artifacts," Borgin replied. "What in particular are you looking for?"

"I am a collector," Harry said. "I am seeking items of great antiquity."

"In that case, sir, I have a few rare and ancient objects you will probably be interested in seeing. I assume you are aware that such items are extremely valuable?" he asked, raising his eyebrows at Harry as if to confirm his willingness to pay.

Harry decided that he wouldn't dignify Borgin's remark with an answer; he gave a single sharp nod.

"Then, if you would please follow me," Borgin said with a slight bow, "I will take you to the private showing room. I am sure you understand that my most valuable stock is not here on display," he said smoothly as he led the way through a door at the back of the shop.

Thirty minutes later, Harry, Ron and Bill were outside, heading back up the street towards Diagon Alley. "What in the name of the Minister's mother was that all about?" Bill asked Harry in a soft voice.

Harry looked about carefully then said in a near-whisper, "It has to do with a search Professor Dumbledore and I were conducting before he died. Bill, I can't give you any details, but I can tell you that its success could be the difference between defeating Voldemort or not. Please, don't ask any more questions. If you really trusted Dumbledore, then you need to trust me as well," he said sincerely.

Bill placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Of course I trust you, Harry," he said seriously. "But I will admit to a great curiosity about what's going on. I also need to caution you, and you too, Ron," he said, nodding to his brother. "I would hate to see something happen to either of you."

"We know," Ron interjected, "that's why we asked you to come along today."

Bill pursed his lips and regarded the boys for a few moments. *No*, he told himself, *they're young men, not boys anymore. They just proved it to me.* Repeating his last thought aloud, he said, "You two just proved to me that you're thinking like adults not foolhardy kids. I'm really glad that you've learned some caution. It's just too bad it took the loss of your friend's freedom to get there." Ron and Harry both looked down. "Sorry," Bill said, seeing their sad expressions. "I didn't mean to bum you guys out. Listen, let's go get a drink. My treat. You can let me know what I can do to help with this 'project' that you inherited from Dumbledore, okay?"

The others nodded and followed Bill down the street. Two doors before the entrance to Diagon Alley, Bill slowed and turned into a disreputable-looking pub. Surprised, but gratified, Harry and Ron followed him inside and up to the bar. It was a dark, dodgy place, with about a dozen tables and a long bar along the wall opposite the door. Bill ordered three Firewhiskys and handing them around, murmured, "Sip it, don't down it. That's the trick to avoid burning your throat raw."

They took their drinks to a nearby table and sat. "I think," Harry began, "that the next time we visit Mr. Borgin, I'll make a purchase. Then, on the third visit, I can begin sounding him out about what we really want."

Bill gave him a knowing look. "It seems that you have learned to use a bit of guile as well as planning," he said, raising his glass to Harry in a small salute. Harry smiled and sipped his drink.

They talked quietly for a while, keeping to innocuous topics and carefully avoiding anything to do with the Order's activities. "How about one more round before we go back?" Harry asked the others. "I'll buy."

"You're on, mate," Ron said happily.

"Fine by me," Bill agreed.

As Harry stood to go to the bar, several cloaked and hooded men entered the pub. Their faces were hidden in the shadow of their hoods, much as Harry, Ron and Bill's were. This was unremarkable, as it seemed to be somewhat of a fashion in Knockturn Alley. Three of the men made straight for the bar, while a fourth turned to the right, seeking a table as far as possible from the one Ron and Bill occupied. The others seated themselves at the bar, talking in an undertone that prevented Harry from hearing what they were saying. Harry got the drinks, and carrying them back to their table, he glanced at the other man. *At least I presume it's a man*, Harry thought. The short figure was huddled in a chair, back hunched over the table, as his left hand signaled the barman for a drink. There was something awkward about the man's hand motions, as if he had to concentrate on what he was doing to coordinate his movements. Something stirred in Harry's memory. *That's odd*, he thought, but he couldn't nail down what was bothering him. He sat down with Ron and Bill, but resolved to keep an eye on the lone figure at the other side of the room.

When they had finished their drinks, they rose to leave. Dropping a few coins on the table for the barman, Harry glanced toward the lone drinker. A brief flash of silver caught his eye, then disappeared under the table at the figure's right. Suddenly, the facts coalesced in Harry's mind, and he understood what he had seen. He turned to Ron and Bill, saying in a soft voice, "Back me up. Wands ready; this could be dangerous!"

He threaded his way between the tables toward the short, hunched figure, as Ron and Bill flanked him once again. As they neared his table, the man stiffened and reached into his pocket. But Harry was quicker. "Don't even try it, Wormtail!" he said in a fierce, low voice, his wand trained on the man's head. Wormtail froze. "Ron, take his wand. Bill, you get his right arm, I'll take the left."

"W-where are you taking me?" the small man squeaked.

"To have a little chat," Harry replied as he and Bill hoisted him upright and escorted him out of the bar.

Afternoon lessons were over, and Hermione was re-reading a chapter in her Arithmancy text to while away the time until dinner. Snape was reading also, but seemed distracted and kept glancing at the clock or door every few minutes. A sudden rapping sound startled Hermione. A tawny-brown owl was perched outside the sitting room window, its beak extended to tap on the glass again. Snape rose and crossing to the window, murmured something too softly for Hermione to catch. The window opened inward and the owl hopped in, extending its leg so Snape could remove the small pouch that was attached to it. He untied it and removed an orange token from the pouch. Looking at the object in his palm, he frowned. "It seems that Wormtail has been delayed; he will not be returning until tomorrow," he said.

"That coin is a message from him?" Hermione asked curiously, rising to walk over and look at it. "How does it work?"

Snape considered a moment, then deciding it wouldn't hurt for her to know, said, "The tokens we use are color-coded: red means help is urgently needed, situation

dangerous; yellow means the sender needs backup, but there is no immediate danger; orange means the sender is delayed, but not in danger. There are other colors as well, but those are the most frequently used. We each have a symbol that indicates who the sender is see?" he said, pointing to a tiny symbol inscribed near the edge of the token. "That symbol, the Greek letter theta, is Wormtail's mark. And here, on the opposite edge," he said turning the coin 180 degrees, "is tomorrow's date. Meaning he will return then." He looked at the girl, his eyebrows raised as if waiting for another question. She didn't disappoint him.

"What's your symbol, sir?" she asked.

He considered telling her that it was none of her concern, then thought, *What the hell! It cannot hurt if she knows.* "It is the Greek letter Pi, lower case."

She smiled. "How appropriate," she said softly, "a number that has no finite end..." She looked down to hide her amusement. *An irrational number?* she thought, suppressing a laugh. *Who knew Voldemort had a sense of humor?* If Snape was aware of the significance of his designation in Muggle mathematics, he didn't let on.

He stared at the girl for a moment, thinking, *What was that about?* Aloud he said, "It was Wormtail's turn to prepare dinner tonight. Since you were next up for tomorrow, would you mind doing it?"

Hermione was surprised that he was asking, rather than telling her. "Not at all," she replied. As she headed for the kitchen, she reflected that Snape's interaction with her was increasingly polite, especially when Pettigrew was absent. While it was a pleasant change from the cold and often demeaning classroom persona she had experienced for the past six years, she was wary of his intentions. *Everything he does has a reason,* she thought. *He's not impulsive (or kind). He must be following a plan of some sort. If I can spot the pattern, then I can figure out where he's headed.*

Later that night, a melancholy mood settled over Hermione. Her thoughts kept dwelling on her parents, Ron, Harry and Ginny the people she loved and missed the most. *Nearly three weeks,* she thought mournfully, *twenty days of this and I don't have any idea how much longer I will be here...* She tried distracting herself with a mystery novel she found on the bookshelf, but to no avail. Finally, she gave up, deciding to go to bed early. Once there, however, she couldn't sleep. A feeling of hopelessness came over her. When she realized she was back to being negative, she scolded herself, *Oh, snap out of it, you whiner!* But she couldn't. She realized she was lonely. *I wish I had someone to really talk to someone,* she finally admitted to herself, *who would give me a shoulder to cry on.* Finally, she broke down and cried herself to sleep.

Wormtail was bound with an Anti-Apparition Charm, at which Mad-Eye Moody excelled. A great deal of information had been extracted from him in the past few hours by Remus Lupin. Whereas threats had been ineffective, his fear of his master being greater than his fear of punishment, Legilimency had proved quite successful. At first, Harry had been surprised that Remus was a Legilimens. But thinking back, he recalled how Remus had sometimes inexplicably known what was on his mind. He remembered how Remus, as his professor, had known what was bothering Harry that day long ago when they had tea in his office. Then, there was the incident with Sirius in the Shrieking Shack. Remus had simply looked intently into Sirius' eyes for a few seconds, then greeted him as a friend, certain of his innocence. *Yes,* Harry thought, *the evidence was there, we just didn't see it before.* He watched as various Order members wrote down all the information Remus related to them.

Arthur, following Remus' directions, had sent a coded owl-message to Snape's house, so that Pettigrew's absence would not arouse suspicion. Their plan was to stage a raid the following morning to rescue Hermione and, if possible, capture Snape. Ron and Harry had insisted on being included in the team that would carry out the attack.

Harry had been livid upon discovering that Hermione was being held captive by Snape. *That sodding bastard has killed nearly everyone I ever cared for! I won't let him hurt her!* he vowed silently. Ron had seemed appalled at the thought of Hermione being at the mercy of their vile ex-professor all this time. However, the prospect of her imminent rescue had him keyed up to the point of distraction; he appeared almost jubilant to Harry. "Ron," Harry said as they waited in the Weasley's living room for the interrogation to end, "we have to go in there tomorrow with our feet on the ground. You have to calm down and focus."

"I know," he said flippantly. "By tomorrow I will be serious. But tonight Harry, we're going to get her back!" he said ecstatically. "I can't help it I'm relieved, happy, excited... all that stuff at once! Just think, Hermione once said I had 'the emotional range of a teaspoon.' I guess this proves her wrong," he laughed. His high spirits were infectious, and Harry found himself smiling in spite of his earlier warning.

"Harry," Remus called from the kitchen, "come in here for a minute!"

Harry immediately got up, making his way hurriedly into the kitchen, Ron at his heels. "What's up?" he asked.

"Well," Remus said slowly, "Wormtail here is refusing to help us breach Snape's wards. It seems that he and Snape are the only ones that can open them from either side. I have pinpointed the location of the house using Wormtail's memories, but if we go there without him, we'll never break the wards to get inside without virtually destroying the place. That would alert Snape to our presence," he said sardonically. "It would also probably injure anyone inside," he finished grimly.

"What can I do?" Harry inquired.

Remus leaned close and spoke in Harry's ear, "Convince Wormtail to get us in he owes you a life debt, Harry."

"Right," Harry said. Turning to face Wormtail, he surveyed the older man's face. There was fear and, surprisingly, determination in his watery, grey eyes. Harry drew up a chair in front of the bound man, noting that his hands, silver and flesh, were tied in front of him. "Listen, I'm going to give it to you straight, Pettigrew," he began. "You owe me. Big time. I spared your life in the Shrieking Shack three years ago. If you help us get into Snape's house tomorrow to rescue Hermione, I'll consider the debt paid."

Pettigrew shook his head. "I can't do that," he said breathlessly. "If I help you, my life won't be worth a Knut. Every Death Eater will be out for my blood."

Harry deliberated for a moment, then said, "What if you had Ministry protection?" Pettigrew's eyes widened and Harry could tell he was considering it. He pressed on, saying, "I personally will testify to the Ministry that you helped us I will insure that they provide protective custody for you. Wand oath," he said, pulling out his wand and touching it to Pettigrew's chest, directly above his heart."

Pettigrew's eyes narrowed; then he nodded sharply. "All right," he capitulated, "I'll do it."

Hermione woke late the next morning. She was momentarily confused. Snape always woke her then met her downstairs for breakfast. *What's going on today?* She thought groggily. As she sat up, she felt a twinge in her lower back. *Damn camp-bed,* she groused mentally. But on the way to the loo, she was hit with a sharp abdominal cramp and realized her lower back pain probably had nothing to do with the cot. *How long has it been?* she wondered. *More than three weeks. Oh. I guess I lost track of the days.* As she splashed her face with water, it suddenly occurred to her where last night's negativity had really originated: hormones. Usually, when she felt that monthly emotional downswing, she indulged in some mood-lifting chocolate and a good chat with Ginny. That usually kept her from going off into tears.

After taking care of her morning ablutions, she went in search of breakfast. From the signs her body was giving her, she estimated she had a few hours before her menses actually started. *Well, Snape will just have to provide me with some 'supplies,'* she thought, with a mental giggle at the picture her dour ex-professor would make in the feminine hygiene aisle of a Muggle pharmacy.

At breakfast, she found that the cramps were bad enough to take away her appetite.

"What's the matter," Snape asked with a scowl. "Are you ill?"

She colored and mumbled, "No."

"Well, what's wrong?" he persisted.

"I..." she stammered, blushing even deeper. Then taking a deep breath, she thought of her Mum and put on what she called her 'clinical face.' She'd seen her mother use it countless times with her patients, but also whenever she had one of 'those' talks with Hermione. "Well, sir," she said in a clipped professional voice, "I'm going to start my menses today. The cramps are a bit bothersome, so I think I'll skip breakfast." Now it was Snape's turn to color. *A remarkable sight on a person so pale*, Hermione thought with a detached air. She continued aloud, "However, I will need to get the necessary supplies." She looked at him questioningly. "Should I change into my Muggle clothes, sir?"

Recovering his composure, Snape raised an eyebrow, saying, "What makes you think I would allow you to go with me?"

She flashed a cocky grin and answered with another question, "You would be willing to buy feminine hygiene products for me?"

He stared at her expressionlessly for a few moments. "Perhaps you have a point. Be ready to leave in five minutes time," he directed. He transfigured his robe into an overcoat and sat down to wait.

She certainly has cheek, he reflected. In fact, removed from the school's environment and interaction with her puerile friends, he realized that she was much more complex than the overachieving know-it-all he had pegged her for. He supposed that his past perceptions of her had been rather one-dimensional.

When she returned, he took her arm and directing his wand to her wrist, intoning, *Defigo Ut Mei Corporis*. That spell," he informed her, "creates an invisible tether, binding you to me physically until I reverse it. You will not be able to move more than four feet away from me. Come," he commanded, motioning toward the door. He unlocked the wards, not with a word, but by placing his right palm flat against the door panel. Once outdoors, he moved to the side of the house to avoid being seen, grasped both her forearms and Apparated.

They emerged from an alley into a moderately busy street and made their way down the left pavement. "I believe there is the Muggle equivalent of an apothecary a few streets in this direction," he informed her.

Looking around, Hermione thought they must be in a good-sized town; it was not big enough to be a city certainly not London. It was probably close to Snape's home, since the weather conditions were the same as those outside his house. *Wherever that was*, she thought wryly. In a very few minutes, they had located the pharmacy Snape was looking for.

Hermione made straight for the appropriate aisle and grabbed the items she needed. She was surprised when Snape turned to her saying, "You may take this opportunity to obtain any toiletries that you are accustomed to using for grooming."

Hermione, a genuine smile spreading over her features, replied, "Thank you, sir."

Ah, Snape thought with satisfaction, *I finally found where her feminine inclinations lie. Much more preferable than her reaction to the clothes!*

Hermione took him at his word, filling her little shopping basket with all of the hair, skin and oral hygiene products she usually used. She kept thinking that he would say 'enough,' but he never did. He remained silent, literally at her elbow, disguising her inability to move away from him by taking her arm as if he were merely escorting her. Once, as they passed a display of hair accessories, he paused and pointing to the hair elastics and barrettes said, "I recall that you often made use of these while you were at school." Smiling, she put some into her basket.

She looked at Snape. "Okay, that's it," she proclaimed.

As he paid for the items Hermione had chosen, the clerk eyed him, her gaze lingering on his long, greasy hair. "Did you find everything you need?" She asked them helpfully. "You know," she continued addressing Snape, "we have some great hair products for men as well. Over in aisle seven."

Snape gave her his best Potions master-glare. "That will be all," was his short answer. Outside on the pavement, Hermione heard him mutter, "As if I would be interested in Muggle potions!" She wisely refrained from commenting; and without another word, they started back.

Hermione hadn't a clue as to what had brought on Snape's expansive behavior in the store, but it definitely made a nice change from his usual demeanor. Hoping to prolong their outing, she decided to let him know she appreciated it. "Sir, I want to thank you, not just for this stuff," she said indicating the pharmacy bag, "but also for letting me come along. It's really good to get out and walk a bit."

Snape, not used to gratitude, looked down at the girl in surprise. "You're welcome," he said automatically. Seeing the sincere and open expression on her face, he abruptly decided to alter his original plan for the morning. *A walk would be agreeable*, he thought. *The weather is quite pleasant, and the girl's company not nearly as tiresome as most her age*. Once they were safely hidden from passing Muggles in a space between two nearby buildings, he took hold of Hermione's arms and Disapparated.

To Hermione's surprise, they reappeared not at Snape's house, but next to a river, downstream from an old mill-town. She looked around with appreciation. In spite of the smelly character of the river, it was a pretty spot; the water moved with a slow, serene current, lapping the grassy green banks. "This is really nice," she said, "very quiet and peaceful."

"Yes," he replied, "I used to come here sometimes as a boy."

"Then that," she said pointing to the town upstream, "is where your house is located?"

He nodded. "Come," he said, "we will walk back into town. When we return, however, I expect you to make up for the lesson time we have missed."

"Certainly, sir," she agreed with a happy smile.

A half-hour later, they wound their way through the narrow, twisting lanes of the town and turned into the small street named Spinner's End. Hermione had barely taken a step before Snape's arm snapped up in front of her, bringing her to an abrupt halt. "Get back around the corner," he hissed. As they backed rapidly out of the street, Hermione saw what had alarmed Snape. Six cloaked figures were creeping along the front of his house, crouched low to avoid the windows. Snape pushed Hermione behind him and peered cautiously around the corner. The figures were gathered on either side of the front door, waiting. "I'd like to see one of them break my wards," he said, his voice barely audible. "No!" he said in a soft, but clearly outraged voice. "The traitorous vermin..." he trailed off.

Hermione crouched down and looked around his legs to get a glimpse of the house. A short, squat man was placing his hand onto the panel of the front door a shining, silver hand. She gasped. "It's Pettigrew!" she whispered.

"Yes. I will repay his treachery later. Do not," he said in a fierce whisper, "attempt to call out if Wormtail's companions are renegade Death Eaters, they will kill you immediately. Whoever they are, I cannot allow them to find my research. We must lead them away from the house." Straightening quickly, he thrust her back a foot and stepped past the corner into plain sight. "Wormtail," he called, "does the Dark Lord know you have some new friends?" He practically dove back behind the corner of the house and pulled Hermione along the street at a run. She heard a muffled blast as a hex hit the spot where they had been concealed moments before.

As Snape had expected, the raiders came charging down the street in pursuit. Having grown up in the town though, Snape had a distinct advantage. He dodged into narrow walkways between houses, through alleys and streets, towing Hermione behind him all the while. Eventually, he was able to work his way in a circle back towards his house. At one point, they emerged from an alley into a wide street one over from Snape's house.

"Hermione!" called a frantic voice. Looking up, she saw Ron and Harry running toward them.

Snape swore and pulled her back into the alley and down a tiny path between two buildings. *Apparently*, he thought, *not all of them followed me. Some must have remained at the house.*

"Hermione," Ron called again, now some distance behind, "fight him!"

The girl gasped as he tugged hard on the invisible tether that bound them together, but she obviously knew it was futile to attempt an attack with her disabled wand. *The brats are still following*, Snape thought, hearing their footfalls. *Potter and Weasley to the rescue*, he thought sourly. *Not if I can help it!* He ducked behind a dumpster and pulling Hermione to him, Disapparated. They materialized at the rear of his house.

Speaking in a whisper, Hermione asked, "Won't they come back here when they realize they've lost us in town?"

"Yes," Snape replied, "but I must insure that the house is closed, and I must reset the wards. Wormtail cannot be allowed to betray my work to the Order."

They crept around to the side of the house and looking cautiously around the corner, found the front deserted. Snape straightened and made his way swiftly to the door. He moved his wand in a complicated motion, like a doubled infinity sign, and speaking in a low voice, changed the access code to his house. Suddenly, they heard the sound of feet pounding on the pavement behind them. They bolted to the left of Snape's house, running between its wall and the neighbor's, bursting into the alley at the back. There, not fifty feet down the narrow passage, stood Wormtail, apparently surprised by their sudden appearance.

Snape reacted first, sending a Disarming Spell at the small man. But Wormtail blocked it, returning a glowing-red Slicing Hex at Hermione rather than Snape. Snape pulled her out of the line of fire, then sent a Stunning Spell and a razor-sharp, orange Slicing Hex of his own back in quick succession. Hermione was wide-eyed, knowing that the two men were dueling for blood, not honor.

"I'm going to finish you, Snape," Wormtail screeched. "You're nothing but a greasy, half-blooded stain on my mother's family name. It's no wonder they wouldn't acknowledge you!"

Snape's face was livid: pale white and twisted into a mask of hatred. "You worthless piece of shit!" he breathed in a soft, menacing voice. "How dare you flaunt your preposterous lineage in front of me? Your so-called pure blood has never given you one tenth the power I hold!" He flicked his wand, sending Wormtail crashing backwards into a garden wall.

Wormtail rolled to the side, pointing his wand at Snape and gasping an incantation under his breath. A fiery rope shot from his wand, twisting around Snape's ankles and tripping him. As he landed heavily on his knees, Wormtail took aim again, yelling, "*Viscus Expulsum!*"

"*Protego!*" Hermione shouted leaping in front of Snape to deflect the curse.

Almost simultaneously, Snape vanished the rope with a quick, "*Ervanesco.*" Then he pulled Hermione to the side of the alley, taking cover behind some trash containers. They again heard the sound of running feet approaching. Five men dashed into the alley as Snape called out, "Wormtail! The next time we meet, you are a dead man!"

Pettigrew, an expression of loathing and fear on his face, Disapparated with a loud crack. The five men spun to confront Snape, but a second crack signaled that he had escaped as well, Hermione still bound to his side.

Ron stood silently for a moment, an expression of disbelief on his face; then he began swearing softly in a steady stream of vicious profanities.

Harry was beyond angry. "He double-crossed us!" he seethed. "I gave that little wanker a wand-oath and he gave us the slip! I swear, if I find him first, there'll be no need for Snape's revenge!"

Remus exchanged a look with Moody, then said in a grim voice, "Yes, whichever side wins, his outlook is poor."

Author Notes:

1. Spells: Defigo Ut Mei Corporis = secure to my body; Viscus Expulsum = entrails expel
2. Is Remus Lupin a Legilimens? I think he probably is. However, the credit for this theory goes to an essay I read at the Red Hen website.
3. Another quote from the Lord of the Rings: Lupin's closing line, "Yes, whichever side wins, his outlook is poor" is from The Two Towers. Merry says these words about Saruman, after the Ents have broken Isengard and confined Saruman to the Tower of Orthanc.

Realizations

Chapter 6 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

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* A big thanks to my beta Larilee for all her help!

Chapter 6: Realizations

They appeared on a stretch of deserted beach, still in the crouched position they had held while hiding behind the garbage cans at the rear of Snape's house. Snape was grasping Hermione's forearms tightly. She let out a long breath as her knees fell forward into the soft sand. Snape did not release her immediately. Looking up at him, she saw he was regarding her intently. "What?" she said irritably.

"Why?" he returned, still staring.

"What do you mean?" she countered. "Why, what?"

"Why did you block Wormtail's curse?" he finally clarified.

She looked angry. "How can you ask that? That curse is an abomination!" she ranted. "I wouldn't let my worst enemy be hit with such a vile piece of magic as that!" She took a deep breath and continued a little more calmly, "Besides, I just reacted. It's not as if I had time to consider the long-term ramifications."

"Lucky for me, I suppose," Snape said with a wry twist of his lips.

"Anyway, even if I'd had the time to think about it, I still would have done the same thing," she continued as if he hadn't spoken. "You saved my life twice since I was captured. I suppose you can consider that I've repaid you, at least partially," she finished with an air of satisfaction.

"That Gryffindor sense of justice," he mocked softly.

She snorted in disdain. "That's a bunch of garbage," she said flatly. "Being from Gryffindor House has nothing to do with it. Some things," she stated definitively, "are just plain wrong -- just evil. Like the Unforgivables, the Dementors, or that curse. Sometimes," she said, looking him straight in the eye, "things are black and white."

They sat facing one another, knees touching in the sand, his hands still on her arms. He gazed at her steadily for a few moments, then said softly, "Thank you."

She nodded. "What now?" she asked.

Snape withdrew from her, leaning back with his arms behind him in the sand. "Let me think for a bit. I need to plan." But he didn't, not right away. His thoughts were still stuck on the girl's remarkable actions. *If she had let that curse hit me, she would be free now -- back with her friends. And I would be dead. It's what I would have done in her place,* he realized. A twinge of dismay followed his realization, but he pushed it down, thinking *Now is not the time for self-examination.* He knew, of course, that the Entrail Expelling Curse was an excruciatingly painful way to die. That is probably the reason Granger put it in the same category as the Unforgivables. *But what was the true reason she did it?* he pondered. *She gave three -- all possibly valid. Yes, sometimes a person reacts first and thinks later. Her aversion to the curse could explain her spontaneous reaction. The justification of 'owing me' was just that -- a justification after the fact, not a reason for her actions. Still, he mused, that didn't make it less true.* Like it or not, they had a bond, an obligation to one another now. *But,* he thought almost hopefully, *what if she had another motivation for protecting me? Is it possible that she has already begun to trust me, that she values me as her tutor?* He shook his head, knowing that his internal debate was irresolvable at the moment.

Enough, he told himself. *What to do now?* He devoted his thoughts to the problem at hand, finally deciding to take her back to the Dark Lord's headquarters. He needed to report Wormtail's betrayal and find another location to work on the Impenetrable Potion. It would be dangerous for her, but they would have to stay at the Riddle House in his basement lab, at least temporarily. He vowed to be especially vigilant for her safety. If, by some stroke of good fortune, she really was beginning to trust him, he couldn't let any of those pure-blooded fanatics get at her.

Hermione sat for a while in silence, alternately watching Snape and thinking. Her life had become incomprehensible lately *Who would have thought I would care what happened to a murderer? Because, she thought, no matter how nicely he may behave towards me, he is still incontrovertibly guilty of killing Dumbledore. I have to keep things in perspective, keep my wits about me.* After a while, she lay back on the sand, the unseen tether pulling lightly at her wrist as she moved her arms to stretch. Abruptly, she realized that her other wrist was bound as well. The pharmacy bag was still firmly wrapped around her wrist where she had placed it during their walk upriver earlier that morning. A sudden laugh broke from her at the ridiculousness of the situation: she had carried this stuff intact through all of that running, hexing and Apparating!

Her laugh startled Snape; he looked at her questioningly. "I've still got it!" she chuckled, holding up her wrist with the bag dangling. "Wormtail nearly killed us both, but my stuff survived!"

His eyes widened in mild surprise. *Yes, Wormtail had aimed a rather nasty curse at her as well,* he remembered. Still, he didn't see what she found so humorous. *Must be a delayed hysterical reaction,* he thought deprecatingly. He took a deep breath and changed the subject. "Granger, we need to return to the Dark Lord's headquarters," he said. "We will likely have to stay there for a short time, perhaps a day or two." He was speaking in a very serious voice, almost earnestly, and Hermione sat up to pay attention. "While we are there you must do exactly as I say; failure to do so could cost you your life. We have," he continued, "over the past few weeks, developed a comfortable mode of interaction with one another. However, that behavior will not be viewed positively by either the Dark Lord or his followers. Both of us will suffer in that case." He took her chin in his hand, looking directly into her eyes. "You will need to be submissive in their presence, and in mine. Most especially, you must be seen to obey me without hesitation."

"Why don't you just put me under the Imperius Curse?" she said resentfully. "If you need a puppet, isn't that the best way to get one?"

"No!" he said forcefully. "The Dark Lord expects--" he stopped abruptly, having almost said too much.

"What?" she verbally pounced into the pause. "Does he think because I'm a Muggle-born that I'm some kind of congenital idiot? A mindless sheep or something?"

Snape took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He had nearly let the truth slip. "Granger, listen to me!" he ordered in a fierce, low voice. "If you speak to any Death Eater in this manner, they will kill you instantly; I will not be able to protect you! You need to remember that all of them are capable of unspeakable brutality, especially towards a Mudblood like yourself. You should fear them! Or have you already forgotten the day you were captured?"

She shivered slightly as his gaze bored into her. He released her chin, satisfied that he had made his point. "W-what should I expect when we go there?" she asked.

"You will be mocked and insulted, but you must not respond. Keep your eyes down and speak to no one but myself. If others are present, speak only in answer to my direct questions. If I have to bring you before the Dark Lord, stay on your knees and do not look into his eyes." He sighed. "As soon as I can contrive it, I will find a more permanent location -- one that is safer for both of us," he finished.

The significance of his wording was not lost on Hermione. She wondered fleetingly what he meant by that last thing he'd said, but her mind jumped over that and focused on his phrase 'a more permanent location'. "Permanent?" she echoed, her voice cracking.

Snape saw the stricken look on her face; it looked out of place on one so young. He felt a moment's pity, but hardened himself against it, pushing it away. "Granger," he said warningly, "you must learn to control your emotions. If you do not, they will be used against you."

She took a ragged breath, visibly working to control herself. "Sorry," she said stiffly. "I'm usually quite logical." She recognized that she'd been on an emotional roller coaster since they had fought Wormtail. *It must be hormones still jerking me around,* she thought. She desperately wanted to delve into what he'd meant by 'permanent', but surmised that this wasn't a good time for either of them to have that conversation. She decided to bring it up later when things were less volatile.

The girl is under a great deal of stress, Snape reflected, *much more than she is accustomed to.* He watched her surreptitiously for a minute as she regained her composure. When he was satisfied that she had mastered her emotions, he rose. "It's time we left. Give me your wand for the time being," he said, extending his hand. She placed it in his palm and watched as he pocketed it. "Now your hand," he continued, extending his own once again. He turned her palm downward and pointing his wand at her wrist intoned, "*Finite Incantatem.*" He grasped both her arms and Apparated.

Back at the Burrow, Ron and Harry listened as Moody gave a full account of their unsuccessful rescue attempt to Molly, Ginny and George, occasionally adding a detail of their own to the story. Arthur and Bill were, of course, still at work. Earlier that morning, Moody had insisted that a small number of people -- six at the most -- would have a better chance of surprising Snape. This had meant that only one of the twins could go along. George was still glaring angrily at Moody (and at Remus as well, for backing up Moody's decision) over being left behind.

"If Ron and I had stayed at the house, instead of chasing that greasy bugger, we would have been able to catch him when he came back!" Harry lamented.

"Don't blame yourself, kid," Moody growled. "He's one slippery son-of-a-bitch. Even if we had cornered him in the house, there's still a good chance he would have been able to escape us."

"Yes," agreed Remus, "he has always been cunning, shrewd: the perfect Slytherin."

"I can't think of a better insult than that!" Ron said. Then, in an anguished voice he burst out, "Why didn't she fight him! She could have tripped him or punched him in the face or something! She didn't even try to get away!"

"You're speaking like a fool, boy!" Moody barked. "She was being dragged along! Couldn't you see that? He probably had her bound to him magically. There are charms for that, you know. And do you honestly think that a slip of a girl like her would stand a chance in a fight with Snape? Use your head!" he finished crossly.

Ron seemed to crumple into the nearest chair. With his hands over his face, he took several gasping breaths, all-too-obviously trying to keep from crying. Harry came to stand beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "It's not anyone's fault, mate," he told Ron. "Well, other than Wormtail and Snape. We did the best we could. It was horrid luck that they weren't in the house when we got there. I could tell that Wormtail was surprised by that."

"I agree," Remus said. "I got the distinct impression from Wormtail's memories that Hermione hadn't been allowed out at all." A thoughtful silence descended in the room.

After a minute, Molly said, "The question is: what do we do now?"

"We go back to using our 'eyes and ears' network and hope for another break," Moody answered.

For the second time in her life, Hermione walked through the unkempt garden behind the Riddle House. Snape followed closely, covering her with his wand. He did not really think she would attempt to escape at this point, but appearances had to be maintained; there were always a few Death Eaters present at their headquarters. They entered at the back, and Snape herded the girl toward the cellar. As they passed through the first-floor sitting room and hurried into the hall, a head turned sharply, and a pair of scowling eyes followed their progress intently. Snape deposited the girl in his lab, a crowded little room with only one chair and a folding cot to sit on. "Stay here," he directed her. "I will return after I report to the Dark Lord."

A few minutes later, he was kneeling on the threadbare carpet in the upstairs salon. He kept his eyes down, waiting for the Dark Lord's permission to speak. Sometimes he felt wearied by this game of submission; always playing the pawn to his master's king. Today was one of those days. His gaze wandered to the fireplace in front of him where the Dark Lord stood brooding, his back to the remainder of the room.

The skeletally-thin figure suddenly whirled about to face Snape. "You have unpleasant news, Severus. I saw it on your face when you entered. Tell me," he commanded.

"My Lord, Wormtail has betrayed us," Snape said. "He led members of the Order of the Phoenix to my house in an attempt to ambush me and retrieve Granger. In the skirmish that followed, he tried to kill both myself and the girl."

"And did you execute him for his betrayal?" queried the high, cold voice.

"No, my Lord," Snape replied, "the rat escaped. I was forced to flee from the Order to avoid capture. I did retain the prisoner." He wondered bitterly if he would be 'punished' for this perceived failure. *Anyone else would have been ensnared, but I escaped with the girl* But the Dark Lord seldom saw things so simplistically. He maintained discipline in his ranks with an iron hand and a ready wand. The silence stretched.

"His disloyalty will be repaid with death," Voldemort finally said. "He is to be hunted down and eliminated."

"Of course, master," Snape responded, thankful that he had escaped punishment himself.

"Get up! Tell me, what progress have you to report on your disparate projects?" the Dark Lord asked.

"I have made a discovery in the Morganian Scrolls," he said. "I believe the text conceals a coded message that will provide more details on the construction of the potion. I am confident that I will break the code within the month, as I have already deciphered the essentials."

"Good. I want that potion the day I face Potter. You will not disappoint me." It was not a question.

"No, my Lord. I will not disappoint you," Snape agreed.

"And what of the girl?" Voldemort inquired.

"She has accepted me as her tutor, but she is still suspicious of my motives," Snape said. "It will be a lengthy process, but worth the effort if I succeed. I believe that I may have begun to gain a foothold in her confidence. A strange thing occurred today, my Lord: the girl deflected a curse that was meant to kill me."

"Show me," the Dark Lord commanded.

Snape brought forth his memory of the duel with Wormtail while maintaining a tight shield over the earlier events of the day. He looked up into the inhuman eyes of his master and felt the invading presence inside his mind. As the memory replayed, Snape tried to look at it objectively, in effect, to remove himself from the emotions he'd experienced during the actual event. Doing so, he came to the conclusion that the girl's actions were probably not a sign of increasing trust in him -- just her 'noble' intentions.

I disagree, Severus, the Dark Lord imposed into his thoughts. He withdrew from Snape's mind and continued aloud. "She is not in your power yet, but I believe that this event is an encouraging sign. You will continue as you have begun." He began to pace back and forth in front of the fireplace. "I have decided to modify your plan with regard to the girl," he said. Snape stiffened, feeling a moment of apprehension, but Voldemort continued, saying, "I believe we should begin baiting my young opponent now. I want to progressively erode his confidence in Granger's loyalty. We will send him memories that show her gradually changing her allegiance." He stopped pacing and turned to Snape. "You will open your mind to me now, Severus. I will choose the first incident to be sent to Potter."

Snape looked up into the cold eyes of his master and gritted his teeth as the Dark Lord began rifling through his memories.

Hermione explored the tiny room, peeking at the contents of several books lying on the work table and assessing the small stock of ingredients stored in the cupboards. She had only been alone about ten minutes when she heard the creak of the door. She turned in surprise, thinking it was too soon for Snape to be back. What she saw turned her surprise to shock. There, slouching in the doorway, wearing the black robes of a Death Eater, was Viktor Krum. Hermione was stunned speechless.

He walked forward, eyeing her gravely, and stopped. "Herm-own-ninny?" he said hesitantly, "vot are you doing here?"

"I-- I've-- I'm-- captive," she stammered, unable to get a coherent sentence past her lips. Suddenly, the dam burst and words tumbled from her. "Oh Viktor!" she cried despairingly, "How could you? How can you be one of them? My God! I can't believe this! I thought you were a decent person." She burst into tears and spun around, her back to Krum, her hands clenched into fists rigidly at her sides.

"Herm-own-ninny," he began in an even voice, "you must try to understand. Not everyone has the freedom to choose their own path. Some of us are bound by the strictures of family, society and tradition. Some of us are constrained by fear; we fear for the safety of our families," he said earnestly.

She turned slowly to face him again, a look of confusion on her tear-streaked face. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"The pure-blood families, they haff always banded together, given support to von another. This is our tradition," he explained. "It has led to alliances, to expectations. When these expectations are not met, whole families can be made to suffer. You would not like me to be the cause of my parents death? My little sister? Should I let her be slaughtered when I flee? Do you see the difficulties?"

"But--" she struggled to articulate her feelings. "How can you-- how can you be part of their atrocities, their hatred?"

"Ve do our best to be a moderating influence. If ve must, ve stand aside, then take our punishment for 'cowardice,'" he said bitterly. He took a deep breath, calming himself. "Herm-own-ninny," he continued, his brows drawing together in the familiar scowl, "how did you come to be here?"

"I was in London three weeks ago with friends. We went to a house to..." she hesitated, trying to recall why they had gone to London. Nothing came to her. "Well," she continued, "anyway, there were several Death Eaters watching us, I guess. They ambushed us and I-- I got on the wrong end of one of their wands. They escaped and took me as a hostage."

He stepped directly in front of her, an expression of pain and longing on his features. "I will try to help you," he said in a near-whisper. "But I must be cautious. Tomorrow I will come to see you again. Perhaps--"

"Who the bloody hell are you?" a voice interrupted from behind Victor.

Victor turned, and seeing Snape in the doorway, he strode forward. "Snape," he acknowledged, giving him a brusque nod of the head. "I saw you arrive earlier and thought it would be enjoyable to renew my 'friendship' with this Mudblood. She is an old friend of mine, after all." He gave a suggestive grin that was meant to mislead Snape about his intentions. Unfortunately for Victor, this was exactly the wrong tack, as it seemed to infuriate his fellow Death Eater.

Snape's lip curled as he surveyed the young man. In a soft, menacing tone, he said, "You will not be 'renewing your friendship' with her, Krum. She is under my authority and protection. If you so much as touch her, I assure you, you will regret it."

Krum backed off, literally and figuratively. His expression changed to one of polite disinterest, and his tone became placating. "I haff no vish to anger you, Snape," he said. He looked at Hermione. "It vas good to see you again, Herm-own-ninny." He nodded again to Snape and hastily exited the small room.

As the sound of his footsteps receded up the stairs, Snape advanced on Hermione, glaring. He didn't stop until he was a step away. "I told you not to speak with anyone other than myself!" he seethed.

"I had no choice, sir," she said quickly before he could continue to berate her. "He just walked in here and I couldn't leave. I was taken by surprise -- shock actually. I had no idea that Victor shared your 'ideological leanings,'" she finished diplomatically.

He was still angry, but he realized she was right. *What else could she have done?* he thought. *At least she didn't leave the room.* He had no wish to extricate her from the clutches of his fellows upstairs. In an abrupt switch of mood, he decided it would do them both good to do something calming and routine. To him, that meant brewing. "Come over here," he instructed, motioning her toward the work table. "We will prepare some basic potions. Some Dreamless Sleep Potion, a batch of Confusing Concoction and a Shrinking Potion should be enough for tonight."

As they began preparing ingredients, he felt his tension gradually ease. Slicing, chopping, and grinding were his best antidotes to anger. *Why*, he wondered idly as he worked, *does my self-control seem so essential in situations where Granger is involved?* At Hogwarts he'd never made much effort to limit his anger toward students, her included. He supposed that it was just a matter of familiarity; that and his long-term objective with the girl of course. But he couldn't deny that he felt protective of her, a sense of responsibility for what happened to her. *Could it be that I feel guilty about initially probing her mind and removing those memories? Bah! That is ridiculous!* He told himself. *If I hadn't done those things, she would be dead. The Dark Lord would have drained her dry and disposed of her. End of story!* He took a deep breath, trying to regain the calming rhythm of his work, and redirect his thought into a more productive channel.

He let his thoughts drift to Krum. *What would the younger man do?* He had no doubt that he hadn't heard the last of him. As he recalled, Krum had been rather obsessed with Granger at one time. He glanced surreptitiously at the girl. She seemed totally absorbed in her task, and he took the opportunity to study her. What was it about her that Krum admired? She was not beautiful -- but certainly not ugly either. He supposed he would have to say she was pretty. She was intelligent, not brilliant, but she undoubtedly worked hard. She had determination, tenacity and stubbornness; those could be considered bad or good qualities, depending on the circumstances. But aside from those obvious things, she had an indefinable trait, something about the way she interacted with him. It wasn't sweetness -- she could be downright bossy. It wasn't maturity -- she had little of the emotional control and none of the perspective which maturity brought to most people. Was it innocence? Was it trust in authority? He couldn't be sure, but he was certain that Krum could have told him what it was.

She looked up to see him observing her. "Sir?" she questioned.

He simply shook his head and resumed grinding the periwinkle seeds.

Harry threw the leather-bound book he had been studying to the floor in frustration. He had spent a great deal of time perusing Black's journal these past two days and had precious little to show for his efforts. *Maybe*, he thought, *I should focus on Borgin for now. If I handle him carefully, he could be a tremendous help in locating objects belonging to Hogwarts' founders.* He sat down and began considering ways to gain the elderly man's confidence.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. "Come in," he called. The door opened and Ginny sashayed in, a large smile plastered across her face. "What's up?" he asked.

"I finally did it!" she cried exultingly. "I scammed Fred and George big time! They think they're so slick, but they didn't even see it coming," she said with a laugh.

"What did you do?" Harry inquired, grinning in anticipation.

"Well," she confided with a sly smile, "you know those Decoy Detonators they invented? I modified a couple of them so that they emitted a puff of purple mist instead of creating a diversion like they're supposed to." She began to giggle. "When they tried to figure out what was wrong with them, my second adaptation was triggered."

"And?" he prompted.

"They're both covered in pink, heart-shaped tattoos!" she said, now laughing so hard that it was difficult to understand her. "I altered the enchantment so it can't be affected by a counter-spell -- they have to wait for it to wear off!" She fell to the bed and dissolved in laughter.

Harry lost it as well, dropping to the bed in a spasm of hilarity. "How long?" he gasped, when he could speak again.

"Probably tomorrow," Ginny said, still chuckling. "But I told them it would last a few days!"

Harry gave another snort of amusement and wiped his eyes. "Miss Weasley," he said in an excellent imitation of Professor McGonagall, "you are incorrigible!" She laughed in delight at his impression and, on impulse, leaned forward to kiss him lightly on the cheek. In little more than a moment, he sobered, looking at Ginny wistfully. "I can't," he whispered.

"I know," she returned frankly, "and I understand." Ginny looked down to dispel any awkwardness. Her eyes fell on the book he had thrown down earlier. "Have you been getting anywhere with that?" she asked, indicating the journal.

"Nope," was his short reply.

"Mind if I spend some time with it?"

"Go ahead," he said. "Just keep it in here and remember to put it in my trunk when you're done."

"Okay," Ginny agreed.

"I'm going down to have a gawk at the twins," he told her with a faint smile. "See you later."

When he'd gone, Ginny settled on the bed and opened the book. She flipped through it looking for the bookmark Harry usually put in when he was done. *Nothing. I guess he forgot to mark it,* she thought. They had been working on the later parts of the journal, on the assumption that Black had found out about the Horcruxes shortly before his death. She turned to the front, thinking, *What the hell, why not give it a look?* She scanned the entries, methodically making annotations and occasionally giving her interpretations in the notebook Harry kept on his bedside table.

After a time, her thoughts began to drift from her task. She remembered that other diary, Tom's diary. He had been so charming at first, then he had changed. He had become manipulative and demanding, forcing her to comply with his wishes. At the end he'd been downright cruel, insulting her and her friends, physically wresting control of her body. He'd compelled her to open the Chamber of Secrets and wait there for Harry. She shuddered at the memories, trying to force her thoughts away. She closed her eyes and unbidden, a memory seemed to float to the top of her thoughts.

Tom was speaking to her, his voice arrogant and amused, *"My victory over that brainless oaf, Hagrid, will always be remembered, thanks to Dippet. I've made certain that Hogwarts will always hold a portion of my triumph!"*

Ginny eyes snapped open. "Bloody Hellhounds!" she exclaimed aloud. *Tom was bragging,* she thought. *Harry said Voldemort was proud of and bragged about particularly nasty things he'd done to people. Like the kids he took to that cave. And getting Hagrid expelled.* Quickly, she hunted through the journal to find the passages where CB and EB had been mentioned. *There!* she thought with elation. *This confirms it!* On the page before her, she read: February 2. Went to KA alone. Saw CB and EB. CB had new info: #2 at Hogwarts?

Ginny dropped the notebook and jumped up, stuffing the journal inside Harry's trunk. She had to find him. Ron too. She had to tell them: the unknown Horcrux was at Hogwarts; it was Riddle's Special Award!

They had been at the Riddle House for three days, and Snape was heartily tired of it. Tired of the cramped little potions lab, tired of the subtle (and not so subtle) slurs that some of the pure-bloods aimed at him, and tired of the constant watchfulness needed to keep his charge safe and out of the other Death Eaters' reach. *By Slytherin's wand,* he vowed, *I am going to dismember Wormtail for making it impossible to remain at my house!* Yes, it was rundown. Yes, it was in the middle of a 'Muggle dunghill,' as Bellatrix so charmingly called the town. Yes, he had to eat his own cooking when he was there. But it was his, and it was blessedly-free of people, except for those he allowed to come in.

Out of all the constant residents of the Riddle house, Dolohov was the worst. That evening, Snape was called to speak with the Dark Lord. Upon his return, he found Dolohov and Pritchard attempting to break the wards he'd placed on the cellar door. "Desist at once!" he hissed, pulling his wand in a heartbeat. The two men spun in surprise to face him. "The Dark Lord wants the girl unharmed. I strongly suggest that you leave her alone, or you will be very sorry indeed," he threatened. "I will not warn you again; I will hex first and talk later," he finished softly in his most intimidating voice.

Pritchard retreated almost immediately, mumbling some excuse about a job he needed to go take care of. But Dolohov was another story. "Are you sure it's the Dark Lord that wants the girl safe, Snape?" he sneered, standing his ground. "You know what I think?"

"I don't believe you think at all," Snape retorted coldly.

"I think," Dolohov nearly snarled, "you've finally found yourself a fuck that you don't have to pay for and you don't want to share. Nothing to worry about, I wouldn't sully myself with such filth. The only thing that bitch is good for is a spot of torture."

"The Dark Lord considers otherwise," Snape said. "Perhaps you would like to give him your opinion on the matter? We can go to see him right now."

Dolohov's jaw clenched as he restrained his anger. "Always playing the faithful servant, aren't you, Snape? Your bootlicking makes me sick!" he growled as he stomped off.

Snape watched him go, then proceeded downstairs. Granger was lying on a cot, reading a Potions text. Not wanting to face her questions, he stalked to the other cot (which was really a chair he had transfigured) and lay down. He closed his eyes and replayed the meeting he had just returned from.

He was kneeling in the upper parlor at headquarters, as was Krum. The Dark Lord paced towards the fire, standing with his back to the two men. "Both of you, get up!" the Dark Lord said. "Viktor, I understand that you have a proposal regarding Potter's friend, Granger."

"Yes, my Lord," Krum acknowledged. But he looked down diffidently and did not continue.

For a moment, Snape thought the younger man was afraid of their master, but he noticed Krum shooting a quick scowl at Voldemort, believing himself to be unobserved. A second passed; Krum looked down, recomposing himself.

The high, cold voice demanded, "Explain your proposal to me."

"My Lord," Krum began, "I haff heard from some of the others that the Mudblood, Granger, is more than just a hostage. That she will be used as a veapon against Potter? If this is true, then I believe I can be of help in dealing with her. I haff known her for more than three years."

The Dark Lord turned to face them, his red eyes burning in anger. "You spoke to none about your project, correct Severus?"

"No one, my Lord. Wormtail must have compromised its secrecy," Snape replied silkily.

The skeletal figure before them nearly hissed in anger, "The imbecile! To risk a whisper being heard by the wrong ears! If those fools in the Order of the Phoenix hear of it,

the trap will be sprung before the bait is in it." His slit-like nostrils flared as he took several long breaths. "At the next summoning I will insure that every member of the circle understands the need for complete silence on certain topics," he said with grim satisfaction. He advanced on Krum; the young man seemed to flinch, but didn't retreat. "You did not actively seek this knowledge, did you?" he asked.

"No, my Lord. I overheard a conversation downstairs two days ago," Krum answered.

"What is it that you think to add to Severus' efforts with the girl?"

"Master, forgive me if this is presumptuous, but I also am familiar with Potter. I know how important his friends are to him. The way to truly hurt him would be to turn his friend against him. I believe that Snape's job is to turn her loyalty to our cause." He glanced shrewdly at Snape. "I think that Granger will respond to me much more quickly than to him," he said nodding to Snape.

"I have known Granger since she was quite young," Snape countered, "twice as long, in fact, as you have been acquainted with her." He knew quite well that Krum's knowledge of the girl was of a different sort than his, but he wanted to make the man admit his personal interest in her.

"We have kept in touch since we met at Hogwarts. I believe that she thinks of me as a friend at the very least. She will trust me more easily. My Lord," he offered, turning toward Voldemort, "I am willing to assist Snape in turning the girl's loyalties. If he has other more pressing duties to you, I would be willing to take all the responsibility. I would take her to Bulgaria; the Order of the Phoenix will never find her there," he finished confidently.

Inexplicably, Snape felt an immediate resistance to the younger man's suggestion. He gave him a penetrating stare. His reluctance didn't make sense -- Krum did know the girl better than him. He would probably be able to provide excellent advice or even take over the entire responsibility for Granger. In that case, he could be rid of the annoyance of tutoring her, answering her continuous questions and protecting her. Krum was at least as likely as himself (if not more so) to gain the girl's loyalty. He frowned in thought. Why, then, did he dislike the idea?

"You do not favor Viktor's plan, Severus?" The Dark Lord asked.

"I am uncertain, master. I admit, it is a good plan, but there are problems associated with removing her from the country," he asserted, thinking quickly to produce an acceptable objection. "I cannot endorse it wholeheartedly. Perhaps it would be best if you were to decide."

Voldemort looked searchingly at each of the two men, clearly reading more than their facial expressions. "I will consider the options for a short time," he finally said. "Tomorrow, the full circle will be summoned, I will give my decision at that time." He flicked his long fingers dismissively at them. "Go now!" he commanded.

Snape opened his eyes a slit and watched the girl silently, furtively. By this time tomorrow they would either be secreted away in a new location or she would be on her way to Bulgaria, with Krum. He decided it would be better not to tell her about Krum's offer. Best not get her hopes up, either way. He was pleased that he had managed to pass the decision to his master. This way, he effectively escaped responsibility for the final outcome -- not to mention any immediate adverse reactions by Krum or Granger.

Apparently, the girl had some portion of that sixth sense that tells a person when they are being observed, for she lowered her book and looked straight at him. "Any news?" she asked wistfully.

He nodded, then sat up to explain more fully. "Tomorrow, I believe that we will leave this place for safer, more permanent quarters. I'm not certain where, but the Dark Lord has promised a guide will be available to take us there." She nodded solemnly, biting her lower lip. *What was wrong with the girl now?* he wondered, noting that she looked as if she were about to cry.

"Well, this pretty much clinches it," she said in a shaky voice, "I'm not a 'hostage' at all, am I? You don't find a permanent hideout to keep a hostage. In fact, I'd wager that no ransom demands were ever made," she declared, looking at him challengingly. Snape was taken off guard, and the momentary look on his face was all the confirmation she needed. "If I never was intended to be ransomed," she continued, "then I would assume that I'm being held because of my connection to Harry." She searched Snape's face, but he had regained his usual inscrutable mask, neither confirming nor denying her suppositions. It didn't matter; she was certain that she was correct. She looked down, thinking about her long-time friendship with The Boy Who Lived, now 'The Chosen One.' Suddenly, the truth hit her: Voldemort was going to use her as bait!

She looked up at Snape, anger and fear written plainly on her face. "You son-of-a-bitch," she whispered vehemently, "I'm a lure for Harry!" His eyes widened ever so slightly, Hermione noticed the affirmation, but didn't stop. "And I suppose," she said flatly, as she held eye contact with him, "that when I've served my purpose I'll be disposed of, just like Bertha Jorkins and Professor Quirrell."

Snape couldn't look away from the accusation in her eyes. He felt a clenching sensation in his stomach; this time he knew what it was: guilt. He wanted to deny it all, but knew that was useless. She wouldn't believe him anyway.

When he didn't answer, she turned her head away muttering, almost to herself, "I told you I would figure out your game, eventually."

Author's Notes:

1. I borrowed the phrase "eyes and ears network" from Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. I just wanted to acknowledge that it's his idea, not mine.
2. Is Krum a Death Eater? He is certainly a prime candidate for recruitment to Voldemort's cause, having been predisposed to the Dark Arts at Durmstrang and by his association with Karkaroff. His choosing Hermione as a date for the Yule ball, however, strongly suggests that he doesn't share the pure-blood prejudice against Muggleborns. In the absence of canon evidence either way, I decided that he would probably be constrained to support the Dark Lord by his circumstances.
3. The unknown Horcrux = Riddle's Special Award. Just my theory.

Resetting

Chapter 7 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic. Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe is the property of J.K. Rowling and her publishers. Anything you recognize belongs to her. I am not making any money from this.

* A big thanks goes to my beta, Larilee, for all her advice and her help in tweaking this one!

Chapter 7: Resettling

When they woke the next morning, Hermione's manner was stiff and silent. Snape could tell that she was still angry after her insights of the night before, but was attempting to cover it with a mask of indifference. He approved. She needed to learn emotional control, especially among the Dark Lord's followers. 'Never let them see you hurting.' That was his mantra one of them anyway. But on the other hand, her attitude was a distinct setback for him. It would take a great deal of effort to regain the ground he had lost.

After eating breakfast in virtual silence, he knew he had to do something. *Perhaps I should try to explain things to her, insofar as I can,* he deliberated. *I do not, in fact, want her to be killed. That is only a last resort. In any event, she must not go before the Dark Lord filled with anger he will read her too easily. Then both she and I will suffer.* "Granger, I ..." He hesitated, uncharacteristically at a loss for words. "We need to talk," he finally managed.

"So talk," she stated without expression.

"I suppose you already realize that your deductions last night were, for the most part, accurate," he said. "It's true that you were never a hostage. The Dark Lord will eventually provoke Potter into make another attempt to rescue you. Potter will have to face the Dark Lord on his own terms." He shot a calculating look at her, trying to measure her reaction. She maintained a cool facade. "It is not, however," he continued, "a foregone conclusion that you will be killed after Potter has been taken care of. I do not favor such an outcome; in fact, it would displease me."

"Why should you care what happens to me?" she asked.

"I dislike waste, Granger. You have intelligence and some talent that I would not like to see thrown away." He looked away as if steeling himself, then said, "And I feel responsible, to some extent."

"That's a laugh," she scoffed derisively. "You've spent the past six years denigrating me and my friends. You never cared about our welfare when we were at Hogwarts, and I don't believe you do now."

He went rigid, anger plainly written on his face. "That is patently false! I protected Potter, and you too, on more than one occasion. It seems that you have conveniently forgotten those incidents."

Hermione stood and walked a few steps away from him, thinking. She knew that he had believed he was protecting Harry, Ron and herself when he had found them with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin in the Shrieking Shack. And two years later he had sent the Order to help them at the Ministry. She supposed that he was essentially correct. She turned back to face him. "You're right. That was an unfair thing to say to you," she admitted. "But you can't deny all those years of cruelty or what you did the day you fled Hogwarts. In light of that, you, of all people, ought to understand my skepticism." He had stood up as she spoke, and now she had to look up into his face. Remembering the reaction he'd had at his house, she felt apprehensive about bringing up Dumbledore's murder again.

But her fears proved groundless. He simply looked down his nose at her for a moment, his face half-covered by his long, lank hair. "I deny nothing," he snapped, "I did what I had to do." After a pause he continued caustically, "Perhaps we will be able to discuss this in the future. This is not the most opportune time to revisit past events." He seated himself, motioning for her to do the same. "Granger, the Dark Lord expects me to bring you before him today. I believe that the entire circle will be there," he warned. Snape noted that the girl looked frightened at the idea of a houseful of Death Eaters. *And well she might,* he thought darkly. "Do you remember the things I told you before we came here?"

"Yes," she affirmed, nodding.

"Good. Just stay close to me and follow my directions. I will ensure that no harm comes to you," he assured her.

It was mid-afternoon when Snape felt his Dark Mark flare, the searing heat burning into his arm. He rose and, looking at Hermione, said simply, "It's time." She swallowed audibly and set her jaw as she joined him at the door. His eyes narrowed as he observed her: she was afraid but attempting to smother her fear. She seemed determined not to cower before so many enemies. "Keep your head down," he whispered as they ascended the stairs, "it's better if you do not look anyone in the eye." He kept a vice-like grip on her upper arm, propelling her along at his side.

They had passed through several small rooms and were entering the foyer of the main floor before they encountered any of the others. "Severus!" a male voice called. Looking up, he spied Rabastan Lestrange waiting near the stairs to the second floor, smiling. He was always glad to see Rabastan, who was one of the few classmates of his to survive the Dark Lord's first war. Nearby were Bellatrix and her husband, Rodolphus. They greeted him more sedately, but without any trace of unfriendliness. Bellatrix had made a complete turnaround in her opinion of Snape since the night he'd made the Unbreakable Vow to her sister, Narcissa. As he crossed the foyer toward the stairs, the front entrance opened, admitting a large group of babbling people. Snape's gaze raked over the unruly mob, assessing their identities. He saw that they were mostly younger recruits who had joined the ranks in the past two years. Many of them nodded to Snape and the Lestranges deferentially. For the most part, the younger Death Eaters treated Snape with elaborate respect which he knew was due to fear. After all, he had taught most of them they were well aware of his temper and talents.

He reached the stairs, Hermione in tow, and stood talking quietly to Rabastan while the others passed up the stairway. A sudden glint of steel flashed past, narrowly missing the girl's neck as she jumped backwards. Snape's eyes flicked to the blade as it imbedded in the handrail. He spun on his heel, whipping his wand out in front of him in a flash. "*Cruris Rumpo!*" he shouted. A tall, heavy form fell to the floor screaming in agony, the bottom half of his calves at a ninety degree angle to the rest. Blood soaked through the man's trousers and pooled on the floor around his shattered legs.

As Snape turned away, a teenaged boy pulled his wand, screaming, "You dirty son-of... Aiiiiiii!"

The boy's wand clattered to the floor; he was holding his blistered wrist as Viktor Krum advanced menacingly toward him.

"You would attack a senior member of the circle? You fool!" Krum indicated the man on the floor. "He deserved what he got. Leave him and get upstairs!"

The boy's eyes narrowed as he took in Krum's surly visage. He looked from the man on the floor to the group gathered at the foot of the steps, seemingly undecided.

"Move, Mr. Caldwell!" Snape hissed. The boy scooped up his wand and fled up the stairs, adjusting his mask. Snape watched as Krum paced toward them. "Good timing," he approved, giving the young man a sharp nod of his head. "Come on, it's time we went up," he said, looking around at the Lestranges. He tugged on Hermione's arm to get her moving. Krum closed in on her other side, taking her left arm protectively.

"That was Owen Caldwell?" she asked Snape in a whisper.

"Yes," he breathed with a minute dip of his head. "His father nearly killed you. How did you dodge the knife?"

"Instinct, I guess," she returned softly. "I felt something coming."

His eyes widened in surprise but he didn't question her assertion. *Incredible!* he thought, *she detected the threat.* Snape had heard of this kind of magical perception, but had never before seen it at work. He wondered if she had utilized it previously or if this was its first emergence. Her power was still developing; there was no telling what

skills she would eventually manifest. They reached the hall outside the upper parlor. "Be silent," he directed her. "Look down."

Trembling perceptibly between the two men, she entered the room full of masked, cloaked figures. With a light squeeze on her arm, Viktor peeled away from them, heading to the other side of the room. Snape walked to his position in the circle and, placing a hand on her shoulder, forced her to the floor. She knelt, sitting on her feet and keeping her eyes resolutely on the floor. A few minutes later, the last Death Eaters arrived, filling all but one of the remaining gaps in the large circle. Hermione moved her head slightly from side to side estimating the number of people present. *About fifty*, she calculated mentally.

Long, measured footsteps rapped against the floorboards, then stopped. Hermione heard a high, cold voice ask, "This place is empty, where is Caldwell?" For a moment there was silence.

Then a hesitant voice spoke. "H-he's down in the entryway, master. He cannot walk."

An arrogant feminine voice interjected, "My Lord, he attacked the prisoner. He was simply disciplined for disobeying your orders." Hermione recognized the voice of Bellatrix Lestrange. She was not likely to forget her after the trap they had walked into at the Ministry.

"And did you mete out his punishment, Bella?" Voldemort inquired.

"No, My Lord," she answered. "It was Severus' privilege."

"Very appropriate," the cold voice hissed. "No one is to touch him for a full six hours. He will serve as an example of the consequences of disobedience for our newest recruits." Vindictive laughter broke out around the circle.

God, they are nasty bastards! Hermione thought in disbelief. *Nasty bitches too*, she amended. From what she had seen in the foyer, there had been a fair number of women along with the men.

"Macnair! Williams!" Voldemort snapped.

"Yes, master?" they murmured together.

"Step forward," he commanded. They did so and before Hermione could speculate on what was happening, she heard him cast the Cruciatius Curse on them. The men fell to the floor writhing and shrieking for several minutes. Finally, Voldemort lifted the curse. The relative silence that followed was broken only by the gasping breath of the two men. "You two allowed your tongues to flap when you should have been silent," Voldemort admonished in his pitiless tones. "Let all here remember, when I declare that information is restricted, I intend that it should remain so. And you two," he said abruptly, speaking to the recovering men, "will not seek reprisals. Your own guilt betrayed you. I saw it in your minds! Lord Voldemort always knows! Now, return to your places." The men staggered clumsily to their feet and retreated.

Hermione again heard the sound of Voldemort's boots striking the wooden floor. He paced around the entire circle, coming to a stop across the room from Snape. "Viktor, come forward," he ordered. Hermione heard Viktor take a single step into the center and wait. "You have offered to assist with the prisoner," he said. "Tell me, why did you make this proposal?"

"To serve you, My Lord. Because I am already familiar with the prisoner, I believe I can greatly further your purposes in this endeavor," Viktor explained.

"Your initiative is to be commended," Voldemort approved, his shrill voice ringing throughout the quiet room. "But," he continued, "I sense that you have another purpose other than service to our cause!" He advanced toward Viktor. Hermione raised her head slightly and peeked surreptitiously from beneath her lashes. Voldemort appeared to be glaring at Viktor, his red gaze boring into the young man's mind. Finally, he broke eye contact. "I believe that the responsibility for the prisoner must remain with my trusted servant, Severus. While you would undoubtedly be of great help with this task, the Mudblood evokes an emotional response in you." As he turned toward Snape, Hermione hastily looked down at her knees. "Severus will not allow such considerations to cloud his judgment. Remember my friends, there can be no conflict of loyalties in my service," he finished.

Voldemort began a slow circuit of the ring of Death Eaters, stopping to hear reports from group leaders, scouts and spies. The meeting dragged on, and Hermione felt her feet begin to prickle from blood deprivation as they fell asleep beneath her. At last, Voldemort arrived at the point where he had started. It seemed that the reports were over, and Hermione fervently hoped the gathering was drawing to a close. She risked another furtive glance upwards.

The emaciated figure of the Dark Lord now stood in front of a pair Death Eaters, surveying them impersonally. What progress have you to report on your special project, Malfoy?" he asked.

Hermione took in a sudden breath in shock. *Malfoy?* she repeated internally. Unable to resist, she scanned the two masked figures. Both were blond, slender and had an arrogant bearing. *Draco and his mother*, she surmised, seeing the waist-length hair on the figure to the right. Draco began speaking, but not loud enough for Hermione to understand the conversation. She heard only occasional words and phrases like 'multiple stuns', 'on New Years Eve' and 'Yes, master!' The last was repeated often, and it amused Hermione to think of the haughty Draco Malfoy being forced to grovel.

After a few minutes, Voldemort interrupted his long-winded account. "Enough!" he exclaimed stridently. "I trust, Malfoy, that you will be able to complete *this* assignment since it does not involve killing a champion of Mudbloods and Muggles!" Derisive laughter filled the room; Hermione saw Draco's neck flush with humiliation and embarrassment. But Voldemort was not quite done. "If your arrangements do not succeed this time, there will be no more chances! The thought of your family reunited should provide sufficient motivation for you. Your fellows here in the circle will hold *you* accountable for those chained in Azkaban if you do not correct your father's mistakes," he threatened. An ugly murmur of approval traveled around the circle, making Draco blanch.

He nodded woodenly. "I understand, My Lord," he said. "I *will* succeed."

Hermione realized that his new task must be to plan the liberation of the Death Eaters currently held in Azkaban Prison. She shivered at the thought of Lucius Malfoy and the others free once more.

"Do not leave, Malfoy," the Dark Lord directed. "There is another matter we must attend to after the meeting." Draco bobbed his head and stepped back into his place beside his mother. Hermione heard Voldemort's footsteps approaching; she felt a spurt of fear and squeezed her downcast eyes shut for a moment. When she opened them, his boots were in her visual range. "Severus, remain until the others have left," he said quietly. "I have made arrangements for you."

"Yes, master," Snape replied calmly. Voldemort walked to the center of the gathering and, to Hermione's relief, finally dismissed his followers, ending the meeting. "Stay where you are," Snape muttered to her. She sighed as she shifted uncomfortably on her numb legs. The Death Eaters dispersed into small groups, talking quietly for the most part and occasionally exchanging personal greetings and news. Most avoided Draco Malfoy, and Hermione presumed it was because he was currently out of favor with their master. As she watched, a pair of hulking men accosted him, growling threats. He ignored them haughtily until they departed. The room was nearly clear when a tall woman with black hair confronted Draco.

Her mocking voice carried clearly to Hermione. "Like father, like son, isn't that right, Malfoy? You're both useless, I say! If it wasn't for your incompetent father, I would still have my husband by my side," she huffed. "I think someone should look into your family bloodlines. There must be some dirt in there somewhere no pureblood worth the name could be as inept as you and your sire!" She swept off, leaving Draco both angry and humiliated.

Unexpectedly, Hermione remembered the incident last year when Harry had found Draco crying in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Harry had said he felt sorry for Draco. As Hermione watched her former classmate struggle to control his emotions, she thought, *He's almost as much a prisoner as I am. Now that I see him, I do pity him.*

At last, only Voldemort, Draco and Snape were left in the room with Hermione; Voldemort motioned for Draco to join them. "Severus and his charge need a safe house,"

Voldemort stated without preface, "you will provide space in your current hideout for them. Take them directly from here, today. You will give Severus whatever he requires to continue his current research. Is that clear?"

"Yes, My Lord," Draco agreed.

"Good. All of you, leave me now!" Voldemort demanded. He walked away from them, making an odd hissing sound as his gigantic snake, Nagini, slithered into the room.

Downstairs, Severus and Draco were greeted by several men, contemporaries of Lucius Malfoy apparently, as they were immersed in recounting one of Lucius' schoolboy escapades. Draco looked as relieved to be away from the gathering and his master as he was to encounter some friendly faces. After a few minutes of polite exchanges, Draco glanced expectantly at Snape.

"We will gather our things from the basement and meet you in the library," he told Draco. Still guiding her by the arm, Snape escorted her to his lab. There wasn't much to 'gather' as they had arrived with little more than the clothes they were wearing. A minute later a soft knock sounded on the partially closed door. Snape flicked his wand at the door, and it swung open, revealing Viktor slouched on the other side. "What do you want Krum?" he asked aggressively. "The Dark Lord has decided who will be responsible for the girl surely you are too intelligent to debate with me at this point."

"I am not here to argue," Krum assured him gravely. "I simply wish to say farewell to Herm-own-ninny if you will permit it?" He raised his eyebrows questioningly and waited.

"All right," Snape conceded. "I will return in a minute." He strode quickly across the small space and exited, forcing Krum to take a step backwards out of his way.

Krum came forward, taking Hermione's hand and squeezing gently. "I do not know when I will see you again. I will hope and pray for your safety," he said.

"I didn't know you prayed, Viktor," Hermione returned lightly. She quickly sobered though, saying, "Oh, Viktor, thank you for trying to help me. I wasn't aware you had asked to take care of me! I wish..." she trailed off, knowing it was useless to rehash her regrets.

He embraced her lightly and then looked into her eyes and whispered, "I will get a message to your friends somehow. I will tell them you are well. I promise."

A tear escaped the corner of her eye, and she threw her arms around Viktor in a desperate hug. He murmured something soothing as he patted her on the back.

"It's time to go, Granger," Snape interrupted.

He was standing unexpectedly close to them, and Hermione wondered how he had got there without her noticing. He reached out and took hold of her arm, and she disengaged herself from Viktor's embrace whispering, "Goodbye, Viktor."

Krum watched solemnly as Snape led her from the room, up the steps and out of his life.

Snape seemed angry as they left the little basement lab of the Riddle House, although Hermione couldn't imagine why. He was clearly eager to leave the place. They met Draco in the library, and he allowed Snape to get Apparition directions directly from his mind using Legilimency.

They appeared outside the front door of a beautiful little cottage. It was situated in a wooded portion of a large, park-like tract of land. Looking around, Hermione was glad they had arrived in daylight. *How pretty*, she smiled to herself. In fact, if she'd had different companions, she would have called it an idyllic spot. She also noticed that it was quite cool, though September was still a few days away. *We must be even further north than Hogwarts*, she supposed.

Her appreciation of the surroundings was rudely interrupted, however, when Draco shoved her roughly toward the door, barking, "Don't stand there gawking like an idiot. Get inside, Mudblood!"

Snape quickly stepped forward, catching her arm as she stumbled and preventing her from colliding with the front of the house. "Draco," he warned, "do not do that again!"

Draco huffed in annoyance, but decided not to argue. Instead, he opened the front door and entered, walking directly into a comfortable-looking sitting room that extended over most of the front portion of the cottage. "There are two bedrooms upstairs," he said, addressing Snape in a sulky voice, "one for each of us." He eyed Hermione with disdain. "What about her?" he asked. "Should I put her in with the house-elves?"

"No," Snape replied, scowling. "Have the elves set up a folding bed for her in my room."

At this, Draco's eyes narrowed and flicked between Snape and Hermione. "Yes, sir," he drawled, the leer on his face plainly showing the drift of his thoughts.

Snape's lip curled. He advanced on Draco until he was glaring down his hooked nose at the young man. "Imagine what you will, Draco I have no control over what goes on inside your twisted little mind," he sneered softly. "But remember this: Granger is my responsibility. I will make all decisions pertaining to her, and I will protect her from harm as the Dark Lord has commanded. You need have nothing to do with her. Is that clear?"

Draco dipped his head in sullen acknowledgement of the unspoken threat and turned to exit the room. In that moment, Hermione thought that he looked a great deal like his mother, as the look on his face suggested that something particularly vile-smelling had been shoved under his nose.

Ron, Harry and Ginny had begun classes again. Some of them, such as Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms and Transfiguration were given by Order members, while others, they attended at the Ministry. Harry and Ron had decided to maintain the same curriculum they'd had the prior year in the hopes of some day qualifying for Auror training. Accordingly, they also took Potions and Herbology. Their Defense instructor was none other than (the real) Moody, whose experience in dealing with Dark Wizards was unrivaled by anyone currently at the Ministry. It was fortunate as well, that Minerva McGonagall was an Order member and could be convinced to teach Transfiguration to Harry and the Weasleys, for she adamantly refused to teach classes at the Ministry as long as Dolores Umbridge was still there. To Harry's surprise, it turned out that Molly Weasley was exceptional at Charms, and a more patient and competent teacher than he had anticipated.

"Well, what did you expect?" Ginny laughed when he confided his surprise to her, "Mum home-schooled all of us until we went off to Hogwarts! She had to be patient in order to put up with our lot!"

Luckily, their schedules still left considerable time for other pursuits. Ron and Harry had gone back to Borgin and Burkes (with Bill, of course) on one occasion. Harry was now the proud owner of an antique signet ring that, according to Borgin, gave its wearer the ability to detect lies. In his persona as a cynical collector of magical artifacts, Harry had, of course, tested it. He had indeed been able to detect when both Borgin and Bill had told him deliberate untruths. It was less clear whether the ring would be able to detect a lie that the speaker actually believed to be true. In any case, Harry felt that he was establishing a solid business relationship with the old shopkeeper. Soon, he would express an interest in locating any objects, magical or otherwise, that were associated with the four founders of Hogwarts. That was the critical first step to locating Helga Hufflepuff's cup, missing since the murder of Hepzibah Smith some fifty years earlier.

Harry, Ron and Ginny had also spent a substantial amount of time deliberating what to do about Riddle's Special Award. Harry trusted Ginny's memory and her conclusion was validated by Black's journal entry. But they had not yet worked out a feasible plan to get to Hogwarts and get access to the award. Thornier still was the issue of how to destroy such a powerful magical object. The most accomplished wizard of modern times, Dumbledore, had lost a hand while destroying one of Voldemort's Horcruxes. How then, was Harry to manage? And Dumbledore had never told Harry how to destroy a Horcrux. The three young people had gone around and around the topic without coming any closer to a solution.

The truth was, they needed information. Hermione would probably have been able to dig up some clues as to the methods of dealing with such things, but she wasn't there. Harry felt at a loss. *Damn Snape for keeping her a prisoner!* he fumed. *Her friends need her. I need her!* He remembered the last time he had seen her: being pulled along behind that murderous bastard like chattel. That had been more than a week ago. His mind fogged with rage and hatred. *Someday, I will kill Snape and avenge the deaths of Dumbledore, Sirius and especially, my parents!*

At times like this, he still found it incomprehensible that a great wizard like Dumbledore could have made such an error in judgment as to trust Snape. *But did he?* a small voice asked in his head. Harry felt immediate resistance to the idea that his own interpretation might be flawed. He must be right! He had seen Snape cast the killing curse with his own eyes! *But*, the insistent voice continued, *Dumbledore claimed that Snape's fast thinking and expertise had saved his life when he lost his hand.* Harry's rage cooled as he became thoughtful. *If Snape had the skills to counter the Dark Magic that was released when Dumbledore destroyed the ring Horcrux, then he probably also knows how to destroy them himself. A fat lot of good that does me!* he thought sourly.

Abruptly, realization dawned and he sat up straight. *If both Snape and Dumbledore knew the spells, perhaps others do too* he reasoned. Snape was very good at Defense Against the Dark Arts but he was not the only talented professor they'd had in that subject. Remus Lupin was just as proficient in his chosen area of expertise. Harry was both excited and uncertain. *Do I dare reveal the secret of the Horcruxes to another person? Does Remus' knowledge cover such a vehemently prohibited subject?* Harry thought hard. In the years since the impoverished werewolf had been his professor, Harry had noticed that he was excellent at counter-curses of all types. What's more, he was trustworthy, his character beyond reproach. It felt right. *After all, my dad and Sirius were his friends all through school; they trusted him.* It seemed only fitting to Harry that he should as well.

It was four days before Harry got the opportunity to approach Remus. He showed up at the Burrow in the company of Moody, who had come for their second Defense Against the Dark Arts class of the week. "Alright you kids," Moody growled in his usual gruff manner, "let's get started." He made straight for the Weasley's parlor, where their lessons were held.

Harry hung back a few moments, then when the others had gone, he turned to Remus. "Can you stay awhile, Remus?" he requested. "I'd like to talk to you in private after my class."

"Sure thing, Harry," Remus agreed.

An hour and a half later, Harry was leading his former professor upstairs to his room so they could talk in private. After closing the door and warding it against eavesdroppers (a precaution that caused Remus to raise his eyebrows in surprise), Harry offered him a seat and thought for a moment. "Well..." he started hesitantly, "Before I start, I need your promise that nothing I tell you here will be repeated to anyone, ever. Not even Tonks."

At Harry's words, Remus' eyes opened even further in surprise. However, the young man spoke so earnestly and appeared so genuinely worried that Remus quickly acquiesced.

"Thanks," Harry sighed in relief. "I'm going to tell you a story, about what I learned last year from Dumbledore. This is probably going to take quite awhile," he said uncertainly, wondering where to start. *At the beginning*, his mind supplied, *when Dumbledore picked me up from the Dursley's. Right.* He breathed deeply and began. For nearly an hour, words tumbled out of him, gradually revealing the extent of Dumbledore's knowledge regarding Lord Voldemort's history.

Remus was a good listener, rarely interrupting except to clarify important details. At one point, when the subject of Horcruxes was introduced, he involuntarily gasped in shock. "So that's how he survived his own rebounded curse," he concluded almost under his breath.

Harry nodded and continued with the tale. At last, Harry revealed the fake Horcrux that he and Dumbledore had retrieved, believing it to be Slytherin's locket. Harry told Remus everything that he, Ron and Hermione had concluded, which had led them to search the Black family home over the past summer. He showed Remus the journal that had once belonged to Regulus Black and finally told him of Ginny's revelation concerning Riddle's Special Award. When he was finished, he looked into Remus's eyes and said desperately, "I know what I have to do, but I don't know how. The Horcruxes have to be destroyed before I can go after Voldemort. Remus," he pleaded, "I'm a seventeen-year-old wizard who hasn't even finished school! I have some power, but not enough knowledge. Can you help me find and use the spells that will destroy the Horcruxes?"

Remus was grave. More serious, in fact, than Harry had ever seen him before. "Harry," he began, "I'm not an expert on this topic, surely you know that. But," he reflected after a moment's pause, "I believe I can discover what we need. The problem is, even if I locate and master the correct spell, I doubt that I'm strong enough to do away with such an artifact myself."

"Well then," Harry pronounced, placing his hand on Remus' shoulder, "it will be up to Ron and I to figure out how to combine our magical abilities. The three of us together should have enough force to break the Horcruxes like Dumbledore did."

During the first few days at their new hideout, Hermione was relieved to find that Draco did indeed have almost nothing to do with her. She hardly saw him. However, as in the beginning of her captivity at Snape's house, she was rarely left alone. When Snape was not with her, she was accompanied by a house-elf. There were two elves in the little cottage; they had been sent by Draco's mother from the Malfoy's manor house. *Heaven forbid that a Malfoy should have to look after any household tasks* Hermione sneered mentally. In any case, the elves were loyal to the Malfoys and apparently under orders to keep a close watch on her. She was reminded forcefully of the elf named Winky, who had been designated as the caretaker for Barty Crouch, Jr. after his clandestine release from Azkaban. Hermione was certain that the Malfoy elves would be just as willing to use their own brand of elf magic on her if she were to attempt an escape or to harm either of the men. In addition, the house was secluded on a rather big property in God-knows-what part of the country. And even if she managed to slip away from them all and get off the grounds, she still couldn't Apparate! *Crap! They really think of every angle*, she fumed in frustration. She hated being resigned to her fate.

Two days after their arrival, Snape disappeared for most of an evening. Upon his return, he sauntered into the sitting room, pulling a small bundle from his pocket. "Here Granger," he smirked complacently, tossing the package to her, "you might appreciate having these items back."

Looking down at her lap, Hermione saw with amazement all of the things she had left behind at Snape's house, magically shrunk. "How did you retrieve these? Isn't the Order watching your house? How did you avoid them?" she asked in rapid succession.

He came as close as she had ever seen to a genuine smile - an odd twist of the lips overlaid with endless arrogance. "The door is not the only point of entry into my house," he informed her. "It was being watched by the Order; it still is. But they never saw me - never even noticed that someone came and went," he scoffed. He headed for his lab, inordinately pleased with himself, to put away the contents of another package in his hands.

Just as she had eventually become used to the daily routines at Snape's house, Hermione found that she was rapidly falling into a new rhythm in this situation. She and Snape had returned to virtually the same schedule for lessons, the main difference being that there was more time for either study or leisure since the elves did all the cooking, cleaning and so forth. Hermione decided that since she was evidently stuck here for an indefinite period of time, she would immerse herself in her studies. She put her formidable determination and effort into learning as much as possible.

Snape was quite satisfied with his current situation. Draco had obeyed the Dark Lord's orders to the letter, giving him everything he required to fully equip and stock a laboratory in the basement of the little cottage. Even better, Draco stayed out of his way. The boy spent most of his time at the cottage in the little library on the main floor or upstairs in his own bedroom, even taking most of his meals apart from Granger and himself. The rest of the time Draco was off meeting with various Death Eaters who were assigned to help plan and execute the escape of their fellows from Azkaban.

Now that he had recovered his research notes, he was set to continue his work on the Impenetrable Potion. He was confident that he would make progress on both his projects. But his principal source of contentment was pure relief at leaving the Dark Lord's headquarters. As if the simple danger and inconvenience of the location hadn't been bad enough, he had been apprehensive that Krum would be given guardianship of the girl. *But the Dark Lord chose me over that Quiddich-playing, Bulgarian pure-blood,* he thought smugly. It was a validation of his status with the Dark Lord, as well as the safest alternative for both himself and the girl. *I couldn't let her or Krum realize her memory had been modified,* after all, he reasoned. *Then the persistent berk showed up again 'to say goodbye' to the girl. He can't even say her name properly!* He had felt quite irritated by their little goodbye scene, wanting only (so he believed) to get out of the Riddle House as soon as possible.

Now he had Granger to himself. *I can work on gradually gaining her trust and loyalty without interference from anyone else* he thought with satisfaction. Snape was a man of calculation and action not reflection. He never stopped to consider if she might, in turn, have an effect on him or what that effect could be.

Author notes:

1. *Cruris Rumpo* = Legs shatter. A rather nasty (non-canon) curse that I thought up.
2. Hermione's sympathetic thought regarding Draco: 'Now that I see him, I do pity him' is a quote from The Lord of the Rings. Frodo says this when he first meets Gollum (The Two Towers: The Taming of Smeagol).

Messages

Chapter 8 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

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Chapter 8: Messages

The Chosen One, aka Harry Potter, was wary of surprises since many of the ones he'd received in his life had been less than pleasant. This one arrived just as Minerva McGonagall was preparing to leave the Burrow after their Transfiguration lesson. The imperious eagle owl that carried the package had perched on the kitchen windowsill, but would not allow anyone other than Harry to approach.

"Must be something for you, mate," Ron stated.

"Brilliant deduction, Ron," Harry drawled sarcastically under his breath. The large owl had already tried to snap off the fingers of everyone else to come near it. Ron only laughed in reply. Harry reached cautiously toward the small, brown parcel tied to the owl's leg and, receiving no reprimand, quickly untied it. The bird immediately fluffed its wings, turned and launched itself out of the open window. Harry regarded the box in his hands for a moment before unwrapping it. Inside he found a folded note and a small capped vial filled with what appeared to be silvery-white fluid. Harry's breath hitched. "It's a memory!" he exclaimed softly.

"Whose?" inquired Molly.

"Dunno. Maybe the note will tell us who it's from," Harry answered. He unfolded the note to reveal a single handwritten line in an unfamiliar scrawl.

Something for you to consider until we meet again.

Mystified, Harry handed the note to Molly, who held it so that she and Minerva could read it simultaneously. They both looked up at Harry with puzzled expressions, then Molly passed the note to Ron and Ginny. After glancing at it, Ron gave Harry a shrug as if to say, 'no idea what that's about.' Ginny, however, frowned in concentration, staring at the short missive.

"What's the matter, Ginny?" Harry asked.

"I... I'm not sure.... This writing looks familiar." She shook her head as if to clear it and held the note out for Harry to take back. But as he reached for it, Ginny abruptly gasped. The note fell from her nerveless fingers and fluttered to the floor. All eyes turned to Ginny as she spoke in a shaky voice, "It's from him: Voldemort. The handwriting is nearly the same as Tom's was in the diary."

A shocked silence descended over the kitchen. Harry was the first to recover. "You're sure?" he asked Ginny. She nodded solemnly. "Well, one thing's for certain," he reasoned, holding the vial aloft, "we can't find out what this is all about without a Pensieve. That's the only way to view a memory like this that I know of." He turned to Minerva McGonagall. "Unless you know another way, Professor?"

"No. I don't know another method," she confirmed. "I believe a Pensieve is the only way to examine an extracted memory such as that." She indicated the silvery contents of the vial with a flick of her bony finger.

"Well, we certainly don't have a Pensieve here," Molly said brusquely. "They are almost impossible to come by not to mention exorbitantly expensive! No one I know has one," she concluded.

"Actually, I believe that someone you know does own a Pensieve: Alastor Moody if I'm not mistaken," Minerva pronounced. "I recall seeing one when we removed him from his magical trunk at Hogwarts."

The Pensieve stood in the center of the kitchen table, surrounded by Harry, Moody, Remus and most of the Weasley clan. "It's only large enough for three people at a time," Moody growled to Harry. "Remus can come with us, but this lot will have to wait while we have a look." He nodded toward the red-headed horde.

"Um, sir?" Harry began hesitantly. "Would you mind terribly if Ron and Remus went in with me first?"

"If that memory is Voldemort's, you want to be careful when viewing it, boy," Moody responded. "I'd rather you had the protection of two adult wizards when you go in."

Harry shook his head at Moody's eternal suspicion; in this instance it was excessive and completely unnecessary. "Sir," he said deferentially, "it's only a memory. It can't harm us. In this case there's no danger. Besides," Harry continued more confidently, "Professor Dumbledore showed me several memories about Voldemort's history last year at Hogwarts. Nothing dangerous happened. I'm not scared to see anything he may have sent me."

Moody stared thoughtfully at Harry for a few seconds before gruffly capitulating.

Harry glanced at Ron and Remus, motioning them nearer. He uncapped the vial and upended its contents into the Pensieve where it began to swirl rapidly. Grasping the upper arm of each of his companions, he nodded toward Remus' wand. "Remus, if you're ready?" he prompted. Remus poked his wand tip into the miniature vortex, and the three of them leaned over the wide-rimmed bowl. As Harry's nose contacted the surface, he felt the familiar sensation of tumbling head-over-heels in slow motion.

His feet hit the ground and he straightened, relinquishing his hold on the other men's arms. They were in a tiny, dilapidated sitting room. The walls were covered in shelves filled with books and there, on an old, shabby sofa, sat Hermione, reading. Across from her, in an equally threadbare chair, was Wormtail. He also held a book, but from the direction of his wandering eyes, seemed to prefer the girl in front of him to his chosen story. Ron was gaping at the scene in disbelief. "Hermione!" he called excitedly. "Bloody hell, we've been so worried about you..."

Getting no reaction, he looked in confusion to Harry, who responded, "She can't hear you, Ron. This is only a memory. You can't affect anything that happens; you're just an observer."

Ron looked chagrined. "But whose memory is it?" he retorted. "Hermione's? Why would Voldemort send you that?"

"I think," Remus interjected, "that it's his memory." He was pointing over Harry's shoulder. The younger men spun around to find Snape standing in the doorway, a view of the narrow street visible behind him. Snape shut the door, causing Wormtail to jump up and scurry from the room. "This must be Snape's house," Remus surmised as Snape walked toward Hermione, tossing a package into her lap and informing her it contained robes.

"Shhh," Harry admonished, wanting to hear their conversation. In amazed silence, the three men watched as Snape returned Hermione's wand, describing the restrictions on it.

"Bugger!" Ron swore softly. "No wonder she hasn't been able to get away."

"Indeed," Remus agreed. They listened as Snape dropped his second bombshell: the offer to tutor their friend in seventh form classes. "I'll be damned," Remus said under his breath.

"Don't do it, Hermione," Ron advised uselessly in a whisper.

Harry watched, the unease obvious on his face, but said nothing. *She's challenging him*, he thought as he listened to Hermione question Snape's motives. *Good job! Don't trust the murdering bastard.*

But when Snape put the decision to the test, asking her outright, Harry knew what the answer would be. After all, this was Hermione: she never turned down an opportunity to learn.

"Well, Granger," Snape asked in a brisk voice, "should I return those books and confiscate your wand for the duration of your stay?"

Looking directly at Snape, she took a deep breath and answered, "No, sir. If you're willing to teach me, I want to learn."

Ron hissed in denial. Glancing at Remus, Harry saw a pained expression on his features. *So, they don't like it any better than I do*, he realized. A white fog began to envelope them as the memory ended. Harry waited expectantly for the floating sensation that had always accompanied his exit from Dumbledore's Pensieve, but it didn't come. The fog became thick enough to obscure their vision, and then inexplicably, began to thin.

When they could see again, they noted that they were still standing in the small parlor of Snape's house. However, Hermione was now dressed in robes, her hair knotted carelessly at the nape of her neck. It was a different day, a different memory, Harry realized. Hermione was practicing a complex wand movement in conjunction with an incantation. Harry recognized it with a jolt, it was an advanced Tracking Charm that Molly Weasley had introduced to Ron and himself the week before. Snape entered the room and sat opposite their friend, watching her precise wand movements, his familiar classroom scowl in place. She completed the charm and looked expectantly at Snape. Harry waited for the soft, sneering comment that had always followed Hermione's successes in Snape's class, but it never came.

Snape nodded calmly. "That is adequate, Granger," he said. "Now, do you have questions on the theory behind this set of charms?" Hermione nodded, launching immediately into a complex discussion of the topic with her teacher.

"He didn't mock her," piped Ron, clearly amazed. "In fact, for Snape, that sounded incredibly positive."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I'm even more surprised that he actually invited her to ask questions! He never did that at Hogwarts." The fog began to shroud the scene as Hermione and Snape finished their conversation. But still, the observers' feet remained firmly on the ground. *Apparently*, Harry thought, *there's more to come.*

This time, when the veiling mist lifted, they found themselves in the alley behind Snape's house. Wormtail stood in a defensive posture as the sound of running feet approached. The three men saw Snape, with Hermione close on his heels, careen into the alleyway, shocking Wormtail into immobility. Wide-eyed, they watched as Snape and Wormtail dueled, taunting one another cruelly.

Then Snape was down, his legs tangled in a rope of fire, and Wormtail flung an Entrail Expelling Curse, evidently wanting to finish him off. Harry cried out in dismay as Hermione, reacting with a speed he hadn't known she possessed, leaped in front of Snape, shielding both of them with the Protego Charm. Snape, having freed himself from the rope, retreated behind some trash bins, pulling Hermione in behind him.

Harry, Ron and Remus heard the pounding of numerous feet and saw themselves, along with Moody and Fred, dash into the alley.

Snape called out, "Wormtail! The next time we meet, you are a dead man!" Pettigrew's only response was the loud crack of his Disapparition. A second crack moments later signaled Snape's departure with Hermione.

The billowing white fog enveloped them again, and Harry felt a floating sensation as he emerged from the memory, turning a slow somersault to land on his feet in the Weasley's kitchen.

Ron was speechless, a stricken look across his expressive face. Harry grabbed his arm and turned to Remus. "Let's go into the parlor to talk," he suggested pointedly.

As he steered Ron determinedly from the room, Moody asked, "What happened in there, boy?"

Harry looked briefly at Moody and the Weasleys. "You can all have a gawk, if you want. We'll talk later," he tossed over his shoulder.

Remus followed the young men into the sitting room and took a seat across from them, wearing a thoughtful expression. He listened as Harry attempted, without visible success, to reason with Ron. "Why'd she do that, Harry?" Ron wailed. "Why'd she save him? She could have been free..."

"Ron, she probably just reacted reflexively when she heard that curse. You know how she is when something offends her sense of justice!" Harry explained. But Ron merely continued to bemoan the events they had witnessed.

After a few minutes of the same sort of exchanges, Remus broke in. "I, for one, am glad she shielded Snape!" he announced. The others were silent, obviously stunned by his pronouncement. He regarded the two young men levelly as he explained, "If Snape had been hit with that curse while she was tethered to him, she would have been a sitting duck for Wormtail. And believe me, if you two had seen what I saw when I was in Wormtail's head, you wouldn't want your friend to be at his mercy. For some reason I can't fathom why he had some very negative feelings towards Hermione," Remus finished grimly.

Fortunately, Remus' revelation seemed to put things into perspective, calming Ron and allowing them all to consider the other events they had witnessed.

"Snape is up to something," Harry concluded. "He never acted like that toward the students at Hogwarts. Well, except for his Slytherins," he amended.

"Yes, I agree, Harry. I think he's trying to manipulate Hermione to what end I can't imagine, though," Remus admitted.

The days seemed to pass both slowly and quickly for Hermione. Slowly, because she found herself increasingly lonely for the company of her friends. Sometimes, it seemed like months since she'd had the kind of relaxed conversation she used to share with them. Quickly, because she endeavored to fill the hours by acquiring as much knowledge as possible. She worked with a single-minded intensity that impressed Snape and even drew the attention (albeit, unwanted) of Draco Malfoy.

"I don't know why you're bothering, Granger," Draco scoffed dismissively. "When the Dark Lord conquers the wizarding world, people like you will be lucky if you're left alive to be house-elves."

Hermione desperately wanted to make a scathing retort to put the arrogant git in his place, but thought better of it before she opened her mouth. Instead she pretended to ignore him and contented herself with private observations such as: *Whereas your pure blood has made you such a brilliant success as a junior Death Eater that your precious Dark Lord made you his right hand man!* The sneer must have shown on her face as she thought it because Draco began to advance toward her threateningly.

"You had better learn to show more respect for your superiors, Mudblood. Your 'protector' may not always be there to defend you," he hissed. He thrust his face in front of hers to insure he wasn't ignored. "When the new order is established, half-bloods will be taking commands from me! People like Snape will find themselves demoted to their proper station in life."

"Interesting plans, Draco," Snape sneered softly from the doorway. "I wonder who you could have heard them from, as they don't seem to match what the Dark Lord has been telling his trusted advisors," he finished silkily.

Draco straightened rapidly, his complexion paling. "I was just giving the Mudblood something to think about," he said non-committally. "She should be prepared for all the possibilities that the future holds."

"As should you," Snape replied coldly.

That evening, Hermione hesitantly broached the topic of the future with Snape. She didn't exactly value Draco's opinion, believing that he was too spoilt and biased for his information to be trusted. She wanted to hear Snape's viewpoint, if he would give it to her. They were sitting before the hearth in their shared bedroom; Hermione was tucked into one of the two chairs Snape had asked the house-elves to bring in. It was a cozy little reading area, conducive to long, tranquil conversations, although Snape wasn't.

"Sir? I know he's just an arrogant little ferret, but... is there any truth in what Draco said this afternoon?" she asked in a rush.

He was silent, and Hermione, thinking he wasn't going to answer, sighed and looked back at her book. "I suppose the answer to that depends on who you ask," he said finally. Hermione searched his face and waited; she had found that silence often elicited more answers from Snape than a barrage of questions (which seemed to annoy him). So it proved tonight. "Draco may just be parroting things he heard from Lucius and his friends all his life," he began in a neutral voice. "However, his specific mention of myself leads me to believe that some of the more fanatic pure-bloods are hoping to sway the Dark Lord to such a plan." He closed the book in his lap and stared into the fire.

"If they only knew..." Hermione whispered. Snape raised an eyebrow, prompting her to elaborate. "The pure-bloods," she explained, "if they only knew their precious Dark Lord is a half-blood himself. How it would shake the foundations of their bigotry... I'd love to see that." She grinned.

Snape didn't smile. "It's more likely that you would get to see the far side of the veil if you told them that! Learn caution, girl." A short pause followed his words. "How did you learn of the Dark Lord's parentage?" he inquired. It had suddenly occurred to him that perhaps she was regaining some of her memories regarding his master's history. His face was set in its customary mask of indifference, revealing none of his apprehension as he waited for her answer.

"Oh, well, we figured it out a couple of years ago. I've known since second year that Tom Riddle was the last surviving descendent of Salazar Slytherin. He told Harry that himself when he emerged as a memory from the enchanted diary. And Professor Dumbledore confirmed it; he told Harry that Riddle's mother was a witch. Then, at the end of the Triwizard Tournament, when he reestablished a corporeal form, he told Harry that his father was a Muggle. Wormtail was there too, so he must know as well," she deduced.

"The Dark Lord seems to have carelessly revealed a great deal about himself to Potter," he remarked softly. "Not many of his followers know that much of his history. I myself only know of his parentage because of my long association with Dumbledore."

They were both quiet, deep in their own thoughts. After a time Hermione gathered her courage to ask the question that had been bothering her since last June. "Sir? I was wondering..." She stopped, knowing there was a good chance that what she was about to say would enrage him. She was reluctant to disrupt their calm rapport, but felt it was important to know the truth.

"What now?" he bit out impatiently.

Not a good sign, she thought with trepidation. But still, she was compelled to forge ahead. "Were... were you always a servant of the Dark Lord, or did you truly change sides all those years ago when you went to Dumbledore?" she blurted.

He looked thunderous, but not worse than she had expected. "What makes you think I would tell you that?" he questioned in return.

"I... It's just that I trusted you after the incident with the Sorcerer's Stone. Harry and Ron, they always suspected you whenever something went wrong," she muttered. "I guess I'm just wondering if I was a fool all that time..." She looked into his cold eyes as if searching for the answer.

"You've always been a fool! Nothing I have or haven't done could change that!" he snapped. Tears sprang into her eyes at his words, and she quickly looked away. *Bloody Gryffindor brashness!* he raged internally. *To ask a man outright to spill his secrets only a fool would do that!* He tried to glare at the girl, but incongruously noticed the tears running down her cheeks. He felt his stomach twist painfully. *Damn! Damn her tears!*

He stared sullenly into the fire, wondering why he had not simply told her to bugg off. It would have been preferable to provoke her anger; that he could have simply ignored. He glanced at the girl again, only to see her wiping her cheek and biting her lower lip in a partially successful attempt to suppress her emotions. He sighed, thinking, *What difference does it make if I tell her? She won't be sharing her knowledge with my enemies.* He took a deep breath and started talking before he reconsidered his decision. "Granger," his voice rasped harshly in the quiet room. "The things I've done, both then and now, I did to survive. It started the night Trelawney made the prophecy. I was spying for the Dark Lord, but was caught. Dumbledore convinced me that it was in my best interest to feed my master only partial information."

"What do you mean?" Hermione queried. "Harry said you were caught before hearing the entire prophecy."

"No. Dumbledore lied to the boy. That night, he proposed a deal to me, in lieu of handing me to the Aurors. In exchange for giving only half the prophecy to the Dark Lord, he offered me sanctuary at Hogwarts and to vouch for me if I should wish to leave my master's service. Needless to say, I took the offer. I had seen what happened to others who had tried to leave Niall Zabini, Regulus Black, Julius Dobbins all dead within a month of abandoning the Dark Lord's service. I had only to propose to my master that I could spy on Dumbledore under his very nose. So I became a double-agent, attempting to satisfy two masters. After the Dark Lord's demise, I stayed at Hogwarts. I kept out of the public eye. I assisted Dumbledore however he needed, whenever he asked. In spite of everything he did," he added in a bitter undertone.

"In spite of...?" she repeated in confusion. "I still don't understand. If you were loyal to Dumbledore, then why did you betray him?"

At that, his temper snapped. "I did not betray him. He betrayed me!" Snape snarled.

Hermione watched fearfully as he tried to control his rage. His lips were pressed together in a thin line and his face was white with anger.

He took several breaths and glowered at the girl. "How many attempts on my life was I supposed to forgive? How many times was I supposed to excuse his favoritism, his slurs to my knowledge and pride? And then, the ultimate betrayal..." he trailed off.

He was staring at the fire again. Hermione dared not speak, uncertain if it would anger or appease him.

"Black tried to kill me when we were sixteen. His attempt failed, but Dumbledore didn't even punish him. Anyone else would have been expelled for such an act! And when I brought Black back to the castle after his escape from Azkaban, Dumbledore and Potter somehow helped him escape. A year later Dumbledore forced me to shake hands with that excrescence, Black. I was supposed to just forgive and forget. "Work for the common good" Dumbledore told me."

"Salt in the wounds," Hermione whispered. Snape nodded jerkily. "I never knew Sirius had done that. It's hard to believe... I always thought he seemed irresponsible, but essentially harmless," she remarked sadly.

"Yes, his good looks and Gryffindor affiliation gained him instant trust from most," Snape observed. "Whereas my appearance ..." He gave a short, bitter laugh.

After a minute he continued his story. "I practically begged Dumbledore for fifteen years to let me teach my strongest subject, Defense Against the Dark Arts. He consistently refused, thinking it would tempt me back to the Dark Arts. He appointed idiots, frauds and even werewolves rather than me. Could I need any clearer proof of how he saw me?"

"He didn't trust you," Hermione reiterated. "A bitter pill to swallow."

Surprised by her understanding, Snape locked eyes with her. He saw sincerity in her gaze. *Of course!* he thought. *Knowledge is crucial to her; she, too, takes pride in her accomplishments.* For the first time in years, he felt he was facing someone who shared his need to be acknowledged. *Indeed, he realized, I have always known this about her.* It had simply not dawned on him before today that her more blatant attempts to be recognized were akin to his own.

But he wasn't quite finished yet: there was one more thing to tell. He spoke in a voice barely louder than a whisper, just discernible above the crackling of the fire. "And after all that, Dumbledore sent me back to the Dark Lord. Back to grovel and kiss the hem of his robes. To be punished for not answering his summons promptly. I had to renew old alliances, combat the old prejudices again. I despised him for that," he said vehemently.

"Then last summer," Snape related, "after Lucius' botched attempt to gain the prophecy, the Dark Lord punished the Malfoys by assigning Draco a near-impossible job: to kill Dumbledore. His mother came to me distraught, pleading for the life of her son. For the sake of my long friendship with Lucius and Narcissa and to allay the lingering suspicions of Bellatrix and her ilk, I made an Unbreakable Vow. I promised to keep Draco safe and to help him finish his task, if necessary. It was necessary. It was either kill Dumbledore or die," he finished.

"No one should have to make a choice like that," Hermione said in a horrified voice.

"At least this way, I have only one master, rather than two." Snape regarded the girl, fully expecting to see revulsion on her face, but instead he saw a curiously tender expression. Feeling uncertain, he reverted to his customary sneer. "I don't need your pity, Granger! I did what I had to do to survive, and I don't expect someone like you to understand!"

Hermione looked offended. "I don't pretend to understand what it was like for you," she offered coolly. "And I don't pity you. I can't imagine what I'd do if faced with the same choice. But pity is not the same as compassion. Pity is for those you look down on; compassion happens between equals, and between friends."

September was half over, and Harry was contemplating his next trip to Bogin and Burkes when another message arrived at the Burrow for him. A large, strong Great Grey owl, carrying nothing more than a letter in its beak, alighted on the kitchen windowsill, rapping politely for entry. Molly, who was busy making an evening snack for the family, promptly opened the window and the bird hopped inside. As the direction on the envelope read 'To the Chosen One' she immediately called out, "Harry, dear, there's a letter for you!" She busied herself by getting water and food for the big Grey, which it gratefully accepted after Harry had taken the letter from it. "Why, he's famished!" she exclaimed, watching the owl gulp water and inhale the meat she had placed on the sideboard for it.

"It's no wonder," Harry commented. "I think this owl has been traveling for two days; that's when the letter is dated." Harry frowned in confusion as he read the short message.

14 September, 1997

To the Chosen One:

I have news about 'the thing that I miss the most'. Although it is currently out of my reach and I miss it still, it is unharmed and I believe it will remain safe. I will inform you if anything happens to change that.

Your One-Time Opponent

"It seems to be a riddle of some sort," said Ron, reading over his shoulder.

Harry passed the note to Arthur Weasley, who perused it rapidly and handed it back with a shrug. "It means nothing to me," he remarked. "But it sounds like whoever wrote it wants you to figure it out not at all like the nebulous message from You-Know-Who."

"Harry," Molly interjected, now having read the note over his other shoulder, "what's 'the thing that you miss the most'?"

Her phrasing jolted Harry and Ron's memories and they yelled simultaneously, "Krum!"

"What?" Molly asked in confusion, "Crumb? What does that mean?"

"Not crumb," Harry answered. "Krum...Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Quiddich player, and my 'one-time opponent' in the Triwizard Tournament," he finished with a smile. "The message is about Hermione. Remember how taken he was with her that year? He even escorted her to the Yule ball." Ron glowered angrily, but Harry paid no attention. "In the second task," he explained, "we had to retrieve the thing that we would miss the most from the Merpeople. Hermione turned out to be the one that Viktor Krum would

miss the most! This note is telling us that he's seen her, and that she's safe."

"But that means Krum is a Death Eater!" Arthur exclaimed. "The Aurors will be very interested in that information."

"But, Dad," Ron objected, "if they arrest Krum, how will he be able to send us word about Hermione?"

"Anyway, we can't be sure from this note that he's really a Death Eater," Harry reasoned. "It sounds to me like he's spying on them. Why else would he be willing to send us information?"

Arthur looked uncertain for a moment until Molly spoke up. "Arthur, I think the intent of this note is clear: he's trying to reassure Harry about Hermione. Why, he's even said he'll contact us if anything changes," she assured her husband soothingly.

Finally, Arthur nodded his head resignedly. "All right, I won't contact the Aurors," he sighed.

Harry let out the breath he had been holding and regarded Krum's owl, which was now tearing at a second helping of meaty chunks Molly had given him. "Would you be willing to take a reply back?" he asked the bird. The large Grey clicked its beak and stepped closer to Harry. Harry took up the original letter and wrote two short sentences.

Thank you. Please, keep in touch.

He refolded the parchment and slipped it back into its envelope, holding it out for the owl. After a last swallow of water, the Great Grey owl clamped his beak over the envelope, turned to Molly and bobbed its head, then winged out of the open window.

"How do you like that," Molly murmured. "A bird with manners!"

Author Notes:

--A big thanks to my beta Larilee for keeping my Potterverse terms cannon-compliant and for all her help!

--Niall Zabini and Julius Dobbins: I made them up!

Research Methods

Chapter 9 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe is the property of J.K. Rowling and her publishers. Anything you recognize belongs to her. I am not making any money from this.

**My deep appreciation goes out to Larilee for her excellent beta reading and amazingly-fast turn around time.

When Hermione woke on the morning of September nineteenth, her first thoughts were not encouraging. *Eighteen. Some 'special day' this is going to be*, she moaned internally. She knew this train of thought was futile, but knowing didn't make her feel any better or keep the regrets from playing repeatedly in her head. *No friends. No Mum and Dad. Bugger!* She was reluctant to get up, preferring to delay the start of the depressing birthday she envisioned. Still, after a few minutes, her incessantly busy brain had come to the conclusion that, at the very least, she should not give Snape or Malfoy any ammunition to mock her. She would have to do her best to hide her feelings for today. Just as she reached this conclusion, Snape emerged from the loo, having completed his morning ablutions (such as they were). Hermione wondered idly if he ever really washed that hair of his during his daily shower. Even fresh from bathing, it was still lank and unappealing.

"Planning on joining the upright segment of the population anytime soon, Granger?" he sniped at her.

In spite of Snape's caustic tone, Hermione knew he was only twitting her; she'd learned to read his face a bit, and the rigid coldness that presaged real anger was absent. He'd been like this for several days, ever since their fireside chat. His comments to her were as pointed as ever, but lacked the real venom she remembered from her school days. She had responded to him in kind, taking his unspoken acceptance of her compassion for what it was worth: the tentative beginnings of conditional friendship. She knew that the balance of power was tipped too far in his direction for the real equality needed between friends he was after all, still her tutor and captor (or guardian, as he saw it). But she recognized the changes and tried to reciprocate in a restrained manner. The most overt thing he'd done was to suggest a small adjustment to their daily schedule. Before their afternoon lesson, generally the warmest period of the day, they now took a daily walk on the extensive grounds that surrounded the cottage. And although she was bound to him by the Tether Charm, she reveled in the quasi-freedom that fresh air and open sky imparted. She found their outings invigorating and had the added satisfaction of noting that he was always more relaxed afterward as well.

On this day, however, she merely gave him a curt acknowledgement as she rose from her camp bed and headed off to brush her teeth and clean up for the day. She was half-way through combing out her hair when she realized that she'd come to the bathroom clad only in the items she'd slept in: tank top and knickers. What's more, she'd been so distracted with brooding that she'd failed to bring fresh clothes in with her. *Well*, she decided, *I'm not going to walk past him half-dressed again. I'll just have to wait until he goes downstairs before I get my clothes.* After six years of dormitory-style living, she was relatively unfazed by a lack of privacy. Snape, on the other hand, maintained a rigid decorum in matters of physical privacy. In fact, he wore his clothes like armor, only appearing in his nightclothes when he was ready to slip into bed. *Oh well*, Hermione thought, *what's done is done. If he's offended, that's just too bad! I've got enough on my mind today without worrying about what Snape, or Malfoy for that matter, thinks of me.* She silently resolved again to keep her emotions under rigid control this day.

Snape wasn't offended. He was, however, somewhat surprised. He wondered briefly (and a little hopefully) if this was a demonstration of trust towards him on the girl's part. But then, his observational skills kicked in and reminded him of her uncharacteristically terse greeting, and he surmised that she was either too grumpy or sleepy this morning to care about how she looked. Nothing unusual, as he felt that way most mornings himself. Shrugging it off, he went down to get breakfast. By the time Hermione joined him in the kitchen, he had forgotten the incident.

Most unluckily, the house-elves had prepared crepes for breakfast that morning. Hermione stopped short a few feet from the table, her eyes wide with dismay. *Oh shit! Not*

today! She turned swiftly and headed toward the parlor.

"No breakfast today?" Snape asked in a puzzled voice.

"No," she retorted shortly. "I'll be out in the parlor when you're ready."

Hermione sat on the sofa, attempting to quell the tears welling in her eyes. *Stop! Crying won't change anything*, she reasoned with herself. Her vision became blurry as her emotions won the round, leaving her reason slumped in a corner of the ring. Her mother always prepared crepes as a 'special breakfast', particularly for birthdays and anniversaries. Strawberry with whipped cream for her Dad's birthday; white chocolate-raspberry for Hermione's. She let the tears fall for a minute, remembering their last special family breakfast together: fresh peach and sour cream crepes, sprinkled with powdered sugar and infused with love. It had been early this summer, for her parents' wedding anniversary. All three of them had helped create them. Cooking was one thing that had helped Hermione maintain a connection with her parents a dependable, enjoyable activity, filled with their family traditions. *I have to stop thinking about them or I'll be a basket case all day!* She scolded herself. Sniffing, she retreated to the downstairs loo to splash her face and recover her composure.

When Snape finally joined her, she was perfectly collected, if atypically quiet. Unfortunately, her concentration was nowhere near its usual level. Advanced Transfiguration, the topic of the day, took a great deal of focus as well as innate power. In her present state of mind she was unable to initiate even the first stage of the transformation she was supposed to be learning. Snape was not amused. "Granger, you're not focusing on the objective," he warned her. "You need to clearly visualize each step of the process before you attempt the incantation. The sequence must flow seamlessly, or you will get an incomplete transfiguration."

"I know," she mumbled. "I'll try again." But her subsequent attempts were no more successful than her initial ones.

Snape watched as the girl went through the motions of the spell. After sixteen years as a teacher, he identified her problem without difficulty: her mind was elsewhere. After she had made three uninspired efforts, he reached out and snatched the wand from her hand. Surprised by his sudden movement, she met his gaze. "Granger," he growled, "what is wrong with you today?"

"Nothing, sir," she said, looking down. "Um, maybe I should read the theory behind this type of transfiguration again so I understand it more thoroughly," she suggested hesitantly. "Then I could try again tomorrow. I'm sure I'd do better then."

His eyes narrowed as he watched the girl dissemble. It was clear that something was bothering her; she was abysmal at hiding her emotions. A sudden idea occurred to him. "Has Draco tried to assault you?" Her eyes widened and she shook her head negatively. "Has he threatened you again?" Snape pressed, his eyes boring into hers.

"No. I've barely seen him over the last three or four days," she assured him. "He's done nothing."

She appeared to be telling the truth. He considered for a minute: he was relatively certain that she wasn't distressed because of him. He had made enough students unhappy to know the nonverbal signals of hostility, fear or offended feelings. *So, if neither Draco nor I is the problem, then what is?*

Another completely different notion occurred to him. "Granger," he began cautiously, "if you are experiencing... discomfort again, I could prepare an analgesic potion for you."

She looked puzzled. "Discomfort? I'm not in any pain. And what do you mean 'again'?"

His eyebrows lifted slightly. "Well," he said wryly, "the last time you skipped breakfast you claimed to be too uncomfortable to eat."

"Oh!" she cried, finally catching his unspoken meaning. "No, I definitely don't need a potion," she asserted. When he continued to regard her with an expression of skepticism, she elaborated. "Really! I'm not even into the chocolate-craving phase yet," she said with some asperity.

A chocolate-craving phase? In spite of his annoyance, Snape was amused. But he still hadn't discovered what was on the girl's mind. And when it came to gaining information, he was nothing if not relentless. He met her eyes, holding her gaze until she became uncomfortable and attempted to look away. He reached out, tilting her chin back up, forcing her to meet his stare. "You realize," he informed her softly, "that I could use Legilimency to find out what you're hiding from me. But," he continued, "I would prefer if you just told me what is wrong."

Hermione bit her lower lip as she reflected. He had shared his secrets with her the other night given her his trust or at least he'd suspended his antagonism. He deserved reciprocal confidence from her if they were to maintain their tentative friendship. "Yes, alright," she agreed, nodding. *But what to tell him without sounding childish?*

Snape waited expectantly. "I suppose," she began slowly, "it all comes down to loneliness. I'm feeling distracted and unhappy because I can't stop thinking about my friends and my family. I had planned to spend all day with my parents today..." She broke off, once again close to tears. After a few steadying breaths she was able to continue. "I'm not sure how much you know about Muggle customs, but in the Muggle world, a person comes of age at eighteen. It's a big deal for most people becoming a legal adult. For me, today was going to be something important that I could share with my parents they've been excluded from a lot of my life since we found out that I was a witch. I know it's futile and you'll think I'm foolish, but I can't stop thinking about them," she said in a quavering voice, not meeting his eyes.

Snape could see that she was clearly on the edge of tears. She was gnawing on her lower lip as well, a sure sign of distress. He gave the mental equivalent of a sigh, knowing he was no good at offering comfort. *And she's right*, he thought, *it is futile to dwell on the situation. Well*, he smirked to himself, *I may be dismal at sympathy, but I probably qualify as an expert at diversionary tactics*. Reaching a decision, he stood. "I do not think you are foolish," he said brusquely. "It's completely understandable that you should miss your family. However, I believe you're right: we should leave the Advanced Transfiguration for another day. Come with me," he ordered.

She followed him to his laboratory where he strode to a cupboard and removed a bottle filled with a viscous, light blue fluid. He motioned her closer and lifted the fluid toward the light so they could examine its attributes. "This base," he informed her, "should be a cobalt blue, with iridescent properties when exposed to the light. As you can see, its color is so pale as to be almost pathetic. It also lacks the necessary reflective trait. I have, as yet, been unable to determine the precise error responsible for its flaws."

"You mean, you brewed this incorrectly, but you don't know what's wrong?" Hermione asked incredulously. She was so taken aback by his apparent admission that she spoke without thinking. His sour expression enlightened her to the insensitivity of her words, and she stammered, "Oh! I didn't mean... I'm sorry, I..." He held up a hand, cutting short her stuttering.

"You are essentially correct, if lacking in discretion," he commented dryly. "To elaborate, I prepared this base from a translated text. While I am certain that I followed the directions accurately, there may be some imprecision in the translation of the technique or even in the ingredients. I have tried modifications to both these variables, but without notable progress." He waited, knowing the question she was likely to ask next.

He wasn't disappointed. "What kind of potion is it supposed to be?" she asked, eyes wide in unfeigned interest. "And what effect is the base designed to enhance?"

"It is a strengthening base, for an ancient and possibly fictitious brew," he informed her. "Which you will not, at present, be privy to. In any case, you don't need to know what the final product is to work on refining this base."

Catching his meaning immediately, Hermione gasped in surprise. "You want me to perfect the base?" she inquired in amazement.

He nodded. "Yes. Or more exactly, I want you to make an attempt at it," he responded sardonically. "I trust you remember Borage's Theorem on Magical Bases and Scarpin's Revelaspell? You will need to begin by separating the base into its component ingredients, then analyzing the interactions between them."

"Yes, of course," she acceded breathlessly.

Snape turned away to gather his own materials. He would continue his experiments with minced dragon heart, while simultaneously keeping an eye on the girl.

Two hours later, Snape watched out of the corner of his eye as she scribbled detailed entries in the notebook he'd provided. She now had a large array of vials in a rack, each containing an individual component derived from the base. He turned away from the girl, hiding his smile of satisfaction.

Late that evening, Snape emerged from the bathroom, his robe knotted tightly over his nightshirt. Granger was still sitting before the fireplace, re-reading her Transfiguration text. He slipped off his robe and slid into bed. He observed her surreptitiously and, truth be told, somewhat smugly. He'd been right to bring her into his research project today. Not only had he successfully distracted her from her unhappiness, but she had brought a fresh perspective to the problem. He waved his wand toward the candles, causing them to extinguish then relight a second later. The girl promptly took the hint and closing her book, made her way to the cot. "You made significant progress with the strengthening base today," he commended her. "We shall continue working on it together from this point."

A bright smile accompanied her softly spoken, "Thank you, sir," as she slipped under the covers.

He extinguished the candles for the night and placed his wand on the bedside table. "Granger," he said as he pulled the covers up to his shoulders, "congratulations on reaching your majority."

Remus sighed as he rubbed his tired eyes. After seemingly countless hours in the National Wizarding Library of London, he still had little more than sketchy, ill-defined descriptions of what he was looking for. He needed spells capable of deactivating and/or destroying powerful Dark objects, specifically, Horcruxes. *I must be going about this the wrong way*, he thought morosely. He pushed the stack of books he'd just perused off to the side and slumped down onto the table, his head on his forearms. *I wish James or Sirius were here to help me*, he moped silently. Remus knew that he was a plodder. His achievements in life had always come through hard work and determination, whereas his childhood friends had succeeded using equal parts inspiration and daring. He missed their reckless brilliance. *Hell, I miss everything about them right now*, he thought. It was one of his life's great ironies that he had regained Sirius' friendship only to watch him die two years later. Although, if he was truthful with himself, he had to admit that Sirius had been desperately unhappy for many months before his death. Remus remembered the day the two of them had returned to the Black family home: the look on Sirius' face had reflected his revulsion and hatred for all the things his family had believed in. He had rejected their Dark Wizardry and pure-blood mania when he was sixteen, vowing never to return.

Remus sighed again. Woolgathering would not get him the answers he needed. *Enough*, he told himself sternly. *Sirius and James are dead. I have to do this on my own.* Picking up yet another book on counter-curses, he flipped to the Table of Contents. "Curses utilizing blood... time-released hexes... familial curses..." he murmured as he skimmed the listed topics. Abruptly, he stopped turning the pages, and his eyes snapped back to the section on familial curses. "Family... Sirius' family..." he declared. "They were Dark wizards for generations! How could I be so obtuse!" he berated himself aloud. *If you want spells to deal with Dark Magic, ask the Dark wizards* he thought triumphantly.

A distinct "Ahem" caused him to look up. A severe-looking librarian was giving him a significant glare. After a moment, she pressed a finger to her lips to emphasize her point. Remus nodded his acquiescence and looked down, smiling to himself. Librarians were the same no matter where they worked, it seemed.

He gathered his books and deposited them in the reshelving cart on his way out of the library. He needed to find Dora. Perhaps she would agree to accompany him to number twelve, Grimmauld Place. He had high hopes for the Black family library!

Tonks hated having to return to their old headquarters. There were so many negative associations for her. First off, because her father was a Muggle-born, Sirius' parents had refused to even acknowledge her birth! They had even gone so far as to wipe her mother's name from their family tree. Second, going there reminded her of Sirius, which in turn made her feel sad, especially for Remus' sake. Last, but not least, there was the sheer depression-factor the house itself seemed to provoke in her. It was dirty, musty, drab and full of nasty reminders of the worst of the Blacks. "God, I hate those elf heads, Remus," she muttered as they ascended the front steps.

"Then close your eyes as we pass through the hall," he replied. "Here, take my hand, Dora, and I'll make sure you don't trip while your eyes are closed."

"If I didn't love you, I'd hex you for using that nickname, Moony," she returned with artificial sweetness.

"Really, my dear," he quipped, "you can't expect me to use your surname anymore. I think we've advanced to a more intimate level of interaction, don't you?" he said with raised eyebrows.

Tonks smiled happily in return and gave up the dispute as a lost cause. She really didn't mind 'Dora' from Remus' lips. But he was the only one she allowed to get away with it aside from her dad. He captured her left hand, leaving her wand hand free, then opened the front door so they could slip inside.

The moment they stepped in, a heavy, fetid stench assaulted their senses. "Ugh!" Tonks cried in disgust. "What the hell is that?"

"It smells like something died in here," Remus answered, gagging slightly in the putrid air. "Maybe an animal got inside and starved to death? Here, let's open some windows," he suggested, spinning around and opening the small louver set into the highest panel of the door. "I'll go up to the parlor and see about getting a window or two unlatched, Dora. You do the ones in the kitchen."

"Okay," Tonks agreed.

Remus hastily climbed the steps to the first floor and entered the parlor. The windows proved quite stubborn, refusing to open until he applied a strong Releasing spell. He gulped several lungs full of fresh air and made his way to the kitchen. As he entered, the intensity of the smell seemed to triple. It was apparent that the source of the odor was somewhere in the kitchen. The windows, as well as the back door, were wide open. Remus spotted a figure in the back garden, retching. *Dora!* He sprinted through the room and jumped down the steps. In a moment he was smoothing her hair (now a sickly green color) back from her face as she emptied her stomach.

"Bloody hell in a hand basket," Tonks moaned a minute later as she straightened. Remus, supporting her with an arm around her waist, led her to a low stone fence where they could sit down. "When the air in the kitchen clears a bit, we need to investigate in there," she stated unnecessarily. Her companion merely nodded.

Some time later, they rose and steeling themselves, reentered the kitchen. A quick visual inspection failed to reveal anything obvious. "What do you think, should we check inside the cupboards?" Tonks asked.

"I suppose so," he answered resignedly. But to their surprise, there was nothing in the cupboards except dishes. "There's the pantry still," Remus said, with a grim expression. He strode to the door and pulling it open, found the origin of the smell at last. It was not an animal.

There, in the boiler room off the pantry, lay Kreacher's body, curled up amid a pile of filthy rags. He'd died in his 'den', with his broken and purloined mementos of the Black family scattered about him. "*Mobilicorpus*," Remus whispered, levitating Kreacher's body out of the house and into the back garden. Tonks followed, her expression a strange mixture of pity and revulsion. Still not touching the elf's corpse, Remus and Tonks inspected it for signs of what had killed the miserable creature. There was no blood or obvious wounds. "What do you think, Dora?" Remus queried, turning to the young Auror.

"If you want my professional opinion," she responded, "I'd say he died of natural causes. There's no evidence of violent death. Let me check for residual curse energy," she added. Extending her wand over the body, she murmured a soft spell. Her wand tip glowed green. "No. There's no indication of a curse, Remus. It appears he died of old age, probably in his sleep."

"Let's cremate him," he suggested. "Now." She nodded.

Pointing their wands at the body, they spoke the incantation simultaneously. "*Aduro Maximus*." White-hot flames engulfed the body, reducing it to ash in mere seconds. They lowered their wands. As if on cue, a light breeze rose, scattering the ashes, leaving behind only a scorched circle in the grass. They turned solemnly toward the house.

"I'm going up to the library," Remus informed Tonks. "It shouldn't take me more than a couple of hours. The Black family collection is not that extensive."

Tonks' eyes widened with interest. "What exactly are you looking for?" she asked curiously. "Maybe I can help. We did study a bit about Dark Magic during Auror training, you know."

He shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll manage, Dora." At her look of disappointment, he relented. "I can't tell you the details," he explained. "I gave my word to keep this matter in strict confidence. But I can tell you that it will be vitally important in the fight against Voldemort."

Tonks gazed into his eyes for a moment. "Okay, I understand," she said with a smile. "I'll make some tea and keep watch so we don't get a surprise visit from any Death Eaters."

Just under two hours later, Remus found Tonks in the kitchen, a cup of tea in her hand and a small burlap sack on the table by her elbow. "Any luck?" she inquired cheerily.

"Unfortunately not." His brows contracted as he eyed the sack. "What's in that?"

"Oh!" Tonks laughed. "Remember back when we were disarming the house, how Kreacher had a habit of snatching anything and everything he could get his hands on? I thought it would be a good idea to clean out his den, just to make sure something really nasty didn't get left behind, you know? I found mostly junk, like broken stuff and pictures, except for this sack. There are a few odds and ends in here that we should check over for Dark Magic before we dispose of them."

Curious now, Remus upended the sack onto the table. He assessed the items quickly: a small musical box, a gold pocket watch, a silver salt shaker bearing the Black family crest and a heavy locket. *Merlin's beard! A locket!* he thought, as he mentally recounted the story Harry had related about Sirius' brother Regulus. *Could this be Slytherin's locket?* He stared open-mouthed for a few seconds before coming to his senses. Without touching any of the items, he levitated them back into the sack. "You're right, dear," he told Tonks. "These definitely need to be tested. Some of the things around here were downright lethal. We wouldn't want a Muggle coming across anything dangerous by accident." He tucked the bag into an inner pocket of his robe and held out his hand to pull his companion to her feet. "Let's go," he said with a smile.

That evening, Remus showed the items to Harry and Ron. "These two," he declared pointing out the music box and locket, "definitely have signs of Dark Magic; Moody and I tested them."

"I remember seeing both of those when we cleared out the drawing room," Ron offered. "That music box saps your strength when it plays."

Harry agreed. "Yeah, I remember it too." He regarded the locket for a moment then turned to Remus. "Does Moody have any idea what the locket may be?" he asked quietly.

"No. We simply looked for evidence of the common motifs used in Dark Magic," Remus replied. "And I've no idea myself how to ascertain if an item actually is a Horcrux. I suppose when I find the spell to do that, I'll also have found the one that can destroy a Horcrux."

"No luck on that yet?" Ron asked. Remus just shook his head, looking glum.

Harry, however, was smiling. "You'll find the spell we need eventually, Remus," he assured the older man. "In the meanwhile, I have an idea how we can positively identify that locket." He looked toward Ron saying, "I think it's time for another trip to Knockturn Alley; we can introduce Remus to our expert on ancient artifacts!"

Harry grinned with satisfaction. *Ha! That was easy. Good job, me!* he silently congratulated himself. If not for his location the National Wizarding Library he would have let out a whoop of glee. Instead, he gathered the parchment before him and took it across the room to the Duplication Desk.

The clerk gave him a bored look and droned, "How many copies?"

"Just one," Harry answered.

Riffling through the parchment, the young man began muttering inaudibly to himself. After a moment, Harry realized he was counting pages. The clerk looked up. "That will be two Sickles, two Knuts, please," he said in the same monotone. Seeing the slight rise of Harry's eyebrows he explained, "It's ten Knuts a page, sir."

"Right," Harry agreed, as he fished the coins from his jacket pocket and handed them over. The clerk waved his wand over the top page and intoned the Duplication Charm. Harry waited patiently (although he was certain that he could have done the job in half the time himself) until the remainder of his copies were finished, then departed for his afternoon Potions lesson at the Ministry. On the walk, he allowed his thoughts to wander back to the events of the day before.

Two days after Tonks and Remus had recovered the artifacts from Kreacher's den, they had made the trip to Borgin and Burkes' dodgy little shop in Knockturn Alley. This time, Remus rather than Bill had accompanied Harry and Ron. Although not as tall as Bill, Remus proved to be even more impressive as a bodyguard, due mostly to his frightening disguise. He had charmed himself to look like Sanguini the vampire, pointed teeth and all. Shoppers instinctively shied away from them as they made their way down the narrow alley and into the dark shop to consult with the aged Mr. Borgin.

"Ah, Mr. Electis, how good to see you once again," Borgin crooned, bowing slightly to Harry. "I see you've taken to wearing your ring. A wise decision, sir, if I might be so bold as to say so," he continued in his ingratiating manner. His eyes flicked to the silent figures backing his wealthy (and therefore valued) customer, widening ever-so-slightly at the feral grin displayed by the vampirish thug at his left shoulder. *Surely even an undeniably questionable 'collector' such as Electis wouldn't employ a Vampire!* Borgin thought, horrified.

"Borgin," Harry said tersely, inclining his head fractionally. "I have acquired an item of dubious origin that I would like your assistance in identifying. I would, of course, offer a suitable compensation for your efforts."

"Of course you would, sir," Borgin mouthed automatically. It was a game. Harry knew it and Borgin knew that he knew it. They played their parts flawlessly. "If you would follow me..." the old man urged as he led them to a private room to inspect the item in question.

Once privacy had been assured, Harry pulled out a velvet pouch and extended it to the shopkeeper. "When I purchased this, I was convinced that it had once belonged to a famous wizard, but I am no longer certain if that is the case. Do you recognize it?" he inquired.

Borgin opened the bag's drawstring and tipped the contents onto his palm. Immediately, he gasped in astonishment, his wide eyes a dead giveaway that he did, indeed, recognize the locket that lay in his hand. In truth, Harry could have left at that point, having gained all the information he needed, except that he was obliged to complete the game. Borgin turned the locket over in his hand, then performed one of his own specialized Authenticity Spells. Satisfied, he reverently put the locket back in the bag and returned it to Harry. "I don't know what you were told, Mr. Electis," he commented in a voice devoid of its usual unctuous quality, "but that is an exceptionally valuable piece. As you may have deduced from the lettering on the back, it once belonged to Salazar Slytherin, one of the four revered founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft

and Wizardry. I last encountered it nearly seventy years ago; my former business partner had purchased it. We sold it shortly after that to a collector such as yourself." He gave Harry his typically oily smile, saying, "I am gratified that it has come into the hands of someone able to appreciate its antiquity and unique history."

"Yes," Harry remarked dryly, "its history is of the utmost importance to me." Having played out his part, Harry was eager to get away. He paid Borgin handsomely, firmly pressing twice the amount the shopkeeper requested into his hand as they headed off to the Leaky Cauldron.

Back in Ron's bedroom, behind formidable silencing and privacy wards, Ron voiced what they were all thinking. "We've really got it: Slytherin's locket! We know the location of two out of the four remaining Horcruxes. All we need are the spells to team-up and destroy them."

"I'm going to the library in London tomorrow morning," Harry informed them. "Moody gave me the names of a few books that cover power melding. He's not too happy about me using them, though. Says it's dangerous to give up control to someone else!"

"Some things never change," Remus laughed. "If Moody stopped being paranoid, we probably wouldn't know him!"

"Any ideas on your next move, Remus?" Ron asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes." He smiled mysteriously. The younger men both looked at him expectantly until he broke out in a chuckle. "Before I tell you about it, I need to talk logistics with Kingsley see if my notion is feasible. Then I'll fill you in."

Remus had a crafty gleam in his eye that reminded Harry of the Professor Bogart-Snape incident back in his third year at school. There was no hiding it Remus was up to something.

October entered with iron-grey skies and howling winds. Although the little cottage stayed snug, out-of-doors was another matter entirely. Hermione wished again for her thick, warm Hogwarts cloak as she and her companion threaded their way through a copse behind their hideout. The air was thick with swirling leaves ripped from their branches. Her cloak, which was actually Snape's spare cloak, magically altered to fit, was plastered to her chest in front and streamed out behind her with the force of the wind. When they had set out forty-five minutes ago, it had been merely breezy. The rising gale indicated that they were in for another storm tonight. By the time they neared the front path to the cottage, Snape was grasping her arm firmly so she could keep pace with him. As he steered her through the doorway and into the front room, he felt an involuntary trembling pass through her.

"You're shivering," he observed. "We should not have stayed out so long. Perhaps these walks should be curtailed in the cold weather."

"No!" she objected vehemently. "It's just the wind-chill that made it less than pleasant. I'm sure tomorrow will be better." Although she knew it was only likely to get colder, she was loath to give up the feeling of freedom she enjoyed during their outings.

Snape regarded her for a few seconds, a calculating look in his eyes. "We shall see," he said shortly. Swinging his cloak from his shoulders, he released the Tether Spell and headed off to the lab. Hermione followed suit. Snape allowed her to spend two hours each afternoon working on the strengthening base with him, regardless of the topic of the day. They had managed to achieve a beautiful deep azure, but the base still lacked an iridescent sparkle. The intensity of her concentration soon pushed all recollections of the cold and wind from Hermione's mind.

Much to Hermione's dismay, Snape refused to go out walking the following day, citing the frost on the windows as proof of the frigid weather. Hermione spent the entire afternoon in a dejected mood.

Snape disappeared early the next morning, instructing Hermione to review the current Herbology chapter in preparation for a quiz. When she next saw him in the early afternoon, he abruptly ordered her to come with him. Once in their room, he silently passed her a large bundle covered in brown paper wrapping. "What's this?" she questioned.

"Open it," he replied, his face expressionless.

She removed the paper, revealing a deep forest green cloak bearing a circlet of silver stars about the hem and throat. The wool was of the finest quality, close-woven and soft to the touch; the inner surface was fully lined with sleek, silvery fur. She gaped at the garment, completely unable to think of anything appropriate to say.

Snape broke the silence, drawing, "I believe that should keep you sufficiently warm on our daily outings."

His words shook loose her tongue and she finally managed to choke out a response. "Where did this come from?" she gasped. Not the most graceful of comments, she knew, but she was at a loss as to what to say. The cloak in her hands was positively extravagant; he couldn't possibly intend for her to wear it in the woods. He couldn't really mean to give her a Mudblood something like this. She met his eyes; he was still watching her with that expressionless mask. "Who does this belong to, sir?" she asked urgently.

Snape pressed his lips together into a thin line for a moment before saying, "It was my mother's. It has been sitting uselessly in a Gringotts vault for many years. I'm pleased to finally get some use out of it," he reported indifferently. Hermione continued to stare at him incredulously until he, losing his (admittedly limited) patience, snapped, "Come, girl! Put it on! We're already late for our daily walk."

Hermione swung the cloak around her shoulders and fastened the clasps down the front. He noted with satisfaction that it was just the right length. As she extended her arm so he could perform the Tether Spell, she met his eyes and whispered, "Thank you, it's a beautiful cloak."

Giving a curt nod, he led her downstairs and out under the grey canopy of sky. It was cold. A wind that had sprung up in the night was blowing keenly from the north. She shivered beneath the starry mantle.

"You are cold?" Snape asked, sounding surprised.

"No," she assured him, "just adjusting to the temperature change." She smoothed the fine wool down over her arm and giving him a sincere smile, declared softly, "It's very warm."

Author's Notes:

1. Scarpin's Revelaspell: in canon (HBP), this spell apparently allows for the identification (possibly by sequential separation) of component ingredients of a potion.
2. Borage's Theorem on Magical Bases: Libatius Borage was the author of Advanced Potion-Making in canon (HBP). I extrapolated the cannon information to infer that he was an active researcher as well as a textbook writer. (Don't all researchers want to name their discoveries after themselves?)
3. Aduro Maximus = Burn Totally (via an online English-Latin translator)
4. Harry's alias, Electis, is a play on his unofficial title, the Chosen One (from the Latin word electus = chosen).
5. At last, another quote from The Lord of the Rings! This one is present in the final scene of this chapter, when our nebulous ex-professor gives Hermione his mother's cloak. "It was cold. A wind that had sprung up in the night was blowing keenly from the north. She shivered beneath the starry mantle." This quote is from *The Return of the King* (The Steward and the King), in which Faramir gives Eowyn his mother's cloak. The last sentence is paraphrased a bit. ** I am not equating Severus Snape with

Faramir son of Denethor! (Although they do share intelligence and strength, Faramir's character was noteworthy due to his nobility and wisdom, whereas canon Snape is portrayed as petty, nasty, and self-serving.) I simply borrowed aspects of the LOTR scene in order to provide a connection to Snape's past and show his evolving relationship with our heroine.

Halloween

Chapter 10 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to JKR. I'm not making any money from this.

**Beta read by Larilee. Thanks, Larilee, for keeping my canon terms straight.

Chapter 10: Halloween

"Are you ready?" Kingsley rumbled in his deep voice.

"Give me a minute," Tonks replied. She focused on the photo in her hand for a few moments then closed her eyes. Her features scrunched up into a pained expression as she concentrated on the alterations to her appearance. A minute later she had taken on the likeness of her colleague, Auror Dawlish. "I really don't like morphing into men," she mumbled, frowning in unknowing imitation of the man she was impersonating.

Dawlish was a competent, ambitious Auror quite good at his job. Unfortunately, he also possessed an arrogant streak a mile wide that did little to endear him to his colleagues (or anyone else for that matter). His attitude was the reason he often received missions abroad. He was currently on a two-week assignment in North Africa, following a lead on the whereabouts of Fenrir Greyback, werewolf and Death Eater. Kingsley had assured Tonks that there was no chance she would get caught 'borrowing' her colleague's identity.

"Amazing! It's nearly a flawless disguise," Remus approved. His grin turned wicked. "Gives a new meaning to the Muggle concept of 'identity theft,' don't you think, my dear?"

Tonks chuckled in appreciation. Remus, unlike many people raised in the wizarding world, made an effort to know and understand current Muggle culture. Because her father was Muggle-born, Tonks herself had been brought up with the best of both worlds; she was glad Remus didn't reject everything non-magical out of hand.

"Okay, I've got the paperwork," Kingsley declared. "Let's go." Together, they wrapped their cloaks around themselves and Disapparated with three soft pops.

They materialized in front of a pair of ornate wrought-iron gates barring their path toward a manor house visible on the crest of a small hill. Kingsley stepped forward, tapping the lock with his wand and speaking in a commanding voice. "Open up in the name of the Ministry of Magic!"

A loud crack announced the arrival of a house-elf on the far side of the gates. The creature stepped forward, bowing. "You is needing to give me the papers before I is letting you enter, sirs," it squeaked, extending its hands through the bars. Taking the sheaf, the elf continued almost fearfully. "My mistress is saying she wishes to see these papers first. I is returning in a minute." The creature disappeared with another crack, leaving them waiting at the gate.

Remus glanced nervously at Kingsley, but the big man looked perfectly at ease, patiently waiting for the elf to return. Remus hoped this subterfuge would be worth the potential danger he was leading his friends into. If something went wrong they could both lose their jobs!

Kingsley's deep voice startled him. "This is just procedure; they always make us wait. Relax, Anderson," he suggested, using the alias they had chosen for Remus.

After another minute, the elf rematerialized. Opening the gate, it bowed low and extended the papers for Kingsley to take back. They followed the diminutive individual (Remus was almost sure it was male) up to the manor. Once inside the door, the elf literally disappeared, leaving them face-to-face with the mistress of Malfoy Manor. Tonks and Remus let Kingsley do the talking.

"I don't know where you Aurors get your information from," Narcissa Malfoy scoffed, "but I assure you, my son is not on the premises. As I have repeatedly told your people, I have not seen him since the Easter holiday, last spring!"

"We're only doing our jobs, Madam," Kingsley soothed. "I'm sure you understand, we have to follow through on the tips we receive, no matter how unlikely. Now, if you please, I have a few questions for you, Mrs. Malfoy. Is there somewhere we can talk while my associates carry out the search of your property?"

Narcissa's eyes narrowed as she glared at 'Dawlish' and 'Anderson' for a moment. She turned to Kingsley. "Your 'associates' had better not break anything, Shackbolt!" she snapped. "The last time Ministry officials were here to conduct a search, several valuable pieces of furniture were damaged!"

"Yes, I recall hearing about that," he admitted. "However, that was a completely different department, Madam; those Unspeakables can be quite careless. My people are trained to follow correct procedures. I assure you, there will be no damage to your home."

"There had better not be," she glowered, giving Tonks and Remus one last suspicious look. "Follow me," she said to Kingsley as she led him from the room. "We can talk in the parlor."

As soon as they were out of sight, Remus and Tonks split up. Tonks to conduct the bogus search for Draco Malfoy and Remus to scour the Malfoy's extensive library. When he entered he was taken aback at the sheer number of books crammed into the floor-to-ceiling bookcases built into the walls. Fortunately for Remus, his recent investigations into Dark Magic had uncovered a charm designed to identify books containing the motifs used in Dark spell-casting. *About the only useful thing I got out of the Black's library*, he thought wryly. Concentrating on what he needed, he held his wand upright in his fist and spoke the incantation clearly: "*Ostendo Prævus Magia*." He scanned the room, surprised that several dozen books were glowing a deep, menacing red. Damn, so many! he groaned mentally, knowing his time was limited. Hastily, he warded the door to ensure privacy and began rapidly pulling books from the shelves for perusal.

Fifty minutes later, an urgent tapping on the door alerted him that time was running out. "Be downstairs in five minutes!" he heard Tonks advise urgently from the other side of the door. He had managed to winnow the original stacks down to a half dozen books: voluminous tomes all. He shrank them as small as possible with a quick, *Reducio* and stuffed them into his pockets to examine in detail later. *Now, to make good our escape.*

Snape stretched his long legs out in front of him as he sank back into the comfortably padded chair. Opening his book, he settled in for a relaxing evening in front of the fire. Considering his current social status (an outlaw) and his personality (a general propensity to see the negative aspects of life), he felt remarkably content. He was making steady progress with the Impenetrable potion, the Granger project was coming along nicely, he was hidden safely away from the retribution of both the Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix, and Draco was still keeping clear of him. Truly, he had many reasons to be happy not that he was tempted to smile, of course. But the lack of a need to scowl was quite satisfying.

He was just becoming interested in the text before him when an unexpected rapping sounded on the front door of the little cottage. With the first thump, he jerked upright; by the third, his wand was drawn as he moved stealthily toward the door. His peripheral vision took note of Granger, wide-eyed and rigid; she hadn't moved from her seat on the couch. "Get down!" he whispered fiercely as he glided noiselessly to the side of the door. Granger slithered down to the floor where she lay flat, abandoning any semblance of dignity in favor of safety. *Good*, he thought, *one less target for an enemy to aim at.* Slowly, carefully, he placed his wand tip at the point where the door met its frame. Wishing this spell could be performed nonverbally, he breathed out the incantation in a voice softer than a whisper. A golden light surrounded the wand, bathing the door in a warm glow; he let out the breath he'd been holding, dropping his defensive posture. "It's not an enemy," he declared, looking over his shoulder towards Hermione. "You can get up." He pocketed his wand as he opened the door, revealing a heavily cloaked and hooded figure whose shoulders were hunched against the cold. Snape's eyes widened. "Rabastan!" he exclaimed in evident surprise. "How did you know where to find me?"

The other man smiled. "Are you going to let me in, Severus?" he asked wryly. "It's colder than a Hag's tits out here, you know!"

"No, I wouldn't know about that," Snape replied with a touch of humor, stepping aside to allow his friend to enter. As Lestrage removed his cloak and tossed it to the elf that appeared at his elbow, Snape glanced at the girl, gauging her reaction to the visitor. *She looks wary*, he decided. *As well she might, considering her past experiences with pure-blood wizards.* "Perhaps," he suggested, raising an eyebrow at the girl, "you would be more comfortable reading upstairs."

She began to rise, but surprisingly, Lestrage objected. "There's no need for that, Severus. I'm here for a social visit, not business. Besides, if you banish her to her room," he continued, switching his gaze to Hermione, "you'll deprive us of the opportunity to get acquainted with one another." He smiled disarmingly at Hermione.

To say that Hermione was taken aback was putting it quite mildly. Her eyes widened as she took in the tall, balding man standing in a relaxed posture by the door. A rather awkward pause ensued until she finally managed to get out a faint, "Good evening, sir," to Lestrage.

He seemed to take this as encouragement or perhaps simply acceptance and strode across the room toward her. "I don't believe that we've ever been properly introduced," he said, taking her hand and making a short, courtly bow over it. "Although," he elaborated, "I have heard quite a lot about you. Rabastan Lestrage, as you have undoubtedly surmised."

"Hermione Granger," she replied automatically. His manners reminded Hermione how antiquated the wizarding world was at times, which led to the recollection that the man before her was certainly a pureblood. Abruptly realizing just who was likely to have talked about her and what the content of those comments had probably been, she colored with vexation.

He noticed her discomfort immediately. "It was all good, I assure you, miss!" he interjected quickly. "In fact," his voice dropped to a conspiratorial pitch, "my informant praised your intelligence and magical prowess quite highly." He obviously hoped this would pique her interest, and if the thoughtful frown she wore was any indication, he had succeeded.

"Your informant... could it... was it Viktor Krum?" she probed. He assented with a nod of his head and a smile. That was all it took to open the floodgates. "Oh! How is he? When did you last see him? Will he be coming here to visit, too?" she asked in quick succession. She was focused on Lestrage, and so did not notice the brief scowl that crossed Snape's face.

Lestrage chuckled gently at her obvious excitement. "Why don't we have a seat, and I'll tell you about it?" he suggested.

"Yes, why don't you do that, Rabastan," Snape advised dryly.

Hearing his tone, Hermione glanced at Snape. He wore his usual inscrutable mask, but was directing a piercing look at Lestrage. He plainly expected an explanation from the man. Hermione decided that caution was warranted. *This is one of those times*, she thought, *when listening would be wiser than talking.* She subsided (both physically and verbally) back onto the couch.

A house-elf appeared next to Snape's chair squeaking, "Is you needing anything, sirs and miss?"

"Bring us a bottle of wine," Snape ordered. The creature reappeared a minute later with a bottle and three filled wine goblets. Snape quirked an eyebrow as Lestrage offered one to the girl, but made no comment. He took a glass and, raising it slightly, pronounced, "To the Dark Lord." The men drained their glasses, but Hermione simply stared down at hers, biting her lower lip. Snape refilled the emptied goblets then sat back, a calculating look directed toward the other man. "Tell me, friend," he prompted, "how did you obtain my location? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord wished the knowledge to be restricted."

"Oh, it is," Lestrage assured him. "Two days ago my scouting team met with the Dark Lord; three other squads were present, including Krum's. After the reports, Krum requested permission from our master to visit your charge here," he said, nodding toward Hermione. "The Dark Lord said he would consider the request." He tasted his wine then turned toward Hermione. "I was curious," he continued, addressing her, "as to why Krum was so interested in you, so I asked him how long he'd known you and when you had met that sort of thing. He was quite willing to talk about you." He gave her another easygoing smile.

She tentatively returned it, wondering why he was making such an obvious effort to be congenial toward her. He was pleasant enough at least in the present circumstances. *Perhaps it's because of Snape; maybe he's just happy to visit with his friend,* she thought, glancing back and forth between the two men.

Her attention snapped back to Lestrage as he continued his story. "The next day, the Dark Lord refused his request, so I asked for permission to visit Severus here. It's well known to our master that our friendship extends all the way back to our schooldays. And, as both of us are senior members of the circle, he trusted me with the location of your hideout."

Hermione was disappointed to hear that Viktor wouldn't be coming, but tried to cover it with a question. "So," she asked hesitantly, "how... how is Viktor? Is he well?"

"Perfectly well, the last time I saw him," Lestrage answered easily.

"If you wouldn't mind, sir, would you give him my greetings when you see him again?" Hermione requested.

"Certainly," he agreed.

Hermione thanked him softly and leaned back in her seat to think. Voldemort obviously didn't trust the newer Death Eaters as he did his long-time minions. She hoped Viktor wouldn't come to any harm because of his concern for her. It was bad enough that he was forced into a facade of support for Voldemort and the purebloods' ludicrous ideals of racial purity and supremacy. *Maybe*, she mused, *I will get to see him again sometime.* With a jolt, she realized that would mean another Death Eater meeting at the Riddle House definitely something to be avoided as far as she was concerned.

When she refocused on the present, she found that the two men were discussing the probable means for liberating the Death Eaters currently incarcerated in Azkaban. Gradually, they moved on to other topics. She was content to sit quietly, sipping her wine and listening to their meandering conversation. Looking at Snape, she noticed his relaxed posture and a definite absence of tightness in his expression. *Funny*, she observed, *I don't think I've ever seen Snape look so at ease. He must actually trust this man.* After a while, she finished the last sip in her glass and set it down. Lestrage moved to refill it, but she shook her head saying, "No, thank you," in a muted voice.

Standing, she bid the men goodnight and disappeared up the stairs.

Both men were quiet for a minute after Hermione had gone. Snape appeared deep in thought, but was actually considering the best method to discover what Rabastan was up to with regards to the girl. While he didn't suspect any nefarious purpose, he had seldom seen him put forth such an effort towards courtly politeness. His own mother had taught him well-bred manners as, no doubt, Rabastan's mother had taught him, but they hardly ever had any use for them. This was a war, and social occasions were a rarity. After consideration, Snape decided on a relatively obvious approach to the subject. Rabastan was, after all, a friend and not likely to rebuff him. "It appears, old friend, that you are already looking forward to the end of the war. Has your mother already picked out a young witch with an acceptable pedigree?"

Lestrangle laughed outright at that, but played along nevertheless. "No, not at all," he denied. "Whatever makes you say such a thing, Severus?"

"It's not often you trot out your party manners," Snape retorted. "In fact, I haven't seen them since the time you managed to charm Anna Rosier into a dinner date in Hogsmeade."

Lestrangle grinned wolfishly. "Yes, that was an event to remember. I thought Evan was going to explode when he found out!" he laughed.

"Yes, well, perhaps things would have gone smoother if you had taken her there on an actual Hogsmeade weekend," Snape said dryly.

"Undoubtedly," Lestrangle concurred, a gleam still lingering in his eyes. "In any case, I'm not practicing for the benefit of a future fiancé although young Miss Parkinson has just joined up, did you know?"

"Deficient," Snape answered flatly. "You can do much better."

Lestrangle took a deep breath and let it out, his expression becoming serious. "Severus, my friend, I don't intend to trespass on your territory. You needn't worry," he stressed.

Although he knew full well what the other man was implying, Snape was still taken by surprise at his casual mention of it as if it were a well-known fact! "My territory?" he queried softly, eyes narrowed with predatory anger.

"Yes, of course," Lestrangle confirmed, eyeing Snape as if puzzled by his anger. "According to Draco, academics are not the only topics you're teaching her. I've heard him say that she sleeps in your bedroom."

"The girl sleeps in my room so I can keep a close watch on her, Rabastan. If she were to escape, the Dark Lord would be most displeased with me! Not something I care to experience," he said with a sardonic twist of his lips. "And as for Draco, his schoolboy associations have given him an inflated sense of his own perceptive abilities, as well as the finesse of a giant," Snape scoffed. "If he doesn't start displaying the Malfoy cunning, even his parents will be hard pressed to excuse his inadequacies."

Lestrangle nodded his agreement. "Young Malfoy has a great deal to learn," he assented while carefully avoiding the earlier topic. Severus seemed quite touchy about Hermione Granger, and he had no desire to start a disagreement with him.

The silence stretched between them until Snape abruptly broke it. "Come, Rabastan," he snapped, "let's stop dancing around the topic. What do you intend to accomplish by befriending the girl?"

"Why, to aid you in your endeavor, of course!" he answered with prompt sincerity. "The Dark Lord may not have complete confidence in Krum, but he acknowledged the merit of his idea."

"Which is?" Snape prompted.

"Krum reasoned that Granger would be more likely to switch allegiance if she feels accepted by at least some of the purebloods," he explained. "Being stuck up here with constant exposure to young Malfoy and his rather vocal dislike certainly won't help you turn her! When Krum was denied permission, I thought it the perfect opportunity for me to step in. If you're willing to accept my help, that is."

"Certainly," Snape acceded, nodding thoughtfully. "The right kind of help would be most welcome." Inside, he was fiercely glad that Krum had been denied access to the girl. He attributed the feeling to pride in his own status with the Dark Lord and let it go at that. He was never one to analyze feelings.

Now that they understood one another, Lestrangle was unable to resist a last dig at his friend. "Well, at least Granger is an attractive woman. If she is even half as agreeable as Krum described, then this should be a pleasant undertaking," he grinned.

"Woman?" Snape sneered. "She's a mere girl."

"You, Severus, have clearly spent too many years as a teacher!" Lestrangle gloated.

"Harry, we need to talk privately later," Remus whispered as he passed the black-haired young man on his way to the Weasleys' kitchen.

Sunday dinner seemed interminable as Harry, who was seated between Fred and Ron, shifted impatiently in his chair. The rest of the family, plus Remus and Tonks, were spread around the long kitchen table, eating, drinking and chatting in a seemingly endless cycle. Finally, when dessert had been eaten and cleared away, the Weasleys and sundry wandered off in several directions. Entering the parlor, Harry approached Remus, casually placing a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, Remus, I'd like to show you a new spell I've been working on. Let's go up to my room," he invited.

"Sure," Remus replied. He turned to Tonks, who was earnestly entreating Molly to help her master a few cleaning and cooking charms (at which she'd always been abysmal). "We'll be back in a few minutes," he told her, following Harry up the steps.

"Well?" Harry prompted after he had locked the door and cast an anti-eavesdropping charm.

"As Dora's father is fond of saying: bingo!" Remus proclaimed with a grin.

Harry's eyes widened with excitement. "You found it? You're sure it will work?" he asked.

"As sure as I can be," Remus said with confidence. "I found the same spell in two of the books from Malfoy's library, and they're completely consistent with one another. Both texts give the same incantation and wand movements; that's a good indication that the spell is authentic."

"Excellent." Harry smiled. "Now we just have to work out how to get our hands on Riddle's special award. It won't be easy getting at that thing while it's stashed away at Hogwarts."

"Whoa! Hold on, Harry," Remus cautioned. "Not only do I have to practice that spell, but you, Ron and I need to be able to combine our magical power. All three of us have to work on that power merging spell." His gaze dropped to the floor. "I'll never be able to destroy a Horcrux alone," he conceded softly.

Harry gave Remus a sympathetic look, knowing that the older man had set aside his pride by admitting he needed help, especially from two wizards who were barely of age. He grasped the other man's arm in a brief gesture of support. "Luckily for us, the process of power merging is pretty simple. Ron and I have been practicing since I found the spell. We even got Ginny to link with us just so we could practice adding a third person to the meld," he added hastily upon seeing Remus' warning look. "Remus, she knows about the Horcruxes. In fact, she knew before you did! But she agreed to stick to planning. I don't want her involved in any of the action." He glanced at his bureau where a replica of the Golden Snitch from the 1997 Quidditch World Cup match was displayed; Ginny had given it to him for his birthday. "At least one person

that I care about is going to stay safe if I have anything to say about it," he uttered in a soft, intense voice.

Harry was right, Remus mused tiredly. Power melding was an absolute doodle compared to the Eradication Hex he himself was trying to master. In just a single two-hour session, Harry, Ron and Remus had managed to perfect their link-up sequence. While linked, they had seamlessly performed several difficult feats including a live-subject Transfiguration, a Charm-string and an advanced, offensive Shield-Shattering Spell. They could even pass control of the merge between them with relative ease.

But the spell that would allow them to destroy the Horcruxes, a sophisticated adaptation of the typical Eradication Hex, was another matter entirely. In fact, it was exceedingly complex. Most Dark artifacts, such as the items they had cleared out of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, only needed to be physically destroyed to dispel their magic. However, Remus knew that a Horcrux was created with a complex spell, under very specific conditions, as well as a piece of the caster's soul. In order to completely deactivate a Horcrux, he needed to sequentially deconstruct the enchantment that had created it, overcome the spiritual element placed inside it and physically break the object. Theoretically, the bit of soul would be expelled into the ether, dissipating harmlessly like the contents of a helium balloon dispersing in the air.

Theoretical was all that it was, at least for now. Remus practiced on Dark artifacts that Tonks and Kingsley provided to him courtesy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's collection. The items, according to Tonks, had been confiscated from the homes (and persons) of suspected Death Eaters during Voldemort's first ascendancy. The cases were long-closed or inactive, usually due to insufficient evidence or the subsequent demise of the accused. After several exhausting days, he felt he had reached an adequate level of proficiency with the spell sequence. "I'm no Dumbledore, true, but I will be able to perform the spell," he assured Ron and Harry. "With your power behind me, I believe we can destroy the Horcruxes."

Now all they had to do was devise a strategy for sneaking into Hogwarts, the most well-warded location in wizarding Britain, aside from the Department of Mysteries.

Three days later providence smiled upon them. All their proposed schemes were immediately discarded when Minerva McGonagall invited the members of the Order of the Phoenix to a private Halloween feast at Hogwarts. As the interim Headmistress of Hogwarts, she had continued to live at the school in spite of its closure. Filch and Hagrid were also in residence to see to the maintenance of the castle and its grounds, respectively.

"Have you ever heard the saying 'you can beat skill, but you can't beat luck'?" Ron asked his companions with a wide smile.

"Appropriate," Remus agreed. "Fate is indeed favoring the foolish, in this case!"

Harry, Ron and Remus all laughed. Privately, all three hoped they would not be declared fools after the fact.

The feast on All Hallows Eve was a long, enjoyable affair. As was usual at Hogwarts, the food was both abundant and delicious in spite of the fact that more than half of the castle's house-elves had been sent to other locations. According to Minerva, many of the Hogwarts elves were second-born in their families. Only first-born elves had the strict obligation to stay with their original families. Subsequent siblings were usually married into other households or sent to large establishments such as Hogwarts. Minerva had temporarily sent many elves back to their initial households until the school could reopen. Harry was pleased to see, however, that Dobby had remained at Hogwarts (since he really had no place else to go). Dobby had informed him solemnly that his friend, Winky, had been sent to St. Mungo's long-term ward for comatose patients, to help take care of Barty Crouch, Jr. Dobby, who had visited her there, reported that she had given up butterbeer and was entirely devoted to her Mr. Barty vegetable though he was.

Once dinner was over, the Order members began to drift away from the table, retiring to the numerous couches and chairs scattered in front of the hearth. They were in one of the side rooms opening off of the Great Hall, similar to the one Harry had been sent to three years ago the night his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. Harry began to feel uneasy and his stomach gave a nauseating twist. *Must be nerves*, he thought. *Hell, we need to do this thing soon or I'm going to throw up.* "Ron," he called, "what say we go and have a look at our old dormitory?"

"Good idea, mate," Ron responded, catching on at once. "You don't mind, do you, Professor McGonagall?"

"No, go on," she replied, turning back to her conversation with Moody. The young men made their way toward the door.

As Harry passed Remus, who was seated on one of the sofas next to Tonks, he tapped the older man lightly on the back. Remus looked up and nodded slightly. "Ten minutes," he mouthed silently. A very few minutes later, Remus claimed the call of nature and disappeared as well. He found his co-conspirators in the hall outside the Trophy Room door. "Any trouble?" he whispered.

"No," Ron answered. "We saw Filch back by the large Portrait Gallery but he was busy clanging about with a suit of armor. He never even flinched when we went past."

The three men exchanged glances, then with a nod of his head, Remus reached out to open the door. They slipped into the Trophy Room, eyes darting from side to side to ensure they were alone. "*Demonstro Pravus Quendam*," intoned Remus, his wand held upright in his fisted hand. Rays of silver extended outward, bathing the room in an astral glow. When rays struck a shiny object, of which there were many, the eerie light was reflected back. Remus' eyes began carefully scanning the room.

"There!" Harry said, his voice sounding unusually deep and calm. Remus shot a look at the young man, slightly alarmed by his odd tone of voice. But Harry appeared fine; his outstretched finger was pointing at an angry red rectangle against the opposite wall. Dropping his arm, he advanced toward the plaque, just close enough read the inscription. "That's it," he confirmed. "It's Riddle's award."

"I think we should back off," Remus advised. They all retreated as far as the room would permit. "Ready?" Remus asked, a slight rasp in his voice betraying his apprehension.

"Ready," Harry answered once again in that deep, unruffled voice.

Remus recognized what it was at last: focus. The young man was an arrow, poised to release at their target. Ron merely nodded, indicating his readiness. Remus felt a hand rest on each shoulder, and heard a murmured incantation. A surge of power entered his chest, blazing hot, nearly painful. Both Ron and Harry were giving him all that they had to offer. Taking a deep breath, he rotated his wand three times, widdershins, initiating the first sequence of the Eradication Spell. "*Inverso molior*," he commanded, unraveling the original casting with the pure power at his disposal. Suddenly, he felt a surge of resistance but he was ready. "*Phasma phasmatis suprimir!*" he shouted, forcing that straining bit of soul, the essence of Voldemort's very being, slowly down. He squeezed it with their combined power, imagining it flat and inert. He became aware of a fresh surge of determination traveling through the meld. It was Harry, and the young man's will felt like iron. Remus held fast, unyielding. The struggling grew feeble, then stopped. *Now to break it*, he thought. "*Rumpo!*" he roared. A blinding flash leaped from his wand and filled his vision. With a deafening blast, he was thrown backward into the wall, too stunned to move for a few seconds.

When Remus opened his eyes, he saw Ron next to him, shaking his head groggily as he rose from the floor. Harry was up already and offered him a hand. He stood, feeling a bit weak but remarkably steady now that it was over. Surveying the room, he noted it was a shambles. Twisted metal and splintered wood were strewn in every direction.

Ron too, was appraising the damage, eyes wide as he took in the level of devastation. "Blood and bloody ashes," he breathed. "The whole room is a wreck."

"I think," Remus said in a muted voice, "we used a bit too much power for the third phase."

Harry began to laugh, a desperate, wheezing sound. "Remus," he gasped a minute later when he could speak, "you have a talent for understatement."

"What in Merlin's name is going on in here?" A commanding voice rang out from the doorway. Three heads snapped in the direction of the speaker: one very angry Minerva McGonagall.

"Oh shit!" Harry swore softly. "We forgot about an exit strategy...."

Author Notes:

1. *Ostendo Prævus Magia* = show evil magic/spells
2. Anna Rosier: I created her younger sister of Evan Rosier. In canon (GoF), Evan Rosier was mentioned as a deceased Death Eater and a known school friend of Severus Snape.
3. Charm-string: I borrowed this idea from Deeble's excellent fanfic "What E'er Therein Is Promised".
4. *Demonstro Prævus Quendam* = reveal evil items/things
5. *Inverso molior* = reverse construct
6. *Phasma phasmatis suprimir* = suppress spirit/soul
7. Ron's oath, "Blood and bloody ashes" is borrowed from Robert Jordan's "The Wheel of Time" series. (I was reading part of it at the time this was written and I just couldn't resist the temptation to use it.)

Impressions

Chapter 11 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse; it belongs to JKR. I'm not making any money from this.

Chapter 11: Impressions

"Harry!" Molly Weasley shouted stridently from the kitchen. "That eagle owl is back!"

Her summons was answered by a thunderous pounding of feet as everyone crowded into the kitchen. Seven sets of eyes were trained on the imperious bird occupying the window ledge. Its head rotated smoothly on its thick neck as it surveyed the room's occupants. Spotting Harry's dark head among the shades of red and pink, the bird fixed its sharp gaze on him, ruffling its feathers impatiently. Harry stepped forward, reaching cautiously toward the small package secured to the bird's leg. It remained motionless as he untied the parcel, staring arrogantly at Arthur and Bill who stood at the front of the small crowd. As soon as it was unburdened, the owl turned, launching itself silently into the dark.

Harry tore off the brown paper and, without hesitation, opened the box. As he expected, it contained another capped vial, filled with what was, unmistakably, another set of memories. Thoughtfully, he swirled the thick, silvery substance, wondering if these would also be about Hermione. Looking down at the box, he spotted a folded piece of paper. As before, the note contained no salutation just a single handwritten line.

As circumstances change, so do people.

He read it through three times, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Turning to Arthur, Harry pushed the phial and note into his hands. "I'll Floo Moody," he said grimly. Walking past Tonks to get to the kitchen fireplace, he noted the confused expression on her face as she read the note over Arthur's shoulder. She hadn't seen the first set of memories, although he was certain Remus had told her about them. Throwing a handful of powder into the grate, he thrust his head into the green flames and called, "Alastor Moody's house."

After a short exchange, Harry pulled back from the fire. "He's coming in a few minutes," he informed the others. Walking over to Ron, he muttered, "Might as well get this over with, mate." Ron nodded solemnly but didn't speak. It was clear that he, too, was apprehensive.

Barely fifteen minutes later, Harry, Ron and Moody leaned over the Pensieve. As his nose touched the surface of the swirling thoughts, Harry's feet seemed to leave the ground. He felt as if he was rolling forward until, with a jolt, his feet hit the ground. Looking up, he saw they were standing in front of a small cottage.

"What do you think, should we go in?" Ron asked. Harry shrugged.

"I'm going to have a look," Moody growled. As he stepped forward, reaching for the doorknob, the door opened and three people emerged. "Death Eater scum!" Moody snarled under his breath as he moved to the side of the doorway to watch.

Harry and Ron stepped back as well, surprised to see Draco Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange and another man, a tall, blond fellow with a full beard, walk out onto the front path.

"It's going well, Draco," the blond man said in a deep, resonant voice. "If you continue at this pace, our preparations should be ready well before the Dark Lord's deadline."

Draco smirked, giving the man an arrogant nod. "Thanks, Nick." Draco's eyes strayed to the woods. Abruptly, his expression altered to a sneer. "That jumped-up Mudblood bitch!" he swore softly. The others, including the three observers, followed his gaze to the two figures that were slowly approaching. Although still some ways off, they were wending their way leisurely between the tree trunks towards the cottage.

Harry recognized them at once. Snape's tall, thin, black-draped form was unmistakable, as was Hermione's bushy mass of hair. He would have known them at twice the

distance.

"And Snape he's almost worse than her!" Draco continued, his rant gaining volume and spitefulness. "He makes me sick, the way he coddles that filthy, little low-life."

"He's only following our master's orders, Draco," Bellatrix said mildly. "Just as you are. Best not interfere, boy," she warned.

"Yes, Aunt," he acceded sullenly.

"Let's go," Bellatrix ordered as she gathered her cloak around herself. She Disapparated with a loud crack, followed closely by the blond man.

Draco remained only long enough to mutter, "I still think that any wizard with a shred of self respect would have refused to associate with a disgusting Mudblood like her!" A third and final crack signaled his departure.

Ron, Moody and Harry stayed where they were, watching the gradually advancing pair. They were walking side-by-side, conversing only occasionally, but in a relaxed manner. As they came into auditory range, the subject of their conversation was apparent: Snape was teaching.

"...and what are its uses?" Snape questioned.

"Well, I believe it's used in Burn Healing Paste," Hermione answered.

"In what form?"

"Um," she bit her lower lip in thought, then brightened as she blurted out, "dried and powdered!"

"Correct," he replied smoothly. "But *Chlorophyllum* is also an essential ingredient in Wizarding Photographic Developing Fluid. Without it, the other magical ingredient, ginger root, would be inert and our photographs would be no different from Muggle pictures," he said.

"Is that... is it considered a Potion?" she asked in amazement. "We never brewed anything remotely like that in school."

"There are many concoctions that are excluded from the Hogwarts Potions syllabus," he replied dryly. "In any case, it's fortunate that you spotted it, as I need to make a batch of Burn Healing Paste fairly soon. You may assist me if you wish."

"Yes, sir," the young woman replied. Although she didn't smile, Harry and Ron knew her well enough to read the anticipation in her eyes: she was looking forward to a new challenge.

Just short of the front door, Snape halted. Reaching into the pocket of his robe, he brought out a handful of orangey-yellow fungi. They were almost trumpet-shaped, like oddly colored morning glory blossoms. "I, too, have collected some ingredients on today's walk. Tell me, girl, what would you be able to brew with these?" he asked, holding them out in front of Hermione.

Her brow contracted as she examined them, but after a minute, her expression cleared. "Cream of mushroom soup!" she piped, giving him a cheeky smile.

His face took on a pained look. "With *Cantharellus*? Hardly! Mushroom bisque is the correct answer," he amended, smirking. With a quick *Finite Incantatem*, he released the tether spell. "Now, go give these to the elves. I'll be downstairs in the lab." Opening the door, he ushered her inside.

Harry was completely taken aback. *Where was Snape's trademark sneer? Where were his cruel, sarcastic comments? And he all but thanked Hermione for finding the Chlorophyllum, whatever that was!*

As Moody stepped forward to follow Snape through the door, white fog began to billow around them. Harry touched the older man's arm. "Wait a minute!" he advised.

When the fog had dissipated, they found themselves standing in a comfortable sitting room. The view outside a nearby window made it apparent that they were now inside the cottage. Ron nudged Harry with an elbow and pointed silently toward a figure curled up in one of the room's cushioned chairs. It was Hermione. As usual, she sat with a book in her lap. Ron smiled. "She's studying for a test," he said, a fond note in his voice.

Harry watched as she alternated her attention between the book in her lap and a set of notes on the chair's arm, her lips moving soundlessly as she occasionally recited answers under her breath. For a moment he felt as if he were back in the Gryffindor common room; the memories this elicited made him smile warmly, much as Ron had.

At the sound of the door opening behind them, all three men turned. Snape entered, ordering Hermione to accompany him, then swept upstairs to what was, apparently, a shared bedroom. Looking around, Harry noticed a Transfiguration text and a pair of feminine pajamas lying on a folding camp bed. The large four-poster bed nearby was flanked by a set of nightstands, one of which held an ancient-looking Potions manuscript that could only belong to Snape. *She has to share a room with him?* he thought incredulously.

His thoughts were interrupted, however, as Snape handed Hermione the large paper-wrapped package he carried, directing her to open it. Harry, Ron and Moody watched as she unwrapped it, revealing a warm and very beautiful cloak (in Slytherin colors, no less). In amazement, the three observers watched as Snape made it clear that the cloak was for her and insisted she wear it. Appearing dazed, Hermione not only donned the garment, but she thanked her captor warmly. In spite of his characteristically emotionless expression, Harry got the distinct impression that Snape was pleased with her reaction and pleased with himself, as well.

"Harry!" Ron hissed, gripping his arm almost painfully. "I don't like this! What the hell is he trying to accomplish?" Ron sounded a bit desperate, and his eyes plainly showed his distress.

Harry understood Ron's concern at once: not only was Snape giving 'his girl' expensive gifts, but she appeared to like it! If it was hard for him, Harry, to see Hermione being so easily influenced, then how much more difficult must it be for Ron. The sudden fog swirling around them cut off further conversation, although their feet stayed firmly on the ground. They waited apprehensively for Snape's next memory.

They were in a laboratory of some sort, the lack of windows indicating that it was probably a basement room. Hermione and Snape were working next to a cauldron containing a thick, light blue fluid. "Why have you shredded these ironwood roots rather than slicing them?" he asked sharply.

"Well," she answered slowly, "I was thinking that their sap would infuse into the potion more quickly this way. It occurred to me that it may be a matter of timing rather than type. I mean, we've already tried various substitutes for them without getting any real result." She looked up at him steadily, waiting for his response.

"Fine," he snapped, "add them!" His lip curled disdainfully. "It can't be any worse than the last ten trials we've run," he sneered under his breath as he turned away.

Hermione added the final ingredient, stirred ten times clockwise, then twice counterclockwise. The potion immediately turned a rich azure, prompting her to gasp in surprise. Snape whipped around to see what was wrong, and in three long strides had reached her side. His eyes widened in shock as he stared fixedly at the concoction for a few seconds. Recovering his composure, he shot a calculating look at his now-smiling assistant. "Well, Granger," he drawled, placing a hand on her shoulder approvingly, "it seems you were correct." He gave her shoulder a light squeeze and bent close to her ear. "Nicely done!" he said silkily.

"Get your hands off her, you greasy scumbag!" Ron hissed fiercely.

As misty white enveloped them once again, Harry's only consolation was that Hermione's smile was directed toward the completed potion, rather than her companion.

They were back in the sitting room. Harry hoped, for Ron's sake, that the Pensieve session would be over soon. Much more provocation and the redhead would begin

raving.

At a knock on the door, Moody pulled both young men to the side of the room. "Better vantage point over here lads," he advised gruffly, placing himself between Ron and the transpiring events.

Harry caught Moody's eye (the normal one) and gave him a nod of thanks. They stayed at the side of the room watching in astonishment as Snape's fellow Death Eater and long-time friend, Rabastan Lestrangle, entered the cottage and began making himself pleasant. *What the hell kind of game is he playing?* Harry wondered. All of a sudden, a possible motive for Lestrangle's behavior occurred to him, followed immediately by a crushing fear for Hermione's safety. She would stand little chance if the man intended to attack her, even with an unaltered wand. As it was, she was virtually helpless. But after a few minutes it became apparent to Harry that something much more subtle was happening. Lestrangle was attempting to befriend her, putting her at ease by talking about Viktor Krum. And it seemed to be working.

"Krum? She's asking about Krum?" Ron questioned under his breath. "What about me?"

Realistically, Harry knew that Hermione probably had no choice about who she was allowed to talk to, but his anger began to override his reason. *How can she sit there, drinking wine with a couple of Death Eaters?* he thought furiously. *She ought to have gone upstairs, refused to talk to them!* He barely registered the content of Snape and Lestrangle's conversation as he watched Hermione. She was curled into the sofa, sitting quietly and sipping her wine with a thoughtful expression. He glanced at Ron, knowing that however painful this was for himself, it paled beside what his best friend was experiencing. Something inside him hardened. *How could Hermione do this to them? To Ron especially!*

It was a great relief to Harry when, as Hermione departed upstairs for bed, the fog surrounded them, and he felt himself float upward. He emerged from the string of memories, landing on his feet in the Weasley's kitchen.

As soon as they were solidly back in the here and now, Ron disengaged himself from Moody's grasp with a savage jerk of his arm. "I'm going to bed!" he snarled, stomping out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

Moody favored Harry with a full-blown scowl. "You realize," he stated gruffly, "that they're manipulating her, don't you, boy?"

Harry nodded. He did, but that didn't take away the anger he felt on Ron's behalf. The others were all looking at them, puzzlement written clearly on their faces, but nobody broke the silence. After a minute, it occurred to him that Moody had a great deal of experience with Death Eaters; if anyone could guess at their motives, it would be him. "What... what do you think they're trying to accomplish?" he asked haltingly.

"If it were only Snape, I would have said seduction was his goal," Moody answered. "But with Lestrangle involved as well, I think it's something much worse." He paused a moment as if reluctant to continue. "There's a good chance that they're after her loyalty. I'd say she's in grave danger. A trusting young girl like her... against practiced manipulators like those two... You and Weasley have to put your anger aside. We need to figure out a way to save your friend," he advised sternly.

Harry nodded woodenly and excused himself, following Ron's example of an early bedtime. He tried to blame it all on Snape. He really tried. But in his mind's eye he kept seeing Hermione's warm smile as she drew that Slytherin cape around her shoulders.

Hermione sighed. It had been a very long day. She had worked her way through an exhausting Charms lesson, read the next chapters for Potions and Transfiguration, taken her usual post-lunch walk with Snape and assisted him during an extended afternoon session in the lab. *Perhaps, Hermione thought wearily, now that dinner is over, I should just go to bed.* No sooner had she resolved to head upstairs, than a familiar rapping was heard at the door. One of the elves appeared and answered it, revealing Rabastan Lestrangle. Since that initial unexpected visit a few weeks back, he had taken to dropping by two to three nights a week. Snape seemed both unsurprised and mildly pleased with this change in their evening routine. And after the first week, Hermione had reluctantly (and privately) admitted that in spite of what she knew about him, she enjoyed Lestrangle's visits as well. Where Snape was terse, he was affable. Where Snape was measured and watchful, he seemed almost careless, willing to approach virtually any topic. And of course, the simple addition of a third person automatically made for livelier, more varied conversations. Yes, she appreciated the novelty of Lestrangle's presence. She did not, however, abandon all caution where he was concerned.

This evening he had brought a portable telescope with him which he intended to set up in the clearing in front of the cottage. A few days prior, Hermione had discovered that Lestrangle was an enthusiastic amateur astronomer. She had tentatively inquired what he thought about the evidence suggesting a tenth planet in the solar system, inadvertently launching him into an animated discussion. Although she had achieved an outstanding on her Astronomy OWL, Hermione had chosen not to take NEWT-level classes in the subject. Listening to him as he described how the planets affected certain aspects of spell-casting, she had begun to regret her decision. In classic need-to-know-it-all mode, she had asked whether he was able to track the motions of Callisto, an important celestial object in certain Arithmancy calculations. This led to his discovering her passion for Arithmancy and, in turn, to his offering to help her chart Callisto's present location. Hence, the telescope tucked under his arm.

"The sky is uncommonly clear tonight, especially considering the time of year," he proclaimed earnestly. "Perfect viewing conditions! Come, Severus, put away your book. Miss Hermione, surely you want to view the moons of Jupiter," he coaxed.

Hearing her given name startled her. It was the first time he had used it. "Um, I was actually thinking of going to bed early tonight," she prevaricated with uncertainty. "But I would like to see them... Perhaps just for a bit?" She looked to Snape, hoping he would agree, as she had no intention of going without him. Lestrangle's familiarity had made her distinctly uncomfortable. Snape gave a sharp nod, indicating his willingness, and she headed upstairs to gather her cloak.

She returned a minute later, dressed in her long, green cloak and carrying Snape's black one over her arm. After he had swung it around his shoulders, she held out her arm to him in an almost automatic gesture, allowing him to cast the tether spell.

Lestrangle watched them, a knowing gleam in his eye. He had caught the nuances of the young woman's behavior. She had not looked to Severus for permission, but for reassurance and protection. He was sure of it. And he recognized that cloak she was wearing: the eight-pointed silver stars were the sigil of the Prince family. *Meaning that the cloak could only have come from Severus,* he concluded. *Interesting....*

Outside, the heavens were a blaze of diamonds against the dark vault of the night sky. Crisp, cold air swirled about them as they huddled in their warm cloaks, waiting for Lestrangle to set up and focus his instrument. Hermione stood next to Snape, but her eyes were directed upward, mesmerized. The contrast of the innumerable white stars amidst black space took her breath away. At last, bringing her gaze back to earth, she looked around at the trees. "It's beautiful here at night," she sighed. "So unspoiled." She glanced at Snape, only to find he was watching her intently, his face inscrutable. "I think," she said holding eye contact with him, "that the woods at night are almost as hypnotic as the beach at night. But in a completely different way. Don't you think so, sir?"

"I don't generally indulge in romantic notions," he responded with a touch of asperity.

She rolled her eyes. "Big surprise," she muttered. Turning to watch Lestrangle fiddle with the telescope, she inquired, "Did you find Jupiter yet?"

"Yes, and all four Galilean moons are visible right now!" he replied with excitement. "Come and have a look," he invited her.

Hermione took her place at the instrument, bending to peer through the eyepiece. The Jovian system jumped into view: a large, orangey-colored striped marble surrounded by its four largest satellites. "Is Callisto the one on the far left?" she asked.

"Yes, that's it. It's the dark grey one." Lestrangle bent close to her ear. "Do you know which one is Europa?" he queried softly.

She chuckled, remembering how Harry had once mistakenly thought that Europa was covered in mice. Straightening, she said, "It's the one with the smooth surface, second out from the planet, right?" He nodded. "Do you want to see?" Hermione asked Snape, stepping back to give him access.

Snape moved into place, peering into the eyepiece for a minute. Without lifting his head, he inquired, "Did you bring a chart to record this on, Rabastan?"

"Yes."

Snape straightened and extended his hand for the sheet of parchment, but the other man smiled faintly and declined to give it to him with a shake of the head. "I thought perhaps Miss Hermione would prefer to pinpoint Callisto's location herself. After all, I did bring the 'scope up here for her sake," he said with an easygoing smile in Hermione's direction.

Snape scowled a moment, then stepped to the left of the telescope. "Very well."

Hermione took the parchment that Lestrange held out to her. He produced a quill and ink from a pocket of the telescope case and gave her those as well. Bending again to the eyepiece, she began carefully marking the position of Jupiter and each of its four largest moons with respect to the background star field. As she worked, she became aware that Lestrange was standing close, his left arm brushing lightly against her right. She subtly transferred her weight to her left foot, allowing her to shift slightly away from him without being too obvious. However, this had the consequence of bringing her in close proximity to Snape. When she had marked all the relevant planetary, satellite and star positions she could, she straightened and began to review her work. Suddenly, she was hyperaware of the silence and the darkness all around her. The tall, warm presences of the two men were close, very close, on either side of her.

"It's not a test," Lestrange joked, breaking the tension abruptly. "I promise you won't get a failing grade if every star is not perfectly positioned, Miss Hermione!"

Hermione grimaced at the awkward-sounding appellation. "I feel like I'm in a bloody Jane Austen novel," she griped. "Either use my first or last name, sir. None of this 'miss' business, if you don't mind." His answering smile was broad, and she realized her tactical error at once. *Damn Slytherins!* she thought with dismay. *That's not the result I was after at all.*

"Why, thank you, Hermione! First names are so much simpler and more pleasant, don't you think?" Lestrange said, smirking. "In return, I insist you call me Rabastan."

"No!" she blurted. "I mean, thanks but I couldn't do that, sir. I wouldn't feel comfortable." She turned to Snape. "I'd like to go to sleep now, sir. Could you release this so I can go in, please?" she asked raising her arm so that he could nullify the charm that bound them together.

"I'll go in as well," Snape replied in a neutral voice as he took her arm. "Rabastan, why don't you pack that up and come in for a drink," he suggested over his shoulder as he steered Hermione to the door.

When Lestrange entered, his telescope folded into a compact bundle inside its case, Snape was already seated, a glass of amber liquor in his hand. There was another waiting on the coffee table for Lestrange. Scooping up the snifter of brandy, he sank into the nearest chair, sipping his drink gratefully. "You shouldn't work Hermione so hard during the day, Severus. You're depriving us of her delightful company," he accused his friend with mock severity.

"But of course," Snape agreed smoothly. "Her entire purpose, according to you, is to provide pleasant conversation for your leisure nights."

Lestrange laughed outright. "Yes, and wouldn't that be pleasant, indeed. Well, my friend, I do see why Krum is so taken with Hermione Granger." Snape made an inarticulate scoffing sound. "Really, Severus, you have to admit, she's intelligent, agreeable, young and pretty. Shame about her birth," he said regretfully. "If she were even half-blood...." He lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

"I advise you," Snape told him quietly, "to make your admiration a little less apparent to the girl. I don't want you to alarm her."

"With you as her protector, I'm sure she's not truly afraid," Lestrange said blandly.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "You're goading me," he growled softly.

Lestrange smiled but didn't risk an answer. Severus was too sharp. If he said anything further, his friend would, no doubt, be clued-in to what he was up to. And he didn't intend to let that happen. *Sometimes, he reflected, it's an advantage to be open-tempered. People never suspect any motive except the one that's clearly in view.* Let Severus believe he was attracted to Hermione Granger. He would accept the reprimand and then back off, leaving Severus to realize where his protectiveness for the young woman truly originated. *Perhaps it will goad him into action... I'd like to see that,* he thought as he regarded his friend. *And who knows, if Severus gets 'closer' to Granger, it may help ensure that the Dark Lord's plan succeeds.*

Upon reaching her room, Hermione decided a nice hot bath was what she needed after the cold of a November night. She retrieved her pajamas while the tub was filling, then settled into the steaming water with a sigh. Lestrange's behavior worried her. Up to this point, he'd been merely polite and friendly, taking obvious enjoyment from conversing with Snape and herself. Tonight, though he had been a bit too familiar for her peace of mind. Snape had noticed too and had subtly extricated her from the unnerving situation. She wondered if he would talk to Lestrange about it. *It's probably egotistical to suppose they talk about me when I'm not there.* In any case, she was certain that Snape would prevent anything from harming her.

The hot water had successfully relaxed her muscles. Her body felt languid, letting her know sleep would be welcome soon. Her mind drifted randomly. She remembered the sumptuous Prefects' bathroom at Hogwarts: she had enjoyed that immensely! Her parents' whirlpool tub was nice, but nothing compared to bathing in a swimming pool full of warm water and colorful, scented bubbles. "Mmmm," she groaned, remembering the feel of the slick marble steps beneath her, as she had lain in the shallows, luxuriating among pink clouds of foam. From there, her thoughts slid easily to another bath she had taken: one where she was lying along the second step of the bath, immersed in the warm pool and partially covered by bubbles, caressing herself. She closed her eyes, reliving and reenacting the memory as she stroked her breasts. She brought Ron to mind, picturing his wonderful smile, his tall, lean body. Her hands stroked down her abdomen and between her legs, seeking. She imagined them kissing, trying to recapture how she felt when their lips were pressed together. But something was missing; it had been so long too many months she could hardly remember what his lips felt like on hers. That realization brought her up short, popping her fantasy like a soap bubble.

Opening her eyes, she sighed again, this time in frustration. That bath memory had aroused not only her thoughts and feelings, but her body as well. *Right,* she decided, *back to the old standby.* Closing her eyes, she pictured Keanu Reeves, standing knee deep in the water of the Prefects' bath, his lithe body clad only in a Speedo brief. *Mmmm, that's hot!* She imagined herself walking to the water's edge and lowering herself to the first step. She brushed her hands over her nipples, feeling them harden. He reached out his hand to hers, clasping her fingers, drawing her down another step to stand in front of him. Her hands slipped smoothly over the soft, wet skin of her ribcage and stomach, skimming over her pubic hair to tease her clit. In her mind's eye, her lover was a tall, dark figure, dimly seen in the low light. She looked up into his dark eyes; they were deep, unfathomable. Another picture came swimming to the surface of her mind: dark eyes in a pale face, watching her intently, inscrutably... a fleeting image of herself, flanked by two tall, warm, male bodies, as she leaned to the left... *No!* she gasped internally, jerking away from the remembered tension. Her eyes popped open. *Had it been sexual tension? Was that what had happened out there?*

She took a deep breath. *Best not dwell on that.* She felt an ache between her legs as her partially aroused body told her it wanted more. *Okay, but no more tall, dark and mysterious. A blond then,* she decided, *with blue eyes and smooth, tan skin... Leonardo DiCaprio.* She began again, imagining him kissing her, caressing her body as she lay back in the warm water, her fingers rhythmically circling and stroking her clitoris. She imagined her lover's blond hair dragging across her torso as he tongued her nipple lightly. Her hand motions became faster as her orgasm approached. She pictured her lover kissing his way down her body as her anticipation built. Finally, she came with a moan of satisfaction. As the pulses of pleasure waned, she relaxed fully in contentment. *Ahhh... Thank God for unattainable men,* she thought. *What else are they good for except fantasies?*

My sincere thanks to Larilee for her work as my beta reader and for her helpful advice.

Author's Notes:

1. Chlorophyllum (Green-spored Lepiota) is a poisonous fungi seen in late summer to early fall; Cantharellus (Chanterelle) is an edible (and delectable) fungi found throughout the summer and into early fall.
2. Why did I pick Callisto to be a significant celestial body? Because it looks cool!

Dirty Revenge

Chapter 12 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

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Chapter 12: Dirty Revenge

Well, that's it, Hermione thought, closing the Herbology text. She was as ready as she'd ever be for the test Snape had promised tomorrow morning. November was drawing to a close, and she was pleased that she had finished with the text in well under four months. Tomorrow's exam was to be a 'final' of sorts. Of course, she was very far from finished with Herbology if she wanted to pass the Herbology N.E.W.T. someday. All she had really done was rote memorization from the book. It had been impossible to learn the practical aspect of the discipline. *No greenhouses here at Minion-Malfoy Retreat. Nor at Snape's house.* And Herbology, she knew, was comprised of about one part theoretical knowledge to four parts applied knowledge. *Someday, I will learn the rest...* she thought with determination. Unfortunately, at this point the depressing reality of her situation occurred to her. *Assuming I ever get the chance to sit the exam*, she reflected solemnly. That could only happen if Harry defeated that inhuman monster, Voldemort. She heaved a sigh of resignation.

Hearing the gusting breath escape the young woman sitting a few feet away from him, Snape flicked his eyes in her direction. "Something the matter, Granger?" he inquired softly.

"Just wondering..." She trailed off, uncertain if she should say what was on her mind.

"Well?" he prompted, lifting an eyebrow.

"...if I'll ever be able to take the N.E.W.T.s," she said quietly. She was staring bleakly down at her lap. Her whisper was so soft, Snape almost didn't catch it. "If I'll even have a future...."

Snape continued to watch the girl, but said nothing. There really was no good answer. After all, he couldn't even guarantee his own future. And he could see, quite plainly, that she was on the verge of tears. *Better to stay silent than to tip her over the edge into a crying bout*, he reasoned. He had neither the aptitude nor the inclination for dealing with emotional females.

She looked away, drawing the back of her hand across her eyes. Then with a shuddering breath, she stood. "I'll be upstairs," she uttered calmly, turning quickly and disappearing up the steps.

Good, Snape approved silently. *She mastered her emotions. How unlike her friends she is*, he mused. *That arrogant brat, Potter, never managed to do half as well! And Weasley, like the rest of his family, displays every thought and feeling on his face practically flaunts them!* He grimaced at the memory of those idiots! *Granger is far more adept than her friends in many areas. She is relatively intelligent and, thank Merlin, logical!* He despised irrational thinkers. And, in spite of her tendency toward periodic mood swings, he generally appreciated her company. With a jolt, he realized that he was agreeing with Rabastan's assessment of the girl. *No*, he corrected himself, *young woman. Rabastan was right about that as well.*

Harry was getting impatient. It was nearly five weeks since they had destroyed the Horcrux at Hogwarts, and he had not made any further progress on his mission. In fact, November had been nothing but drudgery on top of toil capped with worry. Professor McGonagall's retribution over the destruction in the Trophy room had got the month off to a rousing start. He and Ron had spent two entire weekends cleaning up and repairing the place! But the truly difficult part had been explaining their actions without revealing the existence of the Horcruxes. Harry rolled his eyes, remembering his desperate mental scramble to fabricate an explanation....

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"Potter! Weasley! Remus! Explain yourselves immediately!" demanded Professor McGonagall.

"Ron and I wandered into the Trophy room after visiting our old dormitory, Professor. We were just looking around when I spotted Riddle's Special Award," Harry explained rapidly. "When I saw it, my scar started to burn really badly, and I... I lost control. I guess I just reacted with an offensive spell," he finished lamely.

"Yeah, Professor," Ron interposed. "And when I saw Harry grabbing his forehead, I thought he was under some sort of mental attack like what happened two years ago when he saw all that stuff Voldemort was doing! I melded power with him, thinking maybe it would help him somehow but...." He shrugged eloquently, gesturing to the chaos around them.

"And what is your story?" she asked sharply, turning to Remus.

"He came in after the blast, Professor," Harry interjected hurriedly.

"Yes, I... I was just was looking for the two of them," Remus added, latching on to Harry's cobbled-together alibi.

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Harry shook his head, remembering how McGonagall had glared suspiciously at all three of them. But she had not disputed their tale. Remus had escaped the stern Headmistress' wrath, but Harry and Ron hadn't been so lucky. Minerva McGonagall still glared at the two young men for the first ten minutes of each Transfiguration lesson.

Unfortunately, the cleanup of the Trophy room had only been the beginning of November's unpleasantness. All their teachers, both at the Burrow and the Ministry, seemed to have colluded to produce a mountain of coursework for the young wizards. On top of all that, Harry and Ron had been extremely shaken by what they had seen in the Pensieve. Harry couldn't throw off the feeling of foreboding; the memories he had witnessed seemed to have crept into his subconscious to pick away at him.

For much of the month though, Harry's biggest concern was Remus. All through November they saw not a hair of his prematurely greying head. Mrs. Weasley said he had spent the first couple of weeks on Order business: he was with the werewolves again, gleaning any information he could come by. But as the month wore on and Remus didn't return, Harry became worried. Finally, after pestering Moody for most of a Defense lesson, he learned that Remus had gone through a harrowing transformation. He had been forced to stay with the werewolf pack during the full moon, undergoing the painful change without benefit of either medicine or restraints. He was still recovering nearly twelve days later.

At last, when the calendar was finally flipped to December, Remus turned up at the Burrow. He was drawn and pale, but his usual cheerful self. At the first opportunity, Harry ushered the older man aside for a quiet word. Harry was eager to dispose of Slytherin's locket and wanted to plan the best way to go about it. Remus, however, solemnly informed Harry that it would have to wait. He wasn't strong enough yet to direct the complex magic involved. Harry had acceded more gracefully than usual, stifling his impatience in the face of his friend's obvious disability. Privately, he decided that a trip to Knockturn Alley was in order; he would attack the Horcrux problem on the second front.

"Aguamenti!" Water jetted from her wand into the basin. "Evanesc!" The water vanished without a trace. *Good! I think I've got the hang of it now!* Hermione congratulated herself. *Now for the hard part.* She focused her will on the charm and pointing her wand at the basin, thought, *Aguamenti!* Nothing happened. Again: *Aguamenti!* Still nothing. *Damn! Focus Granger,* she chided herself. Once again: *Aguamenti!* "Yes!" she crowed, looking happily at the filling basin on the floor in front of her. Snape had been working her mercilessly on nonverbal charms for the past week. Nonverbal magic, according to him, was the litmus test of excellence in the wizarding world; it was mastered only by those with true talent and power. Well, she wasn't sure she could achieve mastery, but she would settle for facility.

I can't wait to show Snape! she thought, a touch of excitement jumbled with her satisfaction at finally getting the knack of it. *He should be pleased with my progress.* Although she had always been eager for the approval of her teachers, she was aware that her current reaction to Snape's opinion was qualitatively different in some way. She hadn't yet taken the time to analyze the warm feeling she experienced when he approved her successes. She was still enjoying the pure novelty of praise from that quarter. He had also been less taciturn over the past few weeks, often conversing with her quietly in the evenings, as he was wont to do with Rabastan Lestranger. And she enjoyed their time together. A year ago, if anyone had told her she would look forward to conversations with Severus Snape, she would have said they were either mental or completely pissed. She grinned at that thought, then, realizing she was wasting time, shook her head. *Standing here daydreaming won't impress Snape, that's for sure!* she reproved silently. *I had better get back to work.* She returned to practicing the charms drills he had set her to learn.

Forty-five minutes and four successful drills later, she was interrupted by the arrival of Malfoy. Narcissa Malfoy. *Oh joy,* she thought sarcastically, *the light of the magical world has arrived.* Aside from Draco, there was no one whose presence at the cottage she appreciated less than his mother, Narcissa. The other Death Eaters who came to work with Draco largely ignored her existence; she returned the favor, with interest. But Narcissa Malfoy was a different story. She had come to visit Draco on two prior occasions, each of which stood out in humiliating detail in Hermione's memory. During her first visit, mother and son had engaged in a contest of sorts: who could think up the most hurtful, demeaning comments about 'the Mudblood.' In the face of two Malfoys and no Snape (who was out at the time), Hermione was forced to beat a strategic retreat to her bedroom. Her second encounter with the blond woman was not much better. Narcissa had found her alone in the cottage (aside from the elves) and knowing she was unable to retaliate, had proceeded to insult her parents, her friends, her appearance and her virtue. Refusing to acknowledge the stream of vitriol and determined not to run away again, Hermione had endured nearly thirty minutes of the witch's 'company' before Snape's arrival put an end to it.

Today, as usual, Narcissa entered without knocking, an air of arrogance and self-assurance practically projecting from her in waves. *How does she manage that?* Hermione wondered. Aloud, she said merely, "Draco isn't here." She pointedly did not look at the other woman. *I'm not going to take any crap from her today!* she decided. *I've had it with her supercilious attitude.*

"How dare you even address me, you filthy little Mudblood!" Narcissa retorted coldly. "You will remain silent in my presence or I will cast a Silencing Spell on you until you learn your place!" She clapped her hands sharply to summon an elf. "I am here to see Severus Snape, tell him I am waiting in the sitting room," she snapped at the elf. The creature bowed and scurried toward the laboratory door to carry out its orders.

Hermione seethed internally, staring hatefully at the older woman's back. Narcissa, sensing that she was being watched, turned to look at Hermione. "What are you still doing here?" she demanded. "Get out! Now!"

Hermione's chin lifted a bit. "Snape expects me to stay here, practicing the charms he taught me. I'm not leaving until he tells me to!" she said defiantly, turning her back on the blond woman deliberately. She knew the haughty action would anger Malfoy, but she didn't care. *It's time she got back a little of what she dishes out,* she thought heatedly. Hermione forced herself to ignore the other woman, and returned to practicing the nonverbal water summoning charm. As the basin at her feet slowly filled with water, she heard pacing.

Narcissa began muttering, as if talking to herself, but just loud enough to insure that Hermione would be able to hear. "Where in the blazes is Severus? He'd better get here soon. I'm not going to stand around here all afternoon. By Salazar, I don't dare sit on the furniture here anymore, there must be dirt ingrained in every piece by now. Hmph! I suppose it will have to be burned and replaced after the Dark Lord disposes of the Mudblood scum."

Hermione felt her face flush with fury. *That's it!* She pointed her wand at the water in the basin. *Fimusco!* she thought. Nothing happened. "*Fimusco!*" she whispered, abandoning nonverbal magic in her anger. Lumpy, brown clumps poured from her wand, gradually darkening the water, turning it into a thick, sticky mass. "*Globus!*" she mouthed, Conjuring a Gryffindor-red balloon. With a twist and wiggle of her wand, she lowered it to the basin and filled it. *Hmm, another, I think.* "*Globus!*" she whispered again. When the second balloon was ready, she shot a glance at Narcissa Malfoy. *Still pacing and still ignoring me. Good. Wingardium Leviosa!* she commanded silently with an expert swish and flick of her wand. The balloons rose silently. When she was satisfied with their placement, she jerked her arm upward, releasing the Levitation spell.

Splat! The first balloon caught Narcissa Malfoy on the crown of her head, while the second smacked onto the floor immediately in her path. In mid-stride when the balloons dropped, the blond woman stepped directly into the morass at her feet. Her foot slid forward, and with a screech, she went down, landing on her rear in the puddle of gluey, brown mud. Wiping the muck from her eyes, she saw Hermione watching with a grin.

"Oops! Sorry," Hermione said flippantly, not sounding remotely apologetic. "I must have accidentally left those around after my last bath." With a triumphant smile, Hermione spun on her heel, heading for the kitchen. Moments later an electric shock of prescience shot up her back, sending her diving instinctively to the right as a shouted spell rang out behind her.

"Diffindo!"

The hex streaked through the air where Hermione had been a moment before, slamming into a portrait and splitting the canvas. Hermione landed on her belly and scrambled behind a chair, hearing the other woman's scream of frustration at missing her target. Heavy footsteps pounded into the room.

"Expelliarmus!" Snape shouted, disarming Narcissa and neatly catching her wand. "What in Merlin's name is going on here!" he demanded, glaring at the only person he could see: Narcissa.

"That bitch..." Narcissa began.

"She tried to kill me!" Hermione interrupted, springing to her feet and pointing to the canvas bearing the evidence of Narcissa's hex.

"This low-life spawn of Muggles attacked me, Severus. I demand that you punish her!"

"That's impossible," Snape contradicted. "She cannot attack another person her wand won't function offensively."

"Well, she managed this! Or did you imagine I covered myself in this muck?" Narcissa asked rhetorically.

"She got what she deserved!" Hermione returned vehemently. "The insufferable, conceited harridan! I'm sick of her abuse. If she was half as great as she thinks her 'blood' makes her, she would have seen it coming!"

Snape scowled at Hermione for a few moments. "Granger, go upstairs," he ordered in a dangerously quiet voice. "Now!"

Breathing heavily and still enraged, Hermione stared into his eyes a moment. "Fine!" she growled. "I should have known you'd take her side." She jammed her wand into her pocket and stomped up the stairs.

Snape looked appraisingly at the mess on the floor of the sitting room, noting the two scraps of red balloon amongst the mud. He suppressed a smirk. *Diabolically clever. Scourify*, he said, clearing away the evidence of Narcissa's humiliation and offering her a hand up from the floor.

"What are you going to do about that girl?" she asked imperiously, as Snape handed back her wand.

He narrowed his eyes, staring at her coldly until she became uncomfortable and looked away. "I daresay she was not unprovoked, was she, Narcissa?" he asked silkily. Noting the slight shifting of her eyes, he knew he was correct. "As I thought. I believe you should leave now, Narcissa," he said in a deceptively calm voice.

"This house is Malfoy property!" she retorted. "I have every right to be here!"

"And just as you have rights, you also have duties." He advanced on her threateningly. "If you hurt Granger, you will pay the price in blood at the Dark Lord's feet!" he hissed. "He has ordered that she not be harmed, or had you forgotten that? You're fortunate that she is a better duelist than you even with her current wand!"

"You dare to compare that Mudblood slut to me!" Narcissa snarled. She stared at Snape, disbelief written clearly on her face. "Severus, what has happened to your pride!"

Snape stared back implacably. He was furious, but he held his anger on a tight leash.

Abruptly, Narcissa changed tactics, sinking into a chair and looking up at him imploringly. "Severus, we are old friends; let's not argue." She sighed theatrically. "It's just that I'm worried about you, spending all your time with an inferior creature like that. You can do much better."

"Really?" he asked scathingly, stepping closer to glare down at her.

"Of course!" she said smoothly. "Your talent and rank in the Dark Lord's circle will insure it! I'm sure you wish to carry on the Snape line, and there are always witches of good birth looking for an acceptable match."

Snape's face twisted into an ugly sneer. "Ah, so you know many such women, Narcissa? Perhaps you have some names for me?" he asked in a voice just above a whisper. He stepped even closer to her and watched in satisfaction as her eyes widened with a touch of fear. "Is there a cousin of yours that you would recommend? Or maybe the daughter of a friend?" Bending down, he placed his hands on the armrests of her chair, effectively trapping her, intimidating her. Then he played his final card. "Or perhaps," he suggested, moving forward into her personal space, "you are convinced that Lucius will not be returning." Her eyes widened further as she leaned back unwittingly. "Would I be an acceptable replacement should you find yourself a widow, my dear?" he breathed.

"Lucius will be free soon, Severus," she gasped. "I didn't mean to imply..."

"Save your breath, Narcissa!" he interrupted, jerking upright and striding across the room. "And confine your 'concern' to your own family! I will mind my own affairs." He crossed his arms in front of his chest and narrowed his eyes at her. "I trust I have made my point?"

"Yes. Forgive me," she apologized, jumping to her feet. "I... I must go. Good day, Severus." She practically ran from the cottage, the crack of her Apparition sounding before the door had swung fully shut.

Impudent, presumptuous woman! Snape fumed. He felt a savage satisfaction, knowing he had scared her badly, but his anger was not assuaged. He would never be able to deal with Granger in his current mood. "Accio cloak!" he called. Plucking the garment out of the air, he swung it around himself and called for an elf. "I will return in an hour. You know what to do!"

The woods were dismal grey and featureless this time of year like the sky, but Snape hardly noticed his surroundings as he strode down the path, brooding. Narcissa's words had unwittingly opened an old wound. One that he had, until today, believed to be scarred-over and inert.

He'd known since early adolescence that he was unattractive to girls. Almost without exception, young, adolescent girls wanted the good looking boys; older girls sometimes progressed to wanting 'fun' boys, or popular, Quidditch-playing ones. All attributes he would never manage to acquire. He had intelligence, cunning and a fierce desire to prove himself none of which were tenable coin in gender relations. Until his O.W.L. scores came out. Suddenly, there was a small subset of girls eager for something he possessed: knowledge. That they were all girls with the reciprocal problem he faced (they had neither the beauty nor popularity adolescent boys desired) bothered him not at all. He bartered with them: snogging sessions for help with Potions essays, tutoring in exchange for more intimate trysts. He learned a great deal.

When he left school, however, he found he had lost his bargaining chip. The young women he came in contact with (mostly from families that shared his 'ideological leanings') wanted men with good bloodlines and money. They all knew of his Muggle father and his relative poverty. Those two circumstances, combined with his unappealing visage, ensured universal rejection. When he realized that no amount of knowledge and skill would induce a pure-blood to form an alliance with him, he reverted to treating sex as a transaction. The courtesans he infrequently visited gave him what he wanted in exchange for money it was satisfactory.

And now, Narcissa Malfoy, with her privileged life, her 'Most Ancient and Noble House of Black' heritage and her unspeakable arrogance, had re-opened the lesion, shoving his nose into what was forever, irrevocably beyond his reach. *There is no 'Snape line' for me to continue*, he thought contemptuously, prowling the uneven trail between the trees. *Tobias Snape was a Muggle, and the Princes have never acknowledged me. Damn that pure-blood ideal to the lowest hell!*

Eventually, his anger spent, he regained his cold logic. He had always procured what he needed, if not precisely what he wanted, using his wits and talent. And he always would. He would triumph in the only way that ultimately mattered he would survive.

Snape found Hermione in the kitchen, eating lunch. He slid into a seat across the table from her, a house-elf inserting a plate in front of him so quickly it seemed almost to have been conjured. He regarded Hermione flatly for a few moments. She stared back defiantly, obviously still angry and unrepentant. When he spoke, however, he did not voice the reprimand she expected. "You used a charm on an inanimate object, I suppose," he said finally.

She nodded. "And partly using nonverbal magic," she added, a glimmer of mischief returning to her eyes.

"A unique revenge," he observed. "Foolish, but original, at least."

"No." She shook her head in denial. "I can't take credit for it. I actually stole the idea from Peeves," she said smugly. Then, her face took on a more serious expression. "You're not angry with me?" she questioned pensively. He just shook his head. "I thought... I thought you had taken her side," Hermione said, stammering a bit.

"Why would you think that?" he asked neutrally.

"You sent me off like an errant child," she retorted, sounding distinctly resentful. "And after all, I'm not some blond-haired, blue-eyed pure-blood. I'm not the witch you made an Unbreakable Vow to and risked your life to help!" she finished petulantly.

Snape scowled; there was something odd about her voice. *She almost sounds... jealous*, he thought incredulously. *Impossible*. "As I told you before," he explained aloud, "I made that vow for two reasons: to alleviate the suspicions of some of the Death Eaters and because the Malfoys have been my friends for many years. There is nothing beyond the bounds of long familiarity between Narcissa and I. In fact," he smirked, "Lucius would probably kill anyone he suspected of having designs on his wife!"

"I see," she responded, biting her lip thoughtfully.

She looked mollified by his answer. *It was jealousy!* he concluded, suppressing any outward signs of the sudden wave of gratification he felt. After a minute, she abruptly changed the subject, updating him on which nonverbal charm-drills she had completed. As he ate, he listened to her chatter, contributing only minimally to the conversation. Mentally, he pondered whether her jealousy toward Narcissa had more to do with her dislike of the other woman or a desire for his attention and approval.

Although he wanted to get back to the work Narcissa's arrival had interrupted that morning, Snape judged it worth his while to take Hermione out for their usual afternoon walk. He felt an urgent need to observe her reactions to him. *Perhaps*, he deliberated, *I should test the waters. Subtly...* "You should be cautious around the Malfoys, Hermione," he advised her. "All three of them are capable of casting the Cruciatus Curse." He gave her a sidelong glance to judge her reaction. It was the first time he had addressed her by her given name, and despite the serious subject matter, she looked pleased.

"I know," she answered softly. "Harry told me that Draco tried to cast it on him last year at school."

Snape was mildly surprised; he hadn't been aware of such an incident. "I am going to direct the house-elves to stay with you when I am elsewhere in the cottage." At her disgruntled look, he cautioned her again. "It is for your own protection. When Narcissa tells Draco what has transpired today, he will likely seek revenge." Hermione looked both resigned and slightly rebellious, but didn't argue.

"Tell me the sequence of events from this morning's incident," he directed.

"She came in and sent an elf to fetch you, then proceeded to try to kick me out," Hermione related. "I refused to leave and went back to practicing the nonverbal charms you set me. While she was waiting, she started with her typical insulting comments. I guess I just reached my limit. I won't be a helpless victim and take whatever she throws at me, Snape. You don't know what it was like! You weren't here the other times you didn't hear all the things she and Draco said about me!"

"Actually, I have heard them all," he responded quietly. "In fact, I would wager that I know precisely the sort of things they said. Do you think having only one Muggle parent exempts me from the scorn of the most fanatical pure-bloods?"

"But I'll bet you didn't sit there and take it!"

"Often, I had no choice but to do just that. So," he queried, "you decided to retaliate?"

"Yes. But then I foolishly turned my back on her and she tried to hex me!" she recalled ruefully.

"Foolish indeed," he commented. "What spell did Narcissa use when she attacked you?"

"The Splitting Curse. I thought that was only for inanimate objects..."

"No," he denied. "It works quite well on skin." She shuddered slightly at the thought. "Was it poor aim or the mud in her eyes that prevented her from hitting you?" Snape asked, with a hint of humor.

"Neither, I think," Hermione answered. "I felt... it was like the incident at the Riddle House. I can't explain it. It was as if a feeling of danger came over me, and I dove for cover."

"A very useful piece of magic in dangerous situations, Hermione. You are fortunate to have such a skill."

She felt the now-familiar tingle of warmth at his praise, even if it was praise for an unconscious skill. "Um, in any case, you came in right after Malfoy tried to hex me, so you know the rest." She was silent for a minute. "What happened after I went upstairs?" she questioned. "She seems to have left in a hurry. What did you do?"

"I kicked her off of her own property," he said dryly. "Threatened her with the Dark Lord's retribution, among other things," he added darkly. "I doubt she will be back soon."

"Did you loom menacingly? No one does that better than you," she deadpanned.

His eyes widened with surprise. "Cheeky girl!" he chided.

"So, what were the 'other things' you used to scare her off?"

"The horror of intimacy with me." His tone was flat and hard.

She either didn't hear, or didn't want to hear the warning in his voice. "I thought you'd have threatened to hex her at the very least! It seems your bark is worse than your bite, after all," she teased. "What did you do, offer to snog her? Not a very terrifying tactic, if you ask me!"

"Contrary to what most of my former students believe, I do use mirrors. I know better than anyone how repulsive I am to women," he bit out.

"Looks aren't everything," she countered, unconcerned by his ire. "Anyway, if that's the criteria the former Narcissa Black used when she chose a husband, then she deserves the multitude of objectionable qualities in the one she got!"

Snape didn't answer. She was bang-on-target about the Malfoys. There was no point in discussing an indisputable fact like that. But what really sealed his lips was the implication behind her words. She seemed to be saying that she didn't care how he looked. He replayed her words: "What did you do, offer to snog her? Not a very terrifying tactic, if you ask me!" *It's not possible*, he told himself. *Pretty young women are not attracted to me!* But he couldn't deny the teasing quality in her voice. *It sounded almost as if she were... flirting*. All his past experience told him he must be wrong, but still, a seed of hope had germinated somewhere inside him. He resolved to observe her closely. He would deduce her intentions eventually.

*My deep appreciation goes out to Larilee for her work Beta reading this story.

Author's Notes:

1. Fimusco is adapted from the Latin word fimus = dirt/filth
2. Globus = balloon (in Spanish)

False Starts

Chapter 13 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

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Chapter 13: False Starts

Two weeks after Hermione's Herbology 'final,' Lestrage arrived at the cottage in a highly agitated state. "Severus, he's been spotted!" he blurted out as soon as he cleared the door. "Pettigrew's been seen in Bristol!"

Snape rose abruptly. "When?" he asked urgently.

"Last night. Two of the youngsters, scouting out some Muggle targets, reported seeing a man matching his description." Lestrage's usual easygoing, smooth mannerisms were gone; his hands clenched and unclenched as he shifted nervously from one foot to another. "The Dark Lord viewed their memories and confirmed that it was him. He sent half a dozen agents to comb the area and pinpoint the traitor's location."

"Wormtail is mine!" Snape spat, meeting Lestrage's eyes. "I intend to make that little vermin squeal before I kill him," he declared in a deadly-cold voice.

"Yes, Severus," Lestrage agreed with a feral grin, "Wormtail is yours. The Dark Lord has ordered you, Avery and I to off the little bastard."

"Avery is an incompetent fool!" Snape sneered.

"Nevertheless, we three were at school with the rat. Any of us would recognize him instantly!"

Snape's lip curled in disdain, but he refrained from further argument. He began to prowl back and forth across the sitting room, a scowl drawing his brows together in thought. Suddenly, he stopped and clapped his hands sharply, twice. An elf appeared at once, silently awaiting orders. "Granger, take your books upstairs and stay there," Snape directed. "I may need to leave suddenly." To the elf he said only, "Stay in the room with her." Wheeling on his heel, he stalked toward the library, motioning for Lestrage to follow.

Hermione watched the library door shut before she gathered her books and led the elf to her bedroom.

She was still awake, seated in front of the hearth when Snape entered the room nearly three hours later. As far as she could tell, the men had not left the cottage all evening. "No word of him?" she asked tentatively. Snape shook his head, sinking gracefully into the other chair with a resigned sigh. "Pettigrew..." she said, "he's not what he seems, you know."

"If you're going to inform me that he's an Animagus, I have known that for more than two years!" he sneered deprecatingly.

"No. That's not what I meant. Listen," she implored earnestly, "the first time I ever heard of Peter Pettigrew, some of the professors were talking about him and his old school friends. Professor McGonagall said that Pettigrew hero-worshipped Harry's father and Sirius Black, but that he wasn't in their league, talent-wise."

An ugly look passed over Snape's features at the mention of his former adversaries, but rather than the scathing comments he (no doubt) was thinking, he only confirmed McGonagall's opinion of Pettigrew. "He wasn't 'in their league' as Minerva put it," he scoffed. "He was a paragon of mediocrity at the best of times."

"And yet," Hermione pressed, "he managed to perform the Animagus transformation while still in school. Professor McGonagall herself said it's an extraordinarily difficult feat. And she would know, wouldn't she?"

He narrowed his eyes, shooting her a calculating look, but said nothing. She had his attention now.

"The second time I heard about him was on the night you followed us to the Shrieking Shack, the year Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban. Sirius told us that he had suggested using Pettigrew as the Potters' Secret Keeper because it was the perfect bluff. Sirius said no one would believe they would pick a weak, talentless wizard like him. But," she continued relentlessly, "when Sirius confronted Pettigrew after the Potters were killed, Pettigrew not only managed to escape, he very neatly framed Sirius for betraying the Potters and for murdering all those Muggles! Even his so-called friends never saw Pettigrew for what he truly is!"

"Fascinating," Snape said softly. "And what do you think he truly is?"

"Deceptive," she answered promptly. He sniffed at her for stating such an obvious point, but before he could reply, she was talking again. "Did you know that it was Pettigrew that restored Vo... the Dark Lord to his physical body? The spell may have been created by the Dark Lord, but Pettigrew performed the magic. Harry was there; he told Ron and me every detail. Pettigrew not only brewed the base that the bone, flesh and blood were added to, he recited the incantation. His wand focused the energy to accomplish the charm. If that spell's not a bit of powerful Dark Magic, then I don't know what is!"

"Indeed," Snape agreed, nodding thoughtfully.

"He has consistently given everyone around him the impression that he's weak, while managing quite a few advanced feats of magic. I believe he deliberately leads others to discount him, then takes advantage of their low estimation of his abilities," she concluded.

Snape was utterly still for a few moments. *The rat's duplicity is incredible! Even the Dark Lord believes Wormtail to be a truly poor wizard magically weak. The tricky vermin even took me by surprise during our duel at Spinner's End. I will not underestimate him again,* he resolved. "Beautifully deduced," he whispered, eyeing Hermione through the curtain of hair that partially obscured his face. "I see your eidetic memory is useful for more than regurgitation of facts after all." He smirked.

After a contemplative silence, he turned to meet her eyes. "Granger, why did you tell me this? Wormtail's actions almost led to your rescue a few months ago. I should think you would want him to escape."

She shook her head vigorously. "No! I hate him! He's creepy, sleazy, and a traitor to everyone!" she declared ardently. "From my perspective, he's the cause of a lot of the Wizarding world's troubles." She ticked the points off on her fingers. "First, it was his betrayal that deprived Harry of his parents and sent an innocent man to Azkaban."

Snape's lip curled. "Black was never innocent!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Of betraying the Potters, he was," she reiterated. "Anyway, this war is due largely to Pettigrew's actions. He went to find his old master in Albania. He brought him back to Britain and helped restore his body. He tried to kill both of us! Who knows what else he could screw-up if he's not stopped?"

Snape's eyebrows twitched in amusement at her wording. "When I find him, I will endeavor to insure that his ability to 'screw-up' the Wizarding world is terminated permanently," he assured her. His voice was calm and cold, but his eyes burned with intensity.

"Sure, I'll be happy to go with you," Bill declared heartily. "I can't do it tomorrow though. There's a special inventory going on at the bank. I'll be at work until pretty late," he explained. "How about the day after that?"

"I'm good with that," Ron said. "Harry?"

"Yeah, okay. I'll owl Borgin to expect us," Harry agreed.

On the designated afternoon, the trio of disguised wizards entered the dark little shop in Knockturn Alley. Mr. Borgin, apparently on the lookout for them, appeared immediately, an oily smile pasted across his features. "Mr. Electis," he said smoothly, "how good to see you again."

Harry inclined his head fractionally in response. "Mr. Borgin," he acknowledged.

The shopkeeper, forgoing his usual caution, ignored his customer's 'bodyguards' and launched into an effusive (for him) speech. "I have been hoping you would stop by for some weeks now, sir. I have received information regarding an artifact that I believe you will be particularly interested in."

Harry raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. "What would that item be?" Harry asked, feigning only a moderate interest.

"My sources tell me," Borgin related in a somewhat lowered voice, "it is an object that once belonged to the great Helga Hufflepuff."

Harry fought to keep his face impassive as excitement caused his heart to speed up. He took a long slow breath to counteract his rising agitation. "So," he enunciated slowly, "what else do you know about the artifact?"

"Very little, unfortunately," Borgin said with genuine regret. "But I can put you in touch with an associate of mine who has been intimately connected with it. If you wish, I can tell you how to find him. That is," he said hesitantly, "assuming he will see you."

"What do you mean?" Harry inquired sharply.

"He is rather shy of seeing people these days. But with the proper introduction from myself, it is possible. We have been acquainted for a great many years," Borgin explained.

"Who is this person?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"I am not at liberty to say, sir. If he agrees to meet you, then you will learn his identity."

Harry scowled uncertainly. He didn't like this it sounded like a trap. *Then again*, Harry thought, *Borgin must be telling the truth. Otherwise my ring would have warned me.* "Tell me," he said aloud, "will it be dangerous to meet with your contact?"

"I don't think so," Borgin said smoothly.

At his words, Harry's ring sent an odd twitch through his hand, totally unlike the burning sensation he experienced when someone was intentionally lying to him. *Hmm*, he reflected, *Borgin isn't lying outright, but something isn't right.* "If you would excuse us," he told the elderly shopkeeper, "I need to speak with my associates for a moment." Motioning to Ron and Bill, Harry retreated to a point near the door of the shop. "I'd like to follow this lead," Harry informed them, "but it may be dangerous."

"Do you trust him?" Bill asked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the oily little man.

"Not entirely. But he's not lying either," Harry added, holding up his ring with a significant glance. "There's something odd going on though. We should all be on the alert."

Returning to Borgin, Harry informed him that they were prepared to contact his mysterious acquaintance immediately. Borgin, ever eager to help (for a price), wrote a note of introduction for them. He sealed it with a peculiar-looking wax seal and a quick spell that they didn't quite catch. Throwing a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace, he muttered an address and ushered them through hurriedly.

They arrived in a small room that apparently served as an entry hall. A darkened doorway, presumably leading into the rest of the house, was just discernable across from the hearth. The tingle of confinement wards activating was all the warning they needed. Three wands whipped forward as the wizards fairly leaped to form a defensive triangle.

"Well, well. This is a surprise, Mr. Potter," a voice sounded from beyond the doorway.

Harry glanced quickly at Ron and Bill; they were still disguised. *How had they been discovered?* he wondered.

"Who are you? Show yourself!" Bill demanded.

"Now, now. Patience, Mr. Weasley," the disembodied voice counseled.

It was vaguely familiar, and Harry wracked his brain trying to make a connection.

"Whoever it is," Ron whispered, "he's not a young wizard." Harry nodded, acknowledging Ron's conclusion.

"Very astute, young Mr. Weasley. I'm pleased that you are as sharp as I predicted you would be," the voice continued. "I would be better pleased however, if you would lower your wands."

"Not until we know who you are!" Harry declared. "And how you discovered our identities."

"Ahh. That is quite simple, really. You see, I remember every wand I've ever sold. Every single wand. You can hide your faces, my boys, but your wands tell me precisely

who has come to call." With those words a tall, slender figure stepped into the doorway.

"Mr. Ollivander!" Ron gasped. "We thought you were dead!"

"Not yet," he answered sardonically. "Well, come along in, my boys. Come along!" he said impatiently, gesturing for them to accompany him further into the house. "And do put away your wands." He led them into a tiny parlor. As they were now useless, Harry dropped his Appearance Charms. His companions followed suit. When all were seated, Ollivander directed his odd, silvery gaze at Harry. "So, you lead here, do you not, Mr. Potter?" Harry nodded. "What can I do for you?" the wily, old wand maker asked.

Harry held out the letter Mr. Borgin had given him. Ollivander scanned it quickly, pursing his lips as he read. When he finished, he handed back the missive with a heavy sigh. "I regret that I no longer have the item Ebenezer Borgin refers to."

Harry felt his stomach drop, disappointment conspicuous on his face. *A dead end*, he thought morosely.

"Sir," Ron interjected, "do you by chance know where it is?"

Ollivander fixed him with a penetrating stare. "I may," he said slowly. "Let us first insure that we are talking about the same item." He transferred his gaze to Harry. "Tell me exactly what you are trying to locate."

Harry hesitated, not sure how much to reveal. Ollivander's eyes narrowed as he took in the younger man's reluctance; his face acquired a closed look. It was plain to Harry that the wand maker would not reveal anything until he received the information he had asked for. "It's a magical artifact," Harry finally explained, "a cup that once belonged to Helga Hufflepuff."

Mr. Ollivander dipped his head affirmatively. "Why do you want to find it?"

"I can't say, sir. Trust me, you're safer not knowing," he assured the older wizard. "I *can* tell you that it has to do with the fight against Voldemort, and it's very important." Harry noted Ollivander's wince as he named the Dark wizard. "Any information you can give us would be helpful."

The wand maker bowed his grey head in thought for a minute before he acquiesced. "I will tell you what I know, and give you some good advice but I shall want a reward," he said with a strange gleam in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" Bill asked sharply.

"Just this. The cup was stolen from me nearly eighteen months ago, along with several other valuable items from my Hufflepuff collection." At their surprised look, he chuckled. "I was a member of Hufflepuff House during my days at Hogwarts, you see; I collect famous House memorabilia. Along with the cup, there were two Quidditch trophies, as well as an exquisite necklace of yellow diamonds that once belonged to Helga Hufflepuff's favorite granddaughter. All three items were stolen at the same time as the cup. The reward I ask is this: if you find any one of those items, you will return it to me. If you learn anything about their whereabouts, you will pass that information to me."

"Of course, sir. But we can't guarantee the return of Hufflepuff's cup," Harry cautioned.

"Will you tell us how your collection was stolen?" Ron queried.

"Yes," Ollivander confirmed. "That incident is the reason I went into hiding. You see," he explained, "the theft of my collection seems to have been collateral damage." He sighed again. "If you wish, I will tell you the details of what happened that night, as the incident is connected to your search at least tangentially." All three of his guests nodded enthusiastically.

He made himself comfortable, leaning back into the padded armchair and crossing his legs. "It was during the first week of July, the summer before last 1996, to be precise. The beginning of summer is usually a slow time for me, business-wise, so I had taken a few days off to visit an old friend," he recalled. "I was returning home late in the evening, when I saw a number of individuals in the process of breaking into my shop. I live in a flat above the store, you see," he clarified.

"Do you know who they were?" Ron inquired.

"I could identify two of them by their wands. But I recognized them all, in a manner of speaking." At their puzzled looks, he elaborated. "By their cloaks and masks, I knew at once they were Death Eaters! Well, I..."

"Who were the two you could positively identify?" Harry interrupted.

"Walden Macnair and Edmund Crabbe," he snapped, shooting Harry a brief look of annoyance. "As I was saying, I then Disillusioned myself and stayed hidden in the doorway across from my own, but I could neither interfere nor flee without being seen and captured." His lips twisted wryly at his remembered impotence. "There were seven of them: two kept guard near the door, and five ransacked my shop."

"Ransacked it? For what?" Bill interposed.

"For wands, my boy. What else!" Ollivander answered, an impatient bite in his voice. "It seems likely that at least five of them were escapees from Azkaban. Their wands would have been confiscated when they were first captured. I suppose the wands they were using up to that point were stolen from the unfortunate victims of previous Death Eater attacks. But as you know, another wizard's or witch's wand will never give optimal results." Ron, who had experienced this principle first-hand while using Charlie's old wand, made a noise of assent. "From the condition of the room, I presume that the thieves simply pulled armfuls of wands down until they found one that suited." He grimaced in disgust as he remembered the wreckage the thieves had left behind.

"Well, eventually one of them found a good match and joined Macnair and Crabbe, the two who were guarding the door. Macnair told off the third fellow to take his spot said he wanted to search my flat. The bastard must have known about my collection," he growled angrily. "It took a good hour for the filthy thieves to finish their business and Disapparate. The shop was a mess, and my flat wasn't much better. My entire Hufflepuff collection was gone undoubtedly stolen by Macnair!" he stressed bitterly. "It's probably too late to trace the items at this point, but that's the only lead I have for you. My advice would be to start by searching Macnair's family home. It might be useful to interrogate everyone who was known to reside there as well," he added thoughtfully.

"Macnair has a family?" Bill asked incredulously. "Who in their right mind would marry him?"

"No one," Ollivander returned dryly, "but his parents are still alive. And I believe he has two sisters. I remember the younger one particularly well. She was a lovely girl. Cherry wood and phoenix feather, ten and a half inches a powerful wand for such a petite little imp." He smiled fondly, seemingly immersed in memory.

Harry cleared his throat, rousing the old wand maker from his reverie. "Oh, and don't forget to talk to the Macnair's house-elf," Ollivander reminded them. "Those creatures know everything that goes on in their masters' houses."

"If you can get them to talk," Harry said ruefully, recalling Winky's reticence when speaking of her former master, Mr. Crouch.

"At least it's a place to start," Ron said, somewhat unenthusiastically. His face took on a meditative look. "Sir," he voiced, turning to Ollivander, "would you tell me why you went into hiding after the break-in?"

"Think, my boy! If He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were to capture me, he would force me to craft wands for his followers. I also fear," he continued, dropping his voice, "that he may desire a second wand one that can successfully battle against yours, Mr. Potter. I won't allow my skill to be used by him."

"Right," Harry answered solemnly. He stood. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Ollivander. We'll keep your secret and let you know if we find anything." He replaced his Appearance Charms and left with a final nod to Mr. Ollivander. As they took the Floo back to Knockturn Alley, Harry reflected that although they had not found the cup, they were no worse off than when they started.

A storm of knocking sounded at the cottage door. Snape yanked it open, revealing LeStrange and another man. They wore Death Eater robes, and each had a mask dangling from one hand. "Severus, the scouts have cornered the traitor! We're to go in and take him out." Snape stepped back wordlessly, allowing them entry, then whirled around and headed up the steps.

Hermione followed him, halting a few steps behind him in the bedroom, a pensive expression on her face. "What is it you want?" he snapped, not looking at the young woman as he fastened his cloak. "I'm in rather a hurry!"

"You're going after Wormtail? To kill him?" she asked, although there really was no question in her mind. He merely nodded, watching her appraisingly. She pressed her lips together in a grim line for a second, then whispered, "Be careful."

He held her gaze a few moments more, then nodded sharply, once. "I will remember your observations about Wormtail," he assured her.

"Good! Because I'd hate to be left to the tender mercy of the Malfoys and Dolohov," she retorted sharply. But the expression on her face was incongruously soft as she took a hesitant step closer, eyes locked to his. The moment stretched.

"Severus!" LeStrange called stridently from below, breaking the tableau.

"I must go," Snape stated brusquely. He started past her, then paused, grasping her upper arm for a moment. A light squeeze then he was gone. Seconds later, an elf arrived with a loud crack; the door slammed below.

An hour later, Hermione was reading in front of the bedroom hearth while the elf pretended to clean the already tidy room. Over the past few months, she had become so used to them doing this sort of thing that she barely registered the creature's presence, much less realized that it was only doing make-work. Thus, the sudden 'Crack!' of Disapparation made her jump, twisting in her seat to look for the source of the sound. The elf was nowhere in sight but there, in the doorway, stood Snape. He had entered so silently that she hadn't noticed, although the elf, apparently, had seen him and taken it as his cue to depart. She bit her lower lip as she gazed at the dark man in the doorway. He was expressionless, as usual, but his rigidity spoke of his anger quite clearly.

"He slipped away, before we even arrived!" he hissed vehemently. "The damned green scouts never thought to ward against rats leaving the building!" Throwing his mask to the floor in disgust, he stormed into the loo.

As the sound of the shower filtered out to where Hermione sat, she closed her eyes, breathing an unconscious sigh of relief.

*Thanks to Larilee for betaing this story with patience and an ever-ready mental red pen.

Author's Notes:

1. Another Lord Of The Rings quote: Ollivander's line, "I will tell you what I know, and give you some good advice but I shall want a reward," is from The Fellowship of the Ring (from the chapter entitled Strider). Aragorn says this to Frodo shortly after they meet at the inn, The Prancing Pony.
2. Edmund Crabbe: The father of Vincent Crabbe, Harry's classmate. His first name is not given in canon, so I chose one (more or less at random).
3. Ebenezer Borgin: I also chose a first name for Borgin, because JKR never gave us one.

To Share

Chapter 14 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Author Note: 7-20-07 - After receiving many reviews saying that this chapter did not set up the intimacy between our couple properly, I have added some small parts that (hopefully) make clear their growing attraction to one another. I felt that this was especially important in Hermione's case. I hope you enjoy the revised version.

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse; it belongs to JKR. I'm not making any money from this.

Warning: This chapter contains explicit (although not vulgar, I hope) intimacy. If that's not your thing, run away when the kissing begins.

Chapter 14: To Share

She was depressed again. Little wonder, seeing as it was Christmas Eve and she was virtually alone. Companions who are sulking can hardly be counted as company.

She'd had a few brief minutes of happiness that afternoon when a letter had arrived actually for her! A large, Great Grey owl had come to the window, bypassed the elf that admitted it and dropped the missive into her lap. It was from Viktor, a nice cheerful letter that told mostly of his family in Bulgaria and other inconsequential, entertaining tidbits. She had read the letter through three times, experiencing a warm feeling of friendship for its writer. It reassured her that she was not forgotten or unreachable by all her friends.

However, when Snape spotted it later that afternoon, his reaction was anything but pleased. As he scanned the letter, the expression on his face became thunderous. By the time he had finished, he was white with rage. Spinning on his heel, he Summoned his cloak and made for the door. "Krum has gone too far this time. We shall see what the Dark Lord thinks of this!" he hissed, brandishing the parchment.

Snape was furious when he returned. *How dare that surly Bulgarian interfere with Hermione and just when I have begun to make progress* he raged internally. The Dark Lord had been amused by his reaction. Amused! He ground his teeth in frustration. He was almost certain that the girl had a preference for his company. Almost. *I will not allow anyone, world-famous Quidditch player or not, to hinder me! I will succeed on every level this time!* he vowed.

Hermione hadn't seen her guardian in such a foul mood for weeks. From what she could gather from his biting comments, the letter had been sent with the Dark Lord's knowledge and approval. Viktor had asked permission to contact her, reasoning that she would probably be feeling isolated during the holiday. *He was certainly right there*, she thought wryly. She just didn't see why Snape was so incensed by a letter. *What harm could it do?* She retreated to the bedroom solitude being preferable to Snape's inexplicable temper.

If she had been skilled in Legilimency, she might have been able to discern that his anger was rooted in jealousy. If she had recognized it for what it was, she probably would not have been so unhappy. But she did not know Legilimency. And Snape's inscrutable face gave no clue to his underlying motivations. She slept early and woke feeling groggy and unwilling to face the day.

Snape's anger seemed to have burned itself out by morning. As usual, he woke Hermione early, rousing her with a light shake of her shoulder and a list of tasks he intended for them to complete. She listened in silence, feeling more depressed with each item on his list. *What is it with him? Doesn't he know what day it is?* She thought incredulously. *I am not doing this today*, she decided, rolling onto her stomach and pulling the blanket over her head.

Snape knew quite well what day it was. He simply didn't see any point in pretending to 'holiday cheer,' especially in this situation. He disliked Christmas. He had no family, either Muggle or magical, to visit and no one to exchange gifts with, even if he had been inclined to do so. On top of that, Hermione was isolated from her friends and family; it would be a travesty to attempt to celebrate the holiday. *Much better to treat it like any other day*, he reasoned. Hermione, however, did not appear to agree. In fact, she refused point-blank to get up, claiming she was unwell. He regarded her silent, blanket-covered form for a minute before deciding to leave her to her own devices for the time being. He, at least, would accomplish something today!

By lunchtime, he was becoming slightly concerned. Hermione had not shown up in the lab as he expected. He had surmised that she would probably sulk for an hour or two, then pull herself out of her depression and eventually join him. He stomped up the stairs, determined to put an end to her ridiculous behavior. Striding into the bedroom, he saw she was still lying on her cot, but no longer pretending to be sick. She was (predictably) reading, her back turned away from the door and, not incidentally, her irate guardian. Walking to the cot, he grasped the blanket draped over her shoulder, yanking it completely off. She jumped in reaction, as only a truly startled person can, sitting bolt upright with a small gasp. He smirked in satisfaction. "Enough!" he commanded. "You will get up and cease your childish sulking, Hermione!"

Her eyes widened for a moment. "How dare you?" she whispered, gaining her feet as tears of pure rage darkened her eyes. "I have been torn away from my entire life!" she exclaimed, her voice rising with every word. "I have been held captive for months, with no end in sight, and when I feel unhappy because I miss everyone dear to me, you call it childish? Just because you are an unfeeling wretch who has never loved anyone, doesn't give you the right to label my feelings as immature!" She clenched her teeth and said vehemently, "I may have agreed to learn from you, Severus Snape, but I have no intention of emulating your cold manner! Just leave me alone today!" She spun around, tears of rage and frustration finally breaking through her diatribe.

Her words sliced into him, a knife so sharp he didn't feel it until he realized he was bleeding inside. He stared at Hermione in disbelief. It was like finding out your tiny kitten had the claws of a tiger. And he had no argument in return: she was right. All his life, there had only been one person he could say he really loved, only one person who had loved him. "My mother..." he choked out, his normally smooth voice nearly unrecognizable.

Hermione turned slowly, shock registering on her features as she saw his face. He was shaken to the core; she could see it. She had never suspected that words would have the power to hurt him; he always gave an impression of invulnerability. "I'm sorry," she whispered, taking a tentative step toward him. "I shouldn't have said that it was cruel..."

Snape shook his head. "No. You were correct." He walked to the fireplace, staring at the small blaze. He remembered the Christmas just before he had turned eighteen. *Hermione's age*, he realized. That Christmas he had spent alone (his mother had been obliged to work, even on holidays, just to support them). Had it really been so long that he had forgotten that desolate feeling? He had felt as if it were himself against the world back then. Sometimes he still did. *She should not have to endure that*, he thought. He made a sudden resolve: there was a place a place where he had once found consolation he would take her there...

"Hermione," he said softly, turning to catch her eye, "there's something I want to show you. Will you come with me?" She nodded. "You'll need your cloak," he informed her as he summoned his own. "And boots would be advisable, as well."

She transfigured her trainers into tall, warm boots, wrapped her cloak around her and held out her arm for the Tether Spell. Snape looked at her consideringly for a moment then simply took her arm and led her downstairs and out the front door of the cottage. Grasping her forearm tightly, he Apparated them.

If Hermione was surprised that he had forgone the spell to secure her, it was nothing to the astonishment she experienced as she took in her surroundings. They were on a hillside, standing ankle-deep in pristine, white snow and facing a veritable wall of green conifers. Snape led her forward, the green resolving into a large stand of Scots Pines, a few leafless deciduous trees scattered here and there among them. "It's beautiful!" she proclaimed enthusiastically. "Where exactly are we?"

"Several miles from the town where I grew up," Snape answered. "The river is a few miles in that direction," he added, pointing over his left shoulder.

"Can we take a walk in there?" she asked eagerly.

"That's what I brought you here for," he replied sardonically.

As they wandered beneath the canopy, detouring around the numerous, conically-shaped, immature pines, Hermione felt her turbulent emotions subside. There was something about the impassivity of the trees that leached away her negative feelings and smoothed out her thoughts.

"Yes, the trees have a calming influence on me as well," Snape agreed.

Hermione realized with a start that she had spoken her thoughts aloud. Glancing sideways at her companion, she smiled for the first time that day.

Snape took a long, slow breath of the fragrant, pine-scented air. It had been many years since he had walked in these woods, but they still had the power to provoke introspection. He gave himself over to the relaxing impulse, conversing sporadically with the young woman at his side and enjoying the deep quiet of winter in the woods.

Nearly two hours later, Hermione admitted she was tired. And hungry.

"I'm not surprised," Snape quipped, giving her a sidelong look, "considering that you refused to get up for breakfast!"

Her only response was a shrug and a rueful smile.

"Come," he said, taking her hands, "we will return and have a late lunch. Tomorrow, you can help me with some potions I need to brew."

As he grasped her arm to Apparate, she placed her hand over his. She nodded toward the trees. "Thank you for bringing me here," she said quietly. Rising on tiptoes, she gave him a soft kiss on the cheek.

Wordlessly, he tightened his grip on her arm and Apparated them back to the cottage.

Molly was in high spirits. *Christmas! And all my children are safe and accounted for!* She was in her element: at the center of her large, chattering family, surrounded by love, warmth and plentiful, delicious food. Everyone except Percy was present. But even that couldn't dent her sanguine mood, for her absent son had sent a letter containing holiday greetings, along with a gift for his parents.

She noticed that the twins exchanged dark glares each time she showed Percy's letter to a new arrival. *Those two!* she thought reproachfully. *Will they ever grow out of their sibling rivalry with Percy?*

Remus and Tonks finally arrived and were promptly provided with plates of food and cups of eggnog. "So, Tonks, what did your mother say when you demonstrated your proficiency with those housekeeping charms we worked on?" Molly inquired.

Tonks, her mouth full of food, gave Molly a thumbs-up in response.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Molly responded, genuinely happy about the young Auror's success. *Tonks has a great deal of magical talent,* she mused to herself. *She just seemed to have developed a bit of a mental block about cooking and cleaning.* In truth, Molly had been very pleased to teach Tonks. After she had taken on the responsibility of tutoring the teens in advanced Charms last autumn, she had come to the conclusion that she enjoyed teaching. Arthur had been very supportive, even going so far as to suggest that she consider teaching as a career after the war. It was a scary thought to contemplate, stepping outside of the confines of the family and home that she had built around herself. But it was an exciting thought as well. And her success with Tonks had solidified her interest in teaching. *Even if I'm not good enough for a big school like Hogwarts,* she reasoned, *I could still offer private tuition. There are always a certain number of home-schooled children in need of tutors.*

Emerging from her thoughts, Molly saw Harry and Ronald, all but accosting Remus. "Ronald! Harry!" she called. "Leave the poor man alone until he's finished eating!" she scolded.

"It's all right, Molly," Remus retorted laughingly. "We're just making arrangements for a special Defense lesson a few days from now." He gave the two boys a meaningful look and mouthed 'later' out of the corner of his mouth.

What was that all about? Molly wondered. Surveying the sitting room, it appeared that everyone had eaten their fill of the buffet-style meal she, Ginny and Fleur had prepared. *Time to bring in the desserts,* she decided, bustling off to the kitchen.

"Harry!" Molly shouted shrilly from the other room, "That owl is back!"

Harry blanched. *Not today!* he thought. He shot a distressed glance at Ron, who was wide-eyed and pale himself. *Please, no more memories!* he prayed silently. Slowly, he made his way into the kitchen, a procession of Weasleys trailing behind him.

His prayer was answered. A large, Great Grey owl stood on the sideboard, its beak submerged in a bowl of water Molly had obviously provided. Harry stopped short. "That's Krum's owl!" he blurted. "I thought you meant that Eagle owl was back, Mrs. Weasley," he said, laughing shakily. He heard several people let out their breath behind him. Apparently, he was not the only one dreading the other owl's eventual return.

"Here's the letter he brought; he seemed to want me to remove it right away," Molly explained, holding out a folded piece of parchment to Harry.

Harry scanned the note, his eyebrows drawing together in a scowl.

"What is it, mate?" Ron asked. "Is it about Hermione?"

"I don't think so," Harry answered. "I can't make out what it means, though. Here." He extended the letter to Ron. "You try and make sense of it."

As Ron began reading aloud, Molly came up behind him, peering at the note over his shoulder.

"23 December, 1997

To the Chosen One:

On the last day-

Fire in the sky

Blood on the earth

Terror will be unshackled

Warn the watchers

It's signed: Y.O.T.O.," Ron said in a puzzled voice. "Poetry? He's sent us bad poetry?" Ron sputtered.

Fred snatched the letter from his hand, holding it up so George and his father could re-read it with him.

"It's a warning!" Molly stated flatly. "That much is clear."

"The last day..." Arthur muttered. "Of what? The year?"

"Yes, I'd say that's correct," Remus agreed, now perusing the letter over Bill's shoulder.

"Fire in the sky, blood on the earth," Bill quoted, frowning. "That sounds like an attack!"

"Yes," his father agreed, "but where?"

"This line, 'Terror will be unshackled,' is the key," Remus said thoughtfully. He passed the note to Tonks; Charley and Ginny immediately began reading over her shoulders.

"What are people terrified of?" George asked.

"What are they NOT terrified of, these days?" Molly returned sharply. George looked chagrined.

"Unshackled," Harry repeated. "Who or what is shackled right now?" he queried. Looking around the room, his eyes lit on Ginny, who had been uncharacteristically silent. She appeared frightened, her soft brown eyes wide and glassy, fixed on the letter in Tonks' hand. "What's wrong, Ginny?" he asked gently, drawing everyone's eyes to the youngest Weasley.

"Prisoners, Harry," she breathed. "Prisoners are shackled in Azkaban. The poem means the Death Eaters will be unshackled, I think."

Molly gasped audibly.

"Dear Merlin!" Arthur uttered fervently. "We have to warn the Minister!"

"Yes," Molly said, sounding slightly relieved. "The Aurors will be able to stop the attack."

"If Scrimgeour believes us," Bill said grimly.

Silence descended in the room. They all remembered the year when Minister Fudge was in denial. Harry hoped Scrimgeour, as a former Auror, would be more awake to the danger than his predecessor.

Inexplicably, Snape's list seemed to have gotten longer. There were now no less than a dozen Potions to be completed. "This looks like more than one day's work," Hermione commented dryly.

Snape smirked. "Indeed. I imagine we will be busy for several days. It's likely that I will be ordered to prepare several more medicinal Potions this week, as well. The Dark Lord wishes to be fully prepared."

"Prepared?"

Gathering ingredients from the shelf behind her, he huffed impatiently. "What has Draco been planning for the past four months?" he asked in return.

"The release of... Oh!" she exclaimed, comprehension dawning all at once. After a minute, she ventured a timid, "When?"

"New Year's Eve."

"Is that why he hasn't been here the last few days?" she questioned.

Snape shook his head. "Actually, I believe he went to another hidden Malfoy property to celebrate the holiday with his mother. At Narcissa's suggestion, if I'm not mistaken," he said with evident satisfaction. "I don't believe he will be coming back to stay at this cottage." When she raised her eyebrows in surprise, he explained. "If Draco's plan to free those currently held in Azkaban is successful, he will, no doubt, move to his present location with his father."

"And if he's not successful, won't he come back here?"

"If he is unsuccessful, he will be dead," Snape answered flatly.

Oh. Voldemort's justice, she thought with an imperceptible shudder. Now that she knew specifically who and what they were making potions for, she was reluctant to start. She stood, gazing uncertainly at the pile of ingredients for a few moments.

Snape's acidic tone snapped her out of her thoughts. "If you're ready to start sometime today, Hermione? Begin with the top of the list," he directed. "I will begin at the bottom."

She consulted the parchment. The first two were Burn-Healing Paste and Exploding Potion. She froze. "I... I can't... make this," she stated, pointing to the second item on the list.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he retorted sharply. "You are perfectly capable of preparing that. The necessary techniques are well within your abilities."

"It's not my expertise I'm concerned about, sir," she declared coldly. Her tone brought his head up to meet her eyes.

They were filled with determination and, if he were reading her correctly, defiance. He sighed. In truth, he was unsurprised by her reaction, if a bit disappointed. He had hoped to draw her into the work using the pretext that he needed her help. Several times in the past month, she had been very willing to help if she believed it was for his benefit. "You are unwilling to make it? Why?" he asked, although he was certain he knew the answer already.

"I can't... knowingly aid... the Dark Lord," she stammered softly. "And... what about my friends in the Order? If one of them got hurt from this, it would be my doing. I couldn't live with that...." She trailed off, eyes on the floor in unhappiness.

He stepped closer, placing his hand under her chin to tilt it upward. "It would not be your fault, Hermione," he said gently. "That guilt would belong to the person who used the potion. Those who brew potions are not responsible for their ultimate uses."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked, a note of incredulity in her voice.

"I do," he answered steadily. "Besides, this operation will be a surprise attack. It will be over with before the Order or even the Ministry can send reinforcements to Azkaban. No one you know will be hurt," he assured her.

"No," she said, shaking her head slightly. "I can't compartmentalize the truth like that. Perhaps I shouldn't be helping you with these at all."

Damn, Snape cursed inwardly. Her stubborn, Gryffindor 'nobility' would land him in trouble yet. He needed her help if he wanted to complete the work on time that is, if he planned on sleeping between now and the raid! *Perhaps a compromise will work.* He tried again. "Hermione, I need your help to complete these. If I do not, the Dark Lord will be extremely displeased with me." He noted that she was biting her lip - a sure sign of uncertainty. "Would you be willing to make some of the medicinal potions? You can be sure they will not cause harm to anyone."

She met his eyes. "All right," she agreed finally.

The corner of his mouth quirked upward a bit. "Good," he replied. *Now for the reward.* "Perhaps," he added, "when we have finished the simpler concoctions, I will have time to teach you how to make the Blood Replenishing Potion."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really? I'd love to learn that!" she gushed.

"Then we will prepare it together, after the other work is done," he confirmed. As Snape took in her smile and the glowing look she directed at him, he reflected that compromise was certainly worth the effort.

Draco had shown up two days after Christmas to retrieve his belongings. He and Snape had parted stiffly, but with a modicum of politeness at least. To Hermione's eyes, Snape seemed smugly pleased with the new arrangement, affecting a more relaxed attitude in her presence. And she had to admit, she also felt more comfortable knowing that the Malfoys would not be coming around.

It took them four days to finish brewing Snape's list of potions. *Although, to be honest,* Hermione thought, *we could have finished in three.* True to his word, Snape had left the Blood Replenishing Potion for last, so that Hermione could prepare it with his guidance. Originally, they were to do it on the third day. But that morning, Snape had abruptly decided to move his lab to the (now empty) upstairs bedroom. It was next to theirs, and after he had added a connecting door between the two rooms, it was

extremely convenient. It was also much brighter and airier.

"This is certainly better than that dank, stuffy basement," Hermione commented with satisfaction, as she stored the last of the Potion ingredients in their new cabinet.

"Indeed it is. That was the reason for the move, after all," Snape replied with a wry twist of the lips.

Hermione was not at all dismayed by his reproof; it was quite mild by his usual standards. Instead she turned to face him and met his eyes with a slightly pleading look. "Do we have to wait until tomorrow? Can't we start brewing the Blood Replenishing potion now?"

Snape raised his eyebrows in surprise, thinking that Hermione looked quite appealing at that moment. He moved even closer to her and saw her eyes dilate slightly. She was reacting to his proximity. A good sign, he decided, as he suppressed a satisfied smirk. "I am afraid not," he said softly. "The potion needs six continuous hours of attention. It would be foolish to start now, so late in the day." Daringly, he lifted a hand to her face, briefly touching her cheek in reassurance. "We will begin first thing tomorrow."

"Alright," she said in a breathy voice, staring up at him with an odd expression.

Snape was almost certain that her discomfort was due to arousal rather than fear. But he really wished he could use Legilimency to find out what she was thinking. Everything would be so much simpler that way.

The next day, they made the complex Blood Replenisher in the new lab. When the successfully brewed potion was bottled and stored away, they spent the remainder of the day reading and relaxing together. After dinner, Hermione decided a long, hot bath was just what she needed.

When Hermione came out of the bathroom dressed only in her pajamas, Snape was just entering their room. She had long since lost most of her modesty around him and merely continued nonchalantly toward her cot. He didn't stare, but she was aware that he was watching her; perhaps he even appreciated the sight. She looked down at the small, uncomfortable cot that had been her bed for many months and sighed. "I don't think I'll ever feel truly comfortable on this thing," she said.

"Your options remain the same as they have always been: either you take the cot or you can share the bed with me," Snape said sarcastically with that particular twist of the lips that, on him, passed for a smile.

She did not smile at his joke, but instead became totally still. "I think... I'm ready to share," she answered in a soft, hesitant voice.

He was immobilized by her words, unsure if he could have heard or understood her correctly. Seconds passed. He saw her bite her bottom lip apprehensively, but her eyes never left his face. Crossing the room in a few swift, long strides, he took hold of her shoulders and stared intently into her eyes. "Hermione," he breathed, "are you sure? Do you want this?"

"Yes," she whispered in return.

His eyes flicked to her lips, then back up to her eyes. He bent his head, brushing his lips lightly, experimentally, against hers. He pulled back for a moment, and his eyes swept over her face as if looking for something there, and then he kissed her full on the mouth. She opened her lips slightly, and he ran his tongue lightly around them before deepening the kiss. She made a small 'mmm' noise of pleasure, and the self-control he was so proud of was stripped away in a surge of lust, of longing. His arms wound around her, sliding down her back, pulling her against him. She responded to him with equal feeling, running her hands up his back to his neck, then caressing his shoulders. He kissed her face, her neck, her ear, exploring with his lips and tongue, savoring the feel of her skin.

His hands moved down to stroke her bottom, and she flexed her hips toward him in desire. She felt his hardening erection through the fabric of their clothes and pushed herself against him, moving up and down encouragingly. They were both breathing rapidly now, kissing, touching, almost intoxicated by the intensity of sensations. "Hermione," he murmured into her ear, "say my name. Tell me what you want."

He kissed his way down her neck then sucked just above the collarbone, eliciting a small moan of pleasure from her. "Severus," she said slowly, drawing it out to a hissing conclusion. "I want to touch you, be with you... in bed." Like a torch thrust into dry branches, the tone of her voice ignited his desire; he felt almost unbearably aroused. He pulled her to the bed, and they fell across it, exploring each other's bodies with hands, lips, entwining legs.

He was on top of her, her tank top pushed up to expose her breasts. He brushed his fingers over her nipples, teasing them to hardness, then took one nipple in his mouth and sucked, flicking his tongue over the tip. She arched her back and ground her pelvis into his, making him moan and increase his attentions to her breasts. Her hands roamed down his body, stroking his arse and traveling around between them to fumble with the buttons of his trousers.

He pulled away from her, sitting up a bit to pull his shirt out of his pants and over his head. He started on his trouser buttons while she pulled her tank top over her head. He rolled to the side, quickly pulling off his trousers and underwear, dropping them carelessly off the bed. "Let me," he said when he saw she was lifting her hips to push down her pajama bottoms. He drew them down and off, taking her knickers as well and discarding them with his own things.

Lying down next to her, he drew her into his arms. She gasped with the shock of sensation as their bare skin came together. Then they were kissing, caressing intimately. His hand glided down over her stomach and between her legs, gently rubbing up and down over her clitoris. Encouraged by the sounds she was making, he slid a finger into her. She reached down to grasp his cock, stroking him in the same rhythm he was using. After a few minutes, he groaned and pulled back. "Hermione, I want to have you completely..." he said breathlessly.

"Yes," she agreed eagerly. "Now."

He moved over her, positioning himself between her legs, gliding his cock over her folds a few times. She moaned and snaked her arms around his ribs to pull him close, to draw him in. Looking into her eyes, he pushed inside her. He thrust gently at first, setting a slow pace that allowed him to enjoy her kisses. *So responsive*, he thought, listening to her moans. It had been a long time for him, and the feel and taste of her, the sounds she was making, were like heaven. She brought her knees up next to his hips, moving her pelvis rhythmically up to meet his thrusts. Point and counterpoint, they moved together, their tempo gradually increasing until he groaned out, "I can't stop... I'm going..." His movements became erratic, and he kissed her fiercely as he came.

He was breathing hard, his head next to hers. Hermione turned her head a bit and saw an expression on his face that she had never seen before, never even thought possible. It was an open, vulnerable look, the look of a man who could care. She wondered if he had always had this capacity or if it was a newfound result of their intimacy. She was moved to touch his cheek, partly in tenderness, partly in longing.

He opened his eyes and saw her regarding him, saw the unfulfilled lust in her eyes. "Your turn," he said, pushing himself up from his elbows. Slowly, he kissed his way down her body, using his mouth to tease her at breasts, stomach, hips and inner thighs. Grasping her thighs in a strong grip, he pushed them further apart. He explored between her legs with his hands, lips and tongue, settling down to alternately lick and suck on her nub.

Hermione felt as if the sensations would drive her wild. Severus was flicking his tongue rapidly over her clit, bringing her arousal higher and higher. She was moving her hips rhythmically up and down, the tension building, building. Then he sucked on her clit, pumping his fingers into her, and her orgasm broke over her, wave after wave.

She was floating; an indescribable feeling of languor permeated her body. She reached out to embrace him as he crawled up her body, lying on top of her once again. "Incredible," she sighed. "I've never felt anything that intense before." They enjoyed a few slow kisses before he moved to the side and lay next to her. Turning to him, she noticed him watching her, an inscrutable expression on his face. She gave him a small smile, and he reached out to touch her lips softly.

"I will return in a moment," he said as he rolled away from her and off the bed. He disappeared into his lab, returning with a small, brown vial. Detouring to a cabinet, he retrieved a bottle of wine and two glasses. "Here," he said, handing her the vial. "It's a contraceptive potion."

"Thank you." She downed it quickly as he poured a glass of wine for each of them. "Uhh," she said, grimacing at the bitter flavor.

"This should take away the aftertaste," he commented, handing her a wine glass. She drank gratefully as he sat down next to her. They sipped in silence for a minute as he absently ran his fingertips up her arm. "That was not your first time," he said in a neutral voice.

"No, it wasn't," she agreed. He raised an eyebrow as if asking 'who?'

"No one you know," she replied to his unspoken question. "To be honest, I didn't really know him all that well myself." She sipped thoughtfully, unsure of how much to say. "During the Christmas holidays last year, I went to a party at the home of a childhood friend. Her older brother was home from college as well. We got together a few times during the break."

Her admission surprised him, having assumed she would have given it to Weasley, if anyone. Uncharacteristically, he was unsure of what to say, so he reverted to his brusque teacher persona. "Well, Miss Granger," he said with mock severity, "I must say I am shocked you would engage in a casual sexual encounter. I had not thought you so superficial."

She smiled, answering, "Really? You're shocked that the Gryffindor know-it-all would be insatiably curious about such an important topic?"

"Insatiable... I like the sound of that," he said in a low voice.

She laughed in response, a rich, throaty sound that went straight to his groin. He realized he wanted her again. *But there's no need to rush*, he thought. *Neither of us is going anywhere.* A rare feeling of contentment settled in his chest. He was not only tempted to smile, but actually allowed himself a small one.

After a minute, she turned to him, placing her hand on his arm and speaking sincerely, "Severus, you may not have been the first, but you're the only man to ever give me an orgasm by any means. I must admit," she said with a devilish smile, "it sure beats the hell out of doing it myself."

"Perhaps we should attempt to see if we can achieve another first tonight," he replied suggestively. When she looked at him questioningly, he continued, saying, "Care to try for simultaneous orgasm?"

The next morning, they woke at their usual time. Snape found it was impossible to move freely, as Hermione's arms and legs were wrapped around him. He didn't object; he was actually enjoying the novelty of a woman touching him willingly. He lay half-awake, enveloped in her warmth for a few minutes. Gradually, his mind began to rouse, and a nagging doubt about her motives assailed him. *Is she trying to manipulate me? Is it really possible that she is... attracted to me?* He felt he had to know. He rolled from his back to face her, and she opened her eyes lazily, giving him a faint, sleepy smile. He took a deep breath and asked, "Why, Hermione? Why would you want this? Is it just loneliness?"

She pulled back slightly to look at his face. "Yes, of course, loneliness is a part of it. But there's something more," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "I can't say I don't know what it is myself. I suppose you could say I'm accustomed to you. I just needed need to be with you." She knew it was a partial answer, but she couldn't articulate things any better. He didn't seem unhappy, however, so she decided to let it be. *Things will clarify in my head, if I just give it a bit of time*, she thought.

Snape didn't doubt her; he could hear the sincerity in her voice and see it in her eyes. Hermione, in his estimation, had very little guile. "Come, we should get up," he said.

She nodded and stretched as he rose and headed off to the shower.

**A big THANKS to Larilee for betaing this piece!

Author Notes:

1. The Scots Pine is one of only three native conifers in Britain (the others being Juniper and Yew). It is also the only native pine and the most common evergreen and so, seemed an appropriate choice.

2. JKR has stated that Snape, in contrast to Voldemort, has experienced love. Since we were given a glimpse in canon of how unpopular he was among his peers (OotP; Snape's Worst Memory), it seemed sensible that the person who loved him would have been his mother.

*Author Addendum: Some readers may have found it disturbing that Hermione and Snape had sex. When I first posted this story on-line, one reader commented that it seemed akin to non-consensual sex, since she is his prisoner. Although non-con sex was not what I intended to betray, I think that comment shows considerable penetration. Because Hermione is Snape's captive, there is indeed an obvious power imbalance between them. Although the situation in this story is an extreme example, most of us realize, I think, that these sorts of power imbalances in relationships are actually quite common. For example, being involved with someone who is much older, richer, more educated or even (God forbid) a supervisor/boss or professor. Although the sex/power dynamic is not one of the major themes I intended to explore, it is certainly a theme, and therefore probably deserves some consideration. Instead of trying to articulate my opinion, I will give you a quote from Ursula LeGuin's writing to mull over because she is just so much more eloquent than I am...

"I can say only that it may be in our sexuality that we are most easily enslaved, both men and women. It may be there, even as free men and women, that we find freedom hardest to keep. The politics of the flesh are the roots of power."

From: Four Ways to Forgiveness (Story 4: A Woman's Liberation).

Unexpected Outcomes

Chapter 15 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse; it belongs to JKR. I'm not making any money from this.

*Thank you to my beta reader, Larilee. Her advice is always good, and she prevents me from looking foolish with my canon terms!

Chapter 15: Unexpected Outcomes

Ginny peered impatiently through the front curtains for the umpteenth time that morning. *Where is Remus?* she wondered. *He should have been here nearly forty-five minutes ago!* She looked nervously over her shoulder, ever on the alert for the 'Mum patrol.' Her mother had a finely honed instinct for detecting idleness in her children, often swooping down on the hapless victim to assign chores. Ginny wanted to avoid such an outcome at all costs this morning; she had to remain free to tag-along with Ron, Harry and Remus. *After all, she reasoned, it was my idea to hold the 'special Defense lesson' today.* Only the teens and Mrs. Weasley would be home this day. It was a lucky concurrence of events: not only were those with jobs currently at work but there were no N.E.W.T. level lessons, thanks to the Ministry-declared holiday break. Furthermore, now that Christmas and Boxing Day had passed without any adverse events, her mother had relaxed her vigilance. Tomorrow, however, everyone would be home early for New Year's Eve. Today was the perfect opportunity to slip out of the house.

A creak on the stairs behind her sent her scurrying to look busy. She grabbed her Charms text from the end table and plunked into the nearest chair, feigning study.

"Give it a rest, Ginny," Ron's voice chided from the bottom step. "You're not going to fool anyone like that!" She gave him a practiced look of innocence, which did nothing to erase the smug look from her brother's face. "Turn your book right side up," he advised, smiling broadly as he made his way across the living room to join her.

Ginny sighed dramatically but rapidly complied, lest her mother make a sudden appearance. "What do you think is holding Remus up?" she asked her brother.

He shrugged. "Dunno. I hope he gets here soon though; otherwise, we'll be having our 'lesson' through lunch."

Ginny rolled her eyes at her brother's preoccupation with food. *Some things never change.* She glanced hopefully toward the front window, silently willing Remus to appear. A moment later, a muffled crack heralded their former professor's arrival. Ginny jumped to her feet and hurried to the door to let him in.

"Harry!" Ron called excitedly up the stairs. "Come on, he's here!"

A pounding of feet could be heard on the steps as Remus greeted the two youngest Weasleys in his quiet voice. Gazing at the older man thoughtfully, Ginny noted that he still appeared somewhat wan and tired. His smile, however, carried his usual warmth and enthusiasm.

"All right, Harry?" he asked, cocking his head as the black-haired young man joined them by the door.

"Remus," Harry acknowledged with a nod.

"Well, let's go then!" Ginny said brightly.

"Wait!" Remus exclaimed, directing a scowl at Harry. "I thought you said that Ginny would not be involved in any of the 'action.'"

"I'm not!" Ginny retorted quickly. "I'm just going along as a lookout."

Remus narrowed his eyes at the youngest Weasley for a moment, then turning to the young men, he asked, "Why do we need a lookout? What do you have planned?"

"We're going up the hill to our paddock," Ron informed him. "It's hidden from both the house and the village, and since it's my parents' property, there's not much chance that anyone will come across us."

"Except Mum," Ginny interjected. "If I see her headed our way, I'm going to drop one of the twins' Decoy Detonators." She pulled a small object from her pocket and brandished it for the older man to see. "That should distract her long enough for you three to finish."

"All right." Remus nodded his agreement. "I'll just go and tell your mother that we're having a special lesson on Hex Shielding."

"That should please her," Ron observed to Harry as they followed Remus into the kitchen.

Ginny trailed behind, slipping silently through the room and out to the back garden as Remus spoke to her mum. The three men joined her a minute later, setting off for the pasture with long strides that forced Ginny to quicken her pace. Exiting the trees that ringed the field, she smiled warmly. This place held some of her earliest, and happiest, memories: riding high on Bill's shoulders as he romped through the grass with her, playing games of hide-and-go-seek among the bushes and tufts of tall, thick grass, Fred, George, Ron and her all screeching as they ran from their father's searching eyes. More recently, she had enjoyed many hours of Quidditch practice in this paddock, soaring through the air as she, Ron and Harry rehearsed passes, dives and feints together.

She stationed herself at the edge of the trees, where she could see, but not be seen by, anyone coming up the path from the Burrow. From this point, she also had a clear view of the others as they made their way to the center of the field, where an old, rotting tree stump protruded a foot above the grass. They usually used the stump as the toss up point for the Quaffle when they had enough people for an impromptu game, that is.

Keeping a periodic eye on the path, Ginny watched as the men stopped in a tight group approximately forty yards from her. Although she was too far away to hear their conversation, she could see Ron gesturing between Harry and the stump. Harry fumbled with his collar, then pulled something over his head. *The locket Horcrux*, Ginny realized as she watched Harry step forward and place it on the stump. Harry returned to Remus, placing a hand on his right shoulder. Ron stepped to the left, lifting his hand and grasping the older wizard's other shoulder. Ginny saw him draw a deep breath, then nod his red head once. They were ready.

She checked the path carefully before returning her attention to the men. Remus stood in profile to her, slightly in front of Ron and Harry. He had raised his wand and was rotating it as he spoke an incantation; she wished she could hear what it was. *Check the path*, she reminded herself, glancing over her shoulder to ensure that the coast was clear. Remus' shouted words drew her attention back to the field. *Another incantation*, she surmised. Remus stood with his wand outstretched, utterly still, every iota of his concentration focused on the Horcrux. A minute passed, then another. Ginny watched apprehensively as his wand began to shake.

"More!" Remus shouted hoarsely. "This one is stronger!"

To Ginny's ears, he sounded desperate. She squinted in an effort to make out her brother's face; it was contorted into a mask of fear or pain...she couldn't tell which. Remus began to keel, an eerie, howling sound of anguish. A moment later, Harry slapped his free hand to his forehead, and she saw a flash of white as he bared his teeth.

Remus was speaking again, gasping words to the others that were inaudible to Ginny. Even at this distance, she could see that his face was nearly the same color as his graying hair. She peered anxiously down the path, then back to the tableau in the field. *Oh, sod it all! I have to help them!* She decided suddenly. She took off towards the men, pumping her legs as hard as she could. Focused on the scene before her, she tripped on the uneven ground and was suddenly falling forward. Instinctively, she tucked her head, rolling with the fall. Immediately, she pushed herself up out of the weeds, bounding forward again. Remus was on his knees now, panting, yet still holding his shaking wand out before him. She ran faster, leaping roots and bushes, fear and adrenaline lending her an agility she had only previously known while mounted on a broomstick. *Almost there....*

Reaching the men, Ginny skidded to a halt next to Ron and immediately grabbed her former professor's arm. Releasing control of her magic, she slid into the meld, feeling

the hum of power flowing out of her. A second later, she sensed the resistance from that bit of the Dark Lord's soul that resided in Slytherin's locket; it was straining against their efforts to annihilate it. She gritted her teeth and concentrated. *Push, Remus!* she exhorted silently, exerting more pressure through the meld. There was no way she would allow that piece of her former tormentor to escape. *I will never be overpowered by you again, Tom Riddle,* she vowed to the unheeding fragment of Voldemort's essence.

Abruptly, the pressure against the merge snapped. "*Rumpo!*" Remus shouted, his voice rough with exertion. The stump before them exploded with a blast that threw them backwards, shattering the four-way power meld.

Ginny hit the ground arse-first and lay panting for many, long seconds. Ron's face appeared above her.

"Ginny! Are you all right?" he asked worriedly.

She merely nodded. Taking the hand he offered, she hoisted herself to her feet. Harry was several feet away, kneeling next to Remus.

"That was a close thing," Remus said in a weak voice. Catching sight of Ginny, he motioned her closer. "Thank you. Without your help, I think we might all have gotten scorched. I definitely would have," he admitted.

Ginny had a sudden vision of a blackened, lifeless body. *Like Dumbledore's arm!* she remembered, shuddering. She shook her head to dislodge the image. "I'm just glad the Horcrux is destroyed," she replied. Looking around, she caught Ron's eye. "We have to get him to the house."

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "Come on, Harry. We'll carry him." Ron and Harry flanked Remus, each hooking one of his arms over a shoulder as they heaved him off the ground.

When they entered the kitchen some minutes later, the exhausted werewolf suspended between them, Molly gave a little shriek of surprise. "What happened?" she inquired, rushing to seat him and check for injuries. "Did the boys do something dangerous again? Or was it Ginny this time?" She eyed the teens severely before turning back to tend Remus. They edged toward the door into the sitting room as soon as her back was turned.

"No, Molly," he rasped. "It was my own fault. Didn't shield properly," he lied smoothly. As Molly rummaged through the cabinets for a first-aid potion to treat the cut on his arm, he motioned surreptitiously to the teens, mouthing, 'Leave, now!' "In fact," he continued, "Ginny prevented us all from getting seriously injured. She set up a Containment Charm just in time. Don't fear for her, Molly... She's going to be a very powerful witch someday...."

His voice faded as the young people escaped from the kitchen, dispersing to their respective rooms as quickly as possible.

It was late. Snape decided to wrap it up for the night before he began making mistakes. Potions brewing required concentration and a steady hand, neither of which could be maintained in an overtired state. *After all, I didn't exactly have a full night's sleep* he thought, a slight smile lingering on his face as he reviewed last evening's events. Smug satisfaction had dominated his mood all day and with good reason: a night of willing, unrestrained sex with a woman who was not a whore was an extremely rare event in his life.

He cleaned up his work area quickly, placing a Security Ward on his lab notebook to protect its contents. *Perhaps Hermione will still be awake; she often reads late into the night,* he mused. Entering the bedroom, he saw that she was indeed awake. She was stretched out on her cot and, unsurprisingly, reading. He made his way straight into the loo to prepare for bed.

When he emerged ten minutes later, Hermione was still in the same position the exact same position. She was lying on her side, a fist holding up her head, and upon closer inspection, he saw that her eyes were closed. His calculating gaze took in every detail of the situation. She was dressed in her brief pajamas but had made no effort to turn down the covers. His eyes lingered appreciatively on the bare skin of her arms, shoulders and legs. It was obvious that she had been waiting for him. *Then why not wait in the bed?* he wondered. The reason suddenly occurred to him, prompting a smirk; she was uncertain whether she was welcome to 'share the bed' every night. Clearly, she didn't want to assume too much she had been waiting up to see if he would invite her. *A fairly subtle maneuver,* he observed, *for a Gryffindor, that is. But she needn't have bothered.* Without a doubt, he wanted her in his bed regularly, every night if she would consent.

Bending, he lifted the open book from the cot, placing it on the bedside table. Turning back to the sleeping woman, he reached down and grasped her shoulder, squeezing it lightly. "Come to bed, Hermione," he said. She blinked sleepily. Taking her hands, he pulled her upright and guided her half-awake form into the bed. With a silent wave of his wand, the lights were extinguished, and he slid in behind her, pulling her warm body up against his own. A contented sigh escaped him. Yes, he wanted her right here, even if it was just to sleep. Last night he had slept remarkably well, considering that he was unused to spending the night with anyone. *And after all,* he thought, *there's always the morning for other activities.* With that thought, he closed his eyes and consciously relaxed his mind. At last, he felt he had something in his life to look forward to.

Harry looked up as Arthur Weasley came through the kitchen door, Fred and George on his heels.

"Hello, Dear," Molly greeted her husband. "Where's Bill?"

"Goblins don't close early for New Year's Eve," he rejoined wryly.

"Oh! Of course they don't! Well, I suppose we'll be seeing Bill and Fleur for dinner then," Molly concluded as she bustled off to see to lunch.

"Harry, old boy!" George exclaimed in a pompous tone as he grabbed Harry's hand, pumping it enthusiastically.

Harry grinned at the not-so-subtle Percy imitation as the other twin clapped him on the shoulder.

"All right there, Chosen One?" Fred quipped.

Harry nodded. "Never better, guys."

"Where's the little bro?" Fred asked.

Harry tilted his head toward the living room and slipped out of his chair. Fred and George followed him out of the kitchen quietly.

"What's up?" Fred questioned.

"Ron's sort of hiding," Harry explained softly. George raised his eyebrows in a silent question. "Your Mum somehow decided that an accident Remus had yesterday was Ron's fault, even though Remus himself took the blame."

"Was it his fault?" George asked.

"No! Definitely not," Harry said firmly. The twins exchanged a skeptical look, provoking Harry to explain more fully. "Look, if it was anyone's fault, it was mine. I'm the one who asked Remus to teach us some pretty advanced stuff. Unfortunately, Remus, Ron and I had a bit of a containment problem."

Fred scowled, not understanding. "Why does Mum blame Ron then? She's never doubted Remus' word before."

Harry looked slightly uncomfortable. "Well," he began slowly, "it's because of Ginny."

"Ginny?" George said questioningly. He exchanged a smirk with his twin.

"How was she involved?" Fred wanted to know.

"She... well..." Harry hesitated. "To put it plainly, she saved our butts. She had come along to watch, but when she saw we were in trouble, she joined our merge and gave us the power to shield from a rogue spell." Harry gave the twins an abashed smile. "Once Remus had gone and your mum got over the shock, she decided that Ron should have protected his little sister not the other way around!"

George rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Typical Mum!"

"Yeah. Classic," Fred agreed.

"Boys!" Molly hollered from the kitchen. "Lunch is ready!"

Harry grinned. "I'll go tell Ginny and Ron that lunch is on," he said.

Five minutes later, they were all seated around the kitchen table, enjoying one of Molly's delicious meals. Ron had placed himself next to his father and, not incidentally, as far away from his mother as the table permitted. "Dad, did you talk to Minister Scrimgeour about the warning Harry got from Krum?" Ron inquired.

"Actually, I gave him the note in front of Rob Ogden," Arthur said with a satisfied air.

"Who?" Harry asked, giving Arthur a puzzled look from the other side of Ron.

"Robert Ogden, III. He's the current head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry's brows drew together in concentration. "Ogden. I've heard that name before, I think," he muttered.

"Of course you have," Ron's dad confirmed. "His great uncle Tiberius Ogden has been on the Wizengamot for decades. And most of his family has been in Magical Law Enforcement for generations runs in the family you might say. But Rob is the most talented of the lot. Amelia Bones had him pegged as her successor as soon as he proved his mettle in the Auror program."

Harry had a sudden vision of a short, stout, bizarrely dressed man with thick glasses. *The man who confronted the Gaunts was named Bob Ogden*, he realized with a start. Harry had witnessed Ogden's memory of that event in Professor Dumbledore's Pensieve. "Are you sure the Ministry will act on the information, Mr. Weasley?" he asked, uncertainty clear in his voice. Harry had encountered Scrimgeour occasionally while going to or from his classes at the Ministry; the Minister had behaved with an icy formality that left Harry in no doubt as to his displeasure with the 'Chosen One'. He couldn't imagine the man giving credence to information if he knew that Harry was the source.

Arthur nodded. "Yes, the Ministry will take action. Rob will see the right of it. As a matter of fact, Rob took the note, and me, back to his office. Grilled me for half an hour about where I'd gotten it." Seeing Harry's alarmed expression, Arthur laughed. "Don't worry, Harry," he assured the young man. "I didn't reveal your source. I did, however, give him our interpretation of it."

"And?" Fred encouraged.

"He agrees with us. There is going to be a force in place at Azkaban tonight."

"That's good news, Arthur!" Molly exclaimed.

"Who's going from the Order," George asked eagerly.

"No one," Arthur said definitively. The twins looked at their father in astonishment. "Alastor Moody got the word straight from Rob Ogden there will be no Order involvement. Aurors and prison guards only. This is strictly a Ministry operation."

"They know about the Order of the Phoenix?" Ginny queried in surprise.

"Rob knows. His father and Alastor were good friends. The Ogdens wouldn't join the original Order of the Phoenix they believed it bordered on vigilantism. But they never outright opposed Dumbledore's activities either." Arthur fell silent for a minute. "I think Rob is even open to covert cooperation. In any case, we'll know the outcome before it comes out in the *Daily Prophet*," he added grimly. "Kingsley and Tonks are slated to be part of tonight's Auror force."

Snape pulled his black robes close around his thin body. The sea air was frigid like breathing salty ice crystals with each slow intake of air. He was aware of Rabastan moving beside him, shifting nervously from foot to foot. "Patience, friend," he reassured him. "We will be going shortly, no doubt." Lestrangle merely grunted in reply and Snape suppressed a smirk. He knew his friend wasn't impatient; the nervous mannerisms were his way of letting off tension. Rabastan was always like this going into a fight.

He considered what they had to accomplish tonight. It was not insignificant. By his count, there were nine of the Dark Lord's servants currently in Azkaban. Those who had been there the longest had been caught in the Department of Mysteries the night Potter and his little band of followers had gone to rescue Black (*The filthy mongrel!*). Malfoy. Nott. Rookwood. Jugson. Mulciber. All unfortunate enough to have tangled with Albus Dumbledore. The Lestrangle brothers, Dolohov, Macnair and Goyle had also been caught by one of Dumbledore's Anti-Disapparation Jinxes, but had escaped while the old man was confronting the Dark Lord. The Auror responsible for that lapse of watchfulness had been demoted to a dead-end desk job by the next morning! And that worm, Avery, had fled the fight even before Bellatrix Lestrangle. Goyle had not retained his freedom for long though less than three months later, he was back in the Ministry's custody snared during a raid on his family home. *Careless fool!* The Carrows were in the fortress as well, having been apprehended by a squad of Aurors six months ago. And just three weeks past, Macnair had been caught while torturing Muggles for sport.

After tonight, they would all be back in the Dark Lord's fold. The prison guards would be hopelessly outnumbered and overwhelmed before they realized what was happening. That was the plan anyway.

Snape drew his hood forward, shrouding the ghastly mask he wore in darkness. He closed his eyes briefly, picturing Hermione's face as it had looked just before he'd left. He was adept at reading people's expressions, but he was not certain what he had seen on her face. He thought it might have been concern. She had looked at him in precisely the same way on the night that he, Rabastan and Avery had gone after Wormtail. Perhaps she was merely worried that if her 'protector' was killed, she would be mistreated by her next custodian. He didn't dare fall into the trap of believing that she was concerned for his safety. That sort of sentimentality was beyond foolish. She didn't care for him: she was merely lonely, and he was her only option for companionship. Remembering the 'companionship' they had shared that morning, he smiled behind his mask. He saw her face as she lay beneath him with her head thrown back, eyes partially closed, skin flushed from exertion. *That is a better image to take into battle than her apprehension*, he decided.

A loud crack to his left signaled the arrival of their contact. "Snape, Lestrangle," a harsh voice rasped in greeting. "All the squads are in place. Here are your Apparition

coordinates."

Greyback, Snape realized with disgust. *I would know that voice anywhere.* He did not, however, move to take the slip of parchment that the werewolf held out.

Lestrangle strode forward quickly, yanking it from his hand. He well knew his friend's intense aversion to werewolves and the reason behind it. "We're ready," he confirmed, giving Greyback a single dip of his head. Greyback disappeared with another whip-like crack. He glanced at the parchment, then handed it to Snape to read. "All right there, Severus?" he asked softly.

"As much as I ever am," Snape replied cryptically.

Just then, a burst of red sparks erupted far above them. That was the signal to Disapparate.

"Let's go," Lestrangle said shortly.

They disappeared simultaneously, rematerializing in the shadow of a towering wall. *The outer ramparts of Azkaban fortress,* Snape concluded. He placed two vials of exploding fluid at the base of the wall. "Back off, Rabastan," he warned. When they had retreated about thirty feet, they crouched down. Snape lifted his wand, silently sending an Igniting Spell straight at the spot where he had left the vials.

An instant later, a forceful blast erupted, tearing into the wall. Both men whispered a Repelling Charm to protect themselves from flying debris. A similar blast occurred some way off to their right, then others could be heard, some muffled by distance. The other teams had attacked the ramparts; the assault on Azkaban Prison had begun.

The two men stood up to assess the damage. The fluid had blown a sizeable hole in the wall, big enough for two or three people to pass through at a time. Several loud bangs of Apparition occurred behind them. Snape wheeled, wand out, but relaxed when he saw that it was just two of the Charm Breakers with a pair of soldiers flanking them. The small group rushed toward the newly created gap, eager to bring down the wards that protected the inner fortress. "Well," Snape quipped with sardonic formality, "shall we?"

Lestrangle gave a short bark of laughter and followed the last soldier into the breach.

Snape entered cautiously, cognizant of the fact that whatever guards were on duty had undoubtedly been alerted by the explosions. That was the weak point in Draco's plan. If the prison guards were able to call for back-up before the Charm Breakers could bring down the wards, things would get messy. Not that he was worried; he was confident in his own survival abilities. But the Dark Lord would be displeased if too many of his followers were killed or captured. Snape's sharp eyes scanned the open space between the walls. Dimly, he could make out another pair of Charm specialists to the right of the ones he had followed. The air held a palpable sizzle of magic as their powerful Destruction Spells began to take effect on the fortress.

Abruptly, an array of bright red Stunning Spells arced downward from the prison walls. Snape saw one of the Charm Breakers in their group go down. The soldiers sprang into action, one of them positioning himself to shield the group, while the other attempted to Enervate the Stunned man.

"Severus! On the walls!" Lestrangle shouted, pointing his wand toward the indistinct shadows on the parapet above them. Confusion erupted as the attackers began to trade hexes with defenders, the din of the battle augmented by the potent magic from the continued efforts of the Charm Breakers. An explosion rocked the ground between Snape and Lestrangle, knocking the latter to the rough stones of the courtyard.

Snape dove toward his friend. "Rabastan! Are you okay?"

"My arm," Lestrangle hissed, pushing himself up to a sitting position. Blood oozed onto his robe from a gash across his bicep. "It's not serious...not my wand arm," he decided after a quick appraisal. "Just tie it off." Snape did so and a minute later they rejoined the fight.

Snape sent various hexes at the fleeting figures up on the wall, but they were not easy to hit as they dodged and ducked behind the defensive baffles that topped the ancient walls. But even as he fought, his mind coldly evaluated the situation. *There are too many of them up there. This attack was no surprise to them.* He recognized a sophisticated parry-and-return maneuver as a tall figure directly above him blocked his hex and returned a strong Knock-Out Jinx. *That's an Auror tactic! The Ministry was definitely tipped off,* he concluded.

"New orders!" An amplified voice boomed out over the din.

Snape's head whipped around toward the sound, immediately spotting a tall, beefy, blond man running toward their group. *Nick DeAngelo. Relatively young, but a mind like a steel trap,* Snape's memory supplied instantly. *Draco's right hand man during the planning and implementation of this little party.* DeAngelo skidded to a stop some yards behind their assault team. *Out of easy range of the walls,* Snape noted. He backed quickly away from the fortress, covering his own retreat with a sustained Shield Charm. As soon as it was marginally safe, he turned to face DeAngelo.

DeAngelo reversed the Sonorus Charm on his voice. "The Charm Breakers on the north side have deduced which variant of Anti-Intruder Jinx the Ministry used. It's the *Mars Contego,*" DeAngelo said without preface. "Tell your crew. The Charms specialists will know how to break it."

"They had better be able to do it rapidly, or we'll all be target practice for the Aurors. They have the advantage of height," Snape responded waspishly.

DeAngelo's eyes narrowed as they swept the battlements, and then he nodded in understanding.

"What are the new orders?"

"When the wards are breached, all attack personnel are to blast through the walls in as many places as possible. Enter quickly. Get out from under this Ministry barrage," DeAngelo instructed. "As before, Charms specialists will disengage. Once you're inside, open every cell; free all prisoners. We are abandoning the targeted release plan. We'll get our comrades off the island using Side-Along Apparition. The rest of the sods can swim!" He smiled nastily.

Snape gave a sharp nod of his head in acknowledgement and watched the blond man depart at a run to instruct the next group. The new plan made sense, he decided as he rejoined his team. *With all those Aurors inside the walls, we can only benefit from the confusion of a mass prisoner release.* He relayed the new information and orders quickly, noting that the Charm Breaker set to work dissolving the wards before he had finished speaking.

Within a few minutes, an audible throb filled the air around them—the dissolution was almost complete. A deafening thunderclap accompanied by a subtle rippling of the ground signaled that the fortress wards were down at last. So was another of his team members—one of the soldiers, a young recruit. The remaining specialist looked indecisively between the two injured men, uncertain which he should help. "Get him out!" Snape directed, pointing to the man's partner. "I'll deal with this one." The man obeyed without a word, grasping his comrade's arm and disappearing with a pop. Snape used a Sealing Charm to stop the young man's bleeding, then hauled him to his feet. "Get yourself beyond the outer wall. If you can't Disapparate, wait for help." By the time the soldier began to stumble away, Snape had returned to his squad.

The others were already at work. Under cover of a Shield Charm cast by the remaining soldier, Rabastan had smashed a child-sized hole in the prison wall with the Reducto Hex. He added his considerable power to his friend's efforts, and a minute later, they had ducked inside a stone chamber. A figure cowered in the shadowy corner, clearly terrified at the sight of his 'visitors' in their Death Eater regalia. Snape didn't spare him a second glance—he merely blasted the iron door open with a Dark spell he had concocted himself.

In the halls of Azkaban prison, pandemonium reigned. Frequent explosions reverberated through the medieval structure. Piercing screams and strident calls echoed down the corridors as Aurors dueled with Death Eaters and liberated prisoners scrambled to escape the fortress confines. "No! We stay together!" Lestrangle shouted as the young soldier in their team started down a corridor to his left. "Guard our backs while we open everything in this section," he ordered. The young man looked mutinous, but

obeyed.

They worked methodically, demolishing each closed door and assessing if one of their own was inside. So far, they had not found any of the Dark Lord's servants, but had added considerably to the destruction and confusion by releasing a dozen criminals into the halls. As he worked, Snape wondered if the soldier with them had a relative incarcerated here. If so, he could understand the young man's desire to hare off on his own. Rabastan had come across a chamber whose door was magically fortified. He was unable to break it down alone.

"Severus, will your creation handle this?" he asked.

"Perhaps," Snape replied, "if we perform it simultaneously." They blew their way through the spelled door, revealing a guard's antechamber, complete with a desk, several chairs and an array of ankle and wrist shackles hung on the wall. The latter, Snape knew, were used to restrain particularly violent prisoners.

"Jackpot." Lestrage whispered, his eyes on a door at the far side of the room. "I'll bet that leads to solitary confinement cells," he stated, pointing emphatically at the barred door. "Some of ours will probably be in there."

Snape jerked his head wordlessly in acknowledgement. Just then, the soldier, who had started across the room, cried out in pain and crashed to the floor. Snape saw a flash of blue out of the corner of his eye and whirled in time to see a guard dodge back behind the desk. Lestrage moved in a blur, dashing to the far side of the chairs, drawing the guard's attention. That was all the opening Snape needed. He dropped to the floor. "*Stupefy!*" he shouted, sending a Stunning Hex along the floorboards and beneath the bulk of the desk to strike the guard's crouched form.

The man collapsed in a heap, and Lestrage ran to him, searching him quickly and straightening up with a set of keys in his hand as Snape rose from the floor. He glanced at the soldier.

"I'm all right," the man claimed with a slight grimace, levering himself to his knees.

One of the man's legs was bleeding, and Snape doubted it would support him. "Stay," he ordered. "We will return shortly." Rabastan opened the door to the confinement cells and, with a quick look at his friend, proceeded inside. All the cells but one were empty. At the end of the short hall, the filthy form of a man lay in a huddled mass on the stony floor. "It's Macnair," he said softly, "and I think he's been Stunned."

"Probably to keep him quiet during the attack," Lestrage replied wryly. Locating the correct key, they entered the cell and revived him. "Up you come, Macnair," Lestrage encouraged the groggy man as he and Snape each took an arm to haul his muscular frame upright.

Gaining his feet, their old schoolmate regarded them blearily for a few seconds. He shook his head slowly and, in a hoarse voice, murmured, "Rabastan?"

The balding man grinned. "Yes," he answered simply. Rabastan released Macnair's arm and turned to the door. "Come on, we're leaving this place."

Returning to the guardroom, Lestrage gave the soldier a hand up from the floor and supported him with one arm when it became apparent that the man could not walk unaided. Scanning the office, Macnair spotted the unconscious guard. A feral snarl twisted his face, and he started toward the man.

"No!" Snape commanded. "There's no time for revenge. We're to get out as quickly as possible those are the Dark Lord's orders."

Macnair growled deep in his throat but didn't waste his breath arguing the point. Before they left however, he strode to the wall, wrenching free a set of manacles. Experimentally, he held it by one foot cuff, rapidly swinging the other end and nodding with satisfaction as it whooshed dangerously through the air. He regarded Snape for a moment. "I'm ready, Severus," he said in his rusty voice.

Snape whirled wordlessly and strode into the hall behind the others. They retreated in the direction of their own entry point, as that was the closest means of escape. The closest, but not the safest. Large blocks of masonry littered the floor where they had blasted through walls in their earlier zeal to open every cell. And the Aurors were down on this level now. They had not traveled many yards when a searing red jet of light streaked between Lestrage and the young recruit, actually causing the soldier's robes to smoke. He reacted quickly, dousing it with water from his wand as he and Rabastan instinctively dropped to the floor to avoid being easy targets. Snape flattened himself against the wall, aware that behind him, Macnair had mimicked his pose. Eventually, the Auror would have to expose himself in order to fire off another spell. *There! Something moving at the juncture of the hall and that doorway to the left,* Snape noticed. A dark green robe became partially visible as the individual inched stealthily into position for another try. The seconds ticked by as Snape waited, frozen. "*Cruris Rumpo!*" Snape snarled suddenly, wand trained on the Auror's leg that now protruded into the corridor.

With a high-pitched scream that revealed her gender, the Auror toppled out of sight again. "Come on!" Lestrage called to the others. He pulled the soldier to his feet. "Let's move before more of them show up." They lurched past the room where the woman sprawled, a pool of blood gathering under her shattered leg. Macnair, however, ran toward the room, prompting a sharp, "Leave her!" from Lestrage. "She's not going to be following us!"

"The wand!" Macnair rasped in reply, continuing toward the incapacitated Auror. Grabbing the door lintel, he plunged headlong into the room. "Gah!" he yelled a second later, stumbling backwards through the doorway. Hissing in pain, he clapped a hand over a red welt on his forearm.

She's not quite helpless then, Snape thought derisively as he reached Macnair. "Do as Rabastan instructed," he hissed threateningly. "Get up and get out. Now!" He didn't stop to see if Macnair listened, but followed after the others quickly, heading for the end of the hall where they had entered. A soft clanking noise indicated that Macnair, still bearing the leg shackles, was close on his heels.

"Halt!" a deep voice demanded behind them.

Snape spun, wand out, but found Macnair's back directly in his line of fire. Over the man's shoulder, he saw a tall, black man running at them, wand outstretched. The big Death Eater stepped forward to meet him, swinging the chain at a lethal speed. The Auror never broke stride, smoothly sidestepping the manacles and twisting his wand in a silent Levitation Charm. The clumsy weapon was jerked out of Macnair's hands, soaring upwards to the ceiling. Macnair charged forward, determined, apparently, to bring his opponent down by main force. The Auror slashed his wand sharply in a sideways motion, felling the crazed Death Eater with another non-verbal spell. At last, Snape had a clear shot at him. *Diffindo!* he pronounced silently. The man attempted to dodge, but the hex grazed his upper arm, knocking him off balance for a moment. *Petrificus Totalus!* Snape thought fiercely and watched in satisfaction as the man stiffened and fell face down in the darkened corridor.

Snape glanced around. Rabastan had taken the soldier to safety; they had probably Disapparated by now. He stepped up to Macnair. "*Ennervate!*" he whispered, feeling too drained to concentrate on non-verbal magic just then. But Macnair didn't move. Snape knelt next to the big man, pushing him over to assess his injuries. His chest was covered in blood from the Slicing Hex; Snape couldn't find a pulse. He rose in disgust. "Idiot!" he hissed contemptuously. *He always was too bloodthirsty for his own good,* he concluded.

"Down here! They went to this level!" a strident voice called as footsteps slapped on a nearby stairway. Snape sprinted to the cell where they had entered. A slight scraping noise snapped his head to the corner, where the same pathetic figure huddled, too terrified to move. "*Lumos,*" he whispered, illuminating, to his great surprise, the spotty face of Stan Shunpike. After a moment's hesitation, Snape strode forward, grabbed the young man by the arm and propelled him out into the night at wand point. With a loud crack, he Disapparated, taking the onetime conductor with him. Once back on the mainland, he released Shunpike's arm. "You're on your own, boy," he said harshly. "I suggest you get as far away from Britain as you can, while you can!" With another loud crack, he left the disoriented young man on the cold, empty beach facing the North Sea.

Author's Notes:

1. Charm Breakers: for Americans, this may seem to be a new term, but is actually used in the UK editions as an equivalent term to Curse Breaker (in the US editions). I meant it to be a slightly different specialty from the work Bill Weasley does and will probably use the term Curse Breaker later in this fic to distinguish the two. Apologies if that bothers the Brits. Thanks go to Larilee, my terrific beta, for catching that one for me.
2. Mars Contego = shield of the war god. A powerful type of Anti-Intruder Jinx that I concocted non-canon. The name is derived from Mars, the Roman god of war and contego, which translates as shield (from an on-line English/Latin translator).
3. Nick DeAngelo: I made him up. He's the same blond fellow you saw with Draco in chapter eleven.
4. I thought Stan deserved a break; just a little levity....

Aftershocks

Chapter 16 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse; it belongs to JKR. I'm not making any money from this.

**A special thanks to Larilee for her work beta reading this story.

Chapter 16: Aftershocks

"Down here! They went to this level," Tonks shouted over her shoulder as she plunged down the narrow steps. Reaching the ground level at last, she grabbed the door frame, halting her forward motion. After a cautious peek into the silent corridor, she moved quickly toward the still forms lying on the floor. She saw a dark face. "Kingsley!" she blurted, running the last few steps to kneel by the big man's side. "*Finite Incantatem*," she intoned softly, flicking her wand at his rigid form.

Kingsley's body went lax, and he shook his head groggily with a groan. As Tonks helped him sit up, she heard the clomping of heavy footsteps on the stairs. Dawlish emerged from the stairwell a moment later. "Dawlish! Check him out," she called, pointing to the bloody form sprawled face up a few feet down the corridor. *It's Macnair*, she realized as she focused on the man's profile in the dim light. "Come on, up you get," she urged Kingsley, throwing his arm over her shoulder and hefting him to his feet.

"Thanks, Tonks," he replied in his deep voice. He was slightly unsteady, but appeared unharmed otherwise.

She saw that Dawlish was kneeling next to Macnair, checking for a pulse. With clinical precision, he lifted one of the man's eyelids. After a moment of consideration, he ran his wand slowly along the gash across Macnair's chest, closing the wound. He moved quickly to Macnair's head, tilted it back and breathed into his mouth a couple of times. He checked for a pulse, then with a grimace, placed his hands on Macnair's bloody chest and began pumping it.

"What are you doing?" Tonks asked

"His pupils aren't dilated yet. He can still be resuscitated," Dawlish answered shortly.

"Why bother with scum like that?" Tonks asked incredulously. "We're better off with the likes of him six feet under!"

"Death is too easy for him!" Dawlish spat. "I want to see him pay for his crimes!" His voice was savage. After a moment, he glanced up, catching Tonk's eyes. "Are you going to help me, Tonks, or just watch?" Dawlish inquired, never pausing as he pumped the Death Eater's chest.

Tonks sighed. "Fine, but I'm not putting my mouth on him! You do the breathing part."

Dawlish nodded once and moved to comply. After two additional cycles, Macnair gave a weak cough and gasped in a lungful of air on his own. His breathing was shallow and irregular, but he was alive. Dawlish sat back on his heels, a grim smile of satisfaction on his face. "I'm going to enjoy watching your trial," he whispered to the unconscious Death Eater.

"Bind him," Kingsley directed. "Then we need to check these cells to see if any prisoners are still here." He turned to the door across the hall. "I'll do this side."

Within ten minutes, they had ascertained that no prisoners remained within the cellblock. This was hardly a surprise, considering the cell doors appeared to have been blasted off their hinges in most cases. They did, however, revive a Stunned prison guard in the anteroom to the solitary confinement cells. A minute later, Kingsley found their fellow Auror, Cecelia Moore, inside one of the cells. She was weak from blood loss but still very much alive.

Dawlish narrowed his eyes at the sight of the woman's shattered leg. "That's the result of a Dark Curse if I ever saw one," he remarked. "I'll Apparate her to St. Mungo's." He picked her up gently, his actions belying his usual brusque manner.

Tonks watched as he carried the woman out. *Dawlish may be an arrogant berk sometimes, she thought, but he's all right, really. Not to mention good to have around during a fight!*

Snape materialized in the back garden of the Riddle House. He noted several black-clad forms heading through the shrubs, slinking toward the back of the old manor house. *How many of us were injured?* he wondered. *How many didn't make it back?* The Dark Lord would be displeased to learn that their 'surprise attack' had been betrayed. Livid was more like it. He would spare no effort to discover who had squealed to the Ministry. Snape grimaced, knowing that, when discovered, the traitor's punishment would be gruesome. *At least I have nothing to hide in regards to that* he reassured himself. Hearing a soft crack off to the left, he saw a tall figure approaching.

"Severus," Rabastan greeted him with a dip of the head. "Where's Walden?"

"Dead," Snape answered flatly.

Rabastan's eyes widened in surprise. "What happened?"

"Fucking idiot!" Snape spat. "He charged an Auror with nothing but that chain, blocking me from getting a spell off in the meanwhile. The Ministry dog took him down without a hitch," he added in disgust. "I got him then, but it was too late for Macnair."

"The Dark Lord won't be pleased," Rabastan observed bleakly.

"Don't you think I know that?" Snape replied angrily. He didn't even want to think about his master's reaction to the news of Macnair's demise, although he knew fairly well what it was likely to be. *Bastard!* he thought savagely. *Couldn't even die without mucking things up for me!*

Harry unfolded the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet*, flattening the parchment against the kitchen table so that he and Ron could read it simultaneously.

AZKABAN FORTRESS ATTACKED BY DEATH EATERS!

Early this morning Mr. Robert Ogden, III, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, confirmed that Azkaban Prison had been breached by forces loyal to the Dark Lord. "Last night, approximately thirty-five to forty Death Eaters attacked the prison walls, using explosives and ward-destroying spells," Mr. Ogden told reporters. "Although they caused a great deal of damage to the structure and indiscriminately released numerous prisoners, we would like to reassure the Wizarding public that we are back in control of the facility. We have recaptured nearly all of the escaped convicts and are confident that we will have the rest of them back in custody very soon." Although Mr. Ogden declined to name the prisoners that remain at large, sources in the prison's administration have hinted that they are all Death Eaters. "It would seem," said an anonymous Ministry employee, "that the main objective of the assault on Azkaban was to free the followers of You-Know-Who."

"Well, duh!" Ron commented with a roll of the eyes.

Harry gave a mirthless smirk in return. "What a stupid git! Do you think that was Percy?"

"Nah. Percy's a real prat, but he's not stupid," Ron replied. "It was probably someone in the Public Relations Office. They always say the most moronic things as if they were profound revelations!" He turned his eyes back to the article, as did Harry.

Public records have revealed that, as of yesterday, nine confirmed followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were incarcerated in Azkaban. They are:

Carrow, Alecto

Carrow, Amycus

Goyle, Garrick

Jugson, Eric

Macnair, Walden

Malfoy, Lucius

Mulciber, Douglas

Nott, Theodore, Sr.

Rookwood, Augustus

It can be assumed that any or all of these dangerous individuals are now free. Suspected Death Eaters, Gaspard Goyle and Stan Shunpike, were also being held in Azkaban, awaiting trial, at the time of the raid. It is not known whether either suspect escaped during the attack.

"Yeah, *indefinitely* awaiting trial in Stan's case," Harry commented with a sour look. "That seems to be the Ministry's euphemism for 'we don't have enough evidence to convict him, but we're not going to admit it'. It really ticks me off!" he finished angrily.

"Too right, mate," Ron agreed.

Ogden has appealed to the Wizarding community to remain calm and stay on the lookout for any suspicious individuals. "We will follow all substantiated leads in order to recapture these dangerous criminals," Ogden told reporters. "I, personally, will lead this effort!" Until then, the public is advised not to travel alone and to remain alert to their surroundings at all times. Further details on the events at Azkaban will be published as they are made available by official Ministry sources.

"That was almost useless!" Ron scoffed. "They didn't tell us anything we didn't already know. What a rag!" As Harry nodded his agreement, Mrs. Weasley came bustling into the kitchen. "Mum, did anyone in the Order get any details about what happened last night?" he asked hopefully.

Molly motioned to the clock where the hand labeled 'Dad', was pointing to the words 'At Work'. "As a matter of fact, your father will probably have quite a lot to tell when he comes home. I expect we'll see him by lunch. He went to the Ministry in the wee hours after Kingsley Flooded to say that he and Tonks were back. They're both safe, thank Merlin!"

Snape stumbled through the cottage door just as the late winter sun cleared the horizon. Grasping the back of the closest chair for support, he took a few unsteady breaths before staggering to the sofa and falling forward onto it. The loud pop of an arriving house-elf failed to rouse him.

The tiny elf scrutinized the man uncertainly. He knew quite well that it was only common sense to be wary around some wizards; this one in particular had a nasty temper. Even though his ire had never been directed toward the cottage's servants, there was always the possibility of a first time. "Sir?" the elf squeaked tentatively. "Is you all right?"

The wizard didn't move. Cautiously, the creature crept closer, a worried frown across his features. He noticed that the man's breathing was ragged. *He is hurting!* the elf concluded. *I must get Miss; she will know what to do!* he decided, disappearing with another pop.

A minute later, hurried footsteps were heard descending the stairs. Hermione rushed to the couch, kneeling beside the unconscious man. *Strong pulse. No visible blood,* she noted. Knowing it was probably a useless effort, she pointed her wand at him and said firmly, "*Rennervate.*" Nothing happened. It was like trying to change the channel on the telly without batteries in the remote control. *Damn wand! I wonder if I can perform a diagnostic spell?* Holding her wand a few inches above Snape's prone form, she muttered the charm, passing her wand over him. *No broken bones. No internal injuries. Good. But then why is he unconscious?* she wondered. Abruptly, a strong tremor

shook his frame, clenching the muscles in a wave down his lean body. It left him gasping for breath, but still insensible. *Cruciatius*. And probably exhaustion on top of that, she deduced. She sighed in relief. *This I can manage. A few potions to reduce the pain and minimize nerve damage should do the trick. And some rest. A sleeping draught as well, then.* "Can you get him upstairs and into bed?" she asked the elf. The creature complied wordlessly, levitating Snape with a snap of his bony fingers. She made a detour to the lab and grabbed the necessary potions, then hurried into their bedroom via the connecting door.

With the help of both elves, Hermione managed to get the three potions she had chosen into Snape. Immediately, his labored breathing slowed. The lines on his forehead smoothed as his muscles unclenched, relaxing into a deep, calm sleep.

Hermione watched in relief; she was certain that he would be okay after a good, long rest. She yawned. She had slept poorly last night herself, waking again and again to imperfectly recall the random, nonsensical dreams lurking in the back of her mind. *I think I'll have a lie down too*, she decided, unclasping her robe and slipping under the covers. Snape's body radiated heat, and she snuggled close to him, drawn in like a moth to a candle flame. As she drifted off, it occurred to her that it was a good thing they had prepared extra doses of the medicinal potions earlier that week. She was glad, now, that she had agreed to help him with them.

Lunch at the Burrow turned out to be a very enlightening meal for Harry, Ron and Ginny. Arthur Weasley did, in fact, know much more about last night's events than the *Daily Prophet*. What's more, Tonks had accompanied him home for lunch and promised to give the teens a first-hand account of the attack after she had finished eating.

"Is it true, Arthur?" Molly inquired as he and Tonks seated themselves at the kitchen table. "Are all the Death Eaters listed in the *Prophet* on the loose again?"

He shook his head. "Not all, but most of them are free. Specifically, of those who are confirmed Death Eaters, only Amycus Carrow and Walden Macnair didn't escape."

"So they're back in prison?" Ron asked.

"No. They were killed by Aurors," his father clarified.

Harry exchanged a meaningful look with Ron. They had not forgotten Mr. Ollivander's advice. "So," Harry said softly. "Macnair's dead."

"No, he's not," Tonks denied.

"What?" Arthur yelped. "What are you talking about, Tonks?"

She pressed her lips together in a thin line. "You weren't briefed about this at the Ministry, Arthur, because it's been designated as a strict need-to-know item. Only the Aurors who saw the incident, a very few, top department heads and the Minister, himself, know the truth. But the Order needs to know as well, in my opinion. Kingsley agrees."

"Well?" Arthur prompted quietly, directing an expectant look at the spikey-haired witch.

"I'll give you the short-and-not-so-sweet version," she said grimly. "Kingsley was paired with Davidson, but they got separated. He ran into a squad of Death Eaters apparently on their way out with Macnair. Macnair tried to attack him with a foot manacle he had picked up as a weapon, and Kingsley had to use deadly force to stop the maniac! A Slicing Hex to puncture the diaphragm stop the lungs you know?"

Molly made an indistinct noise of disgust.

"Sorry," Tonks apologized contritely. "Anyway, Kingsley said that two of the Death Eaters fled during the fight, but one stayed behind and managed to get him with a full Body-Bind. But when he discovered Macnair was dead, he bolted too. That's where I came in. I found them and released Kingsley. Dawlish checked out Macnair and decided that he could be revived. He sealed the diaphragm and used CPR to get him breathing again."

"CPR?" Arthur queried, puzzlement evident on his face.

"It's a Muggle technique that doctors use to get the heart and lungs started again," Harry offered.

Arthur nodded vaguely, but, thankfully, let it drop.

"But why'd he do it?" Ron asked, incredulous. "I mean, why would an Auror want to save a Death Eater?"

Tonks shrugged. "He claimed that death was the easy way out for Voldemort's followers. Said he wants to see Macnair pay for his crimes."

"It sounds as if he has a personal vendetta against him," Molly observed.

"Maybe," Tonks agreed. "I don't know him all that well to say whether that's true or not. Anyway, Macnair is in St. Mungo's, in the high security ward they maintain for injured criminals."

The room lapsed into thoughtful silence as they resumed eating.

After a minute, Arthur returned to the topic of the escapees. "According to my briefing, every confirmed Death Eater not killed in the attack was Apparated off of the island by their fellows. All the other prisoners were left to their own devices."

Tonks dipped her head in agreement. "That's right," she confirmed. "Aurors saw some of them Disapparate. And later, we caught several dozen convicts loose on the island. As well as..." Her voice trailed off into silence.

"What?" Ginny piped.

Tonks pressed her lips together tightly, apparently steeling herself for an unpleasant communication. "As well as eleven bodies in the North Sea," she finished flatly.

"They tried to swim!" Molly said, sounding horrified.

"That's not the worst of it," Arthur voiced quietly. Molly's eyes met his, waiting. "Sturgis Podmore was one of those who drowned."

Molly burst into tears. Arthur rose at once to embrace his weeping wife. "He... he was in my year at Hogwarts," she cried, her voice breaking. Arthur began to lead her out to the sitting room. "We were friends...."

The others were silent for a full five minutes, each busy with their own thoughts. At last Tonks broke the quiet. "Harry, there's something else you should know." He gave her a questioning look. "If you read the *Prophet's* article then you know that Stan Shunpike and Gaspard Goyle were in Azkaban for suspected Death Eater activities."

Harry shook his head in disgust. "Tonks," he began, "you know as well as I do that Stan Shunpike is no more a Death Eater than we are! He's just a Ministry scapegoat!"

She held up a hand to stop his tirade. "I'm not so sure about that anymore," she retorted. Harry opened his mouth to argue, but she cut him off. "Listen to me, Harry! Stan Shunpike escaped Azkaban last night. He had to have been Apparated off of the island by one of the Death Eaters. I'm afraid he really is one of them...."

"He wasn't among the drowned prisoners?" Ginny asked quietly. Tonks shook her head.

"But what if he made it across alive? Sirius did it!" Ron objected.

Tonks looked dubious. "I suppose there's an outside chance," she conceded, "but the Ministry now considers him a confirmed follower of Voldemort."

"What... what happened to Gaspard Goyle?" Harry asked haltingly.

"He was recaptured within the fortress."

"Is he really a Death Eater?" Ron inquired.

"I don't know," Tonks answered. "I doubt it though. There's no real evidence against him. He's your classmate's cousin, you know about eight years older than you lot," Tonks said. "As far as I can see, his only crime is being related to the Manchester Goyles. That and being at his cousin's place for a visit when the Aurors caught Garrick Goyle."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully, but said nothing. The others were silent as well, apparently digesting Tonks' revelations.

After a few minutes Harry looked up from his soup. "Well," he said slowly, glancing at Ron and then Ginny, in turn, "at least there's a chance to speed up our search now."

"Your search?" Tonks queried, giving him a quizzical look. "Is this the same thing that Remus is helping you with?"

"Sort of," Harry replied. "Tonks, if Remus were to accompany me, is there a chance that you or Kingsley could get me into St. Mungo's to interrogate Macnair?"

When Snape roused on New Year's Day, the afternoon was already fading, casting grey shadows throughout the bedroom of the little cottage. The first thing he noticed was the warmth and weight of a body nestled firmly against his back. *Hermione*, his half-conscious mind registered. He became aware of a bitter, metallic taste in the back of his throat. *From a pain-relieving potion*, he surmised. A vague thought of getting a drink of water crossed his mind, but he felt too sleepy and comfortable to move. At that moment, Hermione sighed in her sleep, nuzzling her forehead against his upper back. He closed his eyes and relaxed into the contented feeling he was beginning to associate with her presence. Within a minute, he had drifted back to sleep.

They woke simultaneously, responding, no doubt, to the greedy crackling of flames in the hearth. Apparently, the elves had cleaned the fireplace and started a fresh blaze to reheat the room. Hermione rolled a bit, attempting to extend her legs, but was hindered by Snape's leg and arm, which were thrown over her body. Realizing she was awake, he withdrew slightly, propping himself up on an elbow as he watched her. A small groan escaped her throat as she stretched out her muscles and joints. He had seen her do this nearly every morning for months, but found it much more intimate now that they were in the same bed.

When she was finished, she turned to him with a slight smile. "How are you feeling?" she asked softly.

"Better than when I arrived this morning," he retorted in his customary sardonic tone.

"You were unconscious. One of the house-elves fetched me."

He nodded. "You gave me something for the pain."

"Yes. A general pain-reducing elixir," she clarified. "As well as a nerve regenerative and a sleeping draught." She waved toward the nightstand where the empty vials still stood.

He gazed at them silently, an inscrutable façade masking his thoughts. Hermione waited, hoping he wasn't irritated that she had treated him without his consent. She knew she had done the right thing, seeing as he was fully recovered at this point, but she still couldn't predict his reactions.

"How did you know I had been subjected to the Cruciatus Curse?" he asked at last.

"You had pretty extensive muscle spasms: your whole body was clenched and you were having trouble breathing. I recognized the symptoms from *The Dark Arts Outsmarted*," she explained promptly. When he raised an eyebrow in surprise, she added, "I did some extra reading on the Unforgivables. After all, it never hurts to be prepared."

The corners of his mouth curled upwards in a momentary smile. "Always the know-it-all," he commented under his breath. "You did well," he said aloud, a note of approval in his voice. "I feel immeasurably better."

Hermione smiled broadly, her expression changing from tense to joyful in a single moment.

She's so willing to be happy so readily affected by my praise, he mused. *A Slytherin would be looking for the hidden motive behind my words, careful not to reveal anything that could be used to manipulate them. But not her. She's just pleased that I approve her actions, happy that I've recovered.* Suddenly, his inner monologue was interrupted by the realization that he had the ability to make another person happy. His mind ground to a halt; this was unfamiliar territory.

"Severus?" Hermione tentatively touched his arm, bringing his attention back to their conversation. "Will you tell me what happened last night? Did... did Draco's plan work? Who cursed you? Did it happen during the attack?"

He was relieved by her change in topic. *This I can deal with.* He briefly considered telling her that he couldn't discuss it or that it was none of her business, but he knew that was untrue. She had been genuinely concerned for him, it seemed not just her 'protector'. Looking into her guileless face, he thought, *Why not tell her what happened? Her knowing won't put anything at risk.* He took a deep breath and began recounting the events of the attack. When he began describing the fight in the corridor, Hermione drew a sharp breath.

"The Aurors did you know either of them?" she inquired with trepidation.

"Yes," he informed her flatly. "The Auror that took down Macnair was Shackbolt. And before you ask, I merely immobilized him. When I saw Macnair was dead, I got out quickly."

"Oh, that's good, then," she breathed softly. "But how did you get in the state you were in this morning?"

"An expression of the Dark Lord's displeasure over Macnair's death," he replied.

"He cursed you?" she cried incredulously.

"He did," Snape confirmed with a mirthless smile. Her indignation amused him; she was so naïve when it came to Dark Wizards and what they were capable of. "He often disciplines his followers with torture. However, I was far from the only recipient of his attentions last night." When she raised her eyebrows questioningly, he elaborated, describing what had happened to the team that had left Amycus Carrow to face two Aurors alone.

She shuddered. *Why would people follow such a monster?* she wondered.

Snape summarized the major outcomes of the attack: all the Dark Lord's followers had been liberated (except the two who were killed), Draco had redeemed his family

name (at least to a sufficient degree that he had avoided summary execution), and the Ministry had suffered a demoralizing blow. "In truth," Snape informed her, "the Dark Lord was furious that the Ministry had somehow got wind of the assault, but he acknowledged that the planning and execution of the operation was, essentially, successful. Draco and his aides were commended, but were also charged with finding the traitor who divulged the information."

To Hermione's great surprise, Snape continued to answer her questions, conversing casually about events as they lay comfortably in bed. It occurred to her that she had previously only seen him this relaxed in the company of Rabastan Lestrange. It seemed that she was now part of the exclusive set of individuals called 'friend' by Severus Snape. *Do I want to be his friend?* she wondered. *That's a stupid question*, she answered herself immediately. *I know I do.* If she were truthful with herself, she had wanted it for many weeks. And, at the very least, she recognized that dealing with a 'guardian' that was friendly was much more pleasant than dealing with the nasty, arrogant man who had been her professor.

Her curiosity satisfied, Hermione became conscious of her growling stomach. But when she suggested that they go downstairs for dinner, Snape forestalled her, summoning a house-elf with two sharp claps. "Bring our meal upstairs!" he ordered. "We are staying in bed this evening."

Aside from trips to the loo, they did, indeed, stay in bed the entire evening. When the elf arrived several minutes later, a large tray of food balanced on its hands, they had a most welcome dinner in bed. Afterwards, they spent several hours reading in bed with occasional breaks for quiet conversation. And much later, they did something else in bed, eventually falling asleep in a tangle of limbs and tussled covers.

Author's Notes:

1. I supplied first names for several Death Eaters that are unknown in canon. Garrick Goyle, Eric Jugson, Douglas Mulciber, and Theodore Nott, Sr. are entirely my own fabrications. I have assumed (perhaps incorrectly) that the Carrows, who were mentioned in GoF, are one-in-the-same as the brother and sister Death Eaters, Alec and Amicus seen in HBP. JKR may set the record straight on these some day.

2. Now they think poor Stan is a real Death Eater! He just can't get a break! (I honestly don't have anything against his character it just seemed the logical outcome of his escape.)

Double-Edged Sword

Chapter 17 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic.
. Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe is the property of J.K. Rowling and her publishers. Anything you recognize belongs to her. I am not making any money from this.

* Many thanks to my beta, Larilee, for her corrections, perspective and great advice! The credit for this chapter's title goes to her as well!

****Warning:** Explicit sexual content in this chapter (very brief). If you don't like that sort of thing, skip to the next section when the kissing starts.

Chapter 17: Double-Edged Sword

"No. You take it!" Harry insisted, forcing the cloak into Remus' hands. "It's like Tonks said: you need it more than I do."

Remus grimaced at the reminder that he, as a werewolf, was unwelcome in many Wizarding institutions. He regarded the cloak in his hands. It was silky to the touch, but it didn't feel like cloth. *More like liquid shadow*, he thought whimsically. He had always been amazed at the feel of it. He gazed at it absently, his mind conjuring an image of the seventeen-year-old James Potter, disappearing beneath these very same silken folds.

The deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt brought him abruptly back to the present. "He's right, Remus. He's the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One. No one will question his accompanying a Ministry Auror, even at St. Mungo's."

Remus nodded, swinging the cloak around his shoulders. He fastened it at the throat and raised the hood.

Harry smiled as Remus' head vanished. He put on his own wool cloak and addressed the spot where Remus had disappeared. "Okay, let's go!"

Remus' guffaw came from across the room.

"Very funny, Moony!" he said, rolling his eyes at the older man's prank. *Now I know why Hermione felt annoyed when she was trying to talk to me while I was wearing the cloak*, he thought, recalling their fourth year at school. He shook his head and followed Kingsley to the fireplace. They would Floo directly from the Burrow to the hospital.

Kingsley strode confidently into the high security ward, nodding to the Auror on duty by the doors. Harry, following in his wake, with Remus quietly bringing up the rear, half expected the guard to question his presence. But he merely gave Kingsley a wordless salute and returned his attention to the corridor.

It's fortunate, Harry reflected, *that Kingsley is high-ranking enough to get in here without questions.* He fervently hoped that the man would emerge from this escapade with his spotless record intact. Although he had learned a few hard lessons in caution lately, he also knew that some risks had to be taken if they were to defeat Voldemort in the end. Nevertheless, he didn't want others to suffer as a result of his decisions. Especially those who were trying to help him.

As they made their way down the hall, Kingsley scanned the room numbers. "It must be the last room on the left," he said softly. "They moved him out of Critical Care the day before yesterday. I heard that it took the Healers two weeks to stabilize his condition." He halted in front of a plain wooden door. Plain in looks but Harry soon discovered that it was secured with a complex series of wards that few would be able to dismantle.

The Auror began rapidly deactivating the security spells, prompting Harry to wonder how the Healers got past the complex security to treat Macnair. He supposed that they had to be accompanied by an Auror every time they needed to go in. At last, Kingsley reached out and turned the doorknob, stepping into the room and motioning the others to follow quickly. Silently, he re-erected several wards, ending with an Anti-Eavesdropping Spell to ensure secrecy.

"All clear," he said at last.

Hearing the sound of rustling cloth, Harry turned in time to see Remus appear to his right, the invisibility cloak balled in his hands. A sudden rasping sound caused all three men to snap their heads toward the occupant of the room.

Macnair lay on his back in the hospital bed, his narrowed eyes fixed on Remus Lupin.

"Hello, my dear old classmate," Remus mocked. He moved a few steps closer to the bed. "You seem surprised by my visit."

"Get away, werewolf!" Macnair gasped weakly.

Remus bared his teeth in a nasty smile, deliberately taking another step closer. Macnair's eyes widened as he jerked his shoulders, but he was unable to move due to the magical restraints placed upon him.

"Remus, cut it out," Kingsley warned mildly. He turned to the young man. "Harry, go ahead and have your little chat with the prisoner. I'll see that the door remains shut."

Macnair's eyes snapped toward Harry in shock. Distracted by Lupin, he had failed to notice who his third and youngest visitor actually was. Recognition dawned on the big man's face and he drew in a sharp breath. For a moment, Harry thought Macnair actually feared him, but if so, the Death Eater mastered it quickly, replacing it with an expression of arrogant hatred. "Potter!" he spat venomously.

Harry's answering stare was every bit as cold as the Death Eater's. "Macnair," Harry returned shortly.

"I'll tell you nothing, boy!"

"We'll see about that, won't we?" Harry answered evenly. Three cautious steps brought him to the bedside. In a show of defiance, Macnair turned his head away; obviously, he did not intend to cooperate. "If you tell me what I want to know, it will be simpler and less painful for you, that is," Harry observed conversationally.

No answer.

Harry sighed. He hadn't really expected the man to be accommodating, but he'd felt that he should at least try to reason with him. *Okay. On to plan B.* "Remus, do you have the serum?" Harry asked, extending his hand.

Macnair's head whipped around as Remus handed a small vial to the young man. "You can't give me Veritaserum," he rasped desperately. "That's illegal!"

"It would be illegal," Harry agreed pleasantly, "if this were Veritaserum. It's not. This," he informed the Death Eater, holding the murky brown fluid aloft, "is *Lingua Solva*. Completely legal to obtain and use. I'm surprised that it's not more widely administered, but then again, there are those pesky side effects to consider."

"Eat shit, Potter!" Macnair swore loudly. "You can't make me swallow that. If you try to force it down my throat, you'll be wiping it off your face!"

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, Macnair," Remus chimed in. "We can and will make you drink it." In one smooth motion he drew and raised his wand. "*Stupefy!*"

Stunned, the Death Eater flopped back against the bed. Harry forced his mouth open and poured the *Lingua Solva* in as Remus pinched his nose closed. Reflexively, the unconscious man swallowed, then took a gasping breath. "*Eneovate,*" Remus said casually.

Macnair's eyes opened slowly, appearing unfocused and dull. Harry grabbed his chin, forcing Macnair to look at him. "A year and a half ago you stole a collection of Hufflepuff artifacts from Ollivander. Tell me what you did with them," he demanded.

"Took them to my house. Hid them," he answered in a voice as listless as his gaze. "Figured I should let them cool off a while before trying to sell them."

"Where are they now?"

"I sold the trophies. The Galleons made my father real happy."

Harry exchanged an anxious glance with Remus. "What happened to the necklace and the cup? Did you sell them too?" he asked with trepidation.

"Couldn't," he answered. "We tried to pawn the necklace, but no dealer would touch it. Too easy to identify, they claimed. Tried to break it up sell the diamonds separately, but we couldn't break the protection charm on it. That damn Hufflepuff bitch must have been smarter than we thought," he remarked acrimoniously.

"We? Who else is involved?" Harry probed.

"My sister."

"What about the cup?" Remus interjected. "Where is it?"

"My home. The Dark Lord ordered us to keep it safe and hidden, at all costs."

"He knows you have it?" Harry blurted loudly. "How?"

"Legilimency. Last year. I was thinking about what to do with it and he saw it in my mind," Macnair elaborated.

"He didn't take it from you? Wasn't he angry with you?" Harry questioned rapidly.

"No. He was pleased that one of his followers had it. He said it was stolen from him many years ago thought it was funny, ironic, he said that we had stolen it back. He ordered us to make sure it stays put, out of harm's way."

Harry exchanged an elated look with Remus. *Finally, they knew the location of the cup!* "Where in your house..."

The Death Eater groaned loudly, interrupting Harry. Abruptly, he turned his head and began retching violently. Harry and Remus quickly backed away from the bed.

"That's all you're going to learn from him, Harry," Remus informed him. "After the sickness passes, he'll be able to resist the potion's residual effects."

"All right. Let's get out of here," Harry decided, signaling Kingsley to take down the wards.

When Remus was safely hidden beneath the invisibility cloak, they slipped into the hall. As Kingsley closed the door on the still-heaving Death Eater, a gloating feminine voice rang out behind them. "Well, well, what have we here?"

Harry spun rapidly, coming face-to-face with Rufus Scrimgeour accompanied by none other than Dolores Umbridge, a satisfied smile spread across her toad-like face. Harry's stomach felt as if it had dropped into his feet. For the space of a dozen heartbeats, no one spoke.

Harry finally gathered his wits enough to speak. "Good day, Minister," he intoned formally, electing to completely ignore the woman by Scrimgeour's side.

"This time, you have gone too far, Mr. Potter!" she whispered venomously. "There is no justifiable reason for your unauthorized presence here! I will see that you are

prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law!"

Time to be the Chosen One, Harry decided. He drew himself up to his full (and now taller-than-Umbridge) height and regarded the squat woman with derision. "No justifiable reason, Madam Umbridge? Really? Have you forgotten that Voldemort is my mortal enemy? I have more reason than anyone to seek information on his doings from one of his followers!" A spiteful part of him was satisfied to see the repugnant woman's twitch of fear at the Dark Lord's name.

"Reason, certainly," interjected Scrimgeour, "but not the right. Unless..." A sly expression crept over the Minister's face. "Unless you wish, at last, to officially ally yourself with the Ministry."

Harry glanced at Kingsley then looked down, considering the likely consequences of accepting or rejecting the Minister's offer. His brain kicked into high gear. *I could twist this to my advantage: get Kingsley out of trouble as well as squeeze some concessions from the cagey old bugger.* "If you agree to forget this incident, I will meet with you to discuss how I might be useful to the Ministry," Harry suggested.

"Minister, no!" Umbridge objected in an outraged voice.

"And," Harry added, raising his voice, "please include Robert Ogden in the meeting, as we will be discussing some conditions I have involving his department."

"That is acceptable," Scrimgeour agreed.

Harry scratched his chin thoughtfully for a few moments, deliberately displaying the white scars carved across the back of his hand. "One more thing, sir? As a courtesy to me, I ask that Madam Umbridge NOT attend."

"Certainly," Scrimgeour assented gruffly. "Well, Harry," he said with forced pleasantness, "there's no time like the present, is there?" Taking the young man by the elbow, he steered him down the corridor, leaving Dolores Umbridge to glower futilely at their retreating backs.

By the time the incensed woman came out of her reverie, Shackbolt was long gone.

A bare hour later, Harry was seated in front of the Minister's desk, with the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Robert Ogden, III, to his right. He smiled slightly to himself. *How ironic*, he thought. *Here I am, a seventeen-year-old wizard, closeted with two of the most powerful men in the Ministry of Magic, about to negotiate!*

After the introductions had been made, Harry got right to the point. "Minister, Mr. Ogden," he said, looking at each man in turn. "You want me to cooperate with the Ministry to be the Ministry-sanctioned 'Chosen One', isn't that right?"

Scrimgeour assented warily, eyes fixed on the young man before him.

"I want it understood that I'm not doing this for personal gain either now or in the future. I do eventually want to become an Auror, but I would rather be accepted into the training based on my merit like any other candidate. I also want it understood that I won't do this simply to further anyone's political aims." His eyes slid sideways toward the Minister, then snapped back to the man who was the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. "I will only do this for the sake of public morale: to give the wizarding population hope."

Ogden nodded his understanding. "What are your conditions?"

"There are two. First," he said, addressing the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, "your department has to agree to release any suspects that you're holding without conclusive evidence. This business of arresting and jailing people without evidence or a trial has to stop." Scrimgeour narrowed his eyes dangerously and opened his mouth to reply, but Harry raised his voice and kept talking, overriding any potential objections. "That kind of thing undermines our justice system; people will eventually lose faith in law enforcement if you keep it up! For example: there's no real evidence that Gaspard Goyle is a Death Eater. He just has the bad luck to be related to one."

Ogden nodded fractionally. "Yes, although guilt by association has netted us a few prizes, it often goes horribly wrong." He met the Minister's eyes briefly. "Remember Aaron Whitby, Rufus? His close friendship with the Caldwells landed him in Azkaban he didn't last a month with the Dementors just wasted away. It was later proved that he had absolutely no connection to He Who Must Not Be Named," he finished grimly. Scrimgeour scowled and leaned back in his seat, realizing that Ogden would side with Potter on this issue.

"Second," Harry continued, turning to the Minister, "you have to convince the Wizengamot to abandon all alliances with the Dementors. Their true allegiances and appetites are painfully clear at this point. They are nothing but foul, evil creatures and must never be involved with the Ministry of Magic again!"

"You ask a great deal, Harry Potter. What makes you think we value your help so highly that we will give in to these 'demands' in exchange for it?" Scrimgeour asked shrewdly.

"Because," Harry drawled, "I really am the Chosen One."

Seconds ticked away as the two men, shocked into immobility by his words, stared wordlessly at him.

Scrimgeour recovered first. "So you're saying... there really is..."

"...A prophecy. Yes."

"You're.... who told..." Ogden stuttered, seemingly unable to form a coherent question.

Harry took pity on him. "I have heard the prophecy heard and seen it in a Pensieve. There's only one person who can destroy Voldemort: me. I am your only chance."

The older men winced slightly at his open pronouncement of the evil wizard's name. But, again, Scrimgeour was the first to regain his composure. "Dumbledore," he murmured. "It was him, wasn't it?" he asked, directing a piercing look at Harry.

Harry merely dipped his head in silent acknowledgement. "That's all I can say about the prophecy," he stated firmly. Raising his head, he looked Scrimgeour squarely in the eye. "I will make you a promise though: I will do what I can to help the Ministry. And when the time comes, I will destroy Voldemort or die trying," he finished grimly. He took a deep breath. "Do we have an agreement, gentlemen?"

"We do," Scrimgeour said, rising to extend his hand to Harry. They shook hands solemnly, sealing their promises.

The late-January sunshine fell across the parchment in Snape's hands. 'The Impenetrable Potion: conceived and prepared by the illustrious Morgan la Fey' the scroll proclaimed. Snape scoffed as he threw it down on the table. *An impenetrable pain-in-the-arse is what it is!* Snape thought derisively. He was irritated. More than irritated, actually. Extremely frustrated was closer to the truth. He had run into one dead end after another, the result being that he had made little to no progress toward completing the potion. He wished that he could bin the whole, ruddy project, but that was impossible. The Dark Lord wanted this potion, and what the Dark Lord wanted, he generally got. In any case, he expected his followers to endure any and all difficulties to procure their master's desires.

Initially, Snape had made a great deal of headway, translating and decoding the Morganian Scrolls, then beginning the actual brewing process. Between Hermione's

innovative idea of grating the ironwood root (to increase the infusion speed) and his own brainwave regarding the proper type of minced dragon heart (Chinese Fireball), they had corrected the problems with the base. The resulting solution displayed all of the required properties: a rich cobalt-blue color infused with iridescent flecks. Beautiful, really, but not good enough, as it was only the first phase of the potion.

When he had begun the second phase in mid-December, he had stopped allowing Hermione to work with him on the project. He had several reasons for this. First, the preparative techniques were quite complex, requiring a higher level of expertise than any secondary school student could have reached. Second, the ingredients were rare (read, expensive and difficult to procure) and he couldn't afford to waste them. And third, the Dark Lord had ordered that the potion's name, purpose and potential existence be kept absolutely secret. Hermione was just bright enough to infer the effects of even so complex a brew if she were to be made privy to the entire ingredient list. She was also well-able to reach the conclusion that it would be used against the Dark Lord's enemies. That would put a serious crimp in the Dark Lord's plan to use her as a lure for Potter. Accordingly, he had begun assigning her some of the advanced N.E.W.T.-level potions to brew during her lab sessions. This was perfect, as it both kept her otherwise occupied and allowed her to learn the material that seventh form students typically needed to master. He also increased the complexity of the wards on his laboratory notebook, knowing that it would be disastrous for her to uncover the information it contained.

Now, nearly six weeks into the second stage of the brewing process, January was running out (along with Snape's patience), and he had still not found a remedy for the potion's instability. He knew that there was a fundamental incompatibility between the strengthening base and one of the latter phase components, but could determine neither the faulty ingredient nor the exact reason for the unsuitability. *Damn it! They should interact properly!* he fumed for the hundredth time.

Always prickly, his temper had become irascible. He had categorically refused to discuss the potion he was working on, but Hermione was certain that it was the source of his ire. She began cramming all her tutoring sessions with him into the span of time directly after breakfast as he was least likely to explode before he worked on his mystery project. She avoided interacting with him in the lab altogether. Evenings were more bearable as they were the only times he seemed to unwind.

Their evening relaxation was furthered by Rabastan LeStrange, who had resumed his visits during the second week of January (once his shoulder injury was fully healed). He stopped by a couple of times each week, usually bringing a bottle of wine, a new star chart or an interesting piece of gossip from the Wizarding world. And although his visits were always welcomed by the inhabitants of the cottage, both Hermione and Snape were careful to avoid giving him any hint of their involvement. Snape had cautioned Hermione that their physical intimacy, were it known, would make both of them vulnerable to maneuvering and stratagems within the Death Eater ranks. It was simpler and safer, he had asserted, to keep their relationship hidden.

Hermione concurred. *LeStrange may be Severus' friend*, Hermione rationalized, *but that doesn't mean he would stay quiet if he knew about us*. Just the thought of the other Death Eaters knowing about her and Severus frightened her beyond reason. They would undoubtedly label her 'slut' or 'whore', and while that would be humiliating enough, her real fear was that her perceived promiscuity would make her a target for rape or torture. So, in LeStrange's presence, she addressed Severus as 'sir' and he called her 'Granger'. They never touched or used any other gesture or phrase that denoted intimacy. In truth, this was not too difficult, as their liaison was confined to the bedroom anyway. Severus was not a man given to casual touching, and he was definitely not one to use endearments.

Finally, on Candelmas Day, Snape discovered the underlying reason for the potion's instability. Late that morning, he had uncovered new information in the Morganian Scrolls: an endnote, laboriously translated and decoded, specified that salamander blood from animals of the family Sirenidae must be used. He had been using standard potions-grade salamander blood derived from the fire-loving variety. Sirens, he soon discovered, were aquatic and gilled, and these traits, apparently, made all the difference. Their blood would be compatible with the base he had only to procure it and the Dark Lord's potion would be finished in a matter of weeks!

When he joined Hermione for lunch at the kitchen table, she saw at once that his temper was improved. In fact, for Snape, he was almost buoyant. This meant, of course, that he lacked the scowl that had been an almost constant feature lately. And the snarling tone that she had (nearly) learned to ignore was gone as well. He was polite. Hermione was floored for about five minutes. Then she began to grin at him in response to even the most mundane comments.

"What, pray tell, is so amusing that you feel compelled to smile in that idiotic fashion?" Snape asked. Although the words were as acerbic as ever, they were belied by his amused tone.

Hermione giggled. Snape rolled his eyes in response. This had the effect of provoking her to burst into open laughter. Snape tried to scowl, but managed only an unconvincing glower. Finally gaining control over her unruly sense of humor, she posed a question of her own. "You finished your potion, didn't you? That's why you're in such a good mood!"

He was instantly serious. "I have told you numerous times that I can't and won't discuss any aspect of what I am working on."

"Yes, I know. But admitting that you succeeded doesn't entail telling me anything."

Snape sighed. "You are a persistent and bothersome little wretch," he said with only a trace of annoyance.

"Yes, but I'm right, aren't I?"

"Partially," he admitted at last. "I've not actually completed the work, but at this point it's only a matter of time."

"That's good then," she voiced softly, letting the matter drop. What did it matter what he was concocting? She was just relieved that he was past the rough spots.

Lunch passed pleasantly for Hermione, as did the rest of the day. The atmosphere in the cottage was more relaxed than any time in the past few weeks and she luxuriated in the easy feeling. In fact, for the first time in a week, Snape took her on an extended after-lunch ramble in the woods. It was overcast and gloomy, as was typical this time of year, but nothing could dent her lightened mood.

When Snape emerged from his lab later that afternoon, he noticed that a single candle had been placed in each window of the cottage. He scowled in confusion, then he remembered the date. He sniffed derisively. *Nothing, not even clouds on Candelmas Day, will bring an early Spring to this climate!* Entering the sitting room, he saw that Hermione was curled into a corner of the sofa, studying her Transfiguration text. He sank into a nearby chair, noticing that she was reading quite a bit ahead of the lessons they had been practicing. *Big surprise!* he thought sarcastically. "Is this your doing?" he asked aloud, waving a hand toward the candles illuminating the windows with a soft glow.

"Yes," she responded with a nod. "It's rubbish superstition, but the candles look pretty anyway."

Snape was silent, but privately agreed with both parts of her statement.

Correctly interpreting his silence as assent, she went back to her reading with a slight smile on her face. They sat together in the comfortable quiet, he thinking, she reading. Eventually, she put her book aside and stared thoughtfully into the fire. "Severus," she said after a few minutes, "do you remember the morning after the first time we slept together?"

"Of course," he answered, wondering where this was going.

"You asked me why I wanted to be with you if I was just lonely, remember?" He nodded and she continued talking. "At the time, I knew there was more to it than that, but I couldn't define my feelings."

Snape sat up straighter, suddenly wary at the prospect of discussing 'feelings'.

Hermione, however, didn't seem to notice. "Well," she said hesitantly, "I know what it is now."

"And?"

"It's trust. I trust you, Severus," she asserted in a soft but definitive voice. "Since the day I was captured, you've protected me. You've tutored me and shown me consideration. I'm not just filling a void in my loneliness you've earned my trust."

For a few moments, he was suspended in a bubble of shock. This was it what he had been working toward for the past six months to gain her trust for the Dark Lord to use. But for the first time, the success of one of his stratagems brought him no sense of triumph. He felt sick: a sinking, twisting sensation in his gut.

Looking into her eyes, he saw her absolute honesty. He had been more successful than he ever could have anticipated at the beginning, gaining not only her trust, but her companionship. In a sudden, rare flash of self-awareness, he realized that he valued it. Valued her. Her trust in him, her acceptance of him, even her reliance on him were all integral to his own satisfaction.

"What is it, Severus?" Hermione asked gently, as he continued to stare wordlessly.

He couldn't answer. It was too late to stop her from being used as a pawn. That was already underway. After all, he knew where the Dark Lord sent the memories that were extracted from him. *But no matter what happens, he vowed to himself, I will not allow any harm to come to her. I will protect her as I promised, even if HE is displeased.* Rising abruptly, he stepped in front of her and pulled her to her feet. Even the thought of his Dark master didn't diminish his resolve as he lowered his lips to hers.

The kiss was deep and fiery, leaving them both panting for breath when they broke apart. "Hermione," he finally managed to articulate in a hoarse whisper, "I need to have you, right now." In answer, she pressed her lips to his in a soft kiss and took his hand. He led her upstairs and shut the door behind them. Amid frantic kisses and ardent caresses they undressed each other, both feeling an inexplicable urgency. Severus backed her to the bed, falling down on top of her when her legs hit the edge. He nestled between her thighs and, taking her mouth in a possessive kiss, thrust inside her. He felt a burning need to make his vow aloud to Hermione, but didn't trust himself to speak. Instead he locked eyes with her, his gaze blazing with repressed emotions as they moved together. Her moans spurred him on, faster, ever faster, each thrust becoming a silent promise: *I will not fail you; I will protect you; no one will hurt you....* Until all thought was obliterated in the feeling of her inner muscles clenching around him, drawing his orgasm over him like a swelling wave.

Hours later a house-elf knocked on their bedroom door: Rabastan Lestrangle had come for a visit. Snape went down at once. "I'll come down in a bit," Hermione told him, needing a little time to think before facing a third party. She felt a little disconcerted by Severus' intense reaction to her earlier admission. His eyes, as they coupled, had held something she had not seen there before: a force of nature, a fiery presence that she could not name. It was not the passion of sexual ardor; that he had shown often (and she was certain she had done the same). She couldn't escape the feeling that something had shifted between them, but she didn't know exactly what it was. It was puzzling, and Hermione Granger had never encountered a puzzle that didn't intrigue her. After a while, she splashed her face, ran a brush through her hair and joined the men.

Lestrangle leaned back into the comfortable sofa, sipping the drink in his hand. *Where, he wondered, is Granger?* At that moment, he heard footsteps on the stairs and she descended into view. *Ahh, lovely,* he admired, following her with his eyes. As usual, in his role as 'the friendly pure-blood,' he stood to greet her graciously. She responded in her typical pleasant manner and moved to take a seat in the furthest chair. Opting not to notice, he sat and began making pleasant conversation. He was distracted for a moment when Severus summoned an elf to get the girl a drink. For a second, he saw an odd expression cross his friend's face as he looked at Granger. But the next moment it was gone, replaced by his customary impassivity. Perhaps he had imagined it. As the evening progressed, his sense that something was off returned. There was an undercurrent between Severus and Granger. It was not negative, but it was there. Something had changed in their dynamic. *Hmm, has Severus finally shagged the witch?* he speculated. He'd had his suspicions at times over the past months, but Severus was always so smooth, revealing little that he did not wish others to know.

Rabastan was not as crafty as Severus, nor as powerful, but he was a keen observer. He set himself to the task of unraveling precisely what was going on between Granger and his friend. He would watch carefully each time he visited. He was confident that, eventually, he would have enough clues to nail it down. And if that proved inconclusive, he would simply confront Severus with a sexually explicit comment: his friend's spontaneous response would tell a great deal.

"Stand, my servant," Voldemort commanded in an unnaturally-high voice. Lestrangle rose but kept his head bowed respectfully. This was one of the things he liked about the man: he was modest, never projecting arrogance or an inflated self-image. "You have a report, Rabastan?"

"Yes, my lord," Lestrangle answered. "The scouts in London have noticed an increase in Auror activity. On four recent occasions, Aurors have arrived during or directly after our activities. We believe that the Ministry has a new method to detect Dark Magic."

The Dark Lord paused, considering this news for several seconds. "Compile a complete list of all the spells my followers used during each incident," he ordered. "Give it to Lucius Malfoy. He is to identify all the motifs that were utilized and determine the common theme for the collective incidents. Then we will know which category of Detection spells the Ministry is using." The skeletal wizard spun on his heel and began pacing in front of the fireplace while he thought. "Tell Malfoy I want his conclusions in two days along with his recommendations for countering the Ministry's strategy."

Two days? Lestrangle thought in amazement. *That's not much time, considering the scope of the job.* Apparently, the Dark Lord was still making his displeasure with Lucius' past failures clear. Lestrangle waited patiently as his master continued pacing; it was not permitted to leave the Dark Lord's presence before you were given leave. As he waited for his dismissal, he allowed his mind to wander. Thinking of the elder Malfoy reminded him of Draco. The whelp had done a fair job so far in his search for the Ministry informant among their ranks: he was interrogating the newer Death Eaters, as they were the most likely to get cold feet. *Thank Merlin, the senior members of the circle are above reproach in that respect.* He remembered all too well when many had believed that Severus was unfaithful to their master. *Hmmm, Severus... what is he up to with Hermione Granger? I'm certain he's bedding her lucky him she's an attractive package, that one....*

"Rabastan!" the Dark Lord hissed suddenly.

Lestrangle started, seeing the Dark Lord standing directly in front of him and looking into his eyes. "Yes, master?"

"I have seen a most unlikely picture in your mind! Tell me," he demanded, "do you truly believe that Severus is bedding the Mudblood, or is that just idle speculation on your part?"

There was no lying to the Dark Lord: he always got to the truth and punished those who were dishonest with him. "I do believe they are sleeping together, my lord," he replied softly.

"What evidence do you have?"

"There were several little things, master," Lestrangle explained. "It seemed to me that his protectiveness of Granger has increased and there is a slight change in her manner as well, from respect toward him to deference for his opinion. I also noticed that both of them seem reluctant to leave me alone in the same room with her." He smiled sharkishly.

"But the final clue came when I suggested to Severus that Granger would be a willing bed partner for him. His face became like windows in a stone wall: windows with shutters inside. To most, it would convey nothing, but I have known Severus long enough to interpret that expression, my lord. Invariably, it means that you have come upon the truth, but he will not discuss it."

Lord Voldemort drew his thin brows together in a momentary scowl. "It is good that you have given me your honest observations, Rabastan. Your loyalty is commendable. I must consider what to do with this information, although I believe it will be very useful indeed. Leave me now!" he ordered.

As soon as Lestrage had left him alone, a terrible smile overspread his features. The beginnings of a plan were already taking shape in his mind. *Yes, Severus was right; Granger will prove very useful to me after all.*

Unconscionably Long Author's Notes:

1. *The Dark Arts Outsmarted*: A book mentioned in OotP (Chapter 18: Dumbledore's Army) No author is given in canon.
2. Lingua = tongue, solvo = to loosen
3. Aaron Whitby: Made him up! He is a relative of canon character Kevin Whitby (a Hufflepuff student).
4. Remember the Impenetrable Potion? We haven't heard about it for quite a few chapters. In case you forgot: It is an ancient and obscure brew that, when prepared correctly, would act as an unbreakable shield. Voldemort wants it for his eventual showdown with Harry.
5. Candelmas Day is derived from the pre-Christian pagan celebration called Imbolc. It was held on February 2, half-way between the Winter solstice and the Spring equinox. According to tradition, if the day was sunny, the second part of Winter would be harsh (and conversely, if the day was overcast, the rest of Winter would be mild). On Candelmas, early Christians distributed candles and put them in windows to counterbalance the darkness of Winter. Candelmas, of course, is the origin of Groundhog Day in America (the Germans, who transplanted this holiday, watched badgers to see if they detected their own shadow).
6. Salamanders of the Family Sirenidae (Class Amphibia) are strictly aquatic and are native to North America. They are nearly legless, having only two small front limbs and resemble eels.
7. Finally, another *Lord of the Rings* quote, this time uttered by Rabastan Lestrage in the final scene of this chapter. "His face became like windows in a stone wall: windows with shutters inside." This is a contraction from a longer passage in *The Two Towers* (from the chapter entitled Treebeard) wherein Treebeard is describing Saruman to Merry and Pippin. The complete passage is: "His face, as I remember it I have not seen it for many a day became like windows in a stone wall: windows with shutters inside."

Outing Secrets

Chapter 18 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to J.K. Rowling and her publishers. I'm not making any money from this.

*A big thanks to Wartcap for stepping in to beta read this story! She also gets the credit for the chapter title.

Shades

By Orm Irian

Chapter 18: Outing Secrets

Harry had been making good on his promise to help the Ministry. During January and February, he had accompanied the Minister to two press conferences, was photographed by the *Daily Prophet* hobnobbing with Rob Ogden and his two top crime scene investigators, and had gone on three 'trouble calls' with a team of Ministry Aurors. And although Gawain Robards had staunchly maintained that Harry was accompanying the Aurors 'for training purposes,' he wasn't fooled. The assignments were all in public places. It was clear that the Ministry wanted their alliance with Harry to be as visible as possible.

Well, he decided, after yet another 'impromptu' walk through the Atrium with the Minister, *if it gives people hope, then it's worth it.* Spotting Ron on the far side of the refurbished fountain, he realized that once again, his friend had waited for him. He had watched helplessly as Ron was shunted aside by various Ministry officials on more than one occasion recently. But in spite of all the new attention Harry was receiving, his friend had not become jealous. For that, Harry was immensely grateful. In fact, a few minutes ago when Scrimgeour had taken Harry's elbow, diverting him through the Atrium, Ron had seemed almost amused. "Ron!" Harry called, lifting a hand in greeting to catch his friend's attention.

"Ready to go then?" Ron asked with a lift of the eyebrows. A slight smirk remained on his face.

Harry scowled. "You think this is funny, don't you?" he accused indignantly as they walked toward the fireplaces to Floo home. "It's bad enough putting up with the politicians and all their annoying hangers-on without you laughing at me!" His expression was so aggrieved that a chuckle burst out of Ron, in spite of his obvious effort to contain it.

"Sorry, mate," Ron said lightly (and not at all sincerely) between chuckles. "But you should have seen your face! Priceless, that was!"

Harry rolled his eyes, not deigning to answer, and stepped up to an empty hearth. "The Burrow!" he called out, throwing a handful of glittering powder into the huge fireplace.

Back at the Burrow, the young men tucked into one of Mrs. Weasley's excellent lunches. They were alone in the kitchen, the others having finished eating while Harry was detained by the Minister. They took advantage of the privacy, however temporary, to discuss the next phase of their mission.

"Have you got permission yet from Robards to investigate Macnair's house?" Ron inquired between bites.

"No. He says Ogden will have to clear it."

Ron frowned. "What's the point of putting up with all those Ministry bigwigs if you can't get some special authorization when we need it?" he asked rhetorically.

"Oh, I will," Harry said. "Soon, I think. But I have to build trust with all those bigwigs before they'll let me act independently."

"Well, when you finally get the go-ahead, make sure you have Kingsley assigned to go with us."

Harry merely nodded, not sure how to tell Ron that it was unlikely in the extreme that the cautious head of the Auror office would allow Harry to bring his friend another non-Ministry employee along. An uneasy silence filled the kitchen for a minute as both young men subsided into thought. Harry shot a look at Ron; his friend was scowling. *I hope he doesn't suspect the truth, he thought fervently.*

But when Ron spoke, it was clear that his thoughts were focused elsewhere. "I wonder what Hermione is doing right now?" he murmured distractedly.

"Dunno," Harry answered, although he wasn't sure Ron was even aware he had spoken aloud. "I would think that she's probably hard at work studying or practicing spells." Harry looked up, meeting his friend's eyes; the pain in them was clear and sharp.

"It's been so long since we've seen her or even heard about her from Krum," he said dejectedly. "It's ironic, Harry: it took us nearly six years to realize that we wanted to be together, then, right after we did, she was snatched away." He shook his head unhappily. "It's so unfair!"

Harry had no idea what to say. He thought privately that Hermione certainly hadn't taken six years to realize she liked Ron, but it would do no good to tell him that. Instead, he reached across the table to grasp Ron's arm in a silent gesture of comfort and support.

"At this point," Ron continued, "I would even welcome another of those Pensieve memories just to be able to see her face."

"Finally!" Snape exclaimed, clutching the small brown package in his fist. The Siren's blood had arrived at last. *Now I can complete the Dark Lord's wretched potion and move on to other things!* It had taken him more than two weeks to locate an apothecary with the right contacts in North America then another equally long wait for overseas delivery of the ingredient. Standing at the window, he watched the brown delivery owl disappear over the trees, a sense of satisfaction diffusing his typical morning disgruntlement. Turning back to the breakfast table, he saw Hermione watching him speculatively. He smirked but said nothing, knowing it would pique her interest. He wasn't disappointed.

"What's that, Severus?" she asked as he tucked the package into a pocket.

"Nothing that concerns you," he answered shortly.

"For your potion then, is it?" she retorted with a cheeky smile.

Snape refused to be drawn in, simply regarding her with a steady, neutral gaze. Her smile widened and Snape frowned. *Blast the girl! She obviously knows that she's right,* he thought.

For her part, Hermione had deciphered the meaning behind his array of masked facial expressions some time ago. It was simply a matter of prolonged exposure combined with close observation. Right now, he was trying to unnerv her with that implacable stare and a long silence. However, her awareness of his tactics gave her immunity against their effects. Only his genuine anger still had the power to derail her. But this morning she had no wish to provoke him, only to tease him. Having accomplished that, she deftly changed the subject. "Will you have time to show me that new nonverbal Transfiguration spell this morning?" At his affirmative nod, she reached for his hand, saying, "Come and finish breakfast, Severus. I'm eager to get started with my lesson."

He sniffed disdainfully. "Over-eager is more like it," he quipped. But he sat down and they finished their breakfast in companionable silence.

Later that morning, Snape was able to finish the Impenetrable Potion. The last phase of brewing had gone without a hitch, and he finally, with great satisfaction, bottled a sample to take to the Dark Lord for testing. This had been one of the most challenging projects he had ever worked on, both because it was technically complex and because it had involved a great deal of translation and interpretation to decipher the source text. He was glad it was over. He was sick of trying to decode the antiquated language and colloquialisms of a delusional, medieval witch. The woman had the audacity to proclaim herself "the illustrious Morgan la Fey." *Ha! She was nothing more than a harlot to her contemporaries. Although, he admitted privately, she was a dab hand at Potions.* Regardless, he was relieved to be done with her creation. He decided that after his daily walk with Hermione, he would present the finished potion to his master.

"It needs to be tested, my Lord. But I have full confidence that it will perform as expected." Snape spoke with assurance, but carefully kept his tone free of arrogance so as not to antagonize the unpredictable and powerful wizard before him. "I suggest that we administer it to an animal first, and then if there are no detrimental side effects, try it on a human subject."

"Yes, that will be acceptable, Severus," Voldemort said carelessly. "Give me the vial."

Snape held it up and watched as his master took the vial in his long fingers to examine it. The rich blue fluid fairly sparkled as he held it up, reflecting even the weak light from the parlor windows. Voldemort's flattened nostrils flared as he brought it close to his face to test its smell. He seemed satisfied by what he found.

With a crook of his finger, he summoned a large eagle owl from its perch in the darkest corner of the room. "*Imperio!*" he shrielled, flicking his wand at the bird. "Drink," he ordered, offering the vial to the spellbound creature. The bird dipped its beak into the potion and took several large gulps as commanded. Again, Voldemort flicked his wand at the bird. "*Stupefy!*"

A golden glow enveloped the owl as the Stunning Spell met the magic of the Impenetrable Potion. The bird was unaffected, standing patiently on the mantle. Voldemort's eyes took on a maniacal light, as his high-pitched laughter rang out, filling the room. "I will be invincible! Potter will be crushed under my feet at last!" he crowed with glee.

When his laughter subsided, he turned back to Snape. "This is excellent, Severus," Voldemort shrielled in a cold voice that seemingly belied the words of praise. His red eyes gleamed strangely as he regarded his kneeling servant. But he did not, as Snape expected, invite him to rise. "Is there enough left in the vial for the second test?"

"Yes, my Lord. That is enough for one person to be protected for approximately an hour."

"I will test it later perhaps on one of the new recruits that has displeased me. I will be able to determine precisely how long the protection lasts," he said with a reptilian smile. "But, I believe we have another matter to attend to, my most faithful servant." He advanced until he stood only inches from Snape. "I have it on good authority that your other project has come to fruition as well, Severus. According to Rabastan, you have successfully seduced the Mudblood. Is this true?"

Snape's mouth went suddenly dry. "Yes, my Lord."

"Why did you not inform me of your progress?"

"My Lord," he answered quickly. "While it's true that she gives me her body, she is not yet ready to give her loyalty. I did not think simply bedding the girl was worth reporting."

Voldemort bent forward until his face was level with Snape's. He grabbed his servant's chin, jerking it upward until their eyes met. "You know I am most interested in

seeing you gain the trust of Potter's friend. This could be the first step. You will show me everything, Severus."

Snape had only a moment's warning before the Dark Lord's powerful mentality intruded into his mind. In that instant, he shielded what he could, and then figuratively gritted his teeth as his master rifled through the remainder of his most personal memories.

Snape left the Riddle House, walking swiftly but woodenly, moving by force of will alone. His sense of violation was beyond anything he could ever remember feeling. The memory of his master's cold, inhuman observation of his and Hermione's intimacies filled him with disgust. It was the mental equivalent of rape, but as a 'loyal servant' of the Dark Lord, he'd had to submit. Submit or suffer the consequences. He stumbled on the uneven ground of the back garden as his mental aversion was transmuted into real, physical nausea. His knees hit the ground and he emptied his stomach, purging the remnants of lunch, but not his overwhelming sense of shame.

He was to blame; he had been totally unprepared for what had just occurred. *Damnation!* he raged silently at himself. *Complacency is the enemy. You know this!* He closed his eyes in anger and self-recrimination. But regrets were futile at this point, and he knew it. His master's mental intrusion had been so swift and powerful that he had been able to shield only two memories: the first night he and Hermione had spent together and the evening that she had told him she trusted him. The rest had been laid bare. And one of his most precious memories had been harvested for his master's use a mere tool to goad Potter. That thought, in turn, reminded him that others, perhaps many others, would witness the scene that the Dark Lord had extracted. He felt sickened anew, knowing that what he prized as one of the very best memories of his life would be viewed with revulsion and horror by *her* friends.

I should have seen this coming. Rabastan's curiosity should have been warning enough for me! Abruptly, he stood, galvanized by a new realization. *Regrets about the Dark Lord's actions may be futile, but there is one person who will answer for his actions,* he thought with steely determination. A grim smile, more frightening than his scowl, overspread his features as he Disapparated with a decisive crack.

He materialized outside an ordinary-looking block of flats in London. *How ironic,* he thought wryly, *that Bellatrix is forced to live among the Muggles she despises so fiercely.* The building was an old walk-up; the Lestranges lived on the third floor. He strode into the entry hall and took the stairs two at a time. Their flat was cloaked with a Muggle Repelling Charm and warded against anyone not bearing the Dark Mark. Any Auror attempting to break the wards by standard Ministry methods would get a nasty surprise. *Ingenious but not an impediment to me,* he noted as he rapped on the door in a complex staccato rhythm. The corner of his mouth turned up slightly as he felt the stroke of magic; he was being assessed. It was Rabastan he would bet on it. Rabastan had always been the most cautious of the Lestrangle trio and would want confirmation that it was not an enemy at the door, even after hearing the coded knock. With luck he would be home alone.

The doorknob rattled, turned, and the door was eased open a few inches to reveal a slice of the younger Lestrangle's face. "Severus!" he cried in surprise, stepping back and opening the door fully. "Come in."

Snape managed a curt nod as he crossed the threshold, but didn't trust himself to speak. Rabastan would get a proper greeting soon enough.

"The others are out scouting a location for a strike tomorrow night," Lestrangle explained as he shut the door with a snap. "A family of filthy blood traitors, I believe. So, what brings..." He cut off mid-sentence as he turned and saw the wand in his friend's hand. It was leveled directly at his heart.

Before he could voice the question that sprang to his lips, Snape's voice rang out. "*Crucio!*"

Lestrangle fell to the ground, writhing and screaming in agony as Snape, an expression of savage triumph on his face, held the curse for a full minute. Lifting the curse, he summoned the other man's wand nonverbally. Lestrangle was in no shape to object.

"You never were very good at dealing with pain, *old friend,*" Snape spat derisively. "I hope the Dark Lord has already given you sufficient recompense for betraying me, because when I am done with you, you won't be able to enjoy your rewards for a while!" He pointed his wand at Lestrangle's legs. "*Diffi...*"

"No, Severus! Please! I didn't betray you!" Lestrangle shouted.

"Liar!" Snape roared, his face twisted into a fearsome grimace. "The Dark Lord himself told me he had the information from you!"

"I didn't tell him about you and Granger! He used Legilimency on me." Lestrangle swallowed convulsively. "Severus, you know I've never been able to Occlude and against the Dark Lord I had no chance of concealing anything."

"You'll understand if I don't take you at your word," Snape replied nastily. "*Legilimens!*" He found the memory instantly, as it was right at the top of the other man's mind. Watching the scene play out, he realized that Rabastan was telling the truth. But the knowledge did not appease his anger, for he could see that Rabastan had been very careless: all the Death Eaters knew that it was risky to let your mind wander in the Dark Lord's presence. He pushed deeper, wanting only to hurt the other man. *There!* he thought vindictively, as he encountered a set of recent memories. *Just what I was looking for.*

Some minutes later he withdrew from Lestrangle's mind. "Did you enjoy sharing that, *old friend?*" he mocked. "Tell me, how did it feel to have someone watch you in your most private and unguarded moments? That is what your negligence resulted in for me! The Dark Lord insisted on viewing all of the encounters he could find. Worse yet, he extracted one of my memories to send to Potter. The entire Order of the Phoenix will probably see it! Do you understand now what you have done to me?"

Lestrangle hadn't moved from the floor, except to turn his head away from his tormentor. He was silent, except for his ragged breathing, but the revulsion on his face was quite clear. He was disgusted, both by Snape's intrusion and by the use their master had put his information to. "Severus," he rasped after a long pause, "I'm sorry. I... I never meant..."

"Save your breath!" Snape interrupted. "It's done. I may have exacted my vengeance, but I do not forgive so easily. Keep away from me from now on if you know what's good for you! And don't come around to the cottage; I don't need your interference with Hermione anymore."

"Hermione, is it?" Lestrangle said in a low voice, pushing himself into a sitting position. Then a second later, understanding dawned on his face. "My God, you're attached to her! I never thought I would see the day when you would choose any woman, much less a Mudblood, over our friendship."

"What is between the girl and I is none of your concern," Snape hissed dangerously. "You will keep your speculations to yourself or I will be having a chat with Pansy Parkinson's father about what I witnessed in your memories." He noted with satisfaction that Rabastan had paled at his threat. "I daresay he would be very interested in those 'special training sessions' you've been having with his daughter." Walking to the door, he yanked it open, dropped Lestrangle's wand to the floor and strode out, Disapparating as soon as he was clear of the wards.

His intuition had been right: when he finally got the go-ahead to investigate Macnair's family home from Robards, the paperwork explicitly stated that only Ministry-employed Aurors were permitted to accompany him. *Ron is probably going to go ballistic,* Harry speculated as he stared at the long-awaited papers before him. He sighed. *How am I going to break it to him?* As he sat before the tiny desk he had been allocated in the Auror's section, an idea occurred to him. One thought followed another, and before long, he had a plan. *Yeah,* he decided. *If I word things exactly right, this just might work!*

"Tell me again why this is a better way to find the cup," Ron grumped.

Harry rolled his eyes. He had explained the whole thing days ago, and at the time, Ron had agreed that Harry's plan was for the best. But now that Harry was actually getting ready to go to meet Shackbolt and Dawlish without him, it seemed that Ron was regretting his compliance. "Come on, mate," Harry cajoled. "You and I both know how important it is to keep our search for the Horcruxes secret. This way, I'll have two professionals helping me find evidence of the stolen items, and an opportunity to question all the family members all with Ministry approval. And no one but us will ever find out that Hufflepuff's cup is a Horcrux. What's more," he elaborated, "since the Macnairs will know that my investigation is officially sanctioned, they will be much less likely to challenge me when I go back with you and Remus. It's the perfect setup!"

"What I want to know," Ron grumbled with a frown, "is how you came up with such a bloody good plan. Your strategy is ruddy awful in chess! Tactics are supposed to be my strong point."

Harry grinned. "Necessity is the mother of invention, after all. Well," he said, tucking a final item into his back pocket, "I'm off. See you in a couple of hours."

Ron dipped his head in acknowledgement. "Be careful. And watch your back; that entire family supports Voldemort."

"Will do," Harry answered.

They approached the Macnairs' large country home without impediment as there was no fence or wall encircling the large garden. Taking the initiative, Harry rapped on the door smartly, calling out, "Open up, in the name of the Ministry of Magic!" A few moments later the door rattled and began to open slowly. A house-elf so small that Harry thought it must be an elf-child looked up fearfully at the three imposing wizards. Before it could speak, Harry extended the authorization papers to the creature as he had been instructed to do by Robards. "Our search warrant and identification papers," he said crisply.

"Here, I'll take those!" a deep voice proclaimed. Harry looked up from the elf to see a heavysset man slowly approaching. He had a pronounced limp in his left leg, a craggy, but still-handsome face and long, black hair liberally peppered with grey. "You're dismissed, Peri. Go and see if your dam needs help preparing luncheon," he directed gruffly.

"Yes, sir," the tiny elf squeaked, disappearing with a pop.

The man, apparently the elder Macnair, took the papers from Harry's outstretched hand but did not glance at them. His eyes were fixed on Harry with a look of contempt. "A bit young for an Auror aren't you, lad?" he asked in a condescending tone that raised Harry's hackles at once.

"My age is not at issue, sir," Harry answered coldly. "We are here to conduct a search of your premises and to ask you a few questions. May we enter?"

Macnair sneered openly at Harry. "Now why would I kow-tow to some snot-nosed, wet-behind-th..."

"Don't be an old fool, Warren!" a melodious alto voice interrupted. "Can't you see that's Harry Potter? Age doesn't matter when you're the boy who defeated the Dark Lord as a baby!"

A middle-aged witch had come into the entry hall from a side door and was gazing past the master of the house to the threesome from the Ministry. She had a regal bearing emphasized by the elegant robes and upswept hairstyle she wore. As she gracefully moved to stand next to her husband, Harry was taken aback. *Is this Walden Macnair's mother?* he wondered incredulously. Since his first encounter with Macnair during his third year at school, Harry had always believed the brawny man to be the epitome of crudity. The contrast between the Death Eater and the woman now appraising the Ministry representatives could not have been starker. But Harry was drawn abruptly from his thoughts by the elder Macnair's next words.

"This is the savior of the Wizarding world?" the big man asked skeptically. "The Ministry's new golden boy?" He gave a short, derisive bark of laughter.

Harry tensed and opened his mouth to reply, but was stopped by Kingsley's hand on his shoulder. The Auror stepped forward. "Rosalind and Warren Macnair, I presume?" he inquired smoothly.

"That's right," the man answered. "Now see here, I don't have time to be reading all this tripe." He brandished the papers still clutched in his fist. "What is it the Ministry wants?"

"As Mr. Potter has already informed you, we are here to conduct a search and to get some information."

"I don't care what these bleeding papers say," Macnair replied belligerently. "I won't submit to an interrogation by the likes of you!"

"I'm afraid you have no choice," Kingsley retorted smoothly. "Now, are you going to let us in voluntarily, or do we need to use force?"

Grudgingly, they were at last allowed to enter.

While Kingsley carried out a standard Ministry interview with the master and mistress of the house, Harry and Dawlish set off to scan the place for interdicted items such as cursed artifacts, poisons, illegal potions and magical weaponry. Harry also used the spell that Remus had unearthed to scan for traces of Dark Magic. He noted several spots in the library and one in the dining room where Dark Spells were in use, but he did not find the particular magical resonance that he was now able to associate with a Horcrux.

After he completed his share of the rooms, he made his way into the kitchen in search of the family's house-elves. Unfortunately, trying to get information out of the creatures proved to be a total waste of time. The elves, a sharp-eyed female and her little son, Peri, were unwilling even to say where Macnair's sister was at the present time. The female became angry when he inquired about Walden Macnair's comings and goings around the time of Ollivander's disappearance, responding only with the typical elf refrain, "You is nosing, Mister! We keeps our silence and our Master's secrets!" The elf-child did nothing but squeak and hide behind his mother whenever Harry addressed him.

Harry left the kitchen in defeat. *Stupid elf loyalty! Why can't more of them be like Dobby? He, at least, was willing to give hints when he couldn't tell me the information outright.*

In the hall outside the kitchen, Harry met up with a grinning Dawlish. "Ha!" he crowed. "I hit the jackpot in the Death Eater's bedroom, Potter."

Harry's stomach contracted with apprehension; he hoped that Dawlish had not found the cup. He couldn't afford to let it fall into the Ministry's custody there were just too many of Voldemort's informants within the Ministry. "What did you come up with?" he asked casually as he slid his wand partially out of its arm holster. If Dawlish had the cup, he would have to *Obliviate* the man.

Dawlish held up a small rack of vials. "Five of these contain poisons and two have venoms that are listed as controlled substances by the Potions Regulation Department. I also found this," he said smugly. In his hand was an object that Harry recognized instantly.

"A Time-Turner?" he whispered in awe. "But I thought they were all destroyed two years ago, when the Death Eaters raided the Department of Mysteries."

"Apparently, our man Macnair is craftier than we gave him credit for. He was at the Ministry the night all the other Time-Turners were destroyed the night You-Know-Who revealed himself. He must have stolen this from the Time Room before the place was smashed up."

Harry could only stare at the now priceless artifact in Dawlish's hand. The Unspeakables would be ecstatic to have even one Time-Turner back. They could use it as a model to attempt to make others. The creator of the Time-Turners, Broderick Bode, had died without passing on his secret fabrication process. When the entire collection

was destroyed, so was the Ministry's last hope of creating more.

Dawlish seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Harry. "With this, the Unspeakables have another chance to deduce how to construct more. And," he added cheerily, "I'll probably get a commendation for finding it!"

Harry smiled ruefully. He couldn't begrudge Dawlish his ambition, or even his pride, as the man was an excellent Auror, but his self interest was a bit overwhelming. *Someday*, Harry predicted privately, *he's going to make a formidable politician.* "Let's go and find Kingsley and get that stuff back to the Ministry," he said aloud.

Kingsley was in the conservatory, which he had searched after he had finished questioning the elder Macnairs. "All clear here," he voiced evenly. "Did either of you find anything?"

"Not me," Harry informed him with a shake of his head, "but he's got a real prize." Harry hooked his thumb toward Dawlish.

Kingsley raised his eyebrows in interest. "Really? What is it?"

"I'll show you outside," Dawlish countered. "Come on, let's get out of this place."

As they made their way back through the house to the front entry, Harry reflected that the trip had certainly not been a total waste of effort. The Time-Turner alone made it worth their while. That and the other items that Dawlish had found would definitely instigate further Ministry scrutiny of the Macnair family, which Harry could use to his advantage. He had already managed to search nearly half the house. When he came back for round two, he would simply give the impression that he was continuing the Ministry-sanctioned investigation. *With Remus, Ron and I all scanning this place for Dark Magic, we're certain to detect the cup!*

Hermione was puzzled by Severus' moods lately. Several days ago, the day he had received the mysterious package by owl post, he had disappeared into his lab for a few hours, only to emerge nearly smiling. She assumed that he had finally met with success on the project that had been absorbing virtually all of his time for the past three months. When he announced that he would be gone for a few hours, she was certain that he had finished his mystery potion and was taking it to Voldemort. *Either he's just really happy to be done with it, or it's something that will please Voldemort and he is expecting to be rewarded,* she speculated.

However, when he returned some hours later, he was in the blackest temper she had seen in months. For the next few days he was quite unpredictable, sometimes reverting to his former school master persona snappish and curt sometimes subsiding into sullen brooding. Gentle probing got her nowhere, as he either insulted her or simply refused to talk, depending on which state of mind he was in. Only at night did he unbend, emerging from his moods to lead her to their bed. Once they were truly alone, all the masks dropped from him and his eyes took on an agitated, almost fierce look. He made love to her with a kind of desperate intensity that, while physically satisfying, perplexed her a great deal.

One night, as they lay entangled together in bed, her body relaxed and mind drifting in post-coital languor, she inadvertently spoke her thoughts aloud. "I can't figure out what's bothering you lately. Has something happened?"

He answered in a sleepy voice that rumbled along her neck where his face was still burrowed. "I just don't..." Convulsively, his arms tightened around her for a moment, then he pulled back so he could see her face. "Hermione, I don't want things to change. I want you to stay with me."

"Well," she answered wryly, "it's not as if I can go anywhere." Then gazing into his eyes, she saw that the desperate look had returned. "Something has happened," she whispered. "Will you tell me, Severus?"

"It's... nothing has... nothing has really happened yet," he answered haltingly. "But, soon, I think, the Dark Lord will put his plans into action. When he and Potter meet for the last time, many things may change, regardless of the outcome." His black gaze dropped away from her and he continued in a low intonation. "If Potter wins, unlikely as that seems given his skills, I will be dead, captured or a fugitive. And if the Dark Lord wins, he will expect all those who remain to give him their loyalty."

Loyalty.

The word hung in the air between them.

So that's what Voldemort has wanted from me all along, she realized. The choice, if he won, would be loyalty or death. She looked away, her mind in a whirl of turmoil. What would she do if Harry was defeated by Voldemort? Could she ever swear loyalty to such a monster or even pretend to? *How about to save your own life... or to stay with Severus?* a small voice whispered inside her. She pushed it away. It would not come to that. Surely, Harry would fulfill the prophecy with a positive outcome. Evil such as Voldemort's wouldn't be allowed to triumph. *Who allows? Who forbids?* her voice of reason asked. A sudden shiver of apprehension ran through her.

Snape drew her close, thinking, perhaps, that she was cold. "Shhh," he soothed, stroking her hair lightly. "It's not here yet. We'll deal with it when it comes."

A week after Hermione's realization, they were working in the lab. Hermione was preparing another of the advanced potions from the N.E.W.T.-level curriculum. Snape was working on a long-shelved project to create an Invisibility Potion. By unspoken agreement, they had not discussed the future any further, both seemingly determined to concentrate on the present and take whatever comforts it provided. Fortunately, Snape's moodiness had mostly subsided and the atmosphere between them was much more relaxed than before.

A loud thumping reverberated through the little cottage, and Hermione's eyes jerked from her reading in surprise. She looked questioningly to her companion, but he had turned his head toward the door. Moments later, they heard the sound of multiple feet pounding up the stairs. Snape drew his wand. "Take cover," he growled.

As the work benches were all situated against the walls, he was the only cover. She scrambled behind him as the footsteps neared. Snape tensed, a hex on his lips, as the door burst open to reveal two black-garbed figures, masks dangling from their hands. Hermione's mind had a moment to register the two faces, Avery and Lestrangle, before Snape's voice interrupted her forming speculations.

"You dare to come here?" he said, cold rage emanating from every line of his body as he stepped forward menacingly. "Get out now, while you still can!"

Avery, who was standing in front of Lestrangle, seemed taken aback. "We're here for..."

"Dark Lord's orders, Severus," Lestrangle explained, interrupting the other man.

That froze Snape's advance. Through clenched teeth, he asked, "What does the Dark Lord command?"

"Pettigrew has been spotted again," Avery responded. "A scout positively identified that hand of his and reported-in immediately. He's in an Irish Wizarding pub; we've got the coordinates." He held up a small slip of paper.

"I'll meet you downstairs directly," Snape informed the two men. After they left, he clapped his hands twice, summoning a house-elf. "I will be out for an indeterminate amount of time. Stay with her," he ordered, gesturing toward Hermione. Black eyes met brown for a few, intense moments. He gave her an almost imperceptible nod, then, pivoting sharply, he strode into the bedroom to gather his gear. A minute later, he was out the door.

Hermione stood motionless in the lab, listening as the sound of his boots receded down the steps.

Author's Notes

1. Warren and Rosalind Macnair: Parents of the canon character, Walden Macnair. J. K. Rowling has never mentioned whether he even has any living relatives, but I needed him to have a family for plot purposes. I choose Warren as the father's name simply because it is alliterative with Walden. Rosalind comes from James Michener's Chesapeake; she's a genteel lady, but a strong woman as well. Don't ask why I choose to make Macnair's mother his total opposite just a whim, I guess.
2. When Hermione is considering whether fate could 'allow' an evil being like Voldemort to triumph, she thinks, "Who allows? Who forbids?" When these words sort of materialized (unplanned) on the page, I knew at once my brain had pulled a quote from memory. At the time, I was absolutely certain that it was from *The Lord of the Rings*, from the chapter entitled 'The Shadow of the Past' (*The Fellowship of the Ring*), where Gandalf first tells Frodo about his magic ring and about Sauron. However, a thorough read through of that scene (and several others) proved fruitless. Then, like the proverbial light bulb over the head, I realized that my memory was playing tricks on me. The quote is actually from Ursula Leguin's Earthsea trilogy (*The Farthest Shore* in the chapter titled, 'Orm Embar'), wherein Ged and Arren are discussing who may be responsible for the weakening of magic. Oh well, it was still the wise counselor advising the young hero. In any case, the scene I have quoted has several parallels to mine in that in both, the topic is evil and a protagonist must (eventually) realize that 'fate' is not a passive enterprise, but something that often moves through the actions of individuals. Arren certainly realizes that he must play his part in the struggle against evil in order to enact change (and there's a hint for any of you that actually read my lengthy author's notes...).

Pound of Flesh

Chapter 19 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to J.K. Rowling and her publishers. I'm not making any money from this.

*Warning: this chapter contains graphic violence and minor character death.

**Thanks a bunch to Wartcap for her excellent beta reading. Once again, the credit for the chapter title goes to her.

Chapter 19: Pound of Flesh

The cottage door slammed. *Alone again*, Hermione thought morosely. She could hardly count the house-elves as company, seeing as neither of them would even participate in a friendly conversation with her. *The Malfoys probably indoctrinated them against Muggle-borns, like the Blacks did with Kreacher.* It was at moments like this that she really missed her friends. Her relationship with Severus made her captivity bearable, but she never forgot that she was, in fact, a prisoner.

Pondering the situation with Pettigrew, she slowly turned back to her potion. *So, the slippery rat has surfaced again. If Wormtail escapes a second time, Severus will be in a towering rage when he gets back*, she predicted. But, she doubted that it would happen. The Death Eaters were not stupid; they would not repeat past mistakes. After what had happened the last time he was supposedly cornered, the scouts would take extra precautions against Pettigrew getting away in Animagus form. *They probably already have the entire area cordoned off with an Anti-Transformation Jinx*, she speculated.

Severus knows what to expect, she assured herself. *He knows how devious Wormtail can be.* Rationally, she felt confident that, this time, he and the others would eliminate the traitorous vermin once and for all. Still, an undefined worry settled in the back of her mind, like a formless specter lurking behind her shoulder. *If something should go wrong... if something should happen to Severus... No!* She pushed that thought away vehemently and consciously focused her mind on the potion before her.

Mercifully, it was not ruined. *Hmm, only three more steps to go and it will be complete.* Working quickly, she finished preparing the next ingredient and added it, stirring clockwise as the text directed. The minutes slipped by as Hermione ground and chopped the last two items. They had to be added simultaneously, exactly fifteen minutes after the preceding step.

At the proper time, she dropped the final components into the brew and held her breath in anticipation. If she had followed the method correctly, the potion would take on a bright acid green color. *One, two, three, four, five*, she counted silently. *There it's changing color! I did it!* she thought triumphantly. *I successfully brewed the Spinosum Renovo Potion!* It was a demanding concoction to prepare, and Hermione was proud that she had managed on her own. She extinguished the flame under her cauldron and began to clean up her work area while the potion cooled.

Feeling euphoric, she gathered the excess supplies and moved toward the storage cupboard to stow them away. As she placed the bottles on the counter and reached for the cupboard with her free hand, she noticed an open book on the end of the workbench. *Best put that away too. Severus must have left it out.* She reached for the book, flipping the cover closed as she lifted it. She froze as she realized what she held. It was Severus' laboratory notebook.

In his hurry to leave, he had forgotten to close and ward it. She swallowed hard. *Should I risk taking a look?* Glancing slyly to the side, she saw that the elf was busy cleaning out the fireplace. The creature neither knew nor cared what she held in her hands. Severus could return at any moment, but realistically, she didn't think that he would be back very soon. In any case, she would hear him enter the cottage. *This will probably be the only chance I will ever get to see what he has been up to* she rationalized. It was an opportunity her curious mind was unable to pass up.

Pulling out a stool, she settled herself at the workbench and opened the notebook. *Whoa, what a mess!* The first pages were covered in Snape's spiky scrawl, with numerous crossings-out and side notes scribbled in the margins. Puzzling out his notations, she realized that he'd been translating and decoding a very old text. There were phrases from a language she didn't recognize, but thought might be some ancient Germanic dialect. It made little sense to Hermione until she saw the name of the famous sorceress, Morgana la Fey. *Ah, this language predates Old English*, she concluded.

Flipping forward, she passed over numerous pages of translations until she found a list of ingredients followed by a detailed brewing process. It was labeled 'The Impenetrable Potion.' Its effects, according to the notes, were to create an impervious shield that would protect the drinker from any and all offensive magical attacks. She drew in a sharp breath. *Was this the project that Severus had been working feverishly to complete?* Almost frantically, she flicked forward to the entry dated 19th September 1997. Her heart sank as she read the dry notations, chronicling her own work on the strengthening base last autumn. Paging steadily through the book, she

saw it all: the day that they had perfected the base's color, the point at which Severus had refused to let her work on the potion any longer, the day he had discovered the last refinement and finally, the notation that the Impenetrable Potion was complete and ready for testing.

The potion was for Voldemort. He would use it against Harry. And she had helped create it.

A crushing sense of guilt assailed her, bringing stinging tears to her eyes. Silently, she let them roll down her cheeks to fall onto the pages of the open journal. *My God, what am I going to do?*

Closing her eyes, she took a shaking breath and considered her options. If she did nothing, Harry would be defeated. But what could she do while she was a prisoner? *I have to get away*, she determined abruptly. *Now while Severus isn't here. But how?* The elves would stop her if she tried to leave the cottage, and the restrictions on her wand prevented her from using magic to incapacitate them. *Think, Granger*, she exhorted herself. There were other types of magic—magic that didn't need a wand. Most magical children experienced episodes of wandless magic when they were under emotional stress. Unfortunately, those were very uncontrolled, volatile situations; she couldn't have reproduced one of her childhood outbursts of magic, no matter how hard she tried. That left... potions. Potion-making was another form of wandless magic.

Mentally, she listed all the potions that might possibly be of use. Most of them were complex, taking hours or even days to prepare. Hopefully, she perused the shelf where Severus stored the finished potions. Her eyes stopped on the Exploding Fluid. *Maybe I can use that?* But even if she was desperate enough to use it on the elf that was babysitting her, that still left the one downstairs to take care of. The noise of the explosion would probably bring the second elf upstairs instantly and she would have to kill him as well. Just the thought made her nauseous. Aside from her aversion to unprovoked violence, it was also risky; there was a high probability that she would get caught by the second house-elf.

Resuming her inspection of the shelves, she spotted the Dreamless Sleep Potion. That had possibilities. *But, how can I get the elf to drink it?* she wondered. Next to the Dreamless Sleep was Bruise Healing Paste. *Transdermal absorption! That's the answer!* Rapidly, she consulted her *Advanced Potion-Making* text; there was a section towards the back on modifying potions for various delivery routes.

Less than thirty minutes later, she held up a beaker of modified Dreamless Sleep. She poured half the liquid into a vial and capped it. That would do for the elf downstairs. She shot a furtive glance at the elf across the room. The creature was sweeping the floor (for the third time), his back to her.

Please, let this work properly, she prayed as she approached the house-elf. "Um, excuse me," she said hesitantly.

The elf spun around, only to receive a face full of Dreamless Sleep for his trouble. The creature's eyes widened in surprise for a second, then sagged closed as he folded to the floor in an untidy heap. Peering closely, Hermione noticed his face was dry. The potion had been rapidly and completely absorbed, just as expected. Her confidence bolstered by success, she headed downstairs to take care of the other one.

She found him in the kitchen. Hearing her enter, the elf turned from the stove and eyed her suspiciously. "What is Miss wanting?"

"Oh... um," Hermione answered haltingly, realizing that she had not thought up a cover story. "I... I'm not feeling well," she improvised, holding up the vial of potion. "I thought a cup of tea might help settle my stomach before I take this draught. Do you think you could make me one, please?"

The elf glared at her for a few moments before moving wordlessly to comply. Hermione walked nervously toward the table, although her real goal was to get as close to the elf as possible before attempting to douse it.

Suddenly, the diminutive creature twisted around to glare at her. "Where is my brother?"

"Your brother?" she replied blankly.

"The other house-elf," he snapped. "Why is he not watching you as Master Snape ordered?"

"He's... he's in the sitting room. Cleaning," she lied desperately, moving a bit closer to the mistrustful elf. "Listen, I'll make my own tea. You don't have to do it," she blurted, hoping that her babbling would distract the elf for a moment.

It worked. Apparently, the prospect of a witch or wizard offering to do their own housework was so novel that he was momentarily frozen in astonishment. In one fluid motion, Hermione pulled the cork out of the vial and threw the contents directly at the motionless elf. It splashed over the lower half of the creature's face and chest, soaking into the knotted pillowcase that served as his garment.

"What has Miss done? My pillowcase is soiled!" the elf cried, outraged. His eyes fastened on her in anger as he drew breath to berate her further. "I is telling Master Snape! You is in troub..." The elf's strident voice cut off mid-word as the potion abruptly took effect, sending him down to meet the floorboards.

"Whew!" she breathed. *Now to get out of here.* She pelted upstairs for her cloak and threw it around her shoulders. After a moment's consideration, she took it off and transfigured it into a Muggle-style coat. Detouring to the lab, she retrieved Severus' notebook, thinking, *Harry needs that potion so that he can meet Voldemort with a fighting chance!* As she tucked it inside her coat, she caught a glimpse of Severus' spiky handwriting on the cover. A pang of regret struck her heart at the thought of leaving him. He had been kind to her. She was certain that, in his own way, he cared. But then, the memory of what he had done returned in full force, hardening her resolve. *No! He used me! He probably lied to me about other things, too.* With a look of determination covering her anxiety and dismay, she made her way downstairs and slipped out of the cottage to freedom.

Regretfully, Ron stared down at his plate. It was still half full. Looking up, he saw Harry watching him.

"All right, mate?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron replied faintly. "Just a bit nervous, you know?"

Harry nodded wordlessly.

Ron noted that Harry, too, had fallen short of his usual quota, leaving a full ham sandwich untouched on his plate. Irritably, the red-head pulled out his wand and performed a Vanishing Spell on the remaining food in front of him. "I wish Remus would turn up."

"Yeah, he's late," Harry added. "Your mum was expecting him for lunch, I think."

"She was," Ron agreed. The two friends lapsed into a brooding silence, as one minute stretched to five and then ten. Finally, a loud pop just outside The Burrow broke the hush.

"About time!" Harry exclaimed, standing to open the door for Remus. However, before he had taken two steps forward, the door opened and Bill Weasley stepped into the kitchen. Harry stopped short in surprise.

"Hey you lot, how're classes going?" Bill asked casually.

Harry and Ron exchanged frowns.

Bill looked puzzled by their reaction. "What's up?" he inquired. "Did Mad-Eye make you practice Unforgivables on each other or something?"

"Nah," Ron answered, "nothing like that. We're just waiting for Remus. We thought you were him, that's all."

"I see," Bill said, as he summoned a plate of sandwiches from the refrigerator and sat down to eat.

Resignedly, the two younger men resumed their places at the table. Fifteen minutes later, Bill had finished eating, but there was still no sign of Remus. As Bill Banished his plate into the sink, the fireplace flared green. A moment later, Remus' head appeared with a pop.

"Harry," he said hoarsely, "there's trouble at the Tonks' residence! I'm afraid that I can't go with you today."

Harry jumped to his feet. "What happened?"

"Death Eater trouble?" Bill asked simultaneously.

Remus grimaced. "Yes, Bill. A squad of them showed up there sometime during the morning. Fortunately, Dora and her parents were at work. When the Death Eaters discovered that the house was empty they went wild and wrecked the place. Andromeda Tonks found the Dark Mark hovering over the house when she arrived home at noon."

"Does the Ministry know about the attack?" Ron questioned.

"Oh yes," Remus affirmed. "Andromeda Apparated straight there as soon as she spotted the Dark Mark; she knows better than to walk into an attack site before the Aurors have checked it out. Her daughter is an Auror, after all."

Bill scowled thoughtfully. "Were they after Tonks or her parents?"

"Could be either," Remus replied. "But, it was probably her parents. Andromeda knows what the Death Eaters think of purebloods like her."

"Blood traitors," Ron stated with a sneer.

Remus bobbed his head affirmatively. "Harry, Mad-Eye and I are going over there to erect some special wards. I'm sorry, but this takes precedence over our plans for today."

"Yeah, okay," Harry agreed glumly.

As Remus' head disappeared with a soft pop, Ron flung himself carelessly into a chair. He felt deflated. *All that anticipation and hyping myself up for nothing!* "Bloody Hell!" he swore, just to let off steam.

Bill examined the two friends, an assessing look in his eyes. "Where were you supposed to go with Remus?" he probed.

"I'd rather not say," Harry countered warily.

"Ah," Bill retorted, sounding a bit disappointed. "I thought you might be taking another trip to Knockturn Alley, in which case I would have volunteered to go along in Remus' place."

Ron glanced at Harry, who was staring speculatively at his eldest brother. He thought he saw what was coming next, but he said nothing; it was Harry's decision whom to let in on their 'project'.

"Bill," Harry began casually, "do you recall our meeting with Ollivander?"

"I'll do the talking. I've dealt with these people before; they'll recognize me," Harry informed the Weasley brothers as they approached the Macnairs' house.

"Won't they expect to see the Ministry paperwork?" Ron asked worriedly.

"Nah, they didn't even look at the papers last time." Donning an authoritative mien, Harry rapped on the front door, calling, "Open up, in the name of the Ministry of Magic!"

The seconds ticked by. Ron wished he felt as confident as Harry looked. Just as he began to wonder if this was all a terrible mistake, the door was opened by a tiny house-elf.

"Can I help you, sirs?" The creature squeaked.

"Yes, I'm Harry Potter from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Is Mr. Warren Macnair home?"

"The master and mistress of the house is out, Mr. Harry Potter."

"No matter," Harry continued decisively. "I'm here to continue the search I began last week. Mr. and Mrs. Macnair have already answered our questions, so they don't really need to be here. My associates and I will complete our search of the premises today." He stepped forward, forcing the diminutive creature to back up into the hall. "Don't let us interrupt your work, elf," he said brusquely, hoping the creature took that as a dismissal.

The house-elf glanced at each of the three wizards with wide, fearful eyes, seemingly at a loss about what he should do.

"Who is in charge of overseeing your duties?" Bill asked the little elf kindly.

"My d-dam," he squeaked in return.

"Go and inform her that we are conducting another search of the house. We will go about our business," he concluded.

"Yes, sir," the elf shrilled and disappeared with a crack.

"Whew!" Ron breathed in relief.

"Okay, let's split up and get to work," Harry directed.

As they had agreed earlier, Bill and Ron headed upstairs, while Harry returned to the library to check out those blips of Dark Magic he had detected on his previous visit.

Ten minutes later, Ron emerged from the master bedroom. *Nothing out of the ordinary in there*, he thought. He scanned the hallway; it was empty, except for an alcove holding a small statuette of a mermaid. *Could there be something hidden in plain sight?* Ron wondered suspiciously. *After all, Macnair has turned out to be more cunning than he seems.* Decisively, he swept his wand over the alcove, chanting, "*Demonstro Pravus Quendam*," and watching for any ripple of response to the spell.

"Who are you?" A puzzled alto voice queried.

Startled, Ron spun around, his wand extended in front of him. "Don't move!" he commanded automatically. He was face-to-face with a youngish woman. *About thirty*, he estimated. She had long brown hair and large, soulful, brown eyes that were regarding him with a faraway expression. Her petite frame was clad in a distinctly odd assortment of items: cowboy boots (with spurs), a pair of flowery Capri pants and a poloneck jumper. Ron scowled. "Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?" he demanded.

The woman cocked her head to one side slightly. "Well," she responded, "I asked first. And since I live here, I think you should tell me your name before I tell you mine."

"What's going on, Ron? Who is she?" Bill had come out of another bedroom to the left.

The woman looked over the newcomer as if she was cataloging everything about his appearance. "You're William Weasley," she asserted finally, meeting Bill's startled gaze. "You probably don't remember me. I was in Hufflepuff and several years ahead of you at school, you see."

"You're right there," Bill remarked dryly. "I don't remember you."

"No one ever does," she said serenely, apparently not bothered by it in the least. "I'm Celia, by the way. I was in my last year when you came to Hogwarts, so it's not surprising that you don't know me. But I have a thing for faces; I recall every face I've ever seen with perfect accuracy."

Ron, who was listening to this exchange with growing amazement, had a sudden memory of old Mr. Ollivander speaking. *"...a lovely girl. Cherry wood and phoenix feather, ten and a half inches ... a powerful wand for such a petite little imp."*

"You're Macnair's sister!" he blurted suddenly.

The woman turned her attention back to Ron. "Do you have something to do with my brother?"

"Sort of," Ron answered cautiously. "We're here to search for contraband items he might have stolen or hidden in the house."

Celia's face brightened at this. "Oh, are you Ministry people? The other Auror fellow wasn't very nice to me last week. He never even thanked me for showing him Walden's favorite stash spot."

"His... stash spot?"

The woman nodded enthusiastically.

"Did he have any other 'stash spots' in the house?" Ron enquired hopefully.

"Oh, yes. He has several. But I know where they all are. I even know where all of Phoebe's hidey-holes are," she declared smugly.

"Bill, get Harry!" Ron directed urgently. Casting his mind back to the day they had spoken to Ollivander, he remembered that the wand maker had mentioned Macnair having two sisters. "So, Phoebe is your sister?" he inquired tentatively.

"Yes, they're both older than me. But," here she lowered her voice conspiratorially, "I don't like them. They're both really mean to me. They always call me names like Scatty Celia, Hufflepuff Whore and even...blood traitor." The last came out in a barely audible whisper. "They turned my mum and dad against me too. My parents took my wand and now I'm not allowed out of the house."

Ron swallowed around the lump in his throat, uncertain what to say to Celia's startling revelations. Thankfully, he was spared the necessity by the sound of two pairs of feet pounding up the steps. Harry burst into the hall, skidding to a stop a few feet from Ron and Celia.

The woman's face altered instantaneously to a delighted expression. "I know you!" she cried. "You were here last week!"

Harry blinked in surprise at this animated greeting. "Yeah. Yeah, I was," he agreed. "... I definitely don't remember seeing you, though."

"Oh, I was hiding," the woman answered with a laugh. "I like to become invisible that way no one can bother me, you know?"

Harry glanced questioningly at Ron. His look said plainly that he thought the woman was barking mad.

"Harry, this is Celia," Ron intervened, "Macnair's youngest sister. She knows all the places where her brother likes to hide things. Celia, this is my friend, Harry."

Celia cocked her head, giving Harry a long, assessing stare. "I suspect you want my help," Celia stated, matter-of-factly.

Harry nodded.

"I'll make a deal with you. After you take away the stuff Walden brought home and hid, could you help me with something?"

"What?" Harry asked warily.

"My sister has some things stashed too. Things that belong at Hogwarts, in my old House. I want you to return them to the Head of Hufflepuff."

Ron's jaw dropped. *Hufflepuff's artifacts! The Horcrux could be with them!*he thought excitedly. "That's what we're here for, Celia," he assured her. "We want to find the stuff your brother stole from your old House! Do you know where these items are?"

"Of course I know! Why would I bring it up if I didn't?"

"Take us to the place," Harry directed. "Please."

Celia nodded and set off down the stairs, leading the three men straight to the large front parlor. She pointed to an ugly chartreuse Queen Anne sofa in a corner. "It's in there," she informed them. "There's a secret panel on the bottom."

Harry immediately performed the detection spell, but got no indication of any Dark Magic in the vicinity.

Ron turned to Bill. "Could it be masked?"

"It's possible. Let me try something," he suggested. Stepping forward, he waved his wand in a complex pattern, looking for all the world as if he were tracing letters in the air. If there was an incantation to go with the movements, it was nonverbal. After a minute, a low humming noise began to emanate from the sofa. Bill dropped his arm to his side, a look of satisfaction on his face. "There are several nasty spells protecting whatever is hidden there. First, there's a complex camouflaging spell that's covering all traces of Dark Magic. Then, there are at least two dangerous curses in place maybe more than two. I can't tell until we eliminate the masking enchantment."

"Can you get rid of it?" Harry asked.

Bill shook his head. "None of us can," he said indicating the three of them. "But, she can do it in a moment. It's tuned to recognize the magic of family members."

"I can't. I don't have a wand," Celia protested with a shrug.

Silently, Ron held out his wand, grip first, offering it to the witch.

A warm smile accompanied her softly spoken, "Thanks." Celia approached the sofa, stopping about five feet away. "*Abisio Ocultamiento!*" A bright flare of light obscured their vision for a moment, then died away.

Bill stepped up next to the witch. "All right. Now, let's see what I can do." He began another intricate series of wand motions accompanied by muttered incantations. After a minute, beads of sweat began to form on his brow, but he did not desist. The seconds ticked past as the curse-breaker used all his skill to attempt to breach the enchantments placed on the hiding place.

Ron watched, his apprehension growing by the moment as Bill's wand began to tremble. *I can't let Bill get hurt; he doesn't even know what that cup really is* he thought. "Come on, Harry. We have to help him," he said abruptly.

The two friends moved to place a hand on Bill's shoulder, merging their power with his. The sudden surge of magical energy shot from Bill's wand, enveloping the sofa in a red glow. A loud crack split the air as the hexes were broken. The men tumbled backwards as the excess energy they had put into Bill's spell rebounded like a recoiling spring.

"Whoa!" Bill exclaimed, pushing himself off the floor. "Whatever you two did was potent stuff."

"It's called a power-meld, bro," Ron informed him. "You did the real work; all we did was provide a little extra energy."

Harry was on his feet already, heading for the sofa. "Help me with this, will you?" he called over his shoulder.

Ron hurried to join him. Together they heaved the sofa onto its back exposing the dusty bottom. "There it is!" Ron pointed to a small panel inset. Curiously, it was fastened only with a small sliding bolt. Harry reached toward it, only to have Ron knock his hand away. "No! I'll do it," he insisted.

Harry looked taken aback. "Why?"

"Because, you are the Chosen One, remember?"

"Bloody hell, Ron! You're not expendable either," Harry began angrily.

"Cut it out, boys!" Bill intervened curtly. "No one is expendable. Anyway, the protective hexes are neutralized which you two would have known if you had bothered to check before you started arguing!"

"Fine!" Ron answered curtly, reaching for the latch. He slid the bolt across and the panel swung open, revealing a wooden box. Ron pulled it out and opened the lid.

"Oooh!" Celia crooned from beside Harry. "There they are! See, I was right. Those rightfully belong to Hufflepuff House."

Indeed, nestled in the satin-lined box were a fabulous diamond necklace and a golden, two-handed cup embossed with a badger. Beautiful as the necklace was, Harry had eyes only for the cup. Gently, he lifted it out of its nest, staring at it in awe. This was the last hidden Horcrux. Nagini still had to be taken care of, but Harry wouldn't have to search for the snake. It would be right by its master's side. He was one step closer to defeating Voldemort. *When Remus is able, he decided, we will destroy this one as we did the locket Horcrux.*

"Harry, be careful with that thing," Bill warned in a low voice. "There's a Retaliation Hex on that cup. Any magic directed at it will rebound on the caster."

"What about this," Ron asked, holding up the necklace. "Is it cursed too?"

"Not that I can detect," Bill answered.

"You! You traitor!" A shrill screech rang out behind them. "*Everberus!*"

The men whipped around just as a tall, muscular woman sent a curse across the parlor, aimed straight at Celia. Reflexively, Celia raised Ron's wand (which she was fortunately still holding). "*Protego!*" she shouted, blocking the curse.

The woman turned her wand on Harry. "Give me the cup, or I'll kill you, boy."

"*Expelliarmus!*" Bill yelled.

In a lightning move, the woman blocked his spell and returned a Splitting Hex.

Unable to parry quickly enough, Bill threw himself sideways, knocking into Celia and sending them both to the floor in an awkward jumble.

"*Incarcerus!*" Harry shouted pointing his wand at the woman. Ropes flew from his wand, but fell short of their mark. He was too far away!

A feral smile distorting her features, the woman roared, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

In desperation, Ron lunged forward, intending to knock Harry out of the path of the curse. He impacted on his friend's back, propelling Harry forward.

As he felt his torso overbalance, Harry threw his hands out in front of him to break his fall. The hideous curse sizzled through the air toward him, striking directly on the bowl of the cup he still held. A flash of magic, like black lightning, rebounded from the cup, striking the woman directly in the chest.

For one long moment, she hung suspended, surrounded by a nimbus of sickly green and black power. Then, a blinding burst of light filled the room, obliterating sight.

When their eyes cleared, they saw a blackened form crumpled on the parlor floor.

"Phoebe!" Celia wailed. "Oh my God! Phoebe..." The brown-haired woman dropped the wand in her hand, collapsing in tears.

Ron and Harry exchanged an uncertain look, as if to say, "What now?" Then Ron put a tentative hand on Celia's arm, obviously feeling that some attempt to comfort her was required.

Bill's murmured voice distracted Harry from the scene of grief. He turned to watch the older wizard waving his wand over the small golden cup lying on the carpet.

After a minute, he met Harry's gaze. "It's inert," he stated definitively.

"Inert?" Harry echoed.

Bill nodded solemnly. "No more Retaliation Hex and no remaining trace of the Dark Magic signature I detected earlier."

Harry felt a flood of relief at the thought that the Horcrux was destroyed, but Bill's next words brought him firmly back to reality.

"Harry, when the Killing Curse hits an inanimate object, it usually destroys it. In order for the Killing Curse to merely render this cup quiescent, it would've had to be animate

in some fashion."

Harry dropped his eyes, not sure how much he should admit. *Damn Bill for being so astute!*

"Is there something you haven't told me?" Bill probed.

"Yeah," Harry finally conceded. Knowing he owed a large debt to Bill he resolved to tell him the truth about the danger they had all been in. "Let's find Remus. We have something to explain to you."

Severus was getting impatient. They had been sitting in an alley across from a seedy Irish pub for the entire afternoon and part of the evening. The Dark Lord had instructed them to capture and execute Wormtail out of the public eye so as to avoid garnering sympathy or assistance for the traitor. This meant that they had to wait for the slippery vermin to leave the pub so they could corner him alone. *This time, there will be no respite for Wormtail,* Snape thought vindictively. *Even if I have to kill him in front of ten Muggles!*

"How much can the bugger drink?" Avery mumbled in disgust.

"I'd like to know where he got the money to sit in there all day getting pissed," Lestrage replied, sounding distinctly disgruntled as he peered around the bins next to him. "Hold on... someone's coming out!" Two figures had emerged from the front door of *The Hippogriff's Haunt*. Lestrage stiffened and leaned forward for a better view. The man on the right was tall, with a huge, protruding belly and broad shoulders; the one on the left was short and dumpy. Both men had their hoods drawn up, effectively concealing their features. "Is that him, the shorter one?"

From the deeper shadows beside Lestrage, Severus' spoke in a soft waspish tone. "That's him, on the left. Notice how he keeps his hands concealed in his robes. Let's let him get a few streets away from here before we close in. I'll keep a Tracking Charm on him, in case he Disapparates."

The others nodded and slipped from the shadows, ghosting along the opposite side of the street as they followed their quarry.

Snape cast the charm nonverbally and glided soundlessly across the road, trailing directly behind Wormtail and his companion. He flitted from one shadow to the next, nearly invisible.

They had progressed a short way when the large fellow suddenly stopped. "Petey, didja hear summat?" he slurred. "Over there." He waved a hand vaguely toward the opposite side of the street.

Snape froze and held his breath. *Shit!* he swore to himself. *If that bubbling fool Avery has alerted the rat, I'll use the Cruciatus Curse on him myself!* He watched as Wormtail thrust his head forward, as if to sniff out whatever, or whomever, was about.

"Nah, I doan' see nothing," Pettigrew replied in a thick voice after a few seconds of scanning the vicinity. He started forward again. "Come on, mate. Them girls won't wait forever, y'know."

At a crossroad, the two men turned left into an unlit alley. Snape stopped at the corner of a building, just short of the entrance. A powerful smell of rotting rubbish as well as a warning prickle of caution assailed him. Something was wrong; this was too convenient. He heard Hermione's voice echo in his thoughts: *"...he deliberately leads others to discount him, then takes advantage of their low estimation of his abilities." Yes, he does.* He heard the soft scrape of a boot as Lestrage and Avery joined him in the shadows.

"What are you waiting for, Severus?" Lestrage asked in a whisper.

"I think he knows he's being followed. This smells like a trap to me."

Lestrage shook his head. "No way. He's just pissed and looking for a lay. I'm going in. You two back me up," he directed. Lestrage slipped noiselessly around the corner, disappearing into the darkness as if it were a vast invisibility cloak.

Snape turned his head to look Avery in the eye. "I still think it's a setup."

"What do you propose, Snape?" he whispered in return.

"We Disillusion each other and take positions on either side of the alley. Be prepared to catch the rat if he takes down Lestrage."

Avery nodded once, sharply. "Agreed." He rapped Snape on the head with his wand, using a nonverbal incantation.

As Snape felt the familiar cold trickle down his back, he reciprocated. Like a chameleon, Avery seemed to fade from view as he took on the color and texture of his surroundings. Snape slipped across the opening, to the right side of the dark alley. Glancing back, he detected the barest distortion of the wall as Avery rounded the corner on the left side.

Moving as quietly as possible, they progressed about thirty feet. There was no sign of Lestrage, Wormtail or his large friend. Abruptly, a red jet of light accompanied by a sizzling noise lit up the alley for a few seconds. In the momentary light, Snape saw the squat form of Wormtail grasp his shoulder, hissing in pain.

"*Stupefy!*" rang out as a white jet arced back toward the source of the first curse.

Snape didn't recognize the voice. *It must be Wormtail's friend,* he deduced. *Fool! Does he think Lestrage will give him a stationary mark?* And indeed, a second later it was apparent he had missed his target when the big man let out a wordless screech, supplemented by a loud crash of bins.

A flare of white light lit up the alley, revealing Pettigrew's friend on the ground, his legs bound together with numerous ropes. As the flare subsided, Snape saw Pettigrew dive behind a bin. Lestrage blasted it out of the way with a spectacular Reductor Curse, but unfortunately Wormtail was ready for him. "*Stupefy!*" he shouted. The spell hit Lestrage squarely in the chest, and he toppled forward in an unconscious heap. Wormtail stood and moved to help his companion. "*Evanescio!*" he commanded, waving his wand over the ropes binding the man's legs.

As he helped his friend up, the two Death Eaters held a wordless conversation. Snape made a rolling motion with his hands, creating a small vortex of distortion. Avery answered with an up-and-down slash of his wand. It was a standard ambush technique: Trip Jinx and then hex when they go down.

Wormtail regarded Lestrage's huddled form on the ground. "I should kill him, while I have the chance," he muttered.

"Kill 'im? Are you barmy?" the big man asked.

"He's a Death Eater, Jimmy! Sent to kill me, no doubt." Wormtail raised his wand.

Time for a distraction, Snape thought. He flicked his wand at a dustbin several feet behind him, levitating it briefly. Abruptly, he jerked his wand upward, releasing the bin. It crashed to the ground, startling Wormtail, Jimmy and, to Snape's amusement, Avery.

"There's more of them!" Wormtail squeaked, crouching slightly and advancing cautiously to investigate the source of the noise. His 'friend' stayed where he was, appearing quite reluctant to encounter additional assailants.

Snape waited until Wormtail drew even with his position, then silently cast the Trip Jinx. The squat man went down with a high-pitched squeal of surprise, landing heavily on his hip.

"*Viscus Expulsum!*" two voices shouted in unison.

The double-curse hit the downed man with a flash of light and a sickening thunk. Wormtail screamed in agony as the contents of his abdomen were forcibly ejected from his body through a ragged, gaping fissure.

Snape and Avery moved forward as one, watching as awareness faded from the traitor's eyes. Wormtail expelled a final breath, eyes staring sightlessly into the darkness.

A brief glance at the man cowering a dozen feet away assured Snape that there would be no trouble from that source. *He's probably wet himself!* he thought contemptuously as he stepped up to Avery, carefully avoiding the bloodied gore scattered on the ground. He tapped Avery on the head with his wand, and in turn received a quick rap to reverse the Disillusionment Charm. He regarded his companion. "Excellent, Avery. I didn't know you had it in you," he sneered. With a last vindictive look at Wormtail's corpse, he Disapparated, leaving Avery to rouse Lestrage.

Author's Notes:

1. The title of this chapter is derived from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, wherein the moneylender, Shylock, ruthlessly requires Antonio to pay him back with a pound of flesh. (Sorry if the gore in this chapter makes this title a little gruesome, but the reference to retribution was just too good to pass up.)
2. The time line for King Arthur (and hence Morgan la Fey) ranges from 490 AD to 550 AD (depending on the source). This predates the usage of the distinct Old English dialect (established after 600 AD) that developed from the variety of Germanic dialects brought to Britain by the Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Jutes and others (all of which became intermingled with Latin words as well). Therefore, I extrapolated that the original manuscript of the *Impenetrable Potion* by Morgan la Fey would have been written in one of the Germanic dialects common at the time.
3. Spinosum Renovo Potion: a medicinal potion that I dreamed up (no basis in canon) to treat spinal injuries. Spinosum is my own derivation (from spine, obviously); Renovo = repair, in Latin, via an online translator.
4. Celia and Phoebe Macnair. I chose these first names purely for my own amusement. I stated in the previous chapter's notes that Rosalind Macnair's name came from a James Michener character. In turn, Michener's Rosalind was named after the female lead in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. It seemed fitting for my Rosalind to have daughters named after the other female characters in Shakespeare's wonderful comedy. (Can't you just hear ditzy Celia Macnair: "Sweet coz, let's away!")
5. Abisio (Latin) = to get rid of; ocultamiento (Spanish) = concealment. Not canon; made it up.
6. Retaliation Hex: I extrapolated the existence of this curse from canon, using the example of how Dumbledore's wand hand was injured by a Dark curse when he destroyed the ring Horcrux in HBP.
7. Everberus: from the Latin word everbero = to strike violently. Not canon; another invention of mine.
8. I freely admit that the method I used to destroy the cup Horcrux is not a novel idea anymore. I have read it in at least two post-HBP fanfics. LOTM's *In Annulo* is the only one I can recall by name though. If you have previously used this plot device, let me know and I will gladly acknowledge your story here as well.
9. I couldn't resist the irony of offing Pettigrew with the curse he aimed at Snape earlier in the story (chapter five). Just a twisted little piece of poetic justice.

Change of Plans - Part 1

Chapter 20 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic. Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe is the property of J.K. Rowling and her publishers. Anything you recognize belongs to her. I am not making any money from this.

*Sincere thanks to my beta reader, Wartcap, for her diligence and expertise.

Chapter 20: Change of Plans (Part 1)

Snape Apparated just outside the front door of his safe house. It was suspiciously dark and quiet, prompting him to approach the door cautiously. Detection spells showed nothing unusual, so he entered the sitting room and lit the candles with a wave of his wand. It was empty, as he'd expected. *Perhaps Hermione has fallen asleep upstairs?* he speculated.

But the bedroom, too, was empty. Even the hearth was cold. *Something is wrong!* his senses screamed at him, now on high alert. It occurred to him that perhaps the Dark Lord had sent someone to the cottage to retrieve Hermione whilst he was out cornering Wormtail, the traitor. *So much for being the Dark Lord's 'most trusted servant'*, he thought sourly. There was no one in the bathroom, but further searching provided Snape with his first clue. Huddled on the laboratory floor, in front of the unlit hearth, was an unconscious house-elf.

Striding up to the creature, he nudged it with his boot, but the elf didn't rouse. "*Rennervate!*" he chanted, flicking his wand at the prone figure. No response. *What the...?* He glared at the insensate elf.

A thorough search of the cottage revealed the second elf on the kitchen floor, face down and in the same state as the first. Snape rolled him over. *This doesn't make*

sense. If the Dark Lord sent Death Eaters to the cottage, why would they incapacitate elves that are loyal to the Malfoys? After a moment, he noticed a discoloration on the front of the pillowcase that the creature was wearing. Bending close, he sniffed at the stain. It smelled familiar, very similar to... Dreamless Sleep Potion!

In a flash of intuition, he knew that Hermione was responsible for this. She had drugged the house-elves and fled! *But, why now?* he wondered. *After all this time... No. The reasons must wait for later. My priority must be to find her and bring her back!* Quite apart from the fact that the Dark Lord would be extremely angry with him if she escaped, he simply wanted her to remain with him. The sudden thought that she might have already made good her escape and be beyond his reach sent a sharp stab of apprehension through his chest. In the deepest recesses of his mind he admitted to himself, finally, that he cared a great deal for her.

Quickly moving to a point outside the cottage's Apparation shield, he concentrated his mind on the unique magical signature of the tracer he had attached to his mother's old cloak and cast a Locator Charm. An image of Hermione's tired face solidified in his mind. As he held the picture of her steady, details of the surrounding terrain began to appear. She was making her way determinedly alongside the grass verge of a dark, deserted lane, in what appeared to be a rural area. After a minute, he got an impression of distance and direction. She was almost due south of him and a little over a dozen miles away. Fortunately, there was no one around her; he would be able to proceed directly to her location without being observed by any Muggles. Picturing her surroundings, he focused his determination on a spot approximately twenty feet in front of her, and Apparated.

A sound like the crack of a whip brought Hermione's head up. She stopped short, an incredulous and horrified expression covering her features as she saw Snape.

He took a step toward her. "Hermione..."

"No! Get away from me!" she cried, backing away.

"Don't make this difficult. You cannot evade me." She took another step back and he realized she was planning to run. *Perhaps I can reason with her.* "I promise, Hermione, there will be no retribution for your actions. I won't ever hurt you," he said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone.

"You already have!" she retorted shrilly. "You used me! I trusted you and all the time you were only interested in your *effing* Impenetrable Potion!"

Snape's eyes widened in shock. *How in hell did she find out?* he wondered.

"Oh, yes, I know all about your 'special' project," she spat bitterly. With a swift motion, she reached inside her coat, pulled out an object and threw it at him. Reflexively, he cast a Shield Charm. The object, a book, bounced off of the shield and fell at his feet. It was his lab journal.

"I won't be part of your master's plans anymore! I won't betray my friends. I would rather die!" she declared vehemently. With a look of determination, she straightened her shoulders and turned in the graceful arc that Snape had watched her perfect during last spring's Apparation lessons at Hogwarts.

"Don't..." Snape warned. But it was too late; she had already initiated the transfer. A nimbus appeared about her torso for a bare moment, then winked out as she was flung completely around by a powerful force. She hit the ground hard and began retching at once. Snape knelt beside her, holding the mass of unruly hair away from her face and half supporting her torso as she vomited again and again. When the spasms finally passed, she collapsed sideways onto the grass.

"Evanesco," he murmured, vanishing the evidence of her ill advised Apparation attempt. She was still gasping for breath and trembling all over, so he pulled her halfway onto his lap. "Foolish stunt," he scolded under his breath, even as he attempted to warm her in his embrace. "You had to realize that it wouldn't work."

"I didn't know *that* would happen..." came her shaky reply. An awkward silence ensued in which Hermione kept her eyes down, refusing to look at Snape's face.

After a minute, he noticed that her shoulders were shaking. *Salazar's balls! Now she's crying.* "Hermione..." He brushed her hair back, trying to see her face, but she turned her head further away in rejection.

"No! Don't try to pretend you care," she sobbed. "I'm just a means to an end. A way to win Voldemort's approval!"

He hissed in reaction to the name. "Hermione, look at me!" he commanded, taking her face in his hands and turning it toward him. "It may have started out as you say, but that's not the situation anymore. You are important to me. More important than the Dark Lord's plans."

"What does it matter? I can't... I won't support Vol... that monster," she said brokenly. "Not even for you. If you force me to go back with you, I'm as good as dead."

"No!" he denied urgently. "I won't let that happen." In that moment he realized that he had made a choice: he would dare his Lord's vengeance rather than give up Hermione. He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "I will find us another alternative."

A glimmer of hope flashed in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know yet. But I promise you, Hermione, I will not let the Dark Lord or his Death Eaters harm you."

"How how can I be sure you're telling the truth? How can I trust you again?" Her eyes were wide, imploring. "Would you make an Unbreakable Vow, *to me?*"

Trepidation gripped his heart, but his voice held steady. "If you need one to believe my promise, then I will make it." Speaking these words was like a setting a seal on his heart. He knew he would do whatever it took to allay her fears.

Staring into his black gaze for a minute, Hermione tried to gauge his sincerity. She shook her head. "No, I don't need the vow. But I need you to promise that you will stop using me stop manipulating me for your master's ends."

He nodded. "On my mother's grave, Hermione, I swear it." She laid her head against his chest, and his arms came around her automatically. *We will have to flee*, he decided. *But carefully and with planning.* Haste and panic had killed Karkaroff, more than any other factors. He, Severus Snape, would make sure that the two of them could not be traced.

Lord Voldemort sat regally in his chair before the fire, looking for all the world like some twisted caricature of a medieval king. He wore a long, velvet robe of blood-red trimmed with black and silver. In his right hand he grasped his wand like a scepter; in his left hand he held a chalice of wine. His familiar, Nagini, lay curled in his lap. At his feet, knelt several of his servants, vying to gain his favor with the news they had brought.

He smiled thinly. "You are all to be commended, my friends. Your information is most useful, and I intend to reward each of you." Setting down his cup, he waved a long-fingered hand toward a jumble of booty that a strike team had plundered in their latest raid. "You may choose one item from among the trinkets on that shelf," he said carelessly. "Then you may leave me."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"You are most generous, Master."

"Thank you, Master. It is an honor to serve."

The murmured thanks of his Ministry spies went unacknowledged and, for the most part, unheard by Voldemort. He was already contemplating the best use of the

information he had just obtained. *A Time-Turner! This is a most fortuitous find!* If he could obtain the time-altering device, he would have a means to accomplish a complete and rapid coup over the Ministry of Magic. Crucial events, often recognized only in hindsight, could be altered to suit his plans. It was a truly unforeseen stroke of luck that a Time-Turner had been preserved by one of his Death Eaters. He scowled in momentary displeasure as he recalled that Macnair had kept the existence of the Time-Turner to himself. *The idiot is fortunate that he is already dead else I would flay the flesh from his bones!* she thought scathingly.

Taking a deep breath, he returned to more pleasant thoughts. *I believe it is time to finish the game I have started with Potter.* With a flick of his wand, a small vial sped across the room straight into his waiting hand. Idly, he swirled the vial, sending the ethereal, white substance inside into a miniature vortex. It was time to twist the knife he had inserted into Potter's psyche. The boy's love for and trust in his friends was practically famous. *If he believes the Mudblood has betrayed him, it will be a major blow to his confidence. If he thinks she is being magically coerced, he will rush to her rescue at the first opportunity. Either way, I win.*

Another flick of his wand brought the large eagle owl to his side, and he smiled as he attached the vial to its leg.

Ottery St. Catchpole was in the midst of an unseasonably warm spell of weather, considering it was only late March. Harry, Ron and Ginny had spent almost all of Sunday afternoon thoroughly trouncing Bill, Fred and George in a decidedly un-refereed game of Quidditch. Still laughing as they recounted particularly ridiculous plays, the group of young people made their way down the path from the paddock to The Burrow.

Harry, who was happily taking the mickey out of George over the redhead's spectacular collision with a tree, didn't see Ron stop short just in front of him. "Oof!" he grunted, running smack into the back of his taller friend. Rubbing his nose furiously with one hand, he pushed Ron lightly between the shoulder blades with the other. "What did you stop for?"

Ron lifted an arm woodenly, pointing silently to a very large owl circling above his parents' house.

"Is that...?" Harry asked in an uncertain tone, squinting upward. Then, as recognition dawned, he gulped. "It's that eagle owl: Voldemort's messenger," he declared in a flat voice. Grimly, he started back down the path, entering the kitchen as the owl alighted on the window ledge. The bird hopped onto the kitchen worktop as if it owned the place, an aura of arrogance nearly rolling off its feathers. Without a word, Harry walked past a startled Molly Weasley and removed a small brown-wrapped parcel from the creature's leg. "Clear off, you shitehawk," he growled through gritted teeth.

With a look of indignation, the owl took off at once, digging its claws deeply into the wooden worktop before sweeping Harry's glasses from his face with a powerful downstroke of its wings.

"I'll thank you to watch your tongue in my home, Harry Potter," Molly reprimanded.

Immediately, Harry felt remorseful. "Sorry, Mrs. Weasley," he replied, picking up his glasses from the floor.

"Well, considering what that particular messenger usually brings, I quite understand, my dear," she relented.

Harry tore open the paper, revealing the expected phial and another note the longest yet from his evil adversary.

Those who know your friend tell me she has always been one to take up a cause.

In this, and in another significant trait, she opposes Forster.'

Harry scowled. Voldemort's messages were always cryptic, but this time he was truly stumped. "Who's Forster?" he wondered aloud.

"May I?" Molly asked, reaching for the paper. Harry handed it to her, and she looked it over as her children crowded around, jockeying for position so that they too could assess the latest missive from Voldemort. None of them, however, could offer Harry an explanation.

"Somehow," Ron muttered, "I just know Hermione would be able to enlighten us about this Forster person."

Harry strode to the fireplace, throwing in a handful of Floo powder and calling, "Alastor Moody's house!"

A minute later, after a brief exchange, he withdrew his head from the green flames and backed away from the hearth. The small fire blazed fiercely, completely engulfing the rapidly rotating form of Remus Lupin. When he had slowed to a stop, Remus stepped out of the fireplace, carefully cradling Moody's Pensieve in his arms. The flames died down to embers behind him.

"Is Moody not coming?" Bill inquired.

"No. He can't make it today," Remus answered, nodding politely to Molly. He placed the Pensieve on the table and looked inquiringly at Harry.

"You, Ron and me," Harry said shortly. He uncapped the clear vial and let the silvery-white contents flow into the basin before him. Ron and Remus stepped up on either side of the black-haired young man. As one, they bent forward, entering the swirling memories, each man acutely aware of a strong feeling of foreboding.

They landed in a well-lit potion-making laboratory, very different from the dingy basement workspace they had last seen in Snape's memory. A door opened to the left and Snape, followed by Hermione, entered the room.

Hermione spoke first. "How long will it take us to make the Blood Replenisher?"

"The entire process takes three and a half hours, so you will understand why we needed to skip our post-luncheon walk and start the preparation directly," Snape replied.

"Yes, I understand," Hermione agreed, the excitement in her expression obvious to the trio of friends watching the scene. "Thank you again for offering to teach me this potion."

Snape turned to face her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "It is I who am thankful to you, Hermione," he said silkily. "Your help with the other potions has prevented me from suffering the Dark Lord's anger."

In reply, she smiled warmly up at the lank-haired, hawk-nosed man as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

As white fog obscured the room, signaling a transition to another memory, Harry swallowed the anger welling up inside him. *The git is manipulating her! Why can't she see that?* His face felt rigid with the effort to maintain his composure; he owed Ron that much consideration.

When the billowing fog dissipated, the three men found themselves standing in a familiar sitting room. It was here, Harry recalled, that Ron, Moody and he had watched Rabastan Lestrangle try to befriend Hermione. In spite of the familiarity of the place, the room looked odd to Harry, but he couldn't put his finger on what was out of place. Just as he began to wonder if Lestrangle was going to make another appearance, a muffled crack sounded outside the cottage. A moment later, the front door was thrown open. A disheveled and clearly injured Snape staggered in, stumbled to the sofa, and fell facedown across it.

"Serves the bastard right!" Ron growled under his breath.

A glance revealed that his friend was white with anger, lips pressed tightly together. "I agree, Ron," Harry remarked.

"There's something strange about this memory," Remus observed suddenly. "It feels different from any of the others Voldemort has sent."

Ron blinked. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I don't know what it is, but it seems almost... flat. Like... I don't know... it's not like a regular memory."

A house-elf had appeared in the room. He attempted to rouse Snape, but was unsuccessful. Eventually, the elf disappeared with a pop, only to return a minute later via the steps, Hermione in tow.

As they watched their friend try to revive Snape, a sudden realization came to Harry. "Flat!" The others looked at him in surprise. "You said it, Ron. It's flat like a television screen! Look around," he exhorted the others. "Nothing has any depth. That's what's different about this memory!"

By this time, Hermione was rushing away to get medicines for Snape, while the elf gently levitated the unconscious man up the steps. The three observers followed.

Abruptly, Remus laughed sourly. "I think I've just worked out what's going on here," he informed the younger men. "Snape is out cold; this memory can't be his! At least not directly." At the puzzled looks from Ron and Harry he expanded his explanation. "I suspect the memory originally came from that elf. Snape obtained it via Legilimency, then extracted the borrowed memory for Voldemort's use! That why it looks flat and two-dimensional; it's a reproduction a copy."

Having solved that small mystery, the three men watched quietly as Hermione, with the help of both house-elves, got Snape into bed, administered several potions and sighed with relief as the insensate man settled into a restful, tremor-free sleep. Yawning, she began to unbutton her robe, shedding it casually and slipping into the bed with Snape.

"Bloody fucking hell!" Ron swore.

In blank disbelief, Harry watched one of his best friends snuggle close to the man who had murdered Dumbledore. Before his mind could form any coherent thought, white fog billowed before his eyes, obscuring his sight completely.

When the cloudy mists cleared for the second time, both Ron and Harry seemed to be in a state of shock. "Perhaps we should end this Pensieve session now," Remus advised. "If there's more, we can see it after you two have had a chance to calm down."

Harry raised his chin, meeting the wary eyes of his former-professor-turned-friend. "No," he said softly. "Let's get it over with now, I say. Ron?"

Ron nodded his wordless assent.

Remus examined their new surroundings. They were in the same bedroom, but the darkness outside the windows proclaimed that this was a completely different memory. The lighting was dim, with only a single candle burning in a sconce by the door. The remaining illumination came from the fireplace, where a crackling blaze was in the process of consuming a pile of logs. Two chairs had been placed in front of the hearth, arranged, no doubt, to derive full advantage from the warmth and light of the fire. Wearing just her pajamas and settled cozily into one of the seats was Hermione, an open book across her lap.

Where's Snape? Remus wondered. *Presumably, this is his memory, so he should be making an appearance presently.* No sooner had that thought formed in Remus' mind than a door opened, emitting a small cloud of steam, at the side of the room.

Snape emerged from the bathroom, his tousled hair still damp from the shower. He wore nothing but a loose robe that covered him to the knees. In bare feet he padded softly across the carpet to stand in front of Hermione. She glanced up questioningly.

"Come," he said softly, capturing her trusting eyes with his intense gaze and extending his hand. She put her book aside and he drew her to her feet. Lowering his head, Snape kissed her on the lips slowly, lingeringly. Her arms slipped around his shoulders as they became lost in their kiss.

Remus' eyes cut to Ron. The young man appeared riveted by the scene unfolding before him: immobilized by shock, or some other overpowering emotion. However, if things progressed in the direction that Remus expected them to, there was no predicting how the volatile redhead would react. A glance at Harry showed that he was livid. Beneath the fringe of his messy hair, his green eyes were blazing with anger and his jaw was clenched in a painful-looking rictus.

Snape broke off their kiss, bringing his lips next to her ear. "Hermione," he breathed. "You make me feel so... alive."

Meeting his eyes, she whispered, "Kiss me again, Severus. Make me feel that too."

"Can you hear what they're saying?" Ron whispered to Harry.

"No. I can't make it out. Remus?"

Remus gave a slight shake of his head. "It was too soft. I couldn't hear them either," he lied, thinking that the others were probably better off not knowing what had been said.

As the couple's kiss deepened and they became immersed in their passion, one of Snape's hands stroked down Hermione's back and across her bottom. Remus could see clearly that she was grinding her pelvis against Snape's in response to his caress.

A rumble of disapproval escaped Ron's throat. "Snape's done something to her," he growled. "She would never allow that scumbag to touch her like that otherwise!"

"Well, he didn't give her anything to drink," Harry responded. "So we can probably rule out a potion."

"Imperius?"

"Possibly."

"That must be it!" Ron said definitively.

Neither young man had moved, but Remus could see the tension in Ron's posture. *He's going to explode*, Remus predicted silently. By this time, the couple had become distinctly ruffled. Snape's hands were exploring the skin under the back of Hermione's cotton pajama top. She was kissing and licking the exposed skin between the lapels of his robe. But when Hermione brought her hands around between them and began fumbling with the belt of his robe, Ron finally blew his top.

"Shit!" he swore. "I'm not going to stand here and watch this... this... vile exploitation!" He stormed toward the bedroom door, wrenching it open and stomping into the hall.

Harry and Remus exchanged a helpless glance and followed him across the room. As they reached the door, Remus grasped Harry's arm. "Go with him, but don't leave the Pensieve yet. Search the house," Remus directed. "Look for anything that might give us clues about what Voldemort and his followers are up to."

Harry nodded. "What about you? You're not going to stay and watch them...." Words seemed to fail the young man and he gestured to the entangled couple.

"Not watch, Harry, but listen." Harry gave him a horrified look. "Pillow talk," he amplified. "People often spill their secrets in the bedroom."

Harry looked thoroughly disgusted. "It's not right," he said sullenly. "Hermione would hate to have someone witness her being... taken advantage of like that."

"As disturbing as it is, we need information desperately." He gave Harry a level look. "Just go. I'll exit separately when the memory ends."

Harry nodded reluctantly and went in search of Ron.

Remus turned back toward the hearth. Hermione had long since opened Snape's robe and now had her hands inside it as she kissed her way down his chest, gradually sinking to her knees. Only the top of her head and Snape's upper half were visible to Remus at this angle, as a chair was now between him and the couple. Snape moaned, tangling his hands in the witch's hair, and Remus didn't need to see any better to know what was happening.

His head thrown back in pleasure, Snape murmured something that Remus, even with his enhanced werewolf's hearing, couldn't make out. *Damn! I'll have to move closer*, he decided. He was not a voyeur; he really didn't want to watch them. But along with his stated purpose of gathering information, he felt it was important to determine if Hermione was truly under some sort of magical compulsion. To do those things he needed to hear their voices, and even more importantly, he needed to get a good look at Hermione's eyes. He moved around to the side of the room, trying to achieve a view that would allow him to assess her condition.

In spite of himself, Remus was caught by the sensuality of the tableau before him. She was pleasuring Snape orally, taking him into her mouth rhythmically as she stroked her hands over his hips and arse. Lost in the irresistible current of spiraling sensations, Snape's breathing quickened and he began to thrust reflexively, his tempo gradually increasing until he reached the inevitable conclusion. As his orgasm took him, he stiffened, grasping her head firmly between his hands as he rode out the spasms of his bliss. Still panting, his fingers relaxed, stroking down her face and neck to rest on her shoulders. "Hermione," he gasped. She released him at last, looking upward demurely from under her lashes. Holding her shoulders, he pulled her to her feet and into his arms for a long, slow kiss. "Your turn," he murmured in an unmistakably suggestive tone.

"You always say that," she replied with a low ripple of laughter.

Remus' jaw dropped in shock. *He always says...?* Neither Hermione's words nor the teasing quality of her voice were consistent with a relationship brought about via mind control. But, it was always best to be cautious when judging the actions of people you are not intimately familiar with. He waited to see what would transpire next.

Snape backed her to the bed and, after helping her remove her pajamas, dropped his open robe from his shoulders. Once they were horizontal, he concentrated on his task with an intensity Remus had only previously seen him apply in the Potions classroom. Eventually, as Remus had expected, Snape reciprocated, going down on Hermione until she was writhing and moaning on the bed. After several minutes, she tensed, arching her back as she crested. Snape's arms, which were curled around her thighs, anchored her in place as she bucked and shuddered out her orgasm.

Remus reluctantly moved next to the bed and willed the young woman to open her eyes. Often, the only evidence of the Imperius Curse was a vague, blank sort of expression in the victim's eyes. *For pity's sake, open your eyes!* he exhorted silently.

But she didn't not immediately anyway. Snape was prowling up her body, licking and caressing as he went, until she was nearly humming with pleasure. Finally, when he was poised directly above her, her eyes fluttered open. They were filled with a lazy contentment that matched the easy smile she wore. "Mmm, you do that so well," she purred.

"I believe that you inspire my creativity in that area," Snape replied, initiating a series of short, teasing kisses. At last, he pulled back and regarded her more seriously. "Hermione, I have a question for you."

Remus tensed in anticipation, hoping at last to hear something other than the various sounds of coitus.

"You've never done that to me before. Was it the first time you ever performed fellatio?"

She bit her lip uncertainly and gave a very slight nod. "But I've read about it, you know?"

"Of course you have," he answered wryly.

She hesitated, then asked, "Was it... okay?"

"I believe tonight you have proved that in some areas of life, natural talent will always be preferable to mere experience."

As the couple came together for yet another long kiss, Remus turned away in irritation. *Merlin's balls! As if it's not bad enough to watch two people that I know having sex now I have to listen to them talk about it? Please, let this memory end*, he thought with an annoyed grimace.

Hermione's sudden high-pitched squeal made him spin around to see what was amiss, but it appeared that she was only surprised. Snape had abruptly rolled them both over, reversing their positions. To Remus' ultimate mortification, Snape began urging his young lover to mount him. "Oh, Gods! Not again!" Remus groaned, turning his back on them resolutely and retreating across the room. Just as he heard the bed springs begin to creak, white fog began to billow all about him. He felt his feet leave the floor and with a graceful somersault, he landed back in the Weasleys' kitchen.

Harry and Ron straightened beside him. "Did you find anything?" Remus inquired quickly, wishing to forestall any questions about his own experiences in the Pensieve.

"Not really," Harry answered.

"Just a notebook," Ron said simultaneously. "It was in Snape's potion-making lab. I bet it was important, but we couldn't open it because it was warded. Even in his memories he's a secretive bast... buggler!" Ron shot a quick look at his mother to see if she had noticed his slip.

"How about you, Remus, anything useful?" Harry asked.

"No," Remus answered shortly. "Not a bloody thing." While the fact that Hermione Granger was involved in a willing liaison with her Death Eater captor was certainly a significant finding, he didn't think that the two young men before him were ready to deal with that revelation.

"Is there a public library in the village?" Harry inquired, eyes sweeping over the Weasley contingent.

"Of course," Fred replied. "It's nothing compared to Hogwarts' library, but we've made good use of it."

"And the librarian's assistant is easy on the eyes!" George added with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

Harry smiled faintly. The irrepressible nature of the twins never failed to hearten him. Tomorrow, he would head to the library; he intended to find out who this Forster person was.

Author's notes

1. Why did Hermione get so ill when she tried to Apparate? Snape warned her (way back in chapter 2) that attempting to Apparate would be 'unpleasant' with the Anti-Apparition device on her wrist. Very unpleasant, indeed.
2. Voldemort's note to Harry refers to a famous quote by the British novelist/essayist, Edward M. Forster: "I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country."

Change of Plans - Part 2

Chapter 21 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to JKR. I'm not making any money from this.

Chapter 21: Change of Plans (Part 2)

It had been a tense week at the cottage. The suspicious elves, although not openly hostile, refused to acknowledge Hermione at all, consulting Snape, 'the master,' in all things. In addition, both Snape and Hermione were cautious and a touch hesitant with one another.

It was during Friday's lunch that a letter arrived by owl post, bringing an actual smile to Snape's face. Hermione's eyes brightened at his change of expression. "What is it, Severus?"

"Good news," he retorted. "The alternative I promised you." He dropped his voice. "In the morning, you and I will be leaving this place."

"To where?"

"I would rather not say yet." He glanced briefly at the house-elf and lowered his voice to just above a whisper. "We won't be returning here. I am taking you to a place where we will both be safe from the Dark Lord."

"We're leaving the country?" she asked in a whisper, dismayed by the idea of leaving everyone and everything she knew behind.

"It's the only way I can keep you, and myself, safe."

After a few moments thought, she nodded. *Exile is better than certain death*, she supposed. *After all, if Harry defeats Voldemort, I'll be able to come back.*

Later that afternoon, Hermione and Snape were working in the lab when they heard a commotion downstairs. The piercing squeal and shrill laughter of a house-elf, answered by a suave, male voice could just be discerned. Raising an eyebrow speculatively, Snape went to see who had arrived.

Hermione followed cautiously; Severus had not said to stay put, but she knew it was wise to be wary of any person the elves seemed happy to see. Her fears proved correct. There, standing in the center of the sitting room was Lucius Malfoy, as arrogant and threatening as ever. She froze near the top of the steps, reluctant to draw his attention.

"Lucius." Snape greeted the blond man curtly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Malfoy's cold grey eyes swept over Snape in casual dismissal as he perused the room. "In case you have forgotten, Severus, this is my property," he stated smoothly. "Perhaps I am simply checking up on its maintenance and the welfare of my servants."

"Yes, of course," Snape countered. "I am sure your only concern is the wellbeing of 'those who serve.'"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed in anger for a second before he controlled his reaction. Snape's double meaning had not been lost on him. It had been a serious blow to his pride when, after his release from Azkaban, he had been demoted to a soldier. The Dark Lord had proclaimed before the entire circle that to regain his trust, the elder Malfoy must 'serve as his master saw fit.' "Where is she?" he asked abruptly.

"She?"

"Don't play games with me, Severus! You know I mean the Mudblood."

"Why should her whereabouts be any concern of yours?" Snape questioned.

"I am here on the Dark Lord's orders," Malfoy announced through gritted teeth. "You are to bring the Mudblood, along with your supply of the Impenetrable Potion, to headquarters immediately."

Snape stared inscrutably at Malfoy for a few seconds. "Of course. It shall be as the Dark Lord commands," he said silkily. "Now that you have discharged your duty as *messenger*, Lucius, you may leave. I will follow momentarily."

"I am to bring you and your prisoner with me," he snarled, enraged by both the reminder of his lowly status and Snape's attempt to dismiss him. "Get her and be quick about it! The Dark Lord is waiting!"

In spite of the gravity of the situation, Snape nearly smiled at Malfoy's discomfiture. *Oh, how the mighty have fallen*, he gloated to himself. However, when he spoke, no trace of emotion colored his voice. "I will be back with the girl in a minute, Lucius."

Whirling, he mounted the stairs as he rapidly reviewed his options. They were few. He could try to take out Malfoy before they reached headquarters and then flee with Hermione, but it was chancy. Malfoy was already agitated there was no telling what he would do if he got the upper hand in a fight. If he incapacitated Malfoy and failed to report, all of the Dark Lord's followers would be after him almost immediately. His careful plans to disappear with Hermione would be for naught. The second option was to take her to Voldemort, as ordered, then wait for a more discrete opportunity to get them both away. It was obvious that something was going forward at headquarters, the summons alone indicated that. If the Dark Lord was ready to move against the Ministry, there would be many people coming and going, as well as final preparations for the long-awaited event. In short, there would be ample opportunities for escape by a resourceful wizard which he knew himself to be.

"What's happening?" Hermione asked anxiously.

He told her of the Dark Lord's unwelcome directive. At her gasp of dismay, he hastened to reassure her. "Do not panic, Hermione. I intend to extract us as soon as it's humanly possible. Tonight, if the opportunity presents itself." She looked frightened but gave him a nod of acquiescence. "Get your cloak," he instructed. "Malfoy is waiting."

For the past several days, ever since they had come out of the Pensieve, Ron's temper had been an extremely uncertain thing. His moods alternated between depressed

and furious. When he was depressed, he moped around The Burrow in a despondent haze, barely acknowledging the other members of the household. When he was angry, the slightest thing could send him into a massive rant, which not even his mother could moderate. Given the choice, Harry preferred the latter option. At least Ron responded to him, even if it was at a decibel level capable of inducing permanent hearing loss.

Unfortunately, Ron was in depression mode today. In spite of the fact that most of the Order of the Phoenix would be coming to The Burrow later for the twins' birthday party, he refused to lighten up. Harry had learned to mostly ignore these black moods, and today, with all the party preparations going on, it was particularly easy.

"Harry, dear," Molly Weasley called, "could you manage to rearrange the sitting room chairs for tonight?"

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley. How do you want them?"

"Just set the room up the way it was at Christmastime," she said absently, already turning back to the food preparations.

"Ron, could you give me hand?" Harry requested.

No response.

Harry sighed in defeat and set to work. As he was levitating one of the large, overstuffed armchairs into a cozy grouping near the window, he saw an owl winging determinedly toward the house. It was a big bird, with unusual markings on its wings. Something stirred in his memory. *Where have I seen markings like that before?* Letting curiosity get the better of him, he abandoned his task and opened the window to get a better look. Seeing the open window, the bird headed straight toward Harry, who backed away to let it enter.

Swooping through the window, the owl back-winged sharply to land on the back of the chair Harry had just moved. "Oi! That's a super-express post-owl!" Ron exclaimed in surprise, pointing out the colored stripes on the creature's wings. "Blimey, Harry, who'd send one of those to our house? Those are really expensive birds to rent!"

"Well, let's find out, shall we?" Harry replied, reaching for the letter pouch attached to the bird's leg. He drew out a plain white envelope with the words, 'The Chosen One,' printed clearly on the front. "It's for me," he said, ripping it open and scanning the contents rapidly. His eyes widened as he read, and when he met Ron's intent blue gaze, he looked frightened. "It's from Krum. Here, read for yourself." He thrust the piece of parchment at his friend.

Ron's eyes zoomed back and forth across the page, his agitation rising with every second. As soon as he'd finished, he handed the paper back to Harry. "Better keep that hidden. If my mum sees it, she won't let me out of her sight."

"What do you think we should do?" Harry asked.

"We have to Floo Remus right away," Ron decided. "Maybe Bill too."

"Then you think we should go? What if it's a trap?"

Ron shook his head in denial. "Not likely. Krum is on our side."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. You Floo Remus and get him to meet us in Hogsmeade. Give your mum some excuse. I'll get our cloaks and be right down."

Fifteen minutes later, they materialized outside of Honeydukes. Looking around, Ron spotted Remus pretending to window shop across the street. They made their way over to him, and together the three men set off for the Three Broomsticks.

Choosing a table well away from the other scattered patrons, Harry sat down, pulling the letter from a pocket and wordlessly offering it to the older man.

Remus unfolded the parchment and read it through.

1 April, 1998

Chosen One:

I have urgent news. 'The thing that I miss the most' is in grave danger. I cannot be more specific here and request that we meet in person at 5:30 this afternoon in the Hog's Head. You will recognize me by my old colors.

Your One-Time Opponent.

Without preamble, Remus asked in a soft voice, "What does he mean 'his colors'?"

"We're not sure, but it could be one of two things," Ron answered. "It's either his old school colors, or his Quidditch team's colors."

"Hmm, you're probably right," Remus agreed. "Let's go over to the Hog's Head then."

Five minutes later, faces hidden in the shadow of deep hoods, they entered the dingy pub. Surprisingly, the generally quiet place had twice the custom of the Three Broomsticks. Harry scanned the room for any sign of Krum. *Either blood-red for Durmstrang or a combination of green, white and red for Bulgaria,* he reminded himself.

"There, by the wall." Ron tilted his head slightly to the left, indicating an old man sitting by himself. He had a tankard in front of him and a walking stick hooked over his thigh. On the arm of his grey cloak was a rectangular patch with horizontal bands of white, green and red: the Bulgarian flag. As they made their way between the tables, the old man looked up from his lager. With apparent difficulty he stood, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Good ter see ya!" he greeted them in a quavering voice. "Why don' we get us a private room fer our reunion?" He limped off to the bar, handing the barkeep a bit of gold as he leaned close to speak with him. Although the suspicious barman gave them all a hard glare and several gruff words, he eventually showed them upstairs. They entered what must have been a private dining room at some time, but now was simply a dilapidated room containing half a dozen rickety chairs. Once the door was firmly shut behind him, the old man pulled a wand from his cane and began casting silencing and anti-eavesdropping spells. When he turned back to face the others, he found a wand pointed directly at his chest.

"Reveal yourself!" Remus ordered.

The old man pointed his wand at himself. "*Finite Incantatem!*" he said. The charms dropped away from him, exposing the dark hair and heavy eyebrows of Viktor Krum. "Let's sit," he suggested.

"Where's Hermione? What kind of danger is she in?" Ron blurted.

"I will tell you everything I know. Please, sit all of you." He pulled the nearest chair toward him and gingerly sat. The others followed his example, and although the chairs seemed a bit shaky, none of them collapsed. Viktor began his tale at once. "The Dark Lord called all the squad leaders together this morning to plan a raid on the Ministry. They, in turn, half ordered all the soldiers to assemble by seven tonight. The Dark Lord himself intends to lead the raid. He will take most of the senior members of the circle as his personal bodyguard. Their objective is to steal a time-altering device."

"The Time-Turner!" Harry exclaimed.

"What does this have to do with Hermione?" Ron pressed.

"After the raid, the Dark Lord intends to lure you, Harry, into a trap using Herm-own-ninny. She was to be brought to the Death Eater's headquarters this afternoon; perhaps she is already there. But, I know her well she will not cooperate. I am certain the Dark Lord will kill her."

"What do you want from us?" Remus asked shrewdly.

"I want you to help me get her out of danger."

"How?" Remus persisted.

"When the strike teams have left for the raid, only a few people will remain at headquarters. Most of the scouts and spies have been deployed to the area around the Ministry of Magic. That will be our best opportunity to rescue Herm-own-ninny."

"You seem to have this all planned out," Remus observed with grudging respect.

"Wait a minute," Harry interjected. "What about you? Why aren't you going on the raid?"

"I am not a soldier. I am a long-range scout and the Dark Lord's liaison with the Bulgarian wizards who support him."

"Oh," Harry said, chagrined at Krum's ready answer and a bit sorry for his suspicion. Viktor had never given them a reason to doubt him; in fact, he had been a great help so far. Putting his worries aside, he tried to focus on the mission before them. "Will the four of us be able to get her out of there? Should I contact the Order for reinforcements?"

"Actually, I think a small number of people will have the best chance of getting into headquarters," Viktor said with assurance. "There will only be a handful of the Dark Lord's followers there at that time. The four of us should be able to manage them." Looking directly at Harry he smiled. "You are a very powerful wizard, Harry Potter. And many of the younger Death Eaters fear you."

"They do?" Harry asked in amazement.

"So, what now?" Ron burst out impatiently.

"Now, ve wait," Viktor replied seriously.

In the basement of the Riddle house, Snape paced the length of the magically-expanded space like a caged tiger: fifteen steps across, turn, fifteen steps back, turn. At some point since he had last seen it, the warren of small underground rooms had been turned into a combat training room. They had removed the flimsy walls that subdivided it and got rid of all the Muggle appliances and junk. His potions-bench and paraphernalia were intact, still in the same corner they had always occupied. Hermione sat huddled on the camp bed next to the bench. She looked terrified.

After his arrival this afternoon, the Dark Lord had informed him about the raid and given him his orders. He was to remain at headquarters with his prisoner. He smiled grimly, remembering his 'master's' words. *"I cannot risk leaving the Mudblood with the soldiers that will be remaining to guard headquarters, Severus. They are young and untried. I need a wizard of your experience and abilities here."* He had pretended dismay at being left out of the action, while in reality, he was elated. The Dark Lord and all but a few of the Death Eaters would be gone for at least an hour plenty of time for him to dismantle the wards and Apparate to safety with Hermione. He had only to wait for the strike force to depart.

He continued his pacing: fifteen steps across, turn, fifteen steps back, turn. He heard a multitude of feet passing overhead, through the library, then the parlor, and finally, out the back door. *They're leaving! Just a few more minutes....* His feet moved without thought: fifteen steps across, turn, fifteen steps back, turn.

All was quiet above. Snape walked to the foot of the stairs, cast an Amplification Charm, and listened intently to the guards' conversation upstairs. Satisfied that they had no intention of venturing to the basement, he began the laborious process of dismantling the Anti-Disapparation Jinx over the Riddle house.

For ten minutes, he struggled against the complex construct the Dark Lord had erected. Sweat ran down his brow, dampening his lank hair and causing it to stick to his face. Impatiently, he brushed it away. *Nearly there!* he thought triumphantly. There was only one anchoring node left to disable.

A sudden shout upstairs startled him, drawing his eyes to the steps. Heavy feet pounded across the floor of the library above. More shouts echoed, then a scream of pain and the crash of breaking furniture. *The sounds of battle!* he realized. "Hermione, take cover!" In his peripheral vision, he saw her scramble to the far side of the workbench. He took a defensive position between her and the foot of the steps.

The noises drew closer. They were fighting directly above him now, in the parlor. With a blast of light and sound, the basement door burst open. Three figures hurtled through the frame, plunging heedlessly down the steps. *Lupin, Weasley, Potter*, his brain registered in shock. *How did they penetrate into the Dark Lord's sanctum?* Just as he realized why they had come (*for Hermione!*), the trio perceived him.

Lupin was the first to fire off a hex. "*Stu...*"

But Snape cast a nonverbal trip jinx before the werewolf could pronounce the first syllable of his spell. Lupin fell, tumbling down the last few steps. A feat which, not incidentally, distracted his companions from their attack. "*Insensabilus!*" Snape shouted. Lupin hit the floor and lay still. Simultaneously, Weasley and Potter leaped the last few steps, landing on either side of the downed werewolf. It was a well-choreographed and effective maneuver, Snape noted automatically, rendering them difficult targets due to their speed and split positions. Clearly, they had been training for battle.

Potter stepped forward, shielding the others as he engaged Snape. The boy's wand moved in a blur as he cast one nonverbal hex after another. But Snape was just as fast, blocking each spell and sending a return hex whenever possible, which in turn, Potter blocked. It was a surreal exchange, silent except for their labored breathing and Weasley's muttered attempts to rouse the werewolf.

"He won't wake, Harry!" Weasley called desperately.

"What did you do to him?" Potter demanded angrily.

"Nothing permanent, unfortunately," Snape said nastily. "It's just a variation of the Stunning Spell."

"Ron? Harry?" Hermione called from the corner.

"Stay back, Hermione!" Snape warned. "Keep out of the line of fire." But it seemed she had no fear that her friends would injure her, intentionally or otherwise. He heard her rise and take a few steps toward him. He edged sideways until she was behind him. *There's no telling how these twits reacted to the last set of memories the Dark Lord sent them. They may view her as a traitor.*

Weasley was on his feet next to Potter, his concern for the werewolf apparently superseded by other factors when Hermione entered the fray. The youths were poised tensely, ready to spring, when a low hiss broke the silence, followed by the sound of something smoothly sliding across the floor.

"The snake!" Hermione screamed, startling the three men. All eyes jumped to the top of the steps where a gigantic serpent was slithering slowly through the doorway. A coil of its thick body hit the first step with a dull thump.

Potter turned his wand on the snake threateningly, hissing and spitting noises emerging from his throat like a stream of invective. The snake paused, flicking its tongue out to taste the air, then continued its inexorable descent.

"It's headed for Remus!" Weasley called.

"Shield spells," Potter directed. The two stepped around the Stunned man casting a dual shield to repel the monster.

Seizing his opportunity, Snape concentrated on the final node of the Anti-Disapparation shield, struggling to dismantle it while the others were distracted. Second by second, he felt the matrix of the node thin until it finally collapsed, its power dissipating. He gasped in relief, only peripherally aware of the ongoing struggle against the Dark Lord's familiar.

"Hold the shield, Ron, I'll Stun it!"

Potter directed a hex at the creature, only to have it rebound, forcing him to block. The snake was still on the stairs, but was gaining ground, pushing against their shield.

"Harry, this has to be Voldemort's pet snake. Can you do the spell without Remus?" Weasley asked desperately.

"No, I never learned it," Potter answered through gritted teeth. "There's got to be another way!"

Watching the struggle, Snape made a sudden decision. Two steps to the right gave him a clear view of the giant reptile. "*Inverso molior*," he intoned, whirling his wand rapidly counter-clockwise. Without a pause, he slashed his wand downward, shouting, "*Confuto Phasma Phasmatis!*" The snake was encased in a sparkling web, its forward motion halted. Raw magical power surged through the room, tingling down the nerves of every person present. Snape, his teeth bared in a feral grimace, jabbed his wand sharply at the immobile snake. "*Sectumsempra!*"

The creature was slammed backwards against the stair treads in a flash of light, its head split open from tip to base. Snape took a step back, his breathing shallow, but otherwise unaffected by the powerful forces he had directed. He was already on guard again.

As one, Potter and Weasley turned from the shattered remains of the snake to face him.

"That spell you knew." Potter's gaze seemed to bore into the grim visage of the man before him. "How?"

Snape's eyes cut momentarily to Hermione, then back to his opponent in a wordless answer.

Potter scowled. "Whose... whose side are you really on?" he demanded.

Silence reigned for a full five seconds before Snape answered. "I am not altogether on anybody's *side*, because nobody is altogether on *my* side." He let Potter digest that for a moment then asked tersely, "Have you disposed of the others?"

Potter nodded.

"Then what are you waiting for, Potter? The Dark Lord and most of his followers are raiding the Ministry as we speak. You will never get a better opportunity to surprise him."

"We're not going anywhere without Hermione," Weasley stated flatly.

"Oh, but I am afraid you are, Weasley. You see, Hermione and I are leaving, and we won't be taking either of you along."

"Severus, please!" Hermione interjected. "I want to help Harry. We can both go to the Ministry with them."

"No! With your wand, you would be a sitting duck! It's too dangerous. As for me, I have no intention of going anywhere near the Dark Lord," Snape declared with finality. "I am sick of being a servant! I've been used by more powerful wizards for most of my life. I won't start serving Potter!" he spat. The sneer he directed at the dark-haired young man left no doubt as to his continued loathing for the son of his former nemesis. Keeping his wand at the ready before him, he extended his other hand back to Hermione. "Come, Hermione. It's time for us to leave."

"No!" Weasley yelled. "*Stup...*"

"*Expelliarmus!*" Snape shouted, executing a lightning-quick parry and riposte that effectively blocked and disarmed the younger man. In an instant, his wand was trained on Potter. "Don't even think about it," he warned. Not daring to take his eyes from his opponent, he let Weasley's wand sail over his left shoulder to clatter on the floor behind him.

Time seemed to stretch as seconds ticked past; none of the men moved a muscle. "Stalemate, Potter. You had best leave while you still have a chance at surprising the Dark Lord." Again, he reached his hand backwards. "Take my hand, Hermione. We're leaving these two to their folly."

A light, firm voice spoke from behind him. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Snape felt his arms and legs snap together as his entire body went rigid. Immobilized and unable to break his fall, he hit the basement floor with a resounding thump, landing hard on his right shoulder. The rap of feet approached. He knew what he would see before it entered his line of sight: Hermione's legs and feet.

She knelt in front of his motionless form. "I'm sorry, Severus," she said in a low, choked voice. "You probably won't understand, but I can't..." she broke off, sniffing, to swipe at her eyes with the back of her hand. He heard footsteps approaching again. Two sets of legs appeared behind Hermione: Potter and Weasley.

Bending close to him, she whispered, "I don't want to leave you, but this is something I have to do." Reaching into his inner cloak pocket, she removed the vials containing the Impenetrable Potion and handed Weasley his wand. Tucking her own vine-wood wand into a back pocket, she eased Snape's mahogany one from his clenched hand.

"*Incarcerous!*" Thick cords shot from Potter's wand, binding him tightly. "That will hold him until the Aurors arrive."

"Come on, Hermione," Weasley urged. "We have to get to the Ministry."

"Go on upstairs," she replied. "I'll be there in a minute." Reluctantly, the young men started up the steps. Snape's lank, black hair had fallen across his cheek, concealing part of his face. Almost timidly, Hermione reached out a shaking hand and pushed it back. "I'm sorry, Severus," she apologized again, "but I can't let Voldemort win. I can't abandon everything I believe in just to secure my own happiness. That would be the ultimate Unforgivable." She leaned forward and placed a damp kiss on his cheek, then resolutely stood and followed her friends.

Snape lay immobile where they had left him as Hermione's tears ran down his rigid face.

Beta read by Wartcap. Thanks Warty!

Author's Notes:

1. The hex *Insensibilious*, is derived from insensible. It's a type of Stunning Spell (non-canon) that I made up. It's a bit nastier than *Stupefy* because the victim cannot be revived using *Reenervate* they have to wake up on their own.
 2. Nagini's 'abilities': Nagini is a wizard's familiar, and in canon, familiars seem to have a special affinity for their owners, to the point that some appear to understand what is said or intended (Fawkes and Crookshanks come to mind here). I assumed that Nagini would understand Harry's Parseltongue but would choose not to obey a wizard other than his owner. However, I did not intend to give the impression that Nagini has spell casting ability. The backlash that Harry experienced when he tried to Stun the snake is the result of protective spells (probably another Retaliation Hex) that Voldemort put on the animal to protect his Horcrux. When faced with the proper 'deconstruction' spell to dismantle the Horcrux, there was no retaliation.
 3. *Confuto Phasma Phasmatis*: essentially the same spell as *Suprimir Phasma Phasmatis* (suppress spirit/soul) that Remus used against the other Horcruxes he helped destroy. Snape, being rather well-versed in the Dark Arts, knows more than one variation.
 4. Another Lord of the Rings quote for the Tolkien aficionados. When Harry asks Snape which side he is really on, Snape answers, "I am not altogether on anybody's side, because nobody is altogether on my side." This is, in my opinion, Treebeard's best line. He says this to Merry and Pippin in The Two Towers (in the chapter that bears his name).
- *Severus fans: Don't despair! It's not over yet!

Mysteries

Chapter 22 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

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Chapter 22: Mysteries

Hermione emerged from the cellar of the Riddle House into a scene of chaos. Amid the broken furniture and shattered glass, the unconscious forms of four young men were sprawled on the floor. Harry and Ron were squatting down next to a fifth man, helping him sit up. Recognition took a few moments to penetrate her overloaded emotions, then she cried, "Viktor!" She hurried to join her friends.

Viktor smiled ruefully up at her. "Herm-own-ninny," he wheezed painfully. "I am very happy to see you safe."

"You're injured!" she exclaimed. Directing her attention to Harry, she asked, "What happened to him?"

"His leg is broken, I think," Harry replied.

"I haff also, I think, a broken rib," Viktor added. "It is difficult to breathe."

"Do you know how to repair broken bones, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"No," she said regretfully. "We should get him to a Healer."

"There's no time! We have to get to the Ministry," Harry decreed.

Ron gestured toward Viktor. "Well, it's obvious that he won't be coming with us. What should we do?"

"Leaf me!" Viktor exhorted. "Go after the Dark Lord."

"No!" Hermione objected.

"We can't leave him here," Ron agreed. "And what about Remus?"

"Here," Hermione said decisively to Ron and Harry. "Stand back." She pointed Snape's wand at Viktor's broken leg. "*Ferula!*" A moment later, a splint affixed itself to the injured limb and was rapidly covered as bandages wound about it. Using a Slicing Hex, she cut a long strip of cloth from the bottom of Viktor's cloak. She wound the cloth snugly around his ribs, securing it with a Sticking Spell. "Ron, find something he can use as a crutch."

"No need," Viktor said, drawing a miniature walking stick out of his pocket and enlarging it with a muttered, "*Engorgio.*"

"Excellent!" Hermione said with satisfaction, giving Viktor an encouraging smile. "Well, help him up!" she directed Harry and Ron.

"Remus is downstairs, Stunned. Can you get him out of here?" Harry asked Viktor as they heaved him to his feet.

"I do not think I can manage the stairs like this," he answered, regarding his leg doubtfully. "But I will go for help. Who should I contact?"

"Get Nymphadora Tonks," Ron said without hesitation. "Besides being an Order member and an Auror, she's his girlfriend. She'll be at her parents' house. Use the Floo at the Three Broomsticks."

Viktor nodded. "I vill."

"And tell her to alert the Order about Voldemort's raid on the Ministry," Harry added. He glanced sidelong at his two friends. "We are going to need some backup there."

Viktor disappeared with a crack. The three friends rapidly bound the still-unconscious Death Eaters.

"Okay, let's go," Harry said. "First we should Apparate to the old Headquarters. We can Floo directly into the Ministry from there and avoid the scouts Voldemort has outside the building."

"I can't!" Hermione objected, holding up her wrist to show them the bracelet. "It's an Anti-Apparation device. One of you will have to take me."

"I'll do it," Ron declared, grasping her upper arm possessively and pulling her closer to him.

She stared at the hand on her arm for a moment. *Later.... I'll have to speak with Ron after. If there is an after,* she added mentally. With a last glance toward the cellar where Severus lay, she said, "I'm ready."

They Apparated to the back garden of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and Harry unlocked the door with a word and a wave of his wand. Once inside, he turned to Hermione. "We need to take a minute to teach you how to power meld with us. I have a feeling that I'll need both of you to shore me up when I face Voldemort."

Ron grinned. "Piece of cake, Harry! If we learned to power meld in fifteen minutes, Hermione will master it in about one!"

The center fireplace in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic flared up, green flames rapidly resolving into the spinning form of the young man known as the Chosen One. He stepped out of the hearth; the flames leapt high once again. Hermione appeared, followed rapidly by Ron.

"Where to, mate?" the redhead asked.

"To the lifts. We need to get to Level Nine."

Hermione's eyes widened. "The Department of Mysteries?"

"Yes." They made their way across the Atrium and through the golden gates, Harry in the lead.

From the shadows, a rasping voice cried, "*Avada Ked...*"

"*Expelliarmus!*" Ron shouted before the curse was completed.

"*Stupefy!*" Hermione yelled an instant later.

Harry threw himself forward on his belly as a Death Eater collapsed in front of the lifts, Stunned. His partner, now disarmed thanks to Ron, charged forward frantically, apparently intending to bowl over Ron with his greater weight. Harry had a perfect view of his legs. "*Tarantallegra!*" he cried.

The man's feet flew out from beneath him, jerking wildly as he crashed to the floor.

"*Stupefy,*" Hermione said in a firm voice, and the man went limp.

"They should all be so easy," Ron commented wryly.

"Fat chance," Harry answered under his breath as Hermione bound the Stunned men and confiscated their wands. The guards were both young men. Voldemort's long-time servants would not go down with so little effort. "Come on," he sighed, punching the down button to call a lift.

"Quite a collection of wands you've got there, Hermione" Ron commented sourly. He eyed Snape's with obvious dislike. "How is it that you can use that one so effectively?" he queried. "I thought another person's wand is usually not compatible."

"It's not as easy to use as my own wand, but surprisingly, it's fairly compatible with my magic," she returned. Ron looked disgusted by the idea, but wisely restrained himself from commenting further. "I think," Hermione continued thoughtfully, "that it may have a dragon heartstring core, like mine." The rattle and chime of an arriving lift saved Ron the trouble of coming up with a non-confrontational answer. It opened with a clang and they hurried inside.

As the doors crashed shut, Hermione suddenly remembered the Impenetrable Potion. "Sheesh!" she cried, smacking her forehead in exasperation. "We could have been killed out there! Where is my brain?" As the young men looked uncertainly at one another over her head, she rummaged through her pockets, eventually drawing out the two vials she had taken from Snape. "Here!" She pushed a vial into Harry's hands. "Drink all of this!" she commanded. "It will protect you from just about anything Voldemort and his Death Eaters can throw at you." She held up the second vial. "You and I can split this one," she said, handing it to Ron. They drank their allotted portions quickly.

"Okay, if there are guards in the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries, the lift will have alerted them that someone is coming," Harry reasoned. "Take defensive postures and have your wands at the ready," he directed.

They moved to the sides of the lift and waited. When it opened, a series of nasty hexes, including a Reductor Curse and a Slicing Hex, impacted against the back wall. A stray Stunning Hex ricocheted off the ceiling grazing Ron's side, but a potion-induced shield flared as it reacted, effectively blocking the hex. Harry dropped into a crouch. "*Stupefy!*" he yelled.

"*Stupefy!*"

"*Stupefy!*"

Three jets of red light streaked out of the lift, one after the other. A dull thump indicated that at least one Stunner had hit a live target.

"Stay back!" Harry cried to his friends, reluctant to let them take the brunt of the attack with only half a dose of protective potion. He leaped through the doors.

"*Expelliarmus!*" But the hex failed to connect. *Damn! He blocked me!*

A red jet of light flashed toward him a nonverbal curse apparently, as he heard no incantation. However, it never reached him. The curse impacted a golden barrier inches from Harry's body, spending its power harmlessly on the shield. "*Insensibilis!*" Harry returned, aiming straight at the chest of the Death Eater. He watched in satisfaction as the man crumpled directly in front of the plain black door that had once haunted his dreams.

"Come on!" He sprinted down the hall, Ron and Hermione on his heels. Yanking open the door, they were faced with the dark anteroom and its numerous exits. "Any clue which one leads to the Time Room?" he asked the others.

Ron shook his head. "Nope."

"Me neither. I don't even know if the same door leads to the same place twice in a row," Hermione said, biting her lower lip nervously.

"Great," Harry remarked sarcastically as he closed the outer door. As before, the room began to rotate until the multitude of doors was a blur before their confused eyes. "I'll just try whichever one is across from us when the room stops spinning."

The revolving room slowed, grinding to a halt. Harry pulled open the nearest door into a cold, dimly lit room that resembled a stone amphitheater. There, in the center, at the bottom of the tiers of benches, was the crumbling archway with its tattered black veil. Harry stared, transfixed for a few moments as he remembered how Sirius had fallen through that arch, never to return. His heart contracted painfully, jerking him back to the present. "Let's get out of here," he growled, turning back to the anteroom.

They tried two more doors, remembering to mark those they had already been through. The second was the Brain Room, which Ron flat-out refused to enter. The third led them into a high hall full of towering shelves, blue-flamed candles and faintly-glowing dusty glass globes: the room where the Prophecies were kept.

"Harry," Hermione whispered. "Didn't this room connect directly to the Time Room the last time we were here?"

"It did," he said softly.

"Maybe we should go through here," she suggested. "It would be more of a surprise than entering directly from the anteroom. All that spinning and grinding is bound to have alerted the Death Eaters that someone is on their way in."

"Good idea," Ron chipped in. "This is as good a starting place as any. Besides, I don't fancy going through too many of the other rooms here." It was clear that he was thinking of the room where the brains resided. Hermione and Harry were just as reluctant to enter some of the other rooms. "Do you have a plan, mate?"

Harry bobbed his head affirmatively. "I'm not exactly sure *what* I will do, but I have an idea *where*," he said cryptically. At his friends' puzzled looks, he tried to explain. "There's a room here, somewhere, that I believe will aid us. From what Dumbledore once said, it contains a great power. I have a very strong feeling call it intuition that I have to confront Voldemort *there*, in that room."

Hermione gave him an incredulous look. Clearly she was extremely worried about staking all their hopes on his intuition. "Are you certain, Harry?"

"More certain than I've ever been before."

"What room is it? Do you know where it is?" Ron asked.

"No, but I'll recognize it when I see it. Professor Dumbledore said that it is kept locked at all times. Remember when we were here two years ago, there was a door we couldn't open? That's the room we need," he said definitively.

"We had better map out a route to it from here then," Hermione suggested in a shaky voice. She was ever logical, even in the face of her fear.

Looking around, Harry spotted a door to the left and gestured to the others. "Let's start over there."

Their chosen door led into a darkened room which resembled a holographic planetarium. Planets, moons, comets, and thousands of clustered stars hung unsuspected in the air, each of them rotating, orbiting and sometimes even pulsing in a spectacular celestial display. Awestruck, the young people turned from one wonder to the next, lost for a few moments in the grandeur that surrounded them. "It's like we're inside a model of the galaxy," Ron breathed.

"The... the doors... Find the doors," Harry directed, shaking off the overwhelming sense of amazement that had held them nearly spellbound. He threaded his way between the stars. In the dim light he could just make out a door on the opposite side of the room. The door opened into the chamber of the arch. He closed it.

Hermione located a door on the right hand side of the room. It led to an office, stuffed with no less than five desks as well as a multitude of filing cabinets. Two doors led from this room. The first proved to be useless, as it led back into the high room containing the Prophecies. The other opened directly into the Time Room.

"Shit!" Ron exclaimed, slamming the door shut in the surprised faces of a dozen black-cloaked figures that had looked up as it opened. "*Colloportus!*" he cried, sealing it behind him. He sprinted after Harry and Hermione, who were already retreating back the way they had come.

Harry raced through the galactic center then veered left, avoiding the entrance to the chamber of the arch. He jerked open another door to reveal the room with the tank full of brains. Ron skidded to a stop. As one, Harry and Hermione each grabbed an arm, propelling him into the eerie room.

With a flick of Harry's wand, the door crashed shut behind them. "*Colloportus!*" he added.

"That won't hold them for long," Hermione gasped. "We'll have to ward the doors to keep them out!"

"No! Just ward the one we came in through," Harry insisted. "Otherwise, we'll be trapped."

Hermione was already putting his advice into action, warding the planetarium entrance with a complex wand movement as she muttered incantations under her breath. Ron appeared frozen in place, staring at the tank of brains with a horrified expression.

"Ron!" Harry shouted, jerking the redhead out of his semi-trance. "Let's see where the other doors lead to." Striding across the room, Harry listened at the right-hand door. Hearing no voices on the other side, he eased it open, only to find yet another entrance to the chamber of the arch. It seemed that every room in this labyrinthine department had access to that one. *Access to death*, Harry thought, swallowing a sudden lump in his throat.

"This one is locked!" cried a muffled feminine shout from the planetarium chamber.

Harry looked over his shoulder nervously. Hermione stood motionless before the door, Snape's dark wand trained upon it. She glanced his way, and he saw both fear and determination in her eyes.

"I can hold this ward stable for a little while, Harry. But it can still be broken by a more powerful witch or wizard," she informed him. He nodded woodenly.

"Harry!" Ron called hoarsely. "This last door won't open!"

Harry whipped around to find his friend standing before a most unusual entry. Easily twice the width of the other doors they had encountered, it had arcane symbols engraved along the lintels. There was no handle. "That has to be it!" he said fiercely, hurrying over to Ron.

"Stand aside!" A high, cold voice ordered from the far side of the door Hermione had warded. "They cannot keep me out."

Voldemort! Harry thought with a surge of fear. "Hermione, leave it. We're going in here!" he shouted, indicating the entry in front of him. Abandoning her task, she sprinted to her friends. Behind her, the door to the planetarium began to vibrate and groan under Voldemort's onslaught.

Harry pushed on the wide door before him, but it was immovable, locked, as its entry from the spinning anteroom had been nearly two years before. Taking a deep breath, a feeling of tranquility descended over him, emanating, perhaps, from the room before him. All at once, he understood what he had to do. Harry glanced quickly to either side; his friends were there, at his shoulders. Grim though their faces were, he felt their love for him, the true essence of philadelphia, flowing from them like a never-ending river. He brought his parents to mind, then Sirius, and finally his beloved mentor, Albus Dumbledore. They were gone, but the love they had given him remained in his heart, in his soul. He placed his palms flat against the door and, pushing gently, smiled as it swung inward. He entered.

At that moment, Voldemort breached the wards to the Brain Room, and the door shattered with a deafening blast. Unconcerned, Harry walked resolutely to the center of the new room, surrounded by the nearly blinding light. Ron and Hermione followed, maintaining their positions to the side and slightly behind him: an arrowhead penetrating deep into the heart of the mysterious.

To Hermione, it was almost overwhelming. The pure feeling like a swelling wave was filling her heart, expanding her chest with its power. *It's love*, she thought dazedly, *an infinite, all-encompassing love. 'Agape' the vicar had once called it*, she remembered dimly. From the corner of her eye she saw Ron reach up to swipe at the tears tracking down his face. She raised her own hand, not surprised to feel wetness there. "It's so much more than eros," she whispered in awe.

"Now," Harry said in a calm voice, "meld with me." His eyes were fixed on the doorway. Ron and Hermione followed his gaze. Watching them from just outside the room, stood the tall, skeletal figure of Lord Voldemort, seemingly hesitant to enter. Harry felt his friends' power flow into him. It was a coiled, hidden strength, crouching like a tiger as it waited for its prey to move within striking distance.

"Potter!" called the shrill, cold voice of Voldemort. "You cannot escape from me! I will hunt you forever! You may as well face me now, boy."

"I am not afraid to face you, Voldemort," Harry replied evenly. "Come in, then! We will get it over with once and for all." Behind Voldemort, the clustered forms of Death Eaters could be seen and heard, glancing fearfully at their lord and murmuring to one another. Harry knew that Voldemort dared not refuse to face him in front of his followers. He waited.

"Prepare yourself, Harry Potter," Voldemort screeched from the doorway. "At long last, you are going to join your parents!"

As his nemesis stepped through the opening, Harry's wand snapped up, automatically assuming a dueling stance. At Voldemort's second step, a high-pitched, hissing whine escaped his throat. His face twisted into a fearsome mask of pain.

"Pleasant ambiance in this room, isn't there?" Harry asked his foe casually.

Voldemort didn't answer. The powerful essence that permeated this place was like poison to him. *Pain upon pain!* Love sought to enter into him, to fill his heart, his mind, even the remnants of his maimed soul. But he fought against it forbade it entry. *Love is ephemeral; only power is eternal!* screamed his intellect. Suddenly, he raised his arm to throw a curse at his enemy. "*Confuto Pectus!*" A jet of sickly orange light arced towards Harry. Inches from his heart, it impacted against a golden barrier, spreading sideways as it diffused. Voldemort's slitted eyes widened. "You!" he spat. "You have my potion!" His red eyes darted to Hermione, belatedly registering her presence and realizing its ramifications. *She is immaterial*, he decided. *I must concentrate on Potter*. Glaring at his young adversary, he hissed menacingly as he considered his next move. *Nothing blocks the Killing Curse*. However, lifting his arm to cast the Unforgivable proved impossible. His wand jerked and twitched in his grasp as his arm muscles refused to obey his will. *It's this cursed room!* he thought desperately, feeling wisps of pure feeling prickling him, infiltrating his superficial defenses. *The longer I stay here, the worst the effect will become*.

Retreat was not an option. Should he do so, he would lose face in front of his Death Eaters. His control over them was as dependent on their fear and loyalty as it was to their cause of racial purity. *I must kill the boy now, before this pain overpowers me*. He forced one foot forward toward Potter, intending to kill him with his bare hands if necessary, but the movement only served to double his agony. The pain was a hundred times no a thousand times worse than when he had tried to possess the Potter brat nearly two years ago! He gasped, rolling his scarlet eyes in desperation and anger, and in that moment of distraction, his enemy struck.

"Coercio!" Harry shouted.

The spell hit Voldemort with a bolt of force, encasing him in invisible, magical restraints. Quickly, the confining net of magic drew tight, preventing all movement. With a cry of hatred that stung the very ears like venom, he strained against his bonds.

Dimly, Harry heard shouts and the noises of fighting outside the door. The Death Eaters battled for their cause against the forces of light; Order members had arrived and engaged. He ignored them all, concentrating every fiber of his being on holding the monster before him immobile. He felt power flowing into him from his friends, an inexhaustible fount of energy, like their love for him. "Hold fast," he said through gritted teeth. "We will break him."

Voldemort's eyes bulged with effort as he strove to free himself, but to no avail. Tendrils of love began to penetrate his defenses, burning like tongues of flame. He could not advance to kill Potter. He could not retreat to escape the anguish lancing into his very being. His screech of pain seemed to rend the air in that bright room, but still he was unable to break the deadlock. In desperation, he considered abandoning his body. His Horcruxes would secure his soul to the physical plane. He could possess one of his followers until a new body was made. The pain escalated. *Ah, agony!* he moaned internally. *I must do it! I will leave this body!*

Closing his eyes, he centered his consciousness. He was accustomed to this technique, having used it repeatedly to possess his familiar, Nagini. On those occasions, he placed only a portion of his essence into his familiar, retaining a foothold of awareness within his human body. But this time would be different: he must desert his corporeal form altogether, becoming nothing more than consciousness. With difficulty, he focused his mind away from the pain, gathering every iota of his formidable will into a tight nucleus of energy. Confidently, he reached out, searching for his servants. *One of them will provide a compatible receptacle*.

For a moment, he sensed many Dark souls outside the room and began to gravitate toward their evil. Suddenly, he felt an irresistible tug and found himself being sucked forward at an ever increasing speed. *Unanchored*, he thought frantically, *I am not anchored to this plane!* With a sense other than sight, he saw an ancient stone archway before him, growing larger and larger as he approached. *Noooo!* His consciousness wailed soundlessly, as he was drawn through the tattered black veil that covered the arch. The cloth fluttered as if it had been ruffled by a gust of wind, then grew still.

In the Room of Love, in the Department of Mysteries, the tall, skeletal body of Lord Voldemort crashed lifelessly to the floor. Harry, breathing heavily, lowered his wand.

"Is it over?" Hermione asked, her light voice piping into the silence like a bird greeting the sun after a storm.

"Yes. He is dead," Harry said raggedly. "Truly dead this time."

Ron squeezed his shoulder in tired acknowledgement, then dropped his arm to his side. "Just as Dumbledore predicted," he observed quietly. "It was love that defeated him in the end."

Author's Notes:

1. According to the HP Encyclopedia at Mugglenet, Hermione's vine wood wand has a dragon heartstring core. As Harry's has a phoenix feather and Ron's a unicorn tail-hair, her wand core of dragon heartstring rounds out the trio nicely, giving them, collectively, the best qualities of all the different wand cores.
2. Three types of love defined by the Hellenistic Greeks (there are at least five total), are: philos, eros and agape. Philos or philadelphia (a somewhat more modern term according to the Oxford English Dictionary) is brotherly love. Eros is sexual love. Agape is a limitless, immeasurable love for humanity or the world, exemplified by the love God (or gods, if you believe in more than one) has for his creation. Although agape is more currently used to define a Christian 'love-feast' as in the Lord's Supper, I have chosen to use the broader, and more antiquated meaning.
3. Why couldn't Voldemort throw the Killing Curse at Harry? It requires powerful hatred to effectively cast Avada Kedavra. Fortunately for Harry, the Room of Love effectively suppresses hatred.
4. *Coercio* = to restrain, confine or enclose. *Confuto Pectus*: confuto = halt or stop, pectus = heart (all translations via an on-line Latin to English automated translator).
5. I managed to insert another Lord of the Rings quote in this chapter. When Harry ensnares Voldemort with the Restraining Spell, Voldemort reacts "With a cry of hatred that stung the very ears like venom..." This is from *The Return of the King* (The Battle of the Pelennor Fields) wherein Eowyn fights the Lord of the Nazgul (who issues the

venomous cry). I like the idea of equating the Lord of the Nazgul with Lord Voldemort. In addition to all their superficial similarities (tall, skeletal, red-eyed), they have both made that classic literary bargain: eternal life, in exchange for everything that makes life worth living.

Death and Discovery

Chapter 23 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to J.K. Rowling and her publishers. I'm not making any money from this (too bad, huh?).

Chapter 23: Death and Discovery

A sudden, high-pitched scream startled Hermione, pulling her eyes away from their fallen foe. The fighting was intensifying outside the Room of Love.

"Come on!" Ron called, heading for the door. Harry and Hermione exchanged a quick glance, then followed their friend into battle. It was terrifying and chaotic, but when all was over not a single Death Eater remained alive within the Department of Mysteries. All of Voldemort's inner circle had chosen to fight to the death, knowing, by Harry's presence, that their master was vanquished.

In truth, the Order of the Phoenix had been in dire straights when the three friends had joined the fray. The young people's attack was both unexpected and fierce. And the fact that none of the trio could be touched by the magic of the Death Eaters had given new heart to the rest of the Order. The real turning point had come when two squads of Ministry Hit Wizards had arrived. Battle-hardened, ruthless and cunning, the specially-trained personnel began taking Death Eaters out of the fight permanently.

Victory was achieved, but the price was high. Order members, Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody and Elphias Doge, were dead. Hermione was saddened to realize that the old Auror would never remonstrate them with his trademark 'Constant vigilance!' again. Two Hit Wizards had been killed and a third squad member, one of the Hit Witches, was gravely injured and not expected to survive. Arthur Weasley had lost his right eye and his son, Fred, his left foot. Fred and George, the twin masters of confusion and mischief, would never be entirely identical again.

Almost no one escaped the battle in the Department of Mysteries unscathed, even if the scars were solely emotional. Kingsley Shacklebolt had sustained a jagged wound across his midsection that bled profusely, although he protested that it was neither deep nor serious. To Hermione's surprise (and pleasure), Nymphadora Tonks had emerged with nothing more than a small cut on her forehead and a bruised shoulder. The young Auror's everyday clumsiness disappeared completely when she was dueling. Neville Longbottom sustained a broken leg, but nothing worse; he counted himself lucky to have come out of his duel with Rodolphus Lestrangle alive. He had fought using every bit of knowledge and skill he possessed, finally gaining the upper hand and Stunning his opponent. A Hit Witch had then dispatched the notorious Lestrangle once and for all fair play being a useless concept in her merciless profession.

In the aftermath of battle, those who were able began to transport the injured to St. Mungo's. Bill carried his father out of the labyrinth of rooms while George, and shockingly Percy, assisted Fred. Hermione watched in amazement as the three brothers left the room together, Fred suspended between George and Percy, an arm over each of their shoulders.

"Mum invited him to the twins' birthday party," Ron said suddenly, startling Hermione out of her amazement. "She insisted that if he came, the twins had to treat him better than the last time he was home." He grinned, happy to see the old rift between his brothers being overcome by their mutual concern.

"Where *is* your mum? Is she here?" Harry asked.

"No," a feminine voice interjected. "She stayed at the Burrow with Ginny." The trio turned to see Tonks, grinning at them as she helped little Dedalus Diggle up from the floor. He had a gash on his head it was bloody, as head wounds often were, but apparently not debilitating.

As the hit squad helped their colleagues, Hermione scanned the room to see if anyone else needed immediate assistance. "Professor McGonagall!" she shrieked, spotting the familiar stern face and now-disheveled black bun of her former Head of House stirring feebly on the floor. Dashing to the older witch's side, she dropped to her knees and helped the dazed woman sit up. "Are you injured?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"No. At least I don't think so," Minerva McGonagall replied, sounding shaken. "He got me with a Stunner just as I punctured his diaphragm." She nodded toward a black-robed figure sprawled a few feet away. "It's a fool's trick. But then, he never was much good at dueling," she said in an oddly-strangled voice.

Hermione examined the profile of the fallen Death Eater. *It's Avery.* She recognized him after seeing him at the Malfoy's cottage. She grimaced, suddenly realizing that McGonagall was unhappy about killing a former student, no matter how wrong he had gone. Mentally putting that aside, she turned back to McGonagall. "Here, let me help you up, Professor. Can you stand?"

"Thank you, dear," the elderly witch replied, gratefully accepting Hermione's aid.

As they passed through the room, they wended their way around the numerous black-clad forms of fallen Death Eaters. Blood was everywhere, and the moans of the injured punctuated the anxious voices of the survivors who were coherent enough to talk. As Hermione led her professor from the room, supporting her unsteady steps, she saw Ron and Harry attending to a pair of injured Hit Wizards. Watching them, she was startled by her professor's sudden gasp. McGonagall had halted, staring toward the right with a revolted expression on her lined face. Following her gaze, Hermione was transfixed by a gruesome sight. It was Rabastan Lestrangle. He lay on his back, eyes open and staring sightlessly at the ceiling. His throat had been slashed by a powerful Slicing Hex. The wound gaped open like a hideous, misplaced grin across his neck. An ever-widening pool of blood flooded the floor around him. Hermione felt a wave of nausea rise up in her and, tearing her eyes away from Lestrangle, hid her face against the other woman's shoulder.

"Come, child," McGonagall murmured, urging her toward the door. Clinging together for mutual support, the women made their way out of the Brain Room at last. And although they left the scenes of carnage behind, they both knew that the memories would stay with them fresh and raw in their minds for a very long time.

Several long minutes later, Hermione and her former professor emerged into the corridor of Level Nine and made their way haltingly along the passageway. With a rattle and clang, the left-most lift opened, disgorging several Aurors surrounding a tall, black-cloaked figure. Long, lank, black hair partially obscured his face, but this did not prevent the two women from recognizing him instantly.

Hermione stopped short. "Severus!" she whispered in shocked tones.

The prisoner's head snapped up and he, too, stopped abruptly. For an instant, his eyes met Hermione's, before he deliberately averted his face and assumed a stiff, expressionless mask. One of the Aurors tugged on his arm and the group resumed their progress down the corridor. Snape kept his gaze fixed straight ahead as he passed Minerva and Hermione, giving no sign that he noticed their existence. The phalanx of Aurors guided him silently to the stairwell, disappearing into the dungeon-like depths of the building where the holding cells were located.

"It's all right, child," McGonagall murmured, patting Hermione's shoulder reassuringly. "He can't hurt you anymore."

Hermione turned haunted eyes toward the older woman. "He never did," she answered hollowly. "He never would."

Snape reclined on the hard, thin mattress of the bed with his back propped uneasily against the cold wall of the tiny cell he now occupied. Since the moment he had uttered the curse that had ended Albus Dumbledore's life, he had known this was a possibility. He had just never seriously considered that the Ministry idiots would be able to successfully capture him. *Then again, they didn't. It was her doing. The last person I would have suspected of treachery.* His mind veered away from the painful topic and the Delilah who, with a damp kiss and a full Body-Bind, had betrayed him. He wondered briefly how many of his one-time 'comrades' were imprisoned here. Because he was in a high-security isolation cell in the bowels of the Ministry, he had seen no one except the guards.

But only a few minutes later, his thoughts were back to the place he couldn't seem to avoid the person he couldn't seem to get out of his head: Hermione. It was like a sore tooth that your tongue cannot help prodding, again and again, even though you know it hurts every time you touch it. *Why did she turn against me? Did she somehow find out about the memories the Dark Lord sent to Potter? Is this her retribution? Perhaps, he reasoned, I overestimated my influence on her or underestimated her damned Gryffindor 'nobility.'* And he wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time in the past day, *What did she mean by those last words she said to me?* He remembered them as clearly as if she were standing in the room this moment. *I can't abandon everything I believe in just to secure my own happiness. That would be the ultimate Unforgivable.* He turned her words over and over in his mind, trying to understand. Did she mean that not abandoning her friends, or her struggle against the Dark Lord, was more important to her than her than what they had shared together? (Even in the privacy of his thoughts, he shied away from the word 'relationship.') Or was it some deep existential thing, rooted in 'feelings'? If so, he would never fathom it. But he knew that she cared for him. Hadn't she said that she didn't want to leave? *But then, why did she?* He shook his head again. *No. There's no understanding it. I'll probably never know why.* He sighed in defeat and vowed to stop allowing his mind to run in circles.

At least she is still alive. Although, I don't know why I should care, Snape thought bitterly. But he knew that in spite of his anger, he did care. He was relieved that she had lived through Potter's confrontation with the Dark Lord and the subsequent battle.

His prison guards had informed him, with unconcealed relish, of his former master's demise. Apparently, they assumed he would be distressed by the news. *Idiots!* he thought derisively. *If I were only free of this cell, I would be celebrating the Dark Lord's death with more enthusiasm than they could ever muster!* In addition, the guards had regaled him with the details of the battles, both inside and outside the Ministry. He felt genuine regret at the news of Rabastan's death. In spite of their recent falling out, they had been friends for many years. He also felt a twinge of pain on hearing that Draco, as well as half a dozen other youngsters he had mentored as Head of Slytherin House, were dead. Evidently, most of the scouts and soldiers the Dark Lord had placed around the Ministry had fled when the Aurors arrived in force. However, a small group, led by Lucius Malfoy, had made a stand, fighting to the death. Father and son had died together an ignominious end to the illustrious Malfoy line.

A day later, the guards brought more news. He was going to be tried for the murder of Albus Dumbledore.

"Good to have you back, Remus!" Arthur started to rise so he could shake his visitor's hand.

"No, don't get up!" Remus exclaimed, pressing the head of the Weasley household back into the most comfortable chair in the Burrow's parlor. "You're supposed to take it easy! No sudden moves, remember?"

Arthur made a disgusted sound. "You've been brainwashed by Molly, I see. She seems to think that I'm going to fall apart at the slightest change in the weather."

"Well, you've just spent two days in the hospital, Arthur. She's entitled to be a bit protective."

Arthur sniffed. "I can't wait until the tissue has healed enough to get a Magical Eye implanted. I only wish there was a corresponding device for Fred," he finished sadly.

"I thought that the prosthetic foot was supposed to interface with the rest of his leg seamlessly," Remus replied with a puzzled frown. "Molly said he will be back to his usual activities sooner than you."

"Oh, he will," Arthur agreed. "The new prosthesis will completely restore movement it's just that... well, he won't be able to feel with it like a natural foot. It doesn't have the magical integration that the new replacement eyes have."

Remus placed a hand on Arthur's shoulder consolingly. "I'm sure Fred will do just fine. He's young he'll heal quickly and be back to his trouble-making self in no time," Remus said with a smile.

"Yes, I know you're right. It's just... just a father's worry. So, how's your head?" Arthur inquired, abruptly switching the focus of their conversation to Remus. "No side effects from the concussion? I see Tonks isn't clucking over you like a mother hen," he said, somewhat enviously.

"No. She's not the motherly type thank Merlin! Anyway, she hasn't the time to spend in worry right now. She's been at work almost constantly for the past two days. The Auror Office is still trying to recoup and reorganize. It's a shame about Gawain Robards," Remus commented sadly.

"Yes. He was a good man and a dedicated Auror." Arthur sighed. "I heard in St. Mungo's that he took out Lucius Malfoy. Is that correct?"

Remus nodded.

"So many good people... lost to this insanity over the last two years. It's such a waste."

Remus nodded again, his thoughts on his fellow Order members. *Alastor Moody, Emmeline Vance, Elphias Doge, Albus Dumbledore and Sirius Black, all gone forever. Merlin! I still miss that willful miscreant Sirius even after two years!* He smiled sadly as he remembered his dear friend. *But look how many survived, a tiny voice piped up inside his head. Against all odds, Harry had endured, defeating the most powerful Dark wizard history had ever recorded. There is hope in the world, after all.*

Suddenly realizing that the house was strangely quiet, Remus asked, "Where are the young people hiding?"

Arthur shrugged. "Upstairs, downstairs, inside, outside they come and go so often that I can't keep track."

Upstairs, the four friends were holding a long-delayed conference. In the aftermath of the events at the Ministry, they had all spent a great deal of time at St. Mungo's. Now that the injured Weasleys were convalescing at home, there were many questions that needed to be asked and answered.

"...and after we found out that you were being held hostage, we received letters saying Hogwarts was closed until further notice. Parents were expected to home-school their children except for the N.E.W.T. level classes offered by the Ministry," Ron said pedantically.

"But we didn't have to take very many of them," Harry interjected. "Ron, Ginny and I got tutored here at the Burrow by Order members for some of our classes."

"So, you three have been taking certified classes all this year?" Hermione asked with poorly concealed envy. She shot a look at Harry, then at Ron. "You... you two will probably be able to take your N.E.W.T.s this spring! Wish I could..." This last was directed toward her shoes.

Harry opened his mouth but was stopped by Ginny's elbow in his ribs. She shook her head meaningfully at him. Hermione was still examining the tops of her shoes, her lower lip grasped firmly between her teeth. The young men exchanged a helpless look. Hermione had always prided herself on her grades clearly the fact that her friends were now academically ahead was a serious blow to her self worth. Her friends said nothing; even Ron was able to maintain a tactful silence while she attempted to suppress the impending tears. Finally, she drew a shaky breath and congratulated them.

"Well done, you two," she said with a nod to her best friends and a small, forced smile. "So, did you take all the classes you needed to get into Auror training?"

"Yeah," Ron confirmed. "But Harry is already part of the program they took him on early, seeing as he admitted to Scrimgeour that he really was the Chosen One! He's the proverbial golden boy, he is!" Ron jibed, glancing sidelong at Harry to see if he would take the bait.

"I am not a golden boy!" Harry objected vociferously. "It's not my fault that..."

Ron let out a bark of laughter, interrupting his friend's objections. "You're so predictable, mate."

At this, Ginny and Hermione burst into peals of laughter at Ron's stratagem. Harry looked from one to the next for a few surprised seconds, then broke down in laughter himself.

A minute later, Harry regained control of himself, wiping his streaming eyes. "You really are a git, Ron," he retaliated, attempting to stifle his wide grin.

"At your service," Ron said cheekily, returning the grin.

The four young people fell into the easy banter they had shared for years. Eventually though, they returned to discussing the events that had led up to Voldemort's demise.

"Harry?" Hermione asked curiously, "How did you know what to do when Voldemort cornered us in the Ministry?"

"It was a lot of things, all coming together at the right time," he answered. "After Sirius died that night at the Ministry do you remember how Voldemort tried to possess me, but couldn't?" He waited for Hermione's nod before continuing his explanation. "Later that night, Professor Dumbledore told me that it was because I had love inside me. Voldemort couldn't stand the feeling. The Headmaster also told me about that locked room. He said it was filled with the power of love. After we got to the Ministry the other night, I remembered all that stuff and I knew I had to go there. I figured that room would put Voldemort at a disadvantage... and I was right," he finished smugly.

"Bloody brilliant," Ron commented in an awed voice.

Ginny just beamed at Harry.

"That was an excellent deduction, Harry. Good job, you!" Hermione added with a smile. "But, it was a bit of a risk, wasn't it?" At Harry's puzzled frown, she explained. "Well, what if Voldemort had been able to escape death again the way he did when you were a baby? The whole cycle could have started over again, couldn't it?"

"What are you talking about, Hermione?" Ron asked irritably. "We, that is Harry, Remus and I..." Ginny cleared her throat loudly. "...and Ginny," Ron amended hastily. "We hunted down and destroyed all the Horcruxes! Without them, Voldemort couldn't come back."

"Horcruxes," Hermione repeated thoughtfully. "That sounds so familiar, but I just can't place it. What are they?"

Harry and Ginny were giving her blank stares, as if they had suddenly stopped understanding English. Ron looked thunderstruck.

"What?" Hermione snapped, aggravated by their inexplicable behavior.

Ron began stuttering. "But... but... it was your idea... we all planned...."

"Her memory's been modified," Ginny said flatly. She stood, and, grasping the confused witch's hand, gave a tug to get her moving. "Come on, Hermione. Let's go and talk to my Dad. He'll know what to do."

They found him in the parlor, chatting comfortably with his visitor. Ginny explained the situation and appealed to her father for help.

Although Arthur Weasley did not know how to determine whether Hermione had been subjected to a Memory Charm, Remus Lupin did.

"If you will allow me to perform Legilimency on you, I should be able to see if there are any obvious gaps in your memory," he informed Hermione.

"Of course, Professor," she agreed in a faint voice.

"Call me Remus, like the rest of this lot does," he said, indicating the other young people with a wave of his hand. "Just sit on the couch and relax. This won't take long," he assured her.

A dozen minutes later, he withdrew from the young woman's mind and sat back with a sigh. "There's no doubt. You were subjected to a number of Memory Charms."

"When?" Hermione asked.

"It's difficult to say with accuracy. Your memories from the last several months or so are all intact, but I located gaps in the year preceding that. I would estimate that the modifications were made about eight months ago."

Harry inhaled sharply. "That's right when she was captured," he said.

Hermione looked upset, but struggled to maintain her composure. "Is there any way to tell who did it?"

"No."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. *Get a grip, Granger. There's nothing you can do about it now!* she exhorted herself. "Well," she addressed her friends, "let's go back upstairs. It looks like I have a lot of catching up to do."

A few hours and several hundred questions later, Hermione had heard all the details that Harry, Ron and Ginny could remember about their adventures locating and destroying the Horcruxes. "So the snake that tried to attack you that night was the last Horcrux?" she asked tiredly.

"It was," Ron confirmed.

Hermione was silent, thinking hard. *Severus was the one who destroyed Voldemort's pet snake. And he and Harry had that odd exchange of words afterwards.* At the time it had made no sense to her, but in retrospect, it was obvious they had been referring to the Horcruxes. *That means that Severus knew about them.* Her mind made the next

connection rapidly. *He must have found out from me, when he drugged me after my capture. And that means that he also was the one who Obliviated me. But why? To save my life, or his own?*

Ron, obtuse as ever to the consequences of thinking aloud, voiced some of the same thoughts she had been mulling over. "You know, I still can't figure out why Snape killed Voldemort's familiar. You would think he would have let the snake get us."

"He was only saving his own skin!" Harry replied angrily. "If he thought he could have got past the snake, he would have left and let it kill us!"

Ron exchanged a brief look with Ginny; they were both familiar with Harry's volatile outbursts whenever their former professor was mentioned. Their usual tactic was to drop the topic.

Hermione, too, knew how much Harry hated Snape, but unlike the others, she no longer felt the need to placate her friend with concurrence or even silence. She had lived with the man for the past eight months, and while she couldn't approve many of his actions, she knew that he was not the 'essence of evil' that Harry believed him to be. "That's not fair, Harry. You can't assume you know his motives and then condemn him based on that. He's the only one who can say why he did it!"

"You're defending him?" Harry yelled, jumping to his feet. "After everything he's done? He killed Professor Dumbledore! He was responsible for my parents' deaths! And even Sirius! He goaded Sirius into leaving his house and got him killed too!"

Hermione was on her feet a split second after Harry. "Voldemort killed your parents Harry not Snape. Snape was at Hogwarts when it happened, already working for Professor Dumbledore! And as far as Sirius goes, you might want to consider that we," and here she made a gesture that included all the room's occupants, "are more culpable in his death than anyone except Bellatrix Lestrange! He went to the Ministry that night to rescue us! I won't deny that Severus Snape killed the Headmaster, but you can't blame him for everything bad in the world!"

Harry was dumbstruck for a few seconds, an incredulous look spread across his features.

"Harry, he protected me," she continued in a softer voice. "He saved my life more than once. Even you should be able to see that he's not totally evil."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. He strode to his trunk, pulled open the lid and rummaged through it. He rose jerkily and thrust a small box into her hands. "Here!" he sneered savagely. "If you're so convinced that Snape is innocent, take a look at those!"

Opening the box, she found that it contained three vials of silvery-looking fluid. "Wh... what are they?" she asked uncertainly.

"Memories. Snape's memories, to be exact. Voldemort sent them so that we would believe you were a traitor to the Order; he even quoted some writer named Forster to imply you were doing it maliciously. Take a good look at those, then tell me how 'noble' Snape is!" With that, he spun on his heel and fled the room, pounding down the stairs.

A minute later, they heard the kitchen door slam. Ginny peered out the window. "He's headed for the Quidditch paddock," she said softly. Turning to Hermione, she added, "I think you should view those before you talk to Harry again. If Remus is still downstairs, he can probably help you find a Pensieve to borrow."

Hermione emerged from the final stream of memories white-faced and shaking. Backing awkwardly away from the basin, she stumbled, only to be caught by Remus. He lowered her into the nearest chair. "How many people have seen these?" she whispered.

"The entire Weasley family, Moody and I viewed all of the first two sequences. However," he added hastily, seeing her panicked look, "only Harry, Ron and I entered the third one."

"I'm surprised that you all of you didn't believe I was a traitor. If I hadn't been through it myself...Well, even I would think that I had turned my coat. The specific incidents, even the order they were presented, were so..."

"Incriminating?" Remus supplied.

She nodded. A tear rolled slowly down her face. *They knew. They knew about me and Severus and they still came to rescue me!* She felt horrible so exposed. *How could Severus have given Voldemort that memory?*

"For what it's worth, initially your friends were upset, believing the worst. But Moody and I convinced them you were being manipulated."

"Is that what you believe?"

"To a degree, yes. He certainly used your love of knowledge to influence your decisions." He knelt in front of the distraught young witch, grasping her hands and speaking earnestly. "As to your relations with Severus well, people do unusual things under stress. I speak from experience, there," he admitted with a faint smile that let her know he would not judge her. "Hermione, your two friends firmly believed, and still believe, that you were under the Imperius Curse. They think Severus forced you. They can't understand how you could not hate him after that."

She nodded her head again. "I have to see Severus," she said painfully. "I have to know why he did it." She realized as well that she would have to tell her friends the truth. Otherwise they would never forgive her for what she was planning to do next.

Harry had avoided her for an entire day after he'd given her the memories, but finally she was able to corner him and demand that they talk. She made certain that Ron and Ginny accompanied them upstairs; they could serve as a possible buffer against Harry's unpredictable temper. Besides, she would rather tell them this truth all at once and be spared the anxiety of repeating it.

As soon as the door was locked and a Silencing Charm was cast, Hermione addressed them collectively. "First, I want to say how much I appreciate you all. Your friendship knowing that there were people out there who cared about me was one of the things that kept me sane while I was a prisoner. But it wasn't the only thing that helped. Which brings me to the second point: Snape."

"You're not going to give us that shite about how he's really not so bad, are you?" Harry demanded aggressively.

"Will you shut it and listen to me, please!" It was a demand rather than a question. "This is difficult for me to say, but I'm not going to lie. You two," she continued, looking from Ron to Harry as she chose her words with great care, "saw all of the memories Voldemort sent. You know... you know that Se... Snape and I were... physically intimate." Ginny's sharp intake of breath alerted Hermione that, until that moment, she had not known.

"That bloody bastard," Ron growled through clenched teeth.

Ginny took in her brother's reddening face and from the look on her own, came to a conclusion that plainly horrified her. "Do you mean... were you... raped?" she whispered.

"No, Ginny. It was worse than that!" Ron interjected. "He the git put her under the Imperius Curse so that she would appear to be willing. He wanted us to think that she had betrayed the Order."

"That's not true, Ron," Hermione denied softly. "He never used the Imperius Curse on me. He never forced me in any way."

Ron turned to Hermione with a look of absolute confusion. "What are you saying?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I'm saying... that it was consensual. We were together by our own choice."

A profound silence followed her declaration. Ron's legs folded involuntarily and he dropped gracelessly onto the bed behind him.

"YOU TOOK SNAPE AS A LOVER?" Harry roared. HOW COULD YOU? YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT HIM! AND WHAT ABOUT RON? HOW COULD YOU BETRAY US LIKE THAT?

But Hermione was not even looking at Ron. Her attention was fixed on Harry as she advanced to stand nose to nose with the enraged wizard. "How *dare* you judge me? You were here! You had your best friend and your girlfriend to turn to. You had a home and a family and don't tell me the Weasleys aren't your family, Harry, because you know they are. You even had the entire Order of the Phoenix to depend on, to turn to for help, to give you lessons," she said furiously. "I had no one! I was taken by Death Eaters and tortured. For months on end I was completely and totally isolated from my family, my friends, the Order, EVERYONE! I had to deal with Wormtail trying to grope me and Draco and his mother denigrating and humiliating me at every turn. I had my magic curtailed and my every move watched and monitored. And through it all, I had no idea whether I would ever be rescued or whether Voldemort would suddenly decide that today was the day I had outlived my usefulness as a way to get to you! So don't you pass judgment on me, Harry James Potter! You have no idea what I went through and no right to decide what I could have or should have done!"

"But...Snape?" Ginny said in a small voice.

"Yes, Snape," Hermione answered shortly. She turned to address Ginny more fully. "Severus Snape saved my life several times! He protected me from the other Death Eaters. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be standing here right now! In Voldemort's eyes I was nothing but a tool. To the Death Eaters I was only a Mudblood not worthy of being treated as a person. Severus was the only one who treated me with any degree of humanity. He tutored me, confided in me and eventually became a friend. I'm certain that, within his limited capabilities, he cared for me. And he wasn't entirely loyal to Voldemort; you two heard him say so the night you rescued me," she reminded the two young men with a pointed glance at each of them. "He was going to abandon Voldemort and the war for my sake. We were going to flee. But in the end, I chose to do what I believed was right rather than what was easy. I chose to help all of you to help fight that evil monster." She met Harry's green gaze squarely. "So don't tell me that I betrayed you! If anyone was betrayed, it was him, Severus."

Harry was staring at Hermione as if he had never seen her before. After a few seconds, she whirled on her heel and stalked out of Harry's bedroom, retreating to the room she shared with Ginny.

And through it all, Ron was silent, shocked, apparently, into total incoherency.

Author's Notes:

1. Hit Wizards and Hit Witches: employees of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement (first mentioned in PoA).
2. Fred's magical foot: non-canon if there can be magical replacement eyes, why not magical replacement feet?

Truth and Consequences - Part 1

Chapter 24 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ced by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to JK Rowling. I'm not making any money from this.

Chapter 24: Truth and Consequences (Part 1)

I should just go home, Hermione thought for the hundredth time that day as she gazed unseeingly at the walls of Ginny's bedroom. *They're never going to understand about me and Severus*. Both Harry and Ron had been assiduously avoiding her since she had dropped her bombshell three days ago. Considering Ginny's strong family loyalty and her attachment to Harry, Hermione had fully expected the same treatment from the younger girl. Happily, that was not the case. In fact, Ginny had been surprisingly supportive. The fiery redhead was more thoughtful and less judgmental than Hermione remembered from their days together at school. *At least there's one person in this house who knows and is still talking to me*, she mused.

The door opened abruptly and the subject of Hermione's thoughts entered. Ginny slammed the door shut behind her and flopped onto her bed. "Whew! If I never peel another potato, it will be too soon!" she exclaimed. "My mum is such a tyrant in the kitchen. Will you do me a favor, Hermione?"

"If I can. What is it?"

"Kick me if I ever start acting like my mother!"

Both girls chuckled. Ginny's complaints about doing housework and cooking sans magic were a regular source of amusement for the two of them.

"Thanks, Ginny," Hermione said. "I really needed a spot of comic relief."

"Have you been brooding again?" Ginny inquired with a scowl. "Listen, stop worrying about those two, they'll come around eventually. You just have to give them more time."

"I doubt that time will make a difference."

"Well, I don't. They need to cool off for a while before they'll be able to see your side of the story. Neither of them has ever been in a situation where they were totally constrained. You were only doing what you had to do in order to stay sane." Ginny's voice dropped to a soft, thoughtful pitch. "I know what that's like. I still remember what it

felt like to be controlled and manipulated by Riddle. Sometimes... sometimes I thought I was going crazy, like I had no control over my own life." She sighed. "Anyway, once they've had time to really think about things, they'll understand your point of view a little better."

"I hope you're right," Hermione replied morosely. She was clearly unconvinced.

"You know, you really do need to sort things out with Ron. He's hurting as much as you over this."

"I'd give it a try if he would only stay in the same room with me," she lamented, shaking her head sadly. "I can't *make* them see things my way and I can't pretend that things haven't changed between us. There's just no point in staying here any longer. I should go back to my parents' house."

Ginny shook her head in disagreement, but didn't speak. They had been over this ground several times before. The two young witches subsided into silence, each engrossed in their own thoughts.

Hermione knew that Ginny was right. She owed it to Ron. He was her friend. He *had* been her boyfriend, albeit for only a short time. She needed to make another effort to get through to him.

But Ron beat her to it. That evening a tentative knock sounded on their bedroom door.

"Come in," Ginny called.

Ron entered a moment later. "Hi, I... um, was wondering if we could talk," he muttered uncertainly, eyes locked onto Hermione's face. "We could go for a walk. I mean, if you want to that is?"

Ginny was on her feet, already heading for the door. As she passed her brother, she touched his arm briefly. "I'll go, Ron. You two stay here and talk."

Ron nodded and watched the door swing shut behind his sister. "Hermione, there's so many things I want to say to you, but I'm not sure where to start."

"Just begin with the most important one," she replied gravely. He nodded but still didn't speak. After a minute the silence became strained and Hermione spoke lightly to break the tension. "Frankly, Ron, I'm just glad you're talking rather than yelling."

Ron's lips quirked slightly. "I did that already out in the Quidditch paddock the day before yesterday. I must have scared off every bird within two miles!" She smiled faintly at his joke. "Anyway," he said more seriously, "I don't fancy having you tell me off watching Harry get it was enough for me. You're still scary sometimes."

He cleared his throat. "I... I've thought a lot about the things you said the other day. About how difficult it was for you, and how isolated you were that whole time. It never occurred to me that... What I mean is, I only thought about how I felt when you were gone not about how you must have felt. When we first saw those memories you seemed almost content the same old Hermione happily studying away the time. It never occurred to us that you were under a lot of stress."

"Ron, the memories you saw were very carefully selected a tiny fraction of what I went through, with none of the unpleasant events like the day I was captured, tortured and interrogated or even the long periods of depression and loneliness I went through. Voldemort was very cunning; he wanted Harry and anyone else who saw them to believe I was a tr..." She broke off, unable to actually say the hated word. "He was trying to manipulate you all."

"I know," he answered quickly. "Moody and Remus spotted that pretty quickly. But in the last set of memories you seemed to be... changed. The only thing that made sense to us was that you were being magically controlled," he ended lamely.

"I was changed," she said softly, but with certainty. "No one could go through eight months of captivity without being affected by their experiences. But the core of who I am my essential self they couldn't touch that, Ron. I'm still your friend and I'm still Harry's friend."

"Just a friend?" he asked in wistfully. "We... we were more than that last summer."

She looked down, confused and uncertain how she should answer.

He seemed to take her silence as encouragement, gazing entreatingly at her. "What happened while you were a prisoner doesn't matter to me. I don't care about your involvement with..." He broke off as he searched for the right words. "None of that changes how I feel about you. I still... I still care about you. I want you as much as I did before all this happened." He stepped close, tentatively lifting his hands to caress her upper arms.

"Ron, don't," she pleaded, removing his hands gently and stepping back a pace.

"Why not?" he inquired in a confused voice. "Is this... are you saying that you don't feel the same anymore about us?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all," Hermione clarified. Meeting his eyes, she saw a sudden gleam of hope rekindle there. That was one of the things she had always found attractive about Ron: his persistent optimism. Her heart contracted painfully, knowing that what she had to say next would dampen it. She sighed. "What I'm trying to say is that a great many things have happened over the past eight months. I have to come to terms with everything with the things I have done as well as with the changes in my life." She forbore to tell him that she also felt she had to sort out her feelings about Severus. Ron didn't need to hear that; that would be akin to pouring salt onto his already wounded feelings. "I can't just jump back into a relationship with you as if nothing has happened. I need time, Ron. And space."

A crestfallen look dominated his features. He looked down. "Is there any hope for us? I mean, is there any point in waiting for you, Hermione?"

"I don't know yet," she replied honestly. "But I do know that all the things I liked about you, all the reasons I was attracted to you while we were at school, are still there. But I have a lot of adjustments to make. I need to get used to freedom again and think about the future. You and Harry have known that you wanted to become Aurors since our fourth year. But I've never been able to narrow down my choices. Now that we all have a future to look forward to, I have to think seriously about mine."

Ron nodded resignedly. "When you decide what you want, you know where to find me." He paused and swallowed hard. "Until then, we're friends."

"You have visitors, Snape!" the evening guard called, rousing the somnolent prisoner from his uncomfortable bed.

Snape sat up slowly, trying to focus on the portion of the hall visible through the bars of his cell. Only the guard was in his line of sight, but he heard footsteps approaching; several different footfalls could be distinguished. Wearily, he rose from the bed. *Might as well meet them at the door*, he decided sarcastically. Briefly, he wondered what 'interesting news' these newcomers would have for him. It seemed that the main form of entertainment for the Ministry guards was taunting him with stories about recently captured or killed Death Eaters. Four people rounded the corner, entering the corridor outside his cell. The guard returned to his chair by the main doors, giving the group a cheery wave as he passed. Snape's eyes were drawn instantly to the shock of pink hair that unmistakably proclaimed the presence of Nymphadora Tonks. He recognized another of the quartet as well. *Dawlish*, his brain registered. What's that arrogant prig doing here? He didn't know the other two men, but he supposed that they were Aurors, like their companions. "Well, well," he sneered as they approached. "To what do I owe this dubious pleasure?"

Dawlish bared his teeth in a travesty of a smile. "That's right, Snape. You'd better do your talking now, while you still can. Because once your trial is over, you won't remember how."

What the devil is he blabbing about? Snape wondered as he attempted to scowl fiercely to cover his uncertainty.

Dawlish, however, seemed to pick up on it anyway and continued to bait his victim. "Haven't you heard about the new bylaw, Law Enforcement Decree #67? It was passed last week. Since the Ministry has irrevocably ended all alliances with the Dementors, we no longer have the option of administering the Dementor's Kiss. Fortunately, the Charms Specialists in the Department of Mysteries have come up with a novel way to deal with irredeemable convicts like Death Eaters. It's called the *Universitas Oblivata*. Your friend Macnair was the first to experience it," he informed Snape with a malicious smile. "Now, he wears a nappy and cries when he's hungry. His mind is a clean slate, just waiting to be re-taught what we deem appropriate. He's even been given a new identity. Bye-bye, Walden Macnair," he finished airily.

Total memory erasure, even language and basic coordination! Snape realized with a shock. He curled his lip, attempting to glare disdainfully at Dawlish's gloating face, but his horror at the description of the new punishment was, apparently, discernable to his tormenter.

"Yes, Snape," the man continued relentlessly, "your turn is coming soon. Total oblivion without the useless body to deal with afterward. I think you'll make a fine janitor once you've been retrained."

"That's enough, Dawlish!" Tonks finally interrupted.

"Don't tell me you have some sympathy for scum like this," Dawlish challenged Tonks incredulously.

"As a matter of fact, I don't," she answered curtly. "But it's not our job to sentence him; the Wizengamot will decide what to do with him. We're just here to deliver a message. And I, for one, would like to get it over and done with. So shut it and let me do what we came for!"

"You can't talk to me that way, Tonks. I have seniority over you."

"Piss off, Dawlish! You don't have the authority to boss me around!"

"Fine! Do it without me then!" he answered. Angrily, the man spun on his heel and stomped back down the corridor.

"Julian!" Tonks called over her shoulder. "Would you come here?"

The portly guard reappeared, huffing slightly. "What's up, cousin?"

"Regulations state that we need four people present during physical interactions with prisoners. I need you to take Dawlish's place; he had to leave."

Julian drew his wand and stepped up next to her two silent companions.

Tonks regarded Snape's stony visage. He had regained his self control and his face betrayed no trace of emotion not even anger. "Snape, I've brought something for you." Reaching into her cloak pocket, she fished out a cloth pouch and extended it to him.

As he took it, he heard a faint clinking noise. *Potion vials?* he speculated silently. Opening the pouch, he removed a small glass bottle. It did not contain a potion. The ethereal silver-white memories swirled rapidly inside the clear vial, seemingly of their own volition. There were three vials. He looked up questioningly at Tonks.

"Those are from Hermione Granger," she informed him. "She petitioned every office right up to the Minister of Magic, but was denied permission to visit you. Even her status as one of the Indestructible Trio wasn't sufficient to get her past the Ministry regulations. No non-Ministry personnel are permitted contact with captured Death Eaters."

The Indestructible Trio, are they now? Snape heard the implied capital letters and knew instantly that it was, ironically, his own doing. The Impenetrable Potion had made them, at least temporarily, indestructible. "Why are you giving these to me?" he asked finally.

"Hermione said they were yours. She begged me to return them to you and made me promise to help you reintegrate them."

He bent his head, allowing his hair to swing in front of his face like a curtain, partially concealing his features. *So, she knows everything,* he surmised. *Why did she send them back now? If Dawlish is correct and I am to have my memories erased, what is the point of having these copies reintegrated into my memory? Perhaps,* he speculated, *she wishes to be rid of all evidence of our liaison.*

"Well, Snape? Are you going to cooperate?"

Why not? They're mine, after all. Lifting his head, he nodded wearily.

The pink-haired witch drew her own wand and stepped closer. "Give me the pouch and put your hands up here next to the crossbars," she ordered. He did as directed and watched dispassionately as she bound his wrists to the metal bars of his cell door. When he was secured, she opened the first vial and drew its contents out with the tip of her wand. Carefully, she raised the delicate silver string to his temple where it vibrated lightly against his skin. "*Memoria concerus,*" she chanted softly.

The thread slipped into his mind, nestling into the grooves and spaces between his thoughts as the individual memories sought to mesh with their original imprints. As each one found its match he relived the events in a rapid burst of recollection like a Muggle video on fast forward. He blinked his eyes at the odd but not unpleasant feeling of reintegration.

"Ready for the next?" Tonks asked.

He gave a sharp nod and stood perfectly still as she repeated the process. When he had assimilated the second set of memories, he felt a wave of dizziness pass through him. He swayed slightly on his feet and grasped the bars awkwardly for balance. Several seconds later, the dizziness receded and he took a shaky breath to reclaim his equilibrium.

Tonks watched impassively until he met her eyes once more. "All right, Snape?"

"Yes. Just finish it!" he snapped.

She pursed her lips in annoyance but said nothing, merely drawing forth the contents of the final vial and softly repeating the incantation.

As the string eased into his consciousness and split apart, Snape closed his eyes. *Perhaps a lack of sight will reduce the vertigo,* he thought fleetingly as he waited for each portion to find its way 'home.' In a flash, he saw again the day he had taught Hermione how to make the Blood Replenishing Potion. Next, he watched his own collapse the morning after the raid on Azkaban. With his eyes shut, the reintegration seemed smoother, slower. *One more to go,* he thought. He repressed a smile as he felt the copy enmesh with its original, allowing him to relive and appreciate the experience of making love with Hermione. When it was finished, he opened his eyes and drew a breath, intending to demand that Tonks release his bonds. Instead, the odd feeling returned as, unexpectedly, another memory settled into place as it attempted to make a home inside his mind. It entwined itself around one of his own recollections of this past Christmas Day, but Snape knew instantly that this memory was not his own. In a whirlwind, he watched events unfold from Hermione's perspective. He felt her relief as they entered the woods, her comfort as they walked arm in arm and he knew, via her own remembered emotions, that even through her hunger and exhaustion, he had brought her a few hours of happiness in the midst of her captivity. It was his last thought before he blacked out.

Snape opened his eyes to find himself stretched out on the hard bed of his cell. He was alone. For a moment he wondered if the Aurors' visit and the return of his

memories had been a dream. The pounding in his head was real enough. He brought his fingers up to massage his temples and felt his left wrist protest in pain. Examining it revealed a red weal where the skin had been abraded. At that point, he remembered the vertigo overwhelming his senses and realized that he had lost consciousness while still tied to the bars of his cell. *It's a rope burn*, he concluded. He must have wrenched his wrist when he fell. *Well, I suppose that means it was not a dream.*

He closed his eyes to ease the ache in his skull and began to analyze the situation. He had a memory in his head that wasn't his own. He was still uncertain how it was possible to assimilate another person's memory, but that was unimportant since, obviously, he had done it. Hermione had given him one of her own memories of their time together. She had deliberately attached it to one of the existing strings, making it undetectable until it was released inside his mind. It was, therefore, a message intended solely for him. *Clever girl*, he thought with a smile. *She couldn't get in to see me, so she sent that instead. But what, exactly, does it mean?* he wondered. That day, she had been extremely depressed because she was separated from her family and friends. In an effort to console her, he had taken her to the pine wood to walk, breathe the scented air and refresh her tired mind. It was a memory of hope, of renewal.

A sudden burst of optimism overtook him, the first truly positive feeling he'd had since his capture. *She sent the message to offer me comfort; she wants me to not lose hope. Perhaps, he thought longingly, she is planning something that will help me.*

"You two are really going?" Poised in the doorway between the parlor and kitchen, Harry was frozen, as if in disbelief. The Burrow was quiet, as all the others had gone to work or were out of the house doing errands.

"I won't let her put up with that circus alone, Harry. Whatever happened before is immaterial. She was there with the two of us at the Ministry! We all faced Voldemort together. She and I don't have to prove anything to you; you already know where our loyalties lie." He turned to Hermione, giving her a gentle push toward the fireplace. "Go on through, I'll be right behind you."

As Ron and Hermione exited the Floo into the Ministry, a wave of noise washed over them. They threaded their way through the mass of onlookers and reporters in the Atrium. The shouted questions from the reporters could barely be heard over the cheering and tumult of the crowd. Flashes of light from numerous cameras repeatedly obliterated the scene with white light, leaving dark after-images dancing in front of their eyes. In short, it was a mob scene. They ignored it all, making their way as straight as possible toward the lifts. Ministry security guards ushered them inside, neatly preventing any of the jostling reporters from entering. The doors shut, abruptly blocking out the din.

"Whew!" Hermione sighed.

"It will probably be worse by the time we leave, you know," Ron warned her.

"How comforting," Hermione said sarcastically under her breath. She sighed again. "Ron?"

"Mmm?"

"I really appreciate that you're helping me with this. I'm glad you can put justice ahead of your own feelings."

"I'm not doing this for the sake of justice, Hermione. I'm doing it for you."

He met her eyes, and in that moment she felt the blue fire of his gaze pierce her composure. "Oh, Ron," she said regretfully. She knew he was hurting. They all were. But somehow, he was able to rise above the pain and be her friend now when she needed it so desperately. Stepping close, she gave him a hug. "Thank you for being here," she whispered, truly grateful for his support.

The clang of the elevator warned them of the imminent opening of the doors and they stepped apart.

"Ready?" Ron asked as the doors retracted, revealing a long hall. Hermione merely nodded. They paced the length of the corridor, both uneasily aware of the plain black door drawing ever nearer. The memories of their desperation and terror in the Department of Mysteries were still fresh and raw. Just before they reached the door, Ron turned sharply to the left, passing through an opening that led down a flight of stairs. Hermione followed.

They emerged from the stairwell into a dungeon-like corridor filled with murmuring witches and wizards, many wearing the stately robes of the Wizengamot. The two young people took up a place by the wall, waiting silently for the courtroom to be opened. Hermione was lost in thought, staring absently at her shoes, when an unexpected voice startled her from her reflections.

"I still can't believe that you're going to defend that bastard!" An angry Harry Potter stood directly in front of her, green eyes alight with emotion.

"Harry, we've been through this already," Hermione reasoned half-heartedly. She was tired of going over the same ground with him. It was clear that they would never see eye-to-eye about Snape. "You know that everything is not as clear-cut as it seems."

"I know that he's nothing more than a murderer just like his 'Master'. I hope they sentence him to the *Universitas Oblivata*! I only wish the Dementors were still around to give him a Kiss!"

Hermione gasped. "You don't mean that, Harry! Convincing the Ministry to dissociate itself from those horrors is one of the best things you've ever done. No one deserves such a fate. Anyway, I'm not going to defend him just clarify some issues for the Wizengamot."

"No matter what extenuating circumstances you think there are, Hermione, he is the root cause of a lot of pain and death, especially in my life," Harry proclaimed. "He doesn't deserve anyone's understanding, much less forgiveness!"

At that, her patience snapped. "So," she retorted, "because you hate him, you're going to choose to be just like him?"

"I am nothing like Snape!" Harry spat.

"Aren't you?" she replied, giving him a hard look. "Severus Snape has spent the last twenty years holding a grudge against your father. He was blinded by his prejudice he refused to see that you are very different from his old enemy. Isn't that exactly where you are headed, Harry? Straight for a permanent, unshakable grudge?"

Harry stared, apparently at a total loss for words.

The ponderous wooden door to the courtroom opened at last and the milling groups of wizards and witches began moving toward it.

"Think hard, Harry," Hermione urged. "Do you really want to trap your emotions in that kind of suspended animation for the next twenty years or so?" Taking Ron's arm, she followed the last of the elaborately-robed wizards into the courtroom, leaving the Chosen One to stare blankly at their retreating backs.

Two burly wizards escorted Snape into the room and seated him in the defendant's chair. Immediately, magical chains encircled his wrists and ankles, binding him securely to the chair.

The Ministry's prosecutor stood. It was the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. "Silence, please! This trial is now called to order. I, Robert Ogden, will be directing the proceedings during this trial. All comments, questions and requests should be directed to me." He gestured to the man seated to his left. "Minister Scrimgeour

will act as my liaison to the Ministry regarding its current executive policies. The Wizengamot, by majority vote, will render judgment in this case. My administrative assistant, Mr. Percy Weasley, will act as court scribe." He indicated Percy who was seated several seats to the right at the end of the central dais.

At that moment, the courtroom door opened. Harry Potter entered silently, nodded to Ogden in apology, and then deliberately made his way along the second row toward his two friends. He took a seat next to Ron.

"The defendant, Severus Snape, is formally accused of the murder of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore by use of the Unforgivable Curse *Avada Kedavra*. Further, he is accused of being a long-time follower of He Who Must Not Be Named a Death Eater. The second charge has already been substantiated by several eye witness accounts as well as the presence, on the defendant's arm, of the Dark Mark. Therefore, these proceedings will focus on the first charge: the murder of Albus Dumbledore.

He turned to address the members of the Wizengamot. "You have all had ample opportunity to read the full statement given by Mr. Harry Potter shortly after the former Headmaster's death." A murmur of agreement was audible and Ogden continued. "Mr. Potter was an eyewitness to the events that took place on the night Albus Dumbledore died. In his statement, he clearly indicates that Severus Snape, then the Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts, performed the Killing Curse on the former Headmaster. Are there any members of the Wizengamot who wish to further question Mr. Potter about the events he witnessed?"

Much head shaking was seen, but not a hand or voice was raised in response.

"Very well," Ogden acknowledged. "I direct the attention of the Wizengamot to the parchments handed out shortly before these proceedings convened. A statement was recently obtained from another witness to the death of Albus Dumbledore: captured Death Eater, Alecko Carrow. Although the testimony of Ms. Carrow is deemed biased due to her allegiance to He Who Must Not Be Named, in essentials, it agrees with Mr. Potter's. It confirms the fact that Severus Snape used the Killing Curse on Albus Dumbledore."

A rumble of surprise traveled around the courtroom. Snape himself maintained an expressionless facade, but Hermione thought she could detect a despondent slump to his shoulders.

"Mr. Snape, do you have any statement to make or any evidence to present that refutes the eyewitness accounts to the death of Albus Dumbledore?"

"No," Snape replied stoically.

"Very well," Ogden responded. "Elders of the Wizengamot, the evidence is before you. I ask that you vote now to reach a verdict in..."

"Mr. Ogden," a voice interrupted. "I beg the court's indulgence, but I have testimony to present for the Wizengamot's consideration before a judgment is made."

Ogden swung around in surprise to see Hermione Granger on her feet, regarding him with a polite expression. *Ah, yes, he recalled, she was Snape's prisoner for months of course she wants to testify against him.* "Miss Granger, it is needless for you to be subjected to such unpleasantness. We have sufficient evidence already with regard to Mr. Snape's activities as a Death Eater. Your personal testimony against him is unnecessary."

"You mistake me, sir," she responded civilly. "I wish to testify in Severus Snape's favor."

A murmur of surprise swept over the courtroom. "Do you have evidence to suggest that the defendant is innocent of the charges against him?" Ogden asked doubtfully.

"No, sir."

"Then what the blazes are you about, girl?" Minister Scrimgeour exclaimed loudly. At that, Ron Weasley stood, anger plain on his freckled face. Rather than speaking, he placed a hand on his friend's shoulder an obvious gesture of support.

Ogden glared at the Minister, clearly annoyed. "Rufus, I would appreciate it if you would control your outbursts." He resumed his questioning of the young woman. "Miss Granger, would you please specify what type of testimony you intend to present?"

"I would like to enter a plea for clemency on behalf of the defendant," Hermione stated clearly. "There are extenuating circumstances relevant to this case which the court is not aware of."

Ogden paused to consider the dynamics before him. Granger was still sporting that polite mask, while Weasley had his eyes narrowed in a calculating fashion. Legally, they had no power within this courtroom; however, they were two thirds of the Indestructible Trio. They had done what many witches and wizards thrice their age would not have dared to do: faced He Who Must Not Be Named. *Perhaps, he speculated, they do have relevant information for the Wizengamot. After all, mysteries seem to pop up around Potter and his friends like toadstools after a rainstorm.* He inclined his head graciously to the young woman. "You may enter your plea," he granted.

Hermione smiled in relief. "Thank you. My plea for clemency will be based on three criteria. Firstly, that Severus Snape did not kill Albus Dumbledore in cold blood, but only acted to prevent his own death. Secondly, that over the course of my capture and captivity he repeatedly saved my life, as well as the lives of three of my friends: Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter and Remus Lupin. And thirdly, that he repudiated his allegiance to Voldemort before his downfall."

Many in the courtroom winced at her open pronouncement of the Dark Lord's name, but Hermione did not look the least bit repentant as she continued. "In order to preclude any doubts about the veracity of my testimony, I ask that Veritaserum be administered to me. I will then answer questions posed by Ronald Weasley."

Ogden didn't like it. He suspected that he'd been set up quite deftly by this young woman. But as he had already agreed to hear her plea, he forbore to raise any objections. He looked to the right end of the dais. "Weasley, fetch the serum and give the proper dose to Miss Granger," he directed. With a wave of his wand, he conjured a chair several feet to the right of the defendant's.

Without prompting, Hermione walked quickly to the seat and awaited Percy, who dispensed the truth serum carefully, making sure that precisely three drops fell onto her tongue. Within seconds, Hermione's face went slack as the drug took effect.

"You may proceed with your questions," Ogden directed Ron.

Ron cleared his throat and briefly consulted the parchment he held. "Please state your full name fo..."

"...Mr. Weasley, that's not necessary," Ogden interrupted. "The court is satisfied that the identity of the witness is indeed Hermione Granger."

"Oh... um, okay," he stammered, as his ears turned red. He cleared his throat again. "Miss Granger, you stated that Severus Snape did not kill the former Headmaster in cold blood. Why then, did he do it?"

"Because he had taken an Unbreakable Vow to protect and assist Draco Malfoy."

Ron frowned at her short answer, and then realized that while under the influence of the Veritaserum, she would only answer the exact question he had asked. "Please explain what that has to do with Professor Dumbledore's death."

"Draco Malfoy was ordered by Voldemort to kill the former Headmaster. If he failed, he would be killed himself. His mother was distressed, fearing for her son's life. She pleaded with Severus Snape to help her son. He took an Unbreakable Vow, both to help the Malfoys and to cover his activities as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix. The vow specified that he was to protect Draco from harm, to help him in his task if necessary and if Draco failed in his task, to step in and complete it." Hermione recited the story in a flat, matter of fact voice, barely pausing for breath. "After many months of effort," she continued, "Draco succeeded in bringing Death Eaters into Hogwarts. However, he couldn't bring himself to kill Professor Dumbledore. When Snape arrived he realized that he would have to complete Draco's task, or die from breaking the

vow. He knew that if he died, both Draco and Dumbledore, who was disarmed, would then be killed by the other three Death Eaters that were present. So he made the choice to save his own and Draco's life. He killed Professor Dumbledore."

Ogden was frowning in concentration. "Did Albus Dumbledore know about the Unbreakable Vow?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Continue, Mr. Weasley."

"You claimed that Snape saved your life and the lives of your friends," Ron read from the parchment. "Describe these instances."

"The first time was the day I was captured. I was being tortured by Dolohov, Pritchard and Caldwell. I struggled, and in the process injured Caldwell. Pritchard became angry and started to cast a Severing Hex at me, but Snape appeared then and blocked the hex. Several weeks later, Caldwell tried to kill me. The knife he threw just missed and Snape hexed him to prevent another attack. The third time, Narcissa Malfoy tried to kill me with a Slicing Hex, but missed. Quickly, Snape disarmed her so she couldn't try again. The fourth time he saved my life was the night I was rescued, just before Voldemort was destroyed. He also saved Harry, Ron and Remus at the same time." She paused as if recollecting the event, then continued in the same soft monotone. "Severus Snape and I were at the Riddle house waiting for a chance to flee when my friends arrived. During the fight, Remus was Stunned and then Voldemort's familiar, a huge, killer snake showed up. Harry and Ron tried to repel it, but it was too strong. Finally, Severus killed it."

"Miss Granger, how do you know that the snake was a killer?" Ogden inquired.

"It was the same snake that attacked and nearly killed Arthur Weasley two years ago," she responded automatically.

"I see. And do you agree, Mr. Weasley, that the defendant saved your life that night?"

"Yes, sir," he answered with a sidelong look at Harry. "May I continue?"

Ogden nodded his permission.

Ron consulted his parchment nervously. "Hermione, you said earlier that Snape had repudiated his allegiance to Voldemort. When did this occur?"

"Right after he killed the snake."

"I find this all too convenient," Scrimgeour commented suspiciously. "Miss Granger, what exactly did the defendant say when he 'repudiated' You-Know-Who?"

"After Snape had killed Voldemort's familiar, Harry asked him outright whose side he was on. He answered that he was not entirely on anyone's side, because no one was entirely on his side."

"I see," Scrimgeour said with satisfaction. "An eleventh hour change of heart and a partial one at that is hardly enough cause to pardon a murderer."

"Minister, you are out of order!" Ogden retorted sharply. A murmur of agreement came from the council members behind him. "The interpretation of testimony and most especially its application to the plea entered is the responsibility of the Wizengamot alone! I ask that you refrain from similar comments. Do you have more questions, Mr. Weasley?"

"Um... yes, a couple."

"Continue, then."

Ron cleared his throat, but for once did not glance at his parchment. "Hermione, you said earlier that Snape was planning to flee and take you with him. Why did you agree to go?"

"The alternative was death. Voldemort would have used me to trap Harry and then he would have killed me. And..." Hermione stammered as she tried to modulate her answer in spite of the drug. "...and because I knew that Severus would protect me because he wanted me to stay with him."

"And did you want to stay with him?" Ron asked.

"Part of me did, yes."

"Mr. Weasley," Ogden interjected. "Is this really relevant to..."

"Do you love him?" Ron blurted anxiously.

"That... depends," Hermione answered slowly into the shocked silence.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked. He seemed confused at not getting a direct answer.

"Well, if you believe that love is based on trust, then I suppose the answer is yes. But if you think that love consists of unquestioning loyalty, then the answer is no. I don't think I am capable of unconditional loyalty."

"Mr. Weasley," Ogden said finally recovering his voice. "These questions are clearly personal in..."

"Sorry, sir," Ron apologized. "I have no more questions." He sat down, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Ogden scowled at the young man he disliked being interrupted, especially repeatedly. "Very well. Give Miss Granger the antidote," he directed Percy.

Snape watched Percy Weasley comply with his orders, but his mind was not focused on what he was seeing. In fact, his prior surprise over Hermione's clemency plea and testimony in his favor had been totally superseded by her final declaration. *She as good as admitted that she loves me under Veritaserum and in front of the entire courtroom*, he thought wonderingly. When he had entered the courtroom, he was certain that he would be rapidly convicted and sentenced, but now she'd planted a seed of hope. It was time to speak up for himself.

Author's Notes:

1. The exact nature of Pensieve memories has never been defined by J. K. Rowling. However, from clues in the text, I think it's clear that they must be copies or reproductions in some sense. Both Dumbledore and Snape quite obviously remembered the events that they deposited in the Pensieve basin after the memories were 'removed' from their minds. (In particular, the scene where Dumbledore shows Harry the prophecy [OotP] comes to mind.) However, Snape puts his 'worst memories' into the Pensieve so that Harry cannot see them during their Occlumency lessons. From this, it can be deduced that it is not possible for another person to access the original memory imprint via Legilimency once the Pensieve version has been drawn out. Still, Snape clearly knew what was in that Pensieve, hence his rage at finding Harry snooping. Rowling's lack of clarity is a little frustrating, but at least it allows fan fiction writers license to use her concept as best suits our needs!

2. Concero = connect/join; memoria = memory

Truth and Consequences - Part 2

Chapter 25 of 25

Written post Half-Blood Prince, this is an alternate book 7 story with action, adventure, romance, and featuring a truly ambiguous Snape. Story follows several plot strings concurrently but is mostly centered on the Granger-Snape dynamic . Rec'ed by Know It Alls!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Potterverse, it belongs to JK Rowling. I'm not making any money from this.

Chapter 25: Truth and Consequences - Part 2

As Hermione returned to her place in the second row, Snape spoke curtly, "Mr. Ogden, I would like to give testimony on my own behalf."

"You have the right to speak in your own defense, Mr. Snape, but be warned that your testimony can be used against you, as well as for you," Ogden said forbiddingly.

"I am aware of that," Snape answered. "My object is to provide additional details to expand and substantiate Hermione Granger's testimony."

"Are you willing to testify under Veritaserum?" Minister Scrimgeour asked.

Snape's lip curled in distaste, but he answered, "I am."

Once again, Ogden nodded to Percy, and the exacting young man dispensed the powerful truth serum. Snape's face relaxed slightly as the drug took effect, but the harsh lines of his visage did not soften he still looked the part of the forbidding Death Eater. Ogden began the interrogation. "Severus Snape, did Miss Granger accurately report the terms of the Unbreakable Vow that you made to Narcissa Malfoy?"

"Yes."

"Exactly why did you make that vow?"

"I was backed into a corner caught between my long friendship with the Malfoys and my need to appear to be a genuine supporter of the Dark Lord. Narcissa's sister, Bellatrix Lestrange, was present and accused me of duplicity. The vow was instrumental in dispelling her doubts; it secured my position as a double-agent while protecting a sixteen-year-old student."

Scrimgeour sat forward. "Did you tell Albus Dumbledore about the vow?" he asked.

"I did."

"And how did he react to the news that you had vowed to kill him?" Scrimgeour persisted.

"He did not believe that situation would ever arise," Snape replied. "In fact, he approved my decision to make the vow, as it effectively solidified my position as his spy. Toward the end of the school year, he informed me that he viewed himself as expendable."

"Are you saying that Albus Dumbledore wanted you to kill him?" Ogden asked incredulously.

"Don't be absurd! Of course he didn't want me to kill him! He did, however, grossly miscalculate with regard to Draco Malfoy's tenacity and ability to complete his task. Dumbledore firmly believed that Draco would never progress to making a serious attempt on his life and that, therefore, the vow I made would never be enforced. He was wrong. Draco succeeded in bringing Death Eaters into the castle and confronted the Headmaster on the Astronomy Tower. He was unable to cast the Killing Curse, and I, in turn, was forced to cast it or die."

During this speech, Harry had been watching his ring, waiting anxiously for the twinge that would alert him to an unintentional lie. The Veritaserum insured that Snape would tell the truth as he believed it, but the ring could detect whether the speaker's beliefs were actually true. He frowned. According to the ring, Snape was correct: Dumbledore had known the nature of the Unbreakable Vow and its possible outcomes and had discounted the danger to himself.

"The testimony of eyewitnesses stated that you were the last to arrive atop the Astronomy Tower that night. If you were loyal to Albus Dumbledore, why did you not fight the Death Eaters who were present?" Scrimgeour asked.

"There were three of them, one a werewolf; the odds were stacked against me in a fight. If I fought and was killed, both the Headmaster and Draco would have been killed immediately by the others. If I died from breaking the terms of the vow, the same thing would result. The Headmaster was a dead man no matter what choice I made."

"Let us move on to the second point in Miss Granger's clemency plea," Ogden suggested. Scrimgeour gave a grudging nod. "Mr. Snape, tell the court why you initially saved Hermione Granger's life and repeatedly protected her during her captivity."

"At first, I was interested in obtaining useful information from her to gain advantage with the Dark Lord. I suggested a plan that would keep her alive and promote my own interests at the same time. However, after only a few weeks as her guardian, I found myself wanting to protect her for her own sake as I had protected Draco Malfoy and numerous other students over the years. Eventually, I developed an attachment to her, and I found my desire to protect her was quite intense."

"Why did you kill the snake He Who Must Not Be Named's familiar?"

"I had already decided to leave the Dark Lord's service. I planned to take Hermione and escape from everything: the Dark Lord, the Ministry, the Order of the Phoenix and her friends. If I allowed the snake to kill Potter, then the Dark Lord would take over the wizarding world. If the Dark Lord was defeated by Potter, it would only be to my advantage. So I killed the snake to save Potter's life."

"You calculating, self-centered bastard," Scrimgeour muttered audibly.

"Rufus!" Ogden warned.

"No, Rob, I won't keep silent! Every so called 'good thing' he did was for his own benefit! We haven't heard a single selfless act that mitigates his crimes!"

"Minister!" Ogden objected. "You were warned already about making judgments within this courtroom. If you continue to usurp the prerogative of the Wizengamot, I will have to ask you to leave the courtroom!"

Scrimgeour subsided with bad grace, staring sourly at his hands which were folded on the desktop before him.

The courtroom door opened, and a bailiff entered, escorting a gangly young man into the chamber.

"Stan Shunpike?" Harry murmured wonderingly.

"This man claims to have evidence relevant to the case, sir," the bailiff declared.

"Is that so?" Ogden queried, looking questioningly at Shunpike.

"Yes, sir. I brought this for you," Shunpike confirmed. Appearing nervous, he walked to the center of the room and handed Ogden a piece of parchment.

Ogden scanned it rapidly, scowling all the while, then shot a glance at the figure before him. "Take a seat, young man," he directed gruffly, but not unkindly. Shunpike scuttled back the way he had come, seating himself at the end of the bench nearest to the door.

Ogden shifted slightly in his seat to address the gallery where the members of the Wizengamot sat. "For the record, I have a signed affidavit obtained under Veritaserum from one Stanley Shunpike, former conductor on the Knight Bus. It has been irrefutably established that Mr. Shunpike has never had any confirmed connection to He Who Must Not Be Named; he has been cleared of all suspicion of being a Death Eater. This affidavit states that on the night of the 31st of December 1997, he was freed from Azkaban Prison by the defendant, Severus Snape. Mr. Snape, did you, in fact, Apparate Mr. Shunpike away from Azkaban Island?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because the only thing he was guilty of was being a pathetic Ministry scapegoat." Even in a Veritaserum-induced daze, the sarcasm was apparent in Snape's voice. "He was never one of the Dark Lord's followers; he didn't deserve to be imprisoned in that place."

"You freed him out of a sense of justice?" Ogden asked in amazement.

"No. When I recognized him, pity was uppermost in my mind."

The entire courtroom was rendered silent for several seconds after Snape's declaration. Regaining his composure, Ogden cleared his throat. "Very well. We shall consider the ramifications of this new evidence along with the plea for clemency that has been entered before we rule on Mr. Snape's sentence. Mr. Weasley, give the defendant the antidote, if you please," he directed.

As Percy hurried to follow Ogden's order, the wizards and witches of the Wizengamot gathered into small groups, muttering among themselves. Some looked angry, some thoughtful, and yet others seemed confused. Most of the spectators in the courtroom watched the proceedings, cocking their heads and straining their ears in an effort to catch bits and pieces of the whispered consultations taking place at the center of the room.

But one person seemed uninterested in the discussions. Harry, wearing a look of intense concentration, was shifting his gaze between Hermione, Shunpike and Snape repeatedly, as if he was trying to make sense of everything he had heard. After a few minutes, he shook his head and lowered his eyes to stare sullenly at his ring.

The minutes dragged on as the quiet discussions continued. Finally, at the request of two elderly witches, Minister Scrimgeour drew his wand and cast a Dome of Silence which encompassed the first three rows of the central gallery. Various members of the Wizengamot stood to collectively address their peers. Eventually, a vote was taken, and while it was obvious that a majority voted for the resolution, the onlookers were ignorant of the exact issue that had been resolved.

With a flick of his wand, the Minister abolished the Dome and the assembly returned to their seats. When the room was again quiet, Ogden addressed the defendant. "Severus Snape, it is the decision of the Wizengamot that you are guilty of the murder of Albus Dumbledore by means of the Killing Curse. Furthermore, the physical evidence indicates that you were a follower of He Who Must Not Be Named a Death Eater. For these crimes, the penalty prescribed by Law Enforcement Decree #67 is the application of the *Universitas Oblivata* Charm."

Snape dropped his head forward and closed his eyes in defeat.

"However," Ogden continued, "in consideration of the extenuating circumstances in the death of Albus Dumbledore, and of the testimony we have heard from you, Miss Hermione Granger and Mr. Stanley Shunpike, the Wizengamot has decided to grant partial clemency. The punishment mandated by Law Enforcement Decree #67 is hereby waived and replaced by the previous penalty for performing an Unforgivable Curse on another person: life imprisonment in Azkaban."

Hermione gave a little gasp as she clasped a hand over her mouth in dismay.

Snape's reaction was silent, but no less dissatisfied. *A life term*, he thought bleakly. He would retain his identity, but be confined to that dismal fortress for the rest of his life. *A very small mercy but still more than I expected when I walked into this room.*

Tears tracked silently down Hermione's cheeks, and Harry, who had been watching her intently, came to a sudden decision. With a final glance at Stan Shunpike, as if to fortify his resolve, Harry stood. "I beg the court's indulgence, but I have additional testimony to present that is relevant to this case." He locked eyes with Rob Ogden. "May I address the Wizengamot?"

Ogden hesitated. The ruling had already been made. Procedure dictated that he should deny the request but this was Harry Potter, the man who had vanquished the Dark Lord. The entire wizarding population held him in awe; his suggestions were taken almost as orders by most within the Ministry of Magic. Ogden caved in to the inevitable. "Certainly, Mr. Potter."

Harry directed his words to the rows where the elaborately-robed witches and wizards sat. "Hermione Granger informed you in her testimony that the defendant killed Voldemort's familiar, thereby saving the lives of myself and my companions. But she did not tell you the entire story. The reason for her omission will become clear when you hear what I have to say. I must warn the court that what I am about to relate is beyond shocking, a gross and inhuman use of magic and a perversion of humanity itself. I am speaking of Horcruxes."

A loud gasp, followed by a chorus of whispers broke the rapt silence. Most of the Wizengamot appeared either angry or appalled. Many of the spectators simply looked confused.

In spite of the various reactions, Harry continued his explanation. "Albus Dumbledore had long suspected that the former Tom Riddle, the self-styled Lord Voldemort, was seeking immortality via the creation of Horcruxes. During my sixth year at school, the Headmaster confided these fears to me, showing me numerous pieces of evidence he had gathered over the years that confirmed his original suspicions. Voldemort had created no less than six Horcruxes, magically splitting his soul into seven parts to insure that he would remain on this side of the veil, regardless of the state of his physical body."

"Good Merlin!" an elderly wizard exclaimed from the third row.

Harry recognized him after a moment's thought. "I completely agree, Elder Ogden. The greed and perversion of magic involved in making Horcruxes are despicable enough, but when you consider that their creation requires the taking of a human life, it is obvious that they are an absolute abomination." He grimaced briefly. "In my second year at Hogwarts, I unknowingly destroyed one of these Horcruxes a diary that Riddle had left in the keeping of Lucius Malfoy. Professor Dumbledore destroyed

another during the summer after Voldemort revealed himself at the Ministry. The Headmaster then assigned me the task of finding and destroying the remaining Horcruxes. All of them had to be destroyed before I could confront Voldemort. With the help of several friends I located and eliminated most of the others over the past year. By the start of April, there was only one Horcrux remaining. It was Voldemort's familiar, the giant snake, Nagini."

Harry paused for a moment considering his next words. "As most of you know, Ron Weasley, Remus Lupin and I, guided by Viktor Krum, infiltrated Voldemort's headquarters to rescue our friend, Hermione Granger. At that time, she was being guarded by the defendant, Severus Snape. As Hermione has already related, Remus was Stunned and Ron and me were attacked by the snake during the raid. The snake was impervious to normal offensive spells. Voldemort must have put protective charms on it. Unfortunately, neither Ron nor I knew how to perform the spell that destroys a Horcrux that was Remus' task. When Snape realized we would be overpowered by the snake, he used a Horcrux Deconstruction Spell to kill it." Harry swallowed, attempting to wet his dry throat. "I don't know why he did it, but I do know that if he hadn't been there and he hadn't chosen to help us, none of us would be standing here today. I would be dead and Voldemort would have won." Harry glanced at his two best friends. Ron gave him a solemn nod; Hermione, a tentative, teary smile. "Elders of the Wizengamot, I... I ask you to reconsider your judgment in favor of greater leniency for the defendant." He sank back into his seat.

Instantly, murmured conversations broke out through the courtroom. After several minutes, Griselda Marchbanks requested the Dome of Silence, and the discussions of the Wizengamot were seen but not heard by the onlookers. Twice the members raised their hands to vote, resulting in an exact split. A tall, dark-haired, powerfully built man stood to address the others, gesturing wildly and with obvious passion. He was followed by a witch so old she appeared incapable of standing without aid. Another vote was taken and the resolution, whatever it was, passed by a mere two votes.

The Minister abolished the Dome of Silence and the jurors returned to their seats, some obviously dissatisfied with the proceedings. Rob Ogden stood once again. "After due consideration," he intoned, "it has been decided by a majority vote to reduce the defendant's sentence to a term of twenty years."

"Preposterous!" Scrimgeour spat softly, but quite audibly.

His outburst drew a glare from Ogden. "The Wizengamot has issued its ruling. I thank the members of this august council for their time and effort. These deliberations are hereby closed. The convict, Severus Snape is to be transferred to Azkaban prison immediately to begin his term."

"Sir, if I might make an observation..." a voice interjected deferentially.

Ogden turned to his assistant. "Yes, Weasley?"

Percy gestured toward Snape. "This prisoner is an acknowledged expert on the subject of the Dark Arts in particular, in countering the Dark Arts. I submit that he would be extremely useful to your department in the context of the Prisoner Reform Act of 1996, section ten, sub-section 'C.'"

"Are you serious, Weasley?"

"Quite, sir," Percy persisted. "Look at the facts objectively. One: Over the past year, the department of Magical Law Enforcement has had a seventy-five percent increase in the number of Dark Objects and Spells, which its personnel have had to deal with. Two: Less than forty percent of departmental employees obtained N.E.W.T. certification in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and of those, a vanishingly small number have experience with the evolution and creation of Dark Magic. Three: Over the past year, two of your people were killed and one was permanently incapacitated while interacting with Dark Objects." Percy cleared his throat and cast a significant glance at Snape. "What we need, Mr. Ogden, is an expert on the topic. Someone who is capable of containing and disarming these dangerous artifacts and who can decipher and counter unknown spells."

Ogden looked thoughtful. "I see your point," he conceded, nodding to Percy. "If the proper restrictions were in place and they would have to be very stringent it might be worthwhile."

"I concur, sir. If the prisoner agrees to cooperate, lives could be saved and the risk to department personnel could be significantly decreased. It would be well worth the reduction in time served."

Minister Scrimgeour's eyes widened in sudden realization. "Are you two discussing the...the Societal Service Work Program? Are you both daft? The man's a convicted murderer a Death Eater!"

"But he is undoubtedly in possession of skills that would benefit wizarding society as a whole and the Ministry in particular, Rufus," Ogden countered evenly. "I think it merits consideration."

"No! I absolutely cannot countenance it! As Minister of Magic..."

"...Unfortunately, Minister," Ogden interrupted, "the identification and recruitment of individuals for this program is under the jurisdiction of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. You have no authority to interfere in this decision, just as I have no right to determine Ministry policy."

Scrimgeour leaned close to Ogden. "You're making a big mistake, Rob," he growled in an undertone. "Mark my words, public opinion will roast you alive if you do this!"

Ogden's eyes narrowed in displeasure. "I am not a politician, and I won't be pressured into following the dictates of one! Damn it, Rufus, I've lost three people in the last year, and we have yet to deal with the majority of known Death Eater residences!" He turned abruptly away from the Minister of Magic. "Mr. Snape, the Ministry has initiated a prisoner rehabilitation program that allows convicts to utilize their skills for the benefit of wizarding society. Would you be willing to participate in it?"

"What, exactly, will I get in return?" Snape countered.

"The provisions of the program stipulate a fifty percent reduction of time served."

"This is outrageous!" a quavering feminine voice called. "It's an insult to the memory of Albus Dumbledore!"

"I agree with Madam Marchbanks!" another witch shouted.

"It's shameful!" a deep voice concurred.

Ogden turned to find the elderly Madam Marchbanks on her feet, her face nearly purple with indignation. "The Wizengamot has completed its part in the jurisprudence of this case," he declared in a measured voice. "This is an administrative matter for which you are not required to be present." He pinned the elderly woman with his stare. "You are free to leave, Madam Marchbanks you and any others of the council who do not wish to hear the rest of these proceedings."

With a sniff of disdain, Madam Marchbanks gathered her handbag and stalked out of the courtroom. She was followed by nearly half of the other council members.

Snape sneered at the backs of the departing jurors. *No doubt those are the same ones who voted against clemency in the first place* he concluded.

"Well, Snape," Ogden said, drawing the dark man's attention back to the matter at hand. "Are you interested in participating in the Societal Service Work Program? What my department needs is..."

"I know what you need from me," Snape interrupted. "You and Weasley were not exactly circumspect in your discussion. I agree to work for the Ministry as long as I do not have to be quartered in Azkaban."

"That can be arranged," Ogden said. "There are facilities available here to accommodate long term inmates. In fact, it would be undesirable to have you incarcerated at such a distance from the Ministry." He shifted his attention to Percy. "Weasley, see to the paperwork," he ordered.

"Yes, sir!" Percy responded. He rose immediately and gathered the parchments before him with alacrity. As he marched purposefully from the courtroom, Ogden stood to formally close the proceedings.

"All issues having been satisfactorily resolved, I declare that this trial and sentencing is hereby concluded." Ogden collected his own parchments and quill as the remaining Wizengamot elders, witnesses and spectators began to rise.

Being manacled to the defendant's chair, Snape stayed put, his eyes seeking Hermione as the murmuring crowd began to move past. She looked up, meeting his eyes, and her gentle smile communicated a world of meaning to him. She was happy with the trial's outcome, she wished him well and she still cared for him in spite of everything that had happened. For the first time, Snape had an inkling of what her parting words in the cellar of the Riddle House had meant: she had to be true to herself. His lips quirked upward into the barest of smiles all he could allow himself in front of so many others. She nodded once in acknowledgment and taking Weasley's arm, left the courtroom.

Most of the lingering crowd had made its way to the door before the guards appeared to release him. "Up you get, Snape," one of them urged as they hoisted him up by the arms.

Turning, Snape saw a familiar figure standing directly between himself and the exit. "Potter," he acknowledged with a nod. The single word and action, spoken without a trace of his old arrogance or disdain, was meant to convey to the younger man the recognition of his debt and the gratitude that he was entirely unable to utter aloud. He didn't understand why Potter had spoke on his behalf in the courtroom, but he was thankful that he had.

"Snape," Harry replied, in an identical fashion. Green eyes met black for an instant, acknowledging that the unspoken message had been received and understood. One of Snape's guards tugged on his arm to get him moving again.

"Wait!" Harry demanded, stopping the guard with a hand on his arm. He turned his gaze back to Snape. "I have something to say to you." He took a deep breath. "I don't like you, Snape. I don't think that will ever change. I testified in this courtroom because Hermione showed me that it was the right thing to do, both for the sake of my friend and justice." Harry paused for a moment, giving Snape the opportunity to respond. But Snape remained silent, and his impassive expression made it impossible to tell what he thought of the younger man's declaration. Harry continued, "This war has forced my friends and I to grow up very fast, but in spite of everything I went through, something of maturity was missing for me. Now that it's over, I'm ready to be a man and let go of my schoolboy grudges." Harry looked piercingly into the older man's eyes. "What about you, Snape? Will you take that final step out of adolescence? Will you let go of your schoolboy grudges?"

"If you can do it, Potter, then I can." There was no arrogance, but a touch of challenge had crept into his voice.

Harry suppressed a smile of satisfaction. "So be it," he said with finality and turned on his heel to leave the Ministry.

Severus Snape woke the next morning to his first day as a convicted criminal in the Societal Service Work Program. *Indentured servitude, that's what it is*, he thought derisively. Realistically, he knew that his present circumstances were far better than he had any right to expect. Even the twenty year sentence to Azkaban would have been a mercy in comparison to total memory erasure or a life sentence. And he was more comfortable now. The permanent cell he had been moved to was larger, warmer and better lit than the dungeon-like isolation chamber he'd been in for the past two weeks. In addition, he was now on the same level as the Auror Offices for the convenience of the Aurors who needed his assistance, undoubtedly. The thought of having to work with people like Dawlish, or worse yet, his former Order colleagues, made him grimace in distaste.

He had no illusions about what he was in for. He would be risking his life on a very regular basis, dealing with dangerous Dark artifacts and perilous spells. Many within the Ministry would view him as expendable; the dirtiest of the dirty work would go to him. But he had no intention of sacrificing himself or taking gratuitous risks. Through the efforts of Hermione, two Weasleys, Shunpike and even Potter, he had another chance, and he fully intended to survive his years of Ministry service and make the most of his second (or was it his third?) opportunity.

"Ready for your first day of work, Snape?" a deep voice called.

Giving a sharp nod, he set aside the breakfast tray a guard had brought earlier and stood as two young Aurors entered his cell. The one who had spoken was called Johnson or Johanson; Snape vaguely remembered teaching him Potions. He didn't recognize the other man, a dark-haired, silent fellow of approximately thirty.

"Lift up your shirt," the first man ordered.

"Why?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"You are required to wear this," he answered, holding up a belt-like, metallic object.

The second Auror raised his wand, giving Snape a questioning look that plainly asked if he would rather be hexed or cooperate.

Snape lifted his shirt and under the scrutiny of his partner, the first Auror put the object around his waist and fastened the clasp. When he tapped it with his wand, a tingle of magic coursed over Snape; the belt was now seamless, without buckle or catch.

Snape scowled. "What is it, Johnson?" he ventured.

"Johanson," the man corrected with a smirk. "It's an anti-Apparition device. You'll need this, too," he continued, as he held out Snape's wand.

Snape narrowed his eyes as he took it. "The Ministry trusts me with my own wand?"

"How else would you do your job?" Johanson replied. "However, if I were you, I wouldn't try anything tricky with it. It's been modified to insure you cannot harm anyone."

"The Virga Termino Charm," Snape stated flatly.

"Precisely. A hex has also been put on it to render you unconsciousness if you attempt to cast any spell at another person."

Snape closed his eyes as the weight of this last irony settled over him. *The gods must think this is the perfect joke.* "If this is a jest, then it is too bitter for laughter," he said under his breath.

"What's that?" Johanson asked irritably.

Snape shook his head wordlessly. *I will survive*, he reiterated silently. *Ten years is not so very long. I will not even be considered a middle-aged wizard when I am released.* He took a deep breath. "I'm ready. Let's go to work."

With a loud crack, Hermione appeared just outside the gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They stood open, ready to admit the hundreds of students who would be arriving this evening for the start of the new school year. Hermione glanced back over her shoulder towards Hogsmeade. It would be several hours before the train pulled into the station to disgorge its excited, chattering load of children. Headmistress McGonagall had suggested that she Apparate directly to the school, no doubt realizing how disruptive the presence of one of the Indestructible Trio would be on the Hogwarts Express. She had also invited her pet student to have lunch at the castle and get settled into her room before the other students arrived. It was an indication of what she could expect this coming year.

Hermione was both relieved and annoyed by her special status. While she wished she could be just another student, realistically, she knew that was unlikely. She was different, and everyone the faculty, the other students and herself knew it.

Although technically too old to attend Hogwarts, as she would be nineteen in a matter of weeks, an exception had been granted by the Board of Governors, allowing her to attend seventh form classes and take her N.E.W.T.s at the end of the year. The thought of being Ginny's classmate brought a smile to her lips. Hermione was (predictably) eager to start formal classes again, knowing that her tutelage under Severus would be universally discounted. She had decided to continue with all the subjects she had studied in her sixth year. In addition, she planned to add Astronomy.

Smoothing down the front of her school robes, she set off across the grounds toward the castle. The day was sunny, warm and mild, more like late summer than early autumn, and she basked in the vibrant colors of grass and sky. Even the weather seemed to reflect the new optimism in the wizarding world now that the threat of Voldemort was securely behind them.

"Hermione!" an alto voice called, drawing her eyes away from the lake. The Headmistress was descending the castle steps, her face wreathed in smiles. To Hermione's surprise, McGonagall greeted her with a brief hug and a heartfelt, "Welcome, child!"

"Thank you, Professor," she answered politely as they stepped apart. Hermione raised her eyes to the castle doors. A feeling of rightness, of homecoming, warmed her to the core. "Well, I'm back," she said.

~Finis~

Author's Notes:

1. Dome of Silence: this idea was shamelessly lifted from the old television farce *Get Smart*, although it was called the 'cone of silence' on that show.
 2. Lord of the Rings quotes:
 - a. In Snape's final scene he says, "If this is a jest then it is too bitter for laughter." This is a paraphrase of Aragorn's line from *The Return of the King (The Last Debate)* in which the Captains of the West decide to assault Sauron as a feint in order to give Frodo a chance to reach Mount Doom. The original quote is, "If this be jest, then it is too bitter for laughter."
 - b. The final dialogue in *Shades*, "Well, I'm back," which is spoken by Hermione, is also the final dialogue in The Lord of the Rings trilogy. Samwise Gamgee says this to his wife after he returns from accompanying Frodo and Bilbo to the Grey Havens. (*The Return of the King* in the chapter titled, *The Grey Havens*).
- *This is the end of *Shades*, but not, perhaps, the end of Hermione and Severus' story. Look for a short sequel in a couple of months.