

# Tabula Rasa

*by ayerf*

The past should not devour the present. A sequel to Redivivus.

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 5*

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### Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I have never claimed ownership of Harry Potter and have no intention of starting to now.

AN: This is a sequel to Redivivus, but not the sequel. I'm still in the process of gradually plotting that out. A good portion of this is spent in flashbacks of various kinds, so this is technically part prequel. Needless to say, this will make little sense without first reading Redivivus, which can be found on my author page.

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"He's here again, my love. I wonder who the Grangers were to him for him to visit with such devotion? He cares for their gravestone as much as I do for yours." The elderly man scrunched up his handkerchief and used it to polish the surface of the slab of marble, however much it didn't actually need it yet. He lovingly caressed the inscribed name of his late wife, before peeking over the top of the stone at the man approaching one of the most recent additions to the cemetery.

Ordinarily George Sutton would have no compunction about approaching a stranger in this quiet graveyard near the town crematorium, but this man did not look very friendly. Tall, dark and severe, dressed like a refugee from Victorian times, Mr. Unapproachable had been coming here ever since the third name had been added to the grave.

"I reckon it's the daughter he comes for. The dentists Granger died seven months before he started coming. I think he may have been responsible for the strange addition of their daughter. Judging by the epitaph, it's almost as if she died in a war. I wish I could tell you more, dear heart, but I daren't ask him," George whispered into the flower holder at the base of the slab. He stole another look at the stranger. "Forbidding is a pretty poor word to describe his presence. I'd better go before he notices me. Until next time."

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I stand before her cenotaph, clutching a single tiny flower between the tips of my finger and thumb. A forget-me-not. I let it go, to flutter down to stick to the slick stone. It had been raining, stopping minutes before my visit. At first I intended to stay away from here, promising myself never to come back. I broke that promise within a month. I think I do well not to visit every day.

It has been over a year now; eighteen months alone. For someone who has spent decades alone, you would think that I would be used to it by now. But for almost two precious years, I was not isolated. That period of companionship has ruined me. I am a shadow of the man I once was. Without her, I have no reason to live on, yet every time I so much as touch a vial of poison, I catch a glint of light. A glimpse of hope. Even when I am not wearing it, my thoughts are drawn to the faintly glowing gemstone of the ring I made for her.

Kept from joining her in death, I instead steadily poison myself with bittersweet memories and mementoes of the past. I know Albus and the few other people who call me friend worry for my sanity. I can see why they question my decision to dwell in the past; I could easily lose myself in it. As it is, my grip on reality is slipping. I care not. Who

cares if I forget the names of my current students? Not I. Does it really matter if I rehash the same old tired syllabus? Binns does it all the time. Albus keeps trying to get me to take back the Defence position, but that one year was enough for me. Besides, it is far easier to churn out the same old material in familiar old Potions. I keep shocking the faculty by continually refusing to take back the job I would have killed for. I cannot fathom why they do not realise that there is only one thing I would kill for now...

Yet killing will not bring her back. Nor will spending my evenings (and nights sometimes, I admit) poring over what I have left of my time with her, but at least it will allow me to feel closer to her for a few precious hours. Sometimes I can almost fool myself into thinking that she's still here, or within reach by owl if I happen to be reading one of her letters to me.

It's painful to so much as think her name, yet she is always on my mind. Hermione. I liken the spark of pain at the thought of her name to a split second under the Cruciatus Curse. I do wonder if in the event that she ever does manage the impossible and return to life, whether I will still be the man I was. I suspect that I'll belong in the same ward as Longbottom's parents in St. Mungo's by that time. If that time ever comes...

My stare down at the memorial I engraved for her is intense enough to be read as a glower by the few Muggles frequenting the cemetery. I stave off the impulse to kneel and run my fingers over her name, instead giving in to the urge to return to brooding in my quarters at Hogwarts. I stalk off, leaving for the nearest place suitable for Apparition.

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2.7.95

Dear Diary,

*I know I'm not terribly good at filling you in on events (if I was, you'd have a name rather than 'Diary'), but I can't keep this to myself. Yet I can't share it with anyone else either. Sometimes it's a Godsend to have an enchanted diary. In days like these, I can't help but think that the enchantment is not permanent. Anyone can read this after my death. I only hope those whom this concerns can forgive me if their secrets are revealed because I'm careless enough to die before my time. Of course, I can also imagine the worst case scenario where Voldemort (good lord, I was tempted to write my stutter over his name) wins and I live to die later in slavery. There are worse things than death, after all.*

*Agh! This is part of the reason why I don't tend to regularly keep a diary. I ramble on and go off point. The real reason I'm writing in here is to vent. I don't want to let this out anywhere else: Severus Snape is a complete and utter bastard. If his parents were married when they had him, I'll substitute prick for that. And Ron thinks that coarse language never escapes me...*

*I only wanted to help Snape and he goes ballistic. You'd think he'd be a little more susceptible to accepting assistance when barely on his feet, suffering Cruciatus Curse lag (as opposed to jetlag), but nothing doing. He is impossible! Although from what I know of him, I shouldn't be surprised by what happened last night.*

*Having overheard Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall discussing various confidential issues (what am I becoming?), I decided that they had enough on their plate. If I could manage to get Snape to accept me as his helper (God, I make myself sound like an elf Santa's little helpers and all!), then he could assure people like Dumbledore who are also concerned for him that he has arranged his own assistance, freeing up some of Dumbledore's valuable time.*

*So I set a basic trip ward on Snape's office, which would alert me when someone entered it. Now that the impostor Moody has been dealt with (poor bugger, does anyone deserve the Kiss?), no one else has reason to enter that room save Snape. He returned late last night, jerking me awake. I hurried down, narrowly avoiding Filch and the dreaded Mrs. Norris on my way.*

*I expected to find Snape slumped on his desk, aftershocks of the Cruciatus wracking his body. Needless to say, I would have been hexed into next year if I hadn't ducked. I thought he was going to burst a vessel. The saving grace was that he was incoherent with rage, a Gryffindor seeing him in a weakened state; no house points lost or detentions! Mind you, I'm not sure my eardrums will ever be the same. I hate it when people shout at me, but I think I find it far more unpleasant when they alternate between roaring and hissing. If Snape has an Animagus form, I'd be willing to bet it was a Chimaera or some other lion/snake composite creature.*

*Thank God the man has self-control. At one point he raised his hand to strike me, but stopped short. I could have sworn he mumbled something about not being his father... But even his self-control has limits. He was overwrought to begin with, too. I don't mean that he got physically violent with me, just that his yelling (all right; my yelling too. I had to make myself heard somehow!) came close to breaking through the silencing spell he set up. Before that could happen, he collapsed. On top of me. For such an almost skeletally thin man, he's heavy. I think I might still be winded. I tried shoving him off me first, but he was literally a deadweight. Thankfully I could reach my wand, so I Levitated him off me before lowering him to the floor. I hope he appreciates my fine control over the spell, or he'd be as bruised as I am.*

*At first I couldn't find a pulse. I panicked, before the training my parents gave me in first aid took over. Then my knowledge as a witch took over, or perhaps it was that I didn't really want to perform CPR on Snape if I could possibly avoid it. The thought of my lips coming into contact with his, albeit in a non-romantic fashion, was... weird. I tried a Revival Charm, and then tried again to find his pulse. I began to suspect that he was either dead ('Oh my God, I killed a teacher!' was my panicked thought) or really was a vampire when I finally managed to find it. Then his eyes opened. I could feel my stomach plummeting to the vicinity of my feet as those black holes narrowed dangerously.*

*By this point, his throat was too raw to, er, roar anymore, so he just hissed his invective menacingly at me. I wouldn't be surprised if that triggers my old nightmares about the Basilisk.*

*I helped him into his chair, a kindness I doubt he'll be able to forgive. He tried to magically Summon a potion to help dissipate the pain clearly wracking him, then grudgingly ordered me to retrieve it before demanding I leave him in peace. His eyes weren't focusing clearly, something made clear by his addressing the coat rack to my left by 'Miss Granger'. I waited until his eyes slid closed before appearing to obey his command. I opened the door, shut it and ducked down, lunging noiselessly for his desk, out of his sight should his vision recover when he opened his eyes. I heard Snape sigh, muttering something uncomplimentary about interfering, insufferable know-it-alls before gulping down his potion.*

*Nothing happened for a while, but then my jaw dropped as I heard something quite unlike Snape. He was laughing make that giggling. I couldn't believe my ears. Many things about the wizarding world make me question my sanity, but hearing Snape giggle like Lavender and/or Parvati takes the biscuit.*

*"Am I the next best thing to house-elves? What is Miss Granger intending to call this ill-fated pet project? S.O.S.? Save Old Snape?" He dissolved again into hysterical laughter. I heard a thump followed by a series of bangs. I cautiously peeked over the edge of the desk to see Snape with his head on the desk, fists hammering on the desk as his shoulders shook. I can only guess that either this was a side effect of the potion or that Snape was very different in private. Somehow I doubt anyone can act as unpleasant as he is, so I'd be inclined to suggest the former.*

*He confirmed my hypothesis with his next statement, a prayer that I was far out of earshot by now. That if I were to see him in his currently unguarded state, he'd be doomed to have me wheedle my way into being his apparently unnecessary handler. But he also sniggered that even if I managed that, he wouldn't remember a thing. I ducked back down beneath the desk as he raised his head, snatching up the empty vial. I think he kissed it, strange man.*

*Snape's oddly good mood didn't last. He began to snuffle, sobbing incoherently. It's probably just as well that he can't remember a thing of his potion-addled time, or I'd become as paranoid as Moody. Snape isn't a Potions master for nothing! Poisoning my food or drink, hell, even my books, would be child's play for him. He noticed my*

presence when I shifted uncomfortably at the sound of his all-out bawling.

He somehow managed to ask whether I'd come to laugh at poor, pathetic 'Snivellus' between sobs. I stood up, shaking my head. He wouldn't believe me at first, until I reminded him that I'd only come down out of concern for him. That I wanted to help him in any way I could. He muttered that I must be insane to want to do so, speech broken up by hiccups.

He's right. I must be insane anyone sane would have run for it the moment he began shouting the first time. But my insanity met results! We actually had a civilised conversation after he'd recovered from his crying jag. Unfortunately, before I could manage to stitch him up with a mutual wand oath, the potion wore off. I'd just made my end of the deal, my wand tip pressed to his when I saw him blinking in the flash given off by the sealed oath as if he'd just woken up. He demanded to know what I'd done. After I told him, he raised his wand. He tried to Obliviate me. After all, a student taking advantage of a teacher in a backhanded attempt to help them is outside of the jurisdiction of school rules. I suppose I was lucky he didn't hex me, although he might as well have.

I staggered under the force of a blow that seemed to hammer my mind. I could feel a killer headache starting, throbbing behind both temples. Snape's voice echoed inside my skull, with accompanying pictures of an alternate sequence of events, with Snape finding me in the dungeons, leading me to his office to assign detention and of course deduct points. I shook my head violently, instantly regretting it as the headache worsened and spread to encompass my entire head before it centralised behind my eyes. With that pressure, the false version of events was forced out of my mind even as blood began to trickle from my nose.

I wonder if he'd have tried the Memory Charm if he'd known what the effects would be? Harry and Ron would no doubt think so if they ever found out, after an ill-fated attempt at tearing Snape apart with their bare hands. I can't blame him for trying. I would have done much the same in his shoes. He had no way of knowing the true extent of my memory and what an attempt to modify it would have. That doesn't mean that I forgive him for requiring me to take a Blood Replenishing Potion. Bastard. For someone usually on top of things, even unexpected things, he stood there like a lemon while the flow of blood increased. I must have fainted, because the next thing I was aware of was once more being in close proximity to the cold stone floor. At least when Snape collapsed, I had the decency to attempt to catch him, which led to him almost flattening me. When gravity exerted its dominance over me, he kept up the lemon behaviour. Well, at least he's consistent!

After he ascertained that I wasn't concussed, he made himself useful by staunching my nosebleed (perhaps flood is a better term?). Then he sent me back into his cupboard to retrieve the aforementioned required potion. I didn't need him to prove his bastardly nature, but of course he thought he did. Of course no apology was forthcoming for the backfired Memory Charm. I wasn't expecting one, nor did I think I really deserved one, what with my attempt to take advantage of his potion-induced lack of Snapeness. I certainly wasn't expecting him to finally threaten to hex me with a curse I still haven't managed to decipher. He did say something about a deterrent from carrying on with my infernal do-gooding, that I'd regret it if I continued to pry in his affairs. He raised his wand again when I tried to defend my position. I decided to retreat before I ended up returned to my parents in a matchbox. I haven't given up on him. He may have won this battle, but he's lost the war. I have a cunning plan... I bet he hasn't a clue how to fend off a determined penpal!

HJG

Minerva McGonagall observed Severus shut the diary, having read it over his shoulder from her position perched in the shadows on top of one of his many bookshelves. It was odd reading in her Animagus form as a cat's eyes worked differently than a human's. At once it was both easier and harder to process what was seen. Minerva found that while she had no trouble finishing each page long before Severus did, she had to reread each one several times in order to get more than just the gist of it.

Anyone else wouldn't have attempted to read what was obviously private, but Minerva shared many of the same flaws as her Animagus form. She was known to play with her food, be driven wild by catnip and be especially partial to meat of every variety save forbidden meats such as human flesh, but her chief failing was her curiosity. If she was aware that someone had a secret, she would stop at nothing to discover what it was. No one collected gossip quite like she did, although she disappointed other gossipmongers by keeping what she found out to herself. For instance, whenever Minerva caught Severus dwelling in the past, she spied on him, but she didn't breathe a word to anyone. Albus no doubt would try to put a stop to it if he knew just how much Severus's mind was back at least eighteen months, something that might well destroy what was left of the breaking man. So Minerva just watched and waited, ready to intervene if Severus really did lose his mind.

"Why did she choose to persevere? I injured her, mostly unintentionally, and she still kept going."

Minerva froze at the sound of Severus's voice, which sounded deeper still through the ears of her cat form. Had he noticed her presence?

"Yes, I know you're there, Minerva. My wards alerted me to your presence. Why are you here?"

Hopping down from her failed hiding place, Minerva gave him the inscrutable look that cat's specialise in before turning back into her human form. She shrugged. "Curiosity killed the cat. You know I could never resist a riddle."

"I see. Don't think that you're out of trouble. You invaded my privacy. In return, you can answer my questions. As a woman, you might better understand, after all." Severus glowered up at her, his eyes bloodshot.

"Very well, ask away."

"Hermione," Severus choked the name out, "kept up with her crusade even after I'd hurt her. Why?"

"You needed help. She could give it. What other reason would she need?"

"I could have managed. I didn't need anyone then. I don't now, either!" Severus snarled, lurching to his feet.

"I'd beg to differ. Hermione kept you going when you'd have given up..."

"Do not speak her name," he spat, interrupting her. "No one else has any claim to her save me."

"Severus, what am I to call her? She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Don't be ridiculous. I know you're hurting, but other people are too. You may have been worse affected by her death, but you have no right to hoard what remains of her. By sharing your grief, the burden will be less."

His face twisting, Severus inhaled harshly, tears shining in his eyes. He angrily dashed them away before any could fall. "Leave me," he demanded.

"Not like this. If you carry on like this, your pain will destroy you. I speak from experience. How else do you think I became such a 'dried up old prune'?"

Severus winced at her words. "You're never going to forgive me for that, are you?"

Minerva sighed. "I forgave you almost immediately. I won't let you forget it anytime soon, however." She pushed her square framed glasses down her nose to peer at him over the top, causing him to squirm uncomfortably as the gesture threw him back into his days as her student, continually getting Transfiguration wrong. "Part of your problem is that for some reason you think that you never deserved her in the first place. A guilty voice in your sorry little mind is telling you that if you never let her get close in the first place that she would still be alive. Am I getting close?"

Before Severus could stop it, one of his hands reached up to rub at the back of his neck, a classic sign of a guilty conscience.

"For the last time, you had nothing to do with her death. Cruel fate and the need to vanquish V-V-Voldemort are the only things responsible."

"That's part of my problem. I was useless, unconscious. I didn't deserve her if I couldn't keep her safe." Severus bit his lip, as if he wanted to keep himself from working through some of his issues.

'Oh no you don't, laddie!' Minerva reached up to adjust one of her hairpins, a clear warning sign to the currently clamming up Severus should he choose to observe it. He opened his mouth, the phrase 'I didn't deserve her' clearly about to be repeated. Quick as a pouncing cat, she struck. Literally. Severus's head snapped to the side with the force of her open palmed blow. He stared at her, baffled, one hand rising to cradle his reddening cheek.

"Don't look so gobsmacked. I'm sure that if *Hermione* could hear what you just said, she would have done much the same. You deserved that for doubting yourself. She persevered with you because you are worth it. You have the potential to be a great man; perhaps not a nice one, but a powerful wizard all the same." Minerva's lips thinned to the point where they almost disappeared. "Now, do I have to repeat that lesson, or reiterate it in a different way?"

"I may be miserable, Minerva, but I have no wish of being miserable in any form but my own," Severus said, eyeing her hands warily. To Minerva's vague surprise, she was idly passing her wand from hand to hand. It was a constant struggle for her not to act on her impulses. Severus was lucky that she had sufficiently trained herself not to act without the conscious intervention of her brain unless severely provoked, or he would find himself Transfigured into a Pygmy Puff. She pocketed her wand before her temptation could prevail.

"I seem to remember a very different tale from you concerning how Hermione managed to work her way past your defences. You seemed to imply that you accepted her as a confidante that night; something about welcoming her concern like a cat enjoys a lap to sit on in front of a fire."

"It was like a man in the desert accepts water, actually. I also never said exactly when I accepted her as my confidante." Severus turned back to his desk, resting one hand protectively on top of Hermione's diary after sitting back down. "I wasn't nearly drunk enough to tell you the truth."

"You lied to me."

"No, I omitted certain truths. Bald-faced lies are hardly my style." Severus Summoned a bottle of Firewhisky, together with two shot glasses. "Drink with me, if you'd care to know more. Drink me under my desk and you may end up with the truth."

Whipping her wand out to Transfigure a comfortable chair, Minerva sat down next to him. She accepted the proffered drink, raising it to eye level. "To Hermione."

AN: Thanks to LadySunflower. Your services as beta were very much appreciated, especially in saving Snape from being OOC before being dosed with and after recovering from a certain potion.

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 5*

Consequences of living in the past.

### Chapter 2

Disclaimer: JKR owns Harry Potter and the associated characters appearing in this.

2.8.95

*Dear Professor Snape,*

*I can only imagine the fate of the letters I previously sent to you. I can only hope that you take the time to read this, sir, instead of blasting it to smithereens on sight. I toyed with the idea of forcing you to read this by placing a curse of some sort on this, whether to do damage to you or me is irrelevant as I dismissed the idea before those details developed. I do not make a habit of attacking my teachers, nor do I find harassing them exhilarating. Do not think that never answering these letters will stop me from sending more, as I am sure you are aware that I am duty bound to do so by the wand oath I swore a month ago. This is the only way I can offer my help to you without compromising your safety, as such the cessation of this would put my magical ability at risk. I hardly need to inform you of the particulars of wand oaths, as any wizard worthy of the name knows that once made a wand oath cannot be lawfully broken. Anyone who tries breaking the oath risks Azkaban, as the Ministry is alerted in the event of the sundering of a wand oath.*

*You will be pleased to know that your refusal to observe basic etiquette and answer these letters does discourage me. You will be no doubt displeased to know that as yet I have never given up on anything, however discouraged I have become. There is also no way for you to take house points or assign detention, as I am operating outside the school rules.*

*However, I am respecting your privacy as much as I can. While I was still at Hogwarts I produced some parchment charmed specifically so that it in the event of interception these letters would appear as though they were written by someone expected to do so, with the content modified with it. Don't think that running out of my charmed parchment will stop me, sir. Shops specialising in stationery such as Scrivenshafts sell parchment with much the same qualities. Not being able to leave Grimmauld Place without the supervision of an Order member doesn't stop me either, as certain members are sympathetic to the needs of a teenage girl apparently writing to her first sweetheart.*

*It is tempting to include evidence of some past wrongdoing that my friends or I can be punished for, just to test whether you are actually reading these. It puts my almost perfect student record at risk, but if it leads to you accepting my help... Your robes caught fire when you were keeping Harry from being thrown off his broom in his first Quidditch match. I know who set them alight.*

*Judging by the events of today, You-Know-Who is going to demand some kind of explanation for it from his followers for both of the scenarios I have conceived. If he was responsible for the attack on Harry, then he will no doubt lash out at those he blames for the failure. If he wasn't responsible, I fear he may punish his spies for not informing him sooner. I hope you stay safe, sir. Be careful.*

*I remain your humble would-be assistant,*

*Hermione Granger*

Carefully folding up the much read letter, I placed it in my desk. The first few letters Hermione sent I destroyed without reading. The next few I read, then used as kindling. The letter I had just finished reading was the first I had kept. I received it after witnessing the punishment imposed by the Dark Lord on his chief spy in the Ministry. If something ever befell Potter at Hogwarts and word reached the Dark Lord... *Voldemort* through anyone who was not me, his chief spy there, the same punishment usually awaited me if I did not have a valid excuse. Of course, sometimes even with a valid excuse I would find myself writhing in agony on the floor in front of him. So it was that when I read the letter, her guess of the events and resulting concern helped sway me to pen a reply. However, my prevailing motives were not of acceptance. At that point I was more interested in lashing out and taking out some of the pressure on me, even if it was on a mostly innocent girl. Any friend of Potter had at least broken school rules, and she had hinted at being involved in causing damage to me and my property.

Hermione had kept every single one of the letters I sent her, enabling me to reread all of our correspondence from that point. Anyone else attempting to read these letters would only see the fake set by the charm. Minerva would not be able to spy on these like she had on Hermione's diary, not that she could; I was vaguely aware that it was a weekday in term time. Minerva would be teaching, as I was in theory. Seventh year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws hardly needed my supervision. I could leave them to get on with things whilst I revisited the past by parchment. I reached into my desk, retrieving the next letter. My reply. I winced at the sight of it. I wasn't proud of my initial reaction to Hermione's offer, viewing it then as interference from a useless Gryffindor.

4/5/95

Miss Granger,

*Cease and desist. Your unsolicited letters are indeed harassment, something that I can alert the authorities to as befits the crime. Unfortunately due to your accursed wand oath I cannot act to stop you that way, nor is this a matter that I can share with anyone.*

*It is true that I cannot act in my position as a Hogwarts teacher to punish you for your impertinence, but rest assured that I can make your life a living hell. Foolish little girl that you are, you need to realise that as a grown wizard more than twice your age, I do not need what assistance you can offer.*

*But I have wanted to know the identity of whoever set fire to my best robes. In return for your information, I will allow you five minutes of my precious time. I will be in the library at Grimmauld Place at 11 P.M. tomorrow. After you give me the name of the culprit, I may be persuaded to listen to your argument. Be warned, I will know if you lie.*

SS

Resisting the urge to crumple the worn piece of parchment in my hands, I leaned back in my chair, eyes clenched shut. If only I had... but I wasn't sure myself what I wished I had done. Did I wish that I had never opened up to Hermione, or that I had let her closer sooner? Minerva was right. Even if I had pushed Hermione away, she would still have died in that car crash, only to come back to life with her Necromantic powers awakened. Voldemort would still have ordered me to pursue her, something that I would have achieved even if I hadn't become friendly with her. Yet still, I almost wished that I had never been blessed (or was it cursed?) with affection for and from Hermione. It would be far less painful now if that were the case.

The scent of the brewing potions was lost to that of aging parchment as I drifted into my memory, specifically that of my pivotal meeting with Hermione in Black's library...

*She was waiting for me, not reading one of the less perilous books as I had expected, but pacing in front of one of the antique reading desks in a futile effort to suppress her nerves. I guessed that the reason for her unease had something to do with the stack of galleons on the desk behind her.*

*Hermione whirled to face me as the door clicked shut; I had entered silently. My gaze swept from the glinting galleons reflecting shifting firelight to her face. Even without the gold, her expression would have been evidence enough; fairly subtle for a Gryffindor but her anxiety (biting her lower lip) was clearly displayed to my Slytherin eyes.*

*I drew breath between clenched teeth in preparation to give a furious tirade, but Hermione spoke first, the movement of her slender throat betraying her nervous swallow.*

*"Professor, this," she gestured at the galleons, "is yours. Compensation for your robes, plus interest."*

*Glowering darkly at her, I strode forward to claim it. A second glance at it revealed a stack of coins behind the first. She had included a lot of 'interest'...*

*"It should also cover the cost of the ingredients that went missing from your private potions cupboard in my second year. As for the indignity and resulting injury of my part in disarming you in the Shrieking Shack, I apologise." She held my gaze as she spoke, unwittingly allowing me to use some basic Legilimency to determine her sincerity. That allowed me to catch the accompanying irreverent thought: 'I'll kiss it better if you want!'*

*Choking at that comeuppance for my mental eavesdropping, I faked a coughing fit to disguise it. "Miss Granger," I spluttered. "You have made your point. You owe me nothing, so count your wand oath as fulfilled as well."*

*"No, sir. We both know that it's not as simple as that. The oath I made is perpetual; it can never be completed."*

*"Know-it-all," I muttered, before scattering the offered galleons in a fit of pique. I spun on my heel, fully intending to stalk out and ignore the insufferable girl.*

*"Professor, wait. I may still count as a minor, but I had hoped that we could discuss this in a mature, adult fashion. I suspect your problem with accepting my offer is largely due to, to..." Hermione fidgeted with the sash of her dressing gown as she struggled to find the right words. "What I mean to say is that..." she trailed off. My sneering at her wasn't intended to help her formulate a coherent phrase, but her chin lifted at the sight of it.*

*"The Latin phrase 'tabula rasa', beyond its usage by Muggle philosophers in furthering the nurture versus nature debate, is also applicable here. I highly doubt that I need to translate it for you, sir, but a fresh start is the greatest opportunity anyone can wish for. A blank slate..." a frown pinched Hermione's face as she saw the warning signs that I was about to cut her off. "Where would you be without second chances, sir?"*

*I flinched at that reminder of all that Albus had done for me. Hermione pressed on, seeing that I was wavering.*

*"Albus Dumbledore is unquestionably a great man, whatever the Prophet dares to imply. You have the potential to be one too, but unless you find a way to share some of your burdens, you will likely be too damaged to reach that stage." Hermione must have realised that her tone was causing a rising suspicion in me concerning her motives. "Do not mistake me, sir. I don't pity you. I respect you. I ask that you respect me in return."*

*She watched me contemplating her words, before playing her trump card, overdramatic Gryffindor that she was. "No, I beg that you do." She dropped to her knees in front of me, head bowed in supplication.*

*"Don't be so melodramatic, Miss Granger. Get up." I reached down to offer my hand to help her up. Once she was back on her feet, I sighed in defeat. "Very well. I will give you your chance. A trial period only, though. If by the end of this month I am convinced that you deserve this... honour, then I may allow the arrangement to continue."*

*Hermione beamed up at me. "Thank you, sir. You won't regret it."*

Indeed, I did not. By the end of the month I was persuaded to take our 'blank slate' agreement as literal, meaning that we really did start anew. Allowing the usage of given names in our correspondence followed a bemusing suggestion from Hermione that we reintroduce ourselves. The experience was made all the more unusual by the fact that it took place on parchment.

I was just reaching in to my desk drawer to replace my terse note with the introductory letters when I happened to look up at the assembled students sweating behind their cauldrons. I frowned, eyes narrowing as I tried to detect what it was that had drawn my attention. There was something making my ears ache, but what? The students were working quietly for once, no conflicts between those wearing Slytherin and Gryffindor house colours for once. Wait. *Slytherin and Gryffindor?* Last time I checked, they were Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students. I dug my timetable out of the depths of my paperwork, to see that the class immediately following my seventh year Ravenpuffs was fifth year Slyffindors. I twisted my head around to stare at the blackboard, horrified. To my admittedly poor knowledge, none of my current fifth years were capable of brewing such an advanced level potion. Even as I almost gave myself whiplash spinning back to face the class, wand in hand, I knew it was too late.

---

The castle shook, enough to make Minerva stagger as she paced around her classroom checking on the progress of her fourth year Ravenclaws. A babble of young voices were either asking each other or their professor what had happened, something that Minerva was all too afraid that she knew.

"Class dismissed. Go to your common room or the library to start your homework. Now!" her voice cracked like a whip, startling the students. They hurried off, allowing her to secure the classroom as she exited hard on their heels.

The position of her classroom on the first floor allowed her to reach the dungeons faster than any other teacher. No doubt to the surprise of many of her students, Minerva possessed a vivid imagination; one currently tormenting her with progressively worse visions of what she would find. Expecting anything from strewn body parts to nothing more than a crater, Minerva was relieved to find Severus and all of the students intact, if covered from head to toe in what appeared to be pink slime. Almost every cauldron in the room had exploded, but the wards had prevented any non-repairable damage.

Severus wiped his currently pink sleeve over his slime-covered face in an attempt to preserve what little dignity he had left. The mortified flush on his face clashed violently with the substance still slowly dripping from the end of his nose. Feeble sparks mingled with smoke appeared from the end of his wand as he attempted what Minerva guessed was a non-verbal Scourgify. If his wand was ever going to work again, it would only be after it was thoroughly cleaned by hand of the potion currently coating the room, as the use of magic might complicate the problem. Bearing this in mind, Minerva cast her own cleansing charm, carefully modifying it to leave the wands in their currently filthy state.

"Hospital w..." Severus started to say, before clutching at his throat as a startled squeak escaped him at the sound of his own voice.

"All students go to the hospital wing," Minerva managed to hiss between clenched teeth. She prided herself on her self control as much as Severus did, but this situation was too much. The students hurried off, avoiding speaking in fear that what had happened to Severus's voice had happened to theirs too. "You should go too, Severus."

He opened his mouth to object, but closed it again with a sour expression on his face. He strode off, robes billowing in his wake.

Minerva closed the door and managed to set up a silencing ward before collapsing against the door in a helpless fit of hysterical laughter. She would treasure the memory of Severus Snape with a voice pitched like a house elf, but adding it to how he looked before the cleansing spell... Minerva shoved her fist into her mouth in a futile effort to stifle her giggles as she felt her ward being effortlessly broken by the master of the school.

"Minerva, what..." Albus looked bewildered before observing the wrecked classroom and the smeared (yet still readable) chalk on the blackboard. "I see," he murmured regretfully.

The next fit of mirth died before it could surface, leaving a cold feeling spreading in its wake. Minerva thought it might be dread, but couldn't be sure whilst in the grip of it. "Albus, please tell me you are not thinking like I believe you are."

"I'm sorry, Minerva, but we both know that Severus has become a danger to himself and those around him. He would never normally have fifth years brew a N.E.W.T. level potion."

---

"What?" *'You can't mean that.'*

"Severus, that is my final word on the matter. We are very fortunate that no one was seriously injured, let alone killed. Until I am satisfied that you are recovered, you will not be teaching in this school. Besides, I do believe that you are overdue for a holiday."

"But Hogwarts is all I have left! I'm not ill. I don't need time to recover." *You won't let me stay, I know it. You'll send me away, not letting me take any remnant of Hermione with me.'*

"Not physically, no. But you have suffered a severe emotional blow. You need time to recover from that."

"You think Hermione's death is an illness I can recover from?" *You unfeeling bastard! If you had any idea what I'm going through..'*

The Hat shuddered at the tone of young Snape's voice; sharp enough to cut through fabric. It gave up the ongoing attempt to put together the next Sorting song, knowing from experience that few teachers had gone quietly. It had no true body to feel sensory disturbances with, but the Founders of this school had blessed (or cursed, depending how you looked at it) it with all of the ordinary senses that a human head was equipped with, plus a few modifications to Sort the students with. Namely, the ability to smell what house best fits someone usually by the time it's placed on their head. Unfortunately, the Hat's hearing was powerful enough to detect thoughts, so actual voices could be uncomfortably loud, together with particularly strong thoughts. Usually Snape and Dumbledore were more comfortable for it to be around as their mind magic shielded their thoughts, allowing it to work in relative peace. That was not the case with Snape at the time of his 'discussion' with Dumbledore.

"Of course not, Severus. But it is obvious to me that spending the time since her death at Hogwarts was counter-productive. You need time to heal, in a place where you are not in surroundings that constantly remind you of what you have lost. I had hoped that time alone would be enough; unfortunately that is not the case."

Snape's thoughts hurling insults at the Headmaster were unrepeatable, enough to fray the Hat's fabric. Snape voiced some of them, although in a more controlled fashion.

"You will thank me for this one day. This way I may yet retain my Potions master instead of losing him to St. Mungo's, and I don't mean to a different job there," Dumbledore spoke as though he hadn't registered the stream of vulgarities from Snape's mouth.

"You may be my employer, but that does not give you right to tell me how to live my life!" *You interfering brother-of-a-goat-lover!*

The accompanying thought was roughly translated, but the meaning was the same.

"I am well over a century your senior, Severus. I was your guardian for many years. I only regret that circumstances did not allow me to fulfil my role properly. And I have been your employer for longer still. But first and foremost, I am your friend. I know you better than you know yourself. I know what must be done to help you. If I have to, I will force you to accept that help, even if the cost is our friendship."

The Hat winced in advance of another explosive outburst as Snape straightened up, his lungs expanding to their full capacity, his face so red it was almost purple. Instead the only explosion was the rush of air as Snape sighed, his shoulders drooping. His face paled back to its more normal old parchment colouring. The ancient Hat would have blinked if it'd been able to, while Dumbledore did so, both of them dumbfounded by the sudden change.

"Fine," Snape spat, his face curiously blank, void of even the slightest scowl. "As you wish, I will take a leave of absence. But I will not leave my return in your hands." His mind magic was back in action too, leaving it as helpless as the next hat as to his motives.

"As a matter of fact, I will not be able to. With Horace Slughorn's retirement, there are very few possible applicants for the interim position of Potions master, and none that I would trust."

"But you've been trying to tempt me back into the Defence position ever since I left it!"

"Yes, in the hopes that it would help. What I will set into motion now is what I had planned then. I will step down from my post as Headmaster, if only temporarily, to take Potions. Minerva will be Headmistress until your return, so your return will be in her paws." Dumbledore looked over the top of his spectacles at the tabby cat currently skulking in one of the corners of the room.

"I think you mean claws," Snape muttered under his breath. He continued in an audible tone. "I will leave as soon as I have collected my personal belongings."

"Severus, catch!" Dumbledore tossed one of his lemon drops at Snape, who was unprepared for this move. He caught the sticky sweet automatically, before his brain could catch up with his reflexes. He vanished from the room, instantly dragged away by Portkey.

'I hope that when Snape was allowed to return, he would be more himself again. No one else criticises my songs like he does, and I truly mourn the lack of his scathing comments,' the Hat thought before returning to its composing.

---

I was still fuming when the owl carrying what Minerva could sneak under Albus's nose arrived. How dare he dictate the means of my 'recovery'? As if not having reminders of Hermione around me would make me forget her. At least Minerva understood, having suffered a similar loss to me before, as she'd confessed during her attempt to drink me under my own desk.

I had attempted to sneak back into Hogwarts to retrieve what I wanted, but Albus bloody Dumbledore had adjusted the wards to keep me out until my mental state was less raw. Bastard. Whatever his birth certificate says, I'm positive that his mother wasn't married when he was born.

Instead I sent a Patronus message to Minerva, all but begging her to either let me in or send me what I requested. A day later the owl arrived where Albus had unceremoniously dumped me, his scarcely used holiday home in the typically wet mid Wales. I was surrounded by sheep, which led me to wonder if Albus had a fondness for them matching his brother's for goats.

Vaguely aware of the long and soggy flight the bird had endured, I fed it before I tore into the package. Minerva, bless her, had included Hermione's diary as well as her letters. On closer inspection some letters were missing, including the 'introductory' ones. The note Minerva had slipped among them explained their absence.

*Severus,*

*The password to break the wards on your desk was not needed as the drawer was open. Unfortunately, it was open during the accident leading to your current circumstances. I saved as many of the letters as I could, but some were beyond repair. You'll be pleased to know that I resisted my inherent curiosity and did not read any of them.*

*Albus has a point. I would suggest that you reread these letters and the diary once before setting them aside, as a ritual to assist your progress through the well known stages of grief.*

*Best wishes,*

*Minerva*

If the suggestion had come from anyone else, I would have ignored it. But perhaps the new Headmistress's advice was worth more than just the time it took to read it. To take her idea further, I could also make use of the Pensieve I had discovered after forcing my way through a trapdoor in search of something more powerful than butterbeer. Holding the antique bottle of Ogden's best up to the light (also recovered during the same hunt), I poured myself a generous helping.

"Here's to us, Hermione, wherever you are."

AN: Thanks to LadySunflower for her invaluable services as my beta, and to my lovely reviewers.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 5*

Reminiscing and perhaps making progress through the stages of grief.

### Chapter 3

Disclaimer: Unless wishes come true, I don't own anything other than the plot and even that is influenced in some way by just about everything I've ever read.

*"Bad day?"*

*I looked up from my position hunched over the essays on which I was currently scrawling venomous criticisms with more pressure than was required; the quill would doubtless break before I had finished.*

*Hermione was standing against the doorjamb, her overstuffed bag as usual taking a few inches from her height. Not that the top of her head reached up any further than my chin when she was unburdened, but most of the inhabitants of the castle were under the impression that her burdened height was natural; of course, for a bookworm like her it may as well have been.*

*Her bag dropped to the floor with a thud as she sidled in, pushing the door shut. Moments later she was perched on the edge of my desk facing me, having given the essays a single glance and summarily dismissed them as beneath her notice. Truth be told, I thought they were beneath my notice as well. Unfortunately it was a requirement of my job to mark them 'fairly' and return them to the miscreant authors undamaged. A far better use of them would be as kindling... I cast a wistful look at the fireplace, before turning back to my marking, attempting to ignore the distraction currently breathing in my ear, sending shivers down my spine.*

*My quill finally split from the pressures exerted on it, spurting crimson ink over my fingers and the dreadful essay currently being marked. I shot a nasty glare at Hermione*

when she expressed amusement at my expense. She muttered an apology before pulling her wand out and casting a cleansing charm, saving me from dirtying my own wand. I opened my mouth, possibly to thank her, only to snap it shut again as I noticed that her Scourgify was a little too strong. The words had been wiped off the parchment. I flicked through the pile, to see that every last one of them was blank.

"I'm sorry, it's my wand playing up again."

No sooner had she finished speaking when my robes began to fade from view, together with any underlying clothes.

"Hermione! What is running through your mind?"

Her cheeks reddened a bit, but she just raised an eyebrow in reply; not that the question really needed one with the rapacious gleam in her eyes. She slid off the desk to land in my lap, pinning me down. Not that I really wanted to move...

Before the blood flow could be diverted any further from my brain, I flicked my wand at the door, setting an Imperturbable Charm up. I was vaguely aware of the clatter as I dropped it onto my desk as Hermione grabbed hold of my head, leaning up to demand a bruising kiss.

She pulled away, silencing any complaints before they could arise by shifting her attentions to my neck. Anyone watching would think she was a vampire rather than a Necromancer, especially as one of her nips was deep enough to draw blood. Hermione muttered an apology before soothing the wound with her tongue, causing a jolt to run to my groin. I growled, twisting my head to inflict a love bite on her own throat.

Hermione shivered, her head falling back as I shifted my lips to her collarbone. I yanked her school robes off her, narrowly avoiding ripping them, before attacking the buttons of her shirt with my teeth and hands. When I had it open (torn in some places, buttons damaged or missing entirely), she slipped off my lap, batting away my grasping hands as they reached for her.

Eyeing my chest as if contemplating exploring it in much the same way as my neck, she glanced at my hands, shaking her head regretfully as she did so. Instead of risking being caught up in my grip, she dropped to her knees. Hermione swept her gaze from my erection to my face and back again.

"Hermione," I whispered, unsure of whether I was imploring her to continue or not.

She leant forward, partly bare breasts brushing against my legs. Lips an inch from her target, she met my transfixed gaze. "I love you," she breathed, moments before descending.

"Hermione!"

Opening my eyes, a mixture between a groan and a sob escaped me as I awoke from my dream. My very vivid dream, judging by the sticky mess clinging to my hand and bedding. I glowered down at the guilty appendage before snatching up my wand to cast a cleansing charm.

I can count on one hand (and that's a hand missing a finger or two) the number of times Hermione practised fellatio on me. She would never have gained the position of Head Girl on those abilities, but the end result was the same. However unpractised the attempts, the simple fact that it was the girl I loved doing the deed was enough.

Stumbling out of bed after catching sight of the time, (a Muggle clock; I loathed wizarding versions for their vagueness) I was dressed in my teaching robes before I remembered that it was impossible for me to be late. I was still sequestered away in Albus bloody Dumbledore's home in Wales. Glaring at my surroundings, I cast Sectumsempra on the clock in a fit of temper. Several gears spilled out of the resulting gashes, before the clock abruptly changed back to its original wizarding version, although also broken. A strangled growl escaped me before I attempted to repair it and Transfigure it back into a less annoying timepiece. The resulting explosion was satisfying, although the fact that it took my eyebrows with it was not.

I snapped my fingers, summoning a house-elf. The tea towel clad creature instantaneously appeared before me, leaving me to wonder if it hadn't been there unseen all the while. Best not to think of it.

"Move my belongings to another room, although leave the sheaf of letters alone. I also want this... crater left here until the owner of this prison has the opportunity to admire it. After all, it is where one of his sock drawers was."

The elf flinched at the unnatural order, but mumbled an affirmative. It vanished, taking my possessions with it. I would have to summon it again to lead me to my new room, but I was ready to settle in for a morning rereading my precious letters. There were benefits to having no responsibility for overseeing a rowdy bunch of hormone over-laden adolescents attempting to brew delicate concoctions with their ham-fisted hands. I could now be distracted in peace, with no danger of an untimely explosion...

---

Dear Severus,

I hope Umbridge is more bearable in the staffroom than she is in the classroom. If she is, forgive the lack of her title. She has got to be the worst Defence teacher Hogwarts has ever had. Having been in both Quirrell and Lockhart's lessons, that's saying something. At least they taught the practical side, something that Umbridge has no intention of doing. If the jinx on the position fails this academic year, all of the students she teaches are doomed.

From what I know of you, knowing that someone incompetent or, even worse in Umbridge's case, willingly neglectful is teaching the position you prefer must be a kick in the teeth. The Headmaster must have his reasons for keeping you in the Potions position and I hope that the foremost reason is being unwilling to risk losing you in a jinxed job.

Also, something is up with Umbridge's detentions. I don't know exactly what, but Harry won't mention anything other than the fact that she had him write lines as a punishment. I don't think that Harry is lying, but I don't think he was telling the whole truth. I wouldn't put it past Umbridge to abuse her position of authority. If she is, is there anything that can be done? I fear that the Ministry has Professor Dumbledore's hands tied.

Yours,

Hermione

---

Hermione,

I would hope that Umbridge doesn't flirt with the students as she does with the teachers. When she comes into the staffroom, there is a rush of excuses and a stampede for the exit.

Your description of her teaching justifies not addressing her as a professor. In my opinion, none of the Defence teachers you have been taught by were competent. Even Lupin should have adjusted his course to allow for coverage of topics that were inadvertently missed instead of concentrating on Dark creatures. In fact, the best teaching you had in that subject was quite possibly by the fake Moody.



*My reasons for wanting the Defence position are many. Beyond the far greater quality of my teaching abilities, the jinx might free me from this hated position. I never wanted to become a teacher. However, the taboo of hiring a known Death Eater is something that only Albus Dumbledore could overcome. Also now that the Dark Lord has returned, I must stay as long as possible in this school in my role as a double agent.*

*As for Potter, I would advise you to keep a close eye on him and try to make him keep his big mouth shut around Umbridge. With the Headmaster around, even with his hands tied, I am sure she wouldn't dare harm a student, so do not worry about possible abuse. Apart from anything else, the Ministry cannot afford a scandal and she knows it, mindless bureaucrat that she is.*

*Regards,*

*Severus*

---

Dear Severus,

The thought of Umbridge flirting is sufficient to give me nightmares. I hope for your sake that your dark past enables you to escape her attentions.

I'm not about to argue with you about the quality of Professor Lupin's teachings, but he was the best of them. The fake Moody was creepy, the feeling that his eye was looking where it shouldn't was a distraction, to say the least.

For someone who never wanted to teach, you are a good teacher, judging by the records of previous exam results, even if your methods terrify some people into incompetence; Neville being the prime example. I'm sure that you remember the tales of who his Boggart turned into.

While I will do what I can with Harry, I think you overestimate my control over him. You also underestimate Umbridge. The Headmaster's hands are tied tighter than you know.

Yours,

Hermione

---

*Hermione,*

*Your last letter was written in an unfamiliar hand, yet I am certain you wrote it as the privacy charm was functional. Kindly explain why in your reply, or I will have your answer in person.*

*Severus*

---

Hermione's explanation was not on paper, so I utilised the formerly hidden Pensieve to revisit the memory, withdrawing the relevant gossamer strand of memory from my mind to float down to the liquid silver surface within the stone receptacle. Touching the bare skin of my fingers to the activated memory launched me inside to the familiar dungeon classroom to the hell of a Slytherin/Gryffindor double potions lesson with both Potter and Longbottom attending.

Observing yourself as if from another person's eyes is always a strange experience, particularly when interacting with those now dead. Seeing Hermione alive yet being fully aware that it was only a memory was a wrench. I tried to touch her only for my hand to pass straight through her. Why did I torment myself like that? I knew very well that an observer in memories could not physically or mentally affect the memory.

I observed my past self watching Hermione like a hawk, pouncing on the opportunity to give her a detention when she helped Longbottom explicitly against orders. When the lesson ended, she stayed behind to arrange when the detention would be. She looked resigned when I warded the classroom to prevent anyone from overhearing. I was vaguely aware from this new perspective that I held my wand a fraction too tightly, putting strain on both wood and wrist when I performed the spell, something to rectify if I remembered.

I watched as the memory of me suddenly grabbed hold of Hermione's right hand, shifting his grip to hold her wrist securely as he pushed her robe down exposing the bandage wrapped around her hand. I envied him for being able to touch her, something completely irrational because it was my memory of the incident. It must be a mark of insanity to be jealous of oneself, particularly from a time when relations between Hermione and I were strictly platonic.

"What's this? It's unlike you to be clumsy." As could be expected, my voice sounded different when heard from outside my body. It was still bizarre, though. Was my voice really that drawling?

"You gave me my first detention with you just to..."

"This is your O.W.L. year. Longbottom won't have your 'help' in exams. Can't you see that your help is more of a hindrance?"

"If I didn't help Neville he'd likely blow up a cauldron every lesson. Call it self defence; I'm stuck sitting next to him. You could try not to be so..."

"So *what*, Miss Granger?"

"You scare poor Neville silly."

"Then he needs to grow a backbone, while you would be so much less trouble for me if you lost yours. Might I suggest you swap somehow?"

"Let go!" Hermione tugged fruitlessly in her attempt to escape. "I thought that we had moved past such pettiness."

"And I thought that you trusted me, yet you're changing the subject. What's wrong with your hand?"

"It's not that I don't trust you. Please, just let me go."

When I (or was it he?) refused, she tried again to squirm free, only to fail as he (I? This is so confusing!) wrenched her around, pinning her to his desk. I'd be lying if I claimed not to have noticed the suggestive position she was trapped in at the time. I certainly noticed it now. If anyone could have entered the room then, charges of an inappropriate student/teacher relationship would have been raised. That or an outcry of rape, as I was in an unquestionably dominant position with Hermione still struggling to escape. I watched myself press a hand against her back, gently but firmly pushing her down onto the desktop, scattering marked and unmarked essays around. I swallowed, feeling guilty that I should find myself attracted to her before she passed her sixteenth birthday. I was no paedophile, yet how could I claim that when I found an underage girl attractive?

I continued watching as her bandage was unwrapped, her arm twisted behind her in order to do so. I moved closer to observe the wound revealed on the back of her wand hand, hearing the hiss of air as he inhaled sharply at the sight of the words carved into the back of her hand in her own handwriting.

"I must observe the library opening hours and curfew." He read aloud, before loosening his grip on her arm. I could tell that I had been too shocked to properly release Hermione, something that hadn't occurred to me then: she was still pinned down. "Who did this? It can't have been Madam Pince; even she isn't this sadistic. Well, unless

you damaged a book, but you would never do that." I blinked at her guilty twitch, something that I had also missed back then.

Hermione mumbled something against the stack of parchment her face was buried in. He let her up, turning her to face him with his grip on her wrist.

"Who?" he repeated, voice cold and controlled. Inside, I knew he was fuming, something also betrayed by the tic below his left eye and white knuckled fingers. How I managed to keep from crushing Hermione's wrist then I don't know.

"Umbridge."

He released her wrist as he spun away, allowing me to appreciate the accompanying movement of my habitual black teaching robes as he marched into my office. Hermione jumped at the crash originating from there and followed to see what had happened. He was rifling through a formerly warded trunk full of potions vials. Mostly poisons, but some other dubious substances.

"However tempting it is to kill the insipid toad with an untraceable poison," he gestured at the deadly array, "the Ministry will only send someone worse. An untraceable diuretic will exact some vengeance." He retrieved the correct potion, before striding over to his storage cupboard, yanking out a jar and offering it to Hermione. "Murtlap essence should alleviate the pain and aid swift healing."

"Thank you," Hermione murmured as she took the jar, her gaze averted, inadvertently meeting mine. I knew she couldn't see me, but I was familiar with the spark in her eyes. She'd desired me even then. I was ambivalent about whether I was relieved or disappointed that she had originally planned to make advances to me after she graduated. It hardly mattered as nothing could change the past. Well, nothing save meddling with a Time Turner and that risked more than just my death. I had thought of using one, but the thought of inadvertently causing Hermione's death myself stayed my hand.

"Just don't break any more rules. Especially not when Umbridge is around. You may go; you'll be late for lunch."

"What about my detention?"

"Come here after dinner today. If you promise never to bring Longbottom and my teaching methods up again, I may conveniently forget to add your detention with me to your student record."

The memory faded, depositing me outside the Pensieve with a jerk. Despite the fresh heartache running through me, I couldn't regret tearing the gaping void of Hermione's absence open further. Not when it let me see her again and revealed more than I had previously known. Perhaps I was becoming some sort of masochist, albeit not in the conventional term referring to sexual tastes.

I stared bleakly around the room, idly counting the number of empty bottles, the majority of which had contained Firewhisky. What would Hermione think if she could see me now? Sighing, I scooped up my memory from the Pensieve bowl and returned it to my mind.

"At least I'm not cutting myself off from my emotions," I muttered, recalling that Hermione had considered that to be trapping oneself inside a self-made prison. Unfortunately for me, it seemed that it was also possible to imprison oneself in a cage constructed by your own emotions; a far cry from a gilded cage with my prevalent feelings.

I reached for a new bottle to deaden the pain, only to think again as her ring slipped out of my shirt, dangling on the chain fastened around my neck. During my time with her, I had been a virtual teetotaler. As a spy, I'd had to be. I didn't know what she had thought of drinking, but it was highly dubious that she would have approved of doing so to excess, as I had of late. I could almost hear Hermione's voice, reciting what she had read of the evils of alcohol; something that made me wonder exactly how effective my Sober-Up potion had been the night before. After all, she'd never lectured me on that topic. Eyeing what was left of Albus's Firewhisky regretfully, I banished the lot, feeling some glee at this further act of petty vengeance. At least it silenced the voice in my head. However much I wanted Hermione back, I didn't want it to be as an Ogden's induced hallucination. Or as a conscience picked up much like viral infection, whichever it was. I loved her deeply, but her voice and lecturing habits were not her most attractive traits to put it mildly.

AN: Betaed by LadySunflower, for which I am eternally grateful.

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 5*

Reluctant meetings

Disclaimer: Everyone knows who Harry Potter really belongs to, and it isn't me.

Chapter 4

"Hello, Severus."

"What are *you* doing here, Lupin?"

"Minerva wanted to know how you're getting on. She would have come herself, but an incident at Hogwarts required her attention." Remus placed the Portkey that had brought him to Severus's retreat on the mantelpiece before it could whisk him away.

"Is Albus making a mess in the dungeons?" Severus snorted, leaving Remus guessing at the content of the unspoken thoughts. Perhaps of either the old man's beard dipping in a volatile potion or a lemon drop being inadvertently lost in the depths of a cauldron?

"How did you know?"

Severus stood, turning to face his undoubtedly unwelcome visitor. "It's been a lifetime since Albus last taught. I highly doubt maintaining discipline in an area outside his last teaching position is really within his grasp."

"There are different dangers associated with Transfiguration and Potions, true." Remus cleared his throat. "Regardless, Minerva wants you back before the end of the year."

"Get Albus to lift his restrictions, then."

"Severus, Minerva does not want to trade a scatterbrained alchemist for a similarly affected Potions master. She wanted to know if you were making progress."

"If that was her way of asking if I had finished acting on her advice, the answer is no."

"After Voldemort fell the first time, I was lost. It took me years to find my way out. I only managed in the end with the support of what friends I had left." Remus walked over to the window, staring out at the small amount of sunlight visible through the clouds.

"I have heard this sob story before, Lupin. Virtually every time I have the misfortune to see you, I have my ears filled with your rubbish about the road to redemption and the importance of friends on that long, twisted journey."

"Albus would tell you much the same sort of thing, I'm sure."

"You're wasting your breath. If I don't listen to Albus, what makes you think I'd listen to you?" Severus sneered. "Save your soulfulness for when you howl at the moon; it might be appreciated then."

"You act as if no one can possibly understand your loss. The tragedy of war is that loved ones do die. Retreating into the past, hiding under the veil of grief from reality will solve nothing." Taking a few deep breaths, Remus forced himself to calm down. Every time he saw Severus, the other man always made at least one comment associated with his affliction. Usually when Remus had outstayed what smidgen of welcome was afforded to him, or when he made the slightest metaphorical step forward. "You have friends, Severus. Friends you are hurting with your determination to face this storm of pain alone."

"One might say that those fool enough to call me friend deserve to be hurt."

With a wounded look at Severus, Remus sighed heavily. It was obvious that he was not going to get anywhere, as apart from anything else Severus had never actually called him friend in return. Perhaps Minerva herself would have better luck, as Albus was doubtlessly still in Severus's black books.

Barely managing to keep himself from stating that he pitied the broken man, Remus took his leave, reaching for the Portkey. From the dark scowl on Severus's face, he had ascertained what that unspoken comment was. Broken or not, he clearly still had his pride. Lingered further would not be sensible; Severus was making twitchy moves toward his wand.

---

After Lupin's unwanted visit, I anticipated the arrival of yet another of those misguided souls who for some bizarre reason counted me as a friend. Instead, in the coming days I received owls from anyone who had reason to try to extend a hand to help me out of my rut; largely those who had cared for Hermione. This 'drowning man' would have none of it; I respected their attempts enough to read what most of the assorted letters had to say, only to use those written in the scrawl of various Weasleys as target practice and burning those originating from Potter on sight. Why couldn't these interfering busybodies leave me in peace? At least Minerva had made no further attempts to contact me beyond sending the Order's pet werewolf. I fully intended to savour my memories; besides, time was meant to be the great healer. Eighteen months was not long, granted that it was a little more now. Or did these idiots think that I would be back to my normal self the instant the observed mourning period was over?

Next they would be expecting me to move on and replace her...well, maybe not in the case of Potter and most Weasleys, as I am well aware of their opinion of my appeal to anyone, let alone to the fairer sex. I snorted; I had no intention of moving on, not whilst her ring still glowed. Even if the unthinkable happened and the glow faded, I had no inclination to start anew. Hermione was a one-of-a-kind witch, although of course she had flaws. For some time after her death, I almost hated her for inadvertently causing her own demise.

Thinking back, I suppose I was fortunate that I only became friendly with Hermione in her fifth year, or I would have suffered all the more. As a friend of Potter, she attracted trouble much like a library attracts bibliophiles. The aftermath of the debacle at the Department of Mysteries loomed in my mind. Inserted into a 'Get Well' card, one of my last letters to her had been decidedly at odds with the method of concealment. She'd kept it anyway.

*Hermione,*

*I will kill you myself if you ever do something like that again. You must have known it was a trap, yet you went anyway. Loyalty to Potter is suicidal, can't you see that? Next time he wants to play at being the hero, might I suggest Stunning him if you can't talk sense into him? Merlin only knows he needs some sense knocked into him.*

*Do you realise how serious this is? You could have died. Without the array of potions provided, you would have died. The Headmaster overruled my assignation of detention and deduction of points from you and the other miscreant students. Rest assured that were you not already injured, I would have shaken some sense into you.*

*Madam Pomfrey said that Potter wanted McGonagall; an Order member. Why didn't you send him to me when you found she was gone? After everything I have shared with you, do you mistrust me? Yet I went to the Order to check up on Black of all people for your miserable fools anyway.*

*Do you have any idea what passed through my mind when I discovered you'd lead Umbitch into the Forbidden Forest and what thoughts plagued me as I searched fruitlessly for you? At least it was simple enough to ascertain where you must have gone. Again, I went to the Order informing them of the changing situation, a message that saved your necks. I warned Black not to go, but no one, especially him, ever listens to me. I was ordered to return to the forest to keep up the search as there was a slim chance that you hadn't managed to leave the grounds. Then I was summoned back to the castle by Madam Pomfrey to brew the potion that kept you alive for a few vital hours whilst the rest of them were procured or made.*

---

Of course, if Hermione had died then, she would have become a Necromancer a few months earlier. Perhaps it was better that her parents had died before she had, as an adverse reaction from them may well have broken Hermione in a way that nothing else could. I sighed, turning back to the letter.

---

*One blessing of this whole mess is that the Dark Lord will not blame me, although I am sure that Potter's misadventure will have some knock on effect to come back to haunt me, beyond your injury. In the event that you are concerned that he will use me to take out his rage on, he has more immediate targets.*

*You may already know this from Madam Pomfrey, but I can assure you that your curse scar will not be permanent. However, I see no point attempting to coddle you by concealing the full truth from you, as our esteemed Matron may have done. It will be at risk of reopening for quite some time, although normal activity will not do so; adventures of the sort that you persist in pursuing may well affect it. Of course, you may be completely unconcerned with running the risk of obtaining a permanent scar. Knowing you as I do, you lack the patience to regard that scar as a temporary feature of your body as it will take years to fully heal. Keep in mind that without magic, it would take a lifetime to fade.*

*If I know anything about you, after your concerns for your friends, you are more concerned about your O.W.L. exams than about your own health. I have every confidence that you will live up to your academic reputation.*

*Concentrate on healing. My thoughts are with you.*

*Severus*

---

The last entry in Hermione's diary raised some questions for me. I have always had an inquiring mind, although I lost much of my zeal for mysteries after Hermione...well, anyway. It must be positive that I can take more of an interest in things, even if they are still somewhat connected to the object of my broodings.

Dear Diary,

Ron's snores are keeping me awake, my curse scar being sufficiently numbed not to pain me. Severus was not happy with me. Why mince words? His letter was not a Howler as such, but I'm glad that he didn't decide to speak to me in person. Bearing his disappointment in writing is more than enough punishment for me.

How could I be so stupid? I suppose I should be grateful that Severus doesn't know the specifics of how I was cursed. What Harry must think of me, if he does think of anything beyond his grief over Sirius's death. I read sufficiently far ahead to be able to perform N.E.W.T. level spells, yet when push comes to shove I forget everything I have learned in a blind panic. 'I forgot' should not be an excuse I can make. I have an eidetic memory, I shouldn't be able to forget anything. Yet I Silenced that Death Eater instead of Stunning him, in the heat of the moment 'forgetting' that of course a fully grown wizard knows how to do non-verbal casting. 'Brightest witch of her age' couldn't be a worse moniker. I didn't even have Ron's excuse of being hexed silly.

At least I do have a reason for my error. Back in the Death Chamber (how do I know that it's called that? Sometimes I worry about where some of my knowledge comes from) I experienced something very strange. Very creepy. Harry's reaction to the room didn't help either. After that, being ambushed by Death Eaters just took the biscuit and left my senses scrambled.

I get the feeling that no one else saw what I did in that room. Only Harry and Luna Lovegood seemed to sense something, but they only claimed to hear whispers beyond the veil. I heard nothing but an eerie silence. An unnatural silence, almost painful in the way that it seemed to deaden sound. I could still hear Harry and the others talking and moving about, but everything was oddly muted. Then IT started. When I entered the room, I saw runes appearing on the crumbling archway, trickling into existence like they were made from blood. Morphing into the next, they slowly spelled out my name and only mine. By the time we left the room, they had seeped into the stone floor, seeming to follow in my footsteps.

I found out today that only Unspeakables should be able to see those bloody runes, and that they are undecipherable to them. One of them was sent here, as somehow they knew that I had seen more than I should have. I don't know how they got the Headmaster to agree, but they had permission to perform a Memory Charm on me. Perhaps I should have had my eidetic abilities on both my medical and student records, as it would mean that I shouldn't need to suffer another nosebleed through ignorance. It didn't help that I was asleep at the time; I have never been more disorientated than being woken by head-splitting pain with rivers of blood streaming from my nose. Madam Pomfrey was livid, threatening the Unspeakable with hellfire and brimstone while she staunches the flow and shoved yet another potion down my throat. As I couldn't be safely Obliviated, I had to sign a confidentiality contract (not that it stops me writing about it in here). One bonus from this whole sorry experience is that I have been offered a job in the Department after my N.E.W.T.s, regardless of what I achieve. If I were anything like Ron and Harry, I would have no reason to do anything but the minimum amount in my schoolwork now, but I would sooner drink the last beverage of Socrates.

Oh, good. Ron has finally stopped snoring. I was getting tempted to smother him.

HJG

---

It somewhat assuaged my guilt over my own failed attempt to Obliviate Hermione to know that a nameless Unspeakable had done the same thing, although at the same time it made me want to find out exactly who it was to bring my fist into contact with his/her nose. By the sounds of it, my protective rage was hardly needed to punish said Unspeakable, as a livid Poppy Pomfrey is not a walk in the park. I should know. Students think that my tongue is the most acerbic at Hogwarts; when sufficiently enraged, Poppy can flense the flesh from the bones with all of the precision expected of a Healer, all without wand or scalpel.

Hermione's description of what had occurred in the Death Chamber mystified me. In retrospect, it doubtless had something to do with her Necromantic powers. I idly wondered what she would have experienced in that ancient room if she had returned when her powers were awakened. Not that there was any way of knowing now, of course. I glowered down at the ring I was absentmindedly fiddling with, caressing the glowing stone with each finger in turn. Such a cruel reminder of stark hopes...

I slipped the ring back onto the chain around my neck, a simple charm allowing the sleight of hand of doing so without undoing the catch. Before I retreated to bed, I would allow myself to read one last letter. The worn scrap of parchment that came to hand was the last letter that I had written to Hermione before the car crash that had irrevocably changed her. Like some of the others, it had creases from the innumerable times it had been folded and reread, and for once, all of those times were by her. I hadn't touched the letter since I had sent it. A ragged gasp escaped me as I inspected it more closely. Bloodstains blotted out some of the words, while half of it was lost entirely, burnt off. This letter had been with her in the crash.

21/8/96

Hermione,

Although the Dark Lord stepped up his attacks, you need not be overly worried about the safety of your family or yourself. Put simply, the Death Eaters have more important targets than Muggles, even if those Muggles are the parents of one of Potter's best friends. Nor are you very high up on the list of priorities, as the Dark Lord's to-do list has Potter and Dumbledore as the top priority. I think it will be of some comfort to know that your safety is one of my priorities; it is a weight off my mind to know that certain members of the Order have warded your home. If need be, it can be put under the Fidelius Charm too.

You wanted to know whether it appears to those unfortunate enough to be captured by Death Eaters. In this case, Blood-ratators are far more vulnerable than Muggle-- contrary to popular belief, Death Eaters do not rape the latter, as Purebloods or those aspiring to be so do not want to taint themselves in the act of doing-- torture is to be expected, with the Cruciatus a favourite of many Death Eaters. Now their presence is known, they will leave witnesses to their crimes, usually a Muggleborn-- that the blessing of a Memory Charm is less likely.

If I were not well aware that ignorance does not make you safer, I would not have answered your question. At least this way you will not be panicked by fallacies perpetuated in such trash as --- Prophet. Why Molly Weasley doesn't realise this baffles me, but then she always preferred to keep her head in the sand along with the rest of her brood. I suppose their home is secure enough now that it has been all but warded to the standards of Hogwarts.

I have no aptitude for foresight. As such, I cannot give you any real assurance save that if it is within my power to keep you safe, I will. If the worst happens and you do fall into the hands of the Death Eaters, I am sufficiently high within the ranks to claim you for my

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Because I do not have the curse of an eidetic memory, I cannot recall exactly how the letter continued after that abrupt end, but I do know what I left unsaid. Although I did share quite a number of secrets with Hermione, I did not tell her everything. She knew that, I'm sure. Some things are just too difficult to express. For instance it is true that, on the whole, Death Eaters did not wish to sully themselves by raping their victims.

However, the Imperius curse was Lucius Malfoy's favourite Unforgivable for a reason, being so much more versatile than the other two. He always viewed the Cruciatus as a glorified thumbscrew, and the Killing curse as too merciful; but then he always did confuse a speedy death with mercy. He was fortunate enough never to witness the death of a loved one due to the uttering of two measly words, unable to do anything. As he has no knowledge of Muggles, he doesn't realise what hearing a twisted, macabre form of 'abracadabra' does to those Muggle-born unfortunate left behind to tell the tale. Voldemort knew, I'd bet everything I have left to lose on it.

Now the question was whether the memories that letter evoked of my time as a Death Eater will overpower my longings for Hermione. Would it be a nightmare or another

erotic dream that tormented my sleep?

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As it turned out, it was both. Visions of Hermione as the one chosen for further torment by 'sparing' her death after watching the torture and murder of her parents haunted me. Then Lucius stepped forward, cruel smirk in place as he raised his wand, somehow knowing of my feelings for the girl. My skills as an Occlumens allow me to resist the Imperius curse, something that also translated over to the dream. Before Lucius could find anyone else to inflict the curse on, I stepped forward to claim her. Even in a dream after his death, Lucius could suffer bitter disappointment. Members of the Inner Circle were permitted to take their prizes elsewhere, far from prying eyes. My slumbering mind inflicted further grief on me by taking Hermione to my current hiding hole, where we christened the guest bed that I was currently sleeping in.

I awoke reaching for her, bitter tears escaping me when I realised the futility of the act. The cold reality of the situation ensured that I would need no frigid shower or imagining of a threesome between Albus, Minerva and Filch to render me in a more comfortable state. Perhaps one day I would be able to handle morning erections by closing my eyes and thinking of Hermione, but not anytime soon.

Rising from bed, I stalked over to the window, yanking back the curtains to glower at the damp dawn outside. Scotland was hardly home to the most hospitable weather either, but I missed it. Albus's hopes that I would be less preoccupied here were in vain; the memory of Hermione would be with me wherever I was. Now that I had finished poring over what written record I had of Hermione, it was time to cut my unwilling sabbatical short... if Minerva would let me.

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"While I would love to have you back, Severus, I must insist that you take some more time off. I will anticipate your return before Christmas; in the meantime, I would recommend that you take this opportunity to have a holiday. I'm sure that everyone would agree that you deserve one," Minerva said, eyeing Severus over the top of her glasses and calmly sipping tea from her cup.

"Minerva, I don't need more time. I want to come home."

"You will in due time. Be thankful that I'm not insisting that you have a companion with you. Or maybe you would like Remus's company?"

Severus glared at her, only to receive a teasing smile for his pains.

"I look forward to having you back at Hogwarts. Your absence has been felt, not least in the number of accidents Albus has had to deal with."

"Where do you suggest I go until then?"

"Use your imagination. I am not the person to ask about holiday destinations, as the number of them that I have had is even less than you. It's a pity that I can't come with you and have Pomona take on the role of Headmistress, but Filius's death hit her hard. She's barely managing to keep up with her own responsibilities."

Severus looked almost guilty, having been too caught up in his own wallowing to notice such things. He opened his mouth, floundering for something to say.

Minerva set her cup down, giving a dismissive wave of her hand. "Don't worry. There are others who are supporting poor Pomona in her time of need. Now, we are concentrating on getting our Potions master back. When you return in December, I hope you will be more at peace. I know you think you are more yourself now, and you may well be so, but a little more time to find yourself never did anyone any harm."

"At peace?" Severus hissed. "*At peace?* I think that you will find that the only time that I will be at peace is when I am six feet under. Since when have I ever been 'at peace'? I'm not sure I know the meaning of the phrase."

Minerva rose to her feet, walking over to the mantelpiece to pick up her Portkey. "And that, Severus, is why you need more time. To learn the meaning of peace. I expect to see you in a couple of months at Hogwarts. Enjoy your holiday, if not for your own sake, then in memory of Hermione." She left Severus fuming, speechless as he watched her vanish.

AN: Sorry for the longer than expected delay. The last chapter will follow shortly. Thanks to LadySunflower for managing to beta this despite other problems.

## Chapter 5

*Chapter 5 of 5*

The beginning of the end.

Disclaimer: If I owned Harry Potter, would I be writing fanfiction?

### Chapter 5

I did not see Minerva again until I stood before the gates of Hogwarts, waiting for her to let me in as an official sign that I was once again welcome here. If I so desired, I am sure that I could have walked onto the grounds, the restrictions of the wards set by Albus met. But I felt like a stranger, although I had only been gone for three months.

The gates opened at Minerva's approach, sweeping the snow on the ground aside as they did.

"Welcome home, Severus. Exactly why you wanted me to meet you out here in the cold is beyond me. Did you forget how cold winter in Scotland is?"

I flushed. It was true that my travels had taken me to warmer climes, but perhaps I could make amends for dragging Minerva out into the cold. "I thought a drink either in The Three Broomsticks or The Hog's Head would suit."

Minerva gave me a sceptical look, but accepted my excuse. One of the privileges granted to the Head of the school was the ability to whistle up a thestral-drawn carriage instantly, allowing us a more comfortable journey to Hogsmeade.

After the promised drink, Minerva couldn't hold in the question she had obviously wanted to ask since I had arrived. "I hope you are more at peace now. Have you at least learned what the concept of it is?"

"In a way. Although I doubt I have to the satisfaction of most people."

"I have known you since you started your education at Hogwarts, Severus. I would not expect anything else of you."

I drained my second glass of Ogden's best. "Promise me something."

"Within reason, I will. I'm not about to enter into a suicide pact with you."

I glowered at her. Minerva had the memory of an elephant; she would never let me forget such unfortunate statements as being unable to be at peace unless I was dead. "Just promise me that you will keep away any misguided fools hoping to 'ease my pain' by replacing Hermione. My actions resulting from such a situation would be unfortunate."

"I will do my best, although you should be warned that Narcissa Malfoy has been asking after you."

"I thought you loathed Narcissa," I stated, puzzled that Minerva should be in possession of such knowledge.

"There is such a thing as gossip. There are also at least two gossip mongers resident at Hogwarts." She gave no names, but I was well aware of who those gossips were. Between Hooch and Filch, it was a wonder that there were any secrets left in the wizarding world.

"At least I know to avoid Narcissa like the dragon pox now."

Minerva wished me luck, while exchanging a knowing look with me. We both knew that Narcissa was all but impossible to avoid. I might manage it for a few more months, but sooner or later she would catch up with me. Now that Lucius was dead, however, she would face an unpleasant surprise. I no longer had a reason to be civilised; it was time to introduce Widow Malfoy to the real Severus Snape, terror of the Hogwarts dungeons. Unfortunately, knowing my luck, dear Narcissa would be unfazed. She doubtless knew that I was 'not myself', lost in grief. Plus she had known Voldemort. Compared to the late Dark Lord, I was not so scary.

For a Gryffindor, Minerva was fairly good at keeping her face clear of emotion. As a Slytherin, I am adept at reading into such attempts. I could tell that she was all but biting her tongue to keep from saying anything that I might take offence to, like resigning myself to bachelorhood. I suspect that if it were anyone but Narcissa showing interest, she might have risked our tentative friendship.

Our conversation shuddered to a halt. Minerva was not the only one keeping herself from saying anything. I could feel the weight of Hermione's engagement ring dangling from the chain around my neck, a burden that I might be able to share. But I was afraid that if I showed the glow to anyone else, it would fade, taking my hopes with it.

"I must be getting back. I may only be Headmistress until midnight, but there is a fair bit of bureaucracy to wallow through before I can have my old position back."

"Allow me to escort you." I offered Minerva my arm as we made our way out into the bitter weather.

---

That night I sat before the fire in my quarters, idly ruffling through Hermione's letters, her diary placed precariously on top of the pile. I yawned widely, slumping back in the chair. Lulled by the firelight, my eyelids slid closed. I jerked awake as a sudden crackle roused me, a strangled cry escaping my throat as I spotted the cause of the noise. The contents of my lap had slipped forwards as I dozed off, tipping the letters and the diary into the flames. I had enough presence of mind to extinguish the fire with a panicked, jerky jab of my wand before reaching into the ashes for what remained.

The letters had largely collapsed into ash, but the diary was undamaged. I threw it to the side, frantically trying to salvage the scraps of singed parchment still remaining. Trust Hermione to enchant her diary; why couldn't she have also applied the same fire resistant charm to the letters? *Why hadn't I?* A movement in the corner of my eye drew my attention back to the diary, where it had fallen open to the last page. Previously blank, words were gradually forming.

14.3.97

Dear Severus,

*If you are reading this, I am dead. The recurring nightmares that I have been getting ever since mid February concern the 'final battle'. I fear that they are visions of the future, that my death is inevitable. Presumably I am unable to return; even a Necromancer has limits, after all. Hopefully that is not the case, but in the event that I am gone, I won't request that you don't grieve or demand that you move on. Doing so would be to ask that you discard yourself. Instead, all I ask is that you live.*

*I have no idea what is beyond the cold darkness of oblivion, but where there is hope there is life. Or in this case, an afterlife. May we meet again.*

*I love you,*

Hermione

Eyes burning with the effort of suppressing tears, I brought my hand up to grip the bridge of my nose, teeth clenched and breathing harsh. 'She couldn't have known what was to happen! She would have told me.' My throat ached with suppressed sobs. 'If she truly loved me, she would have warned me.' Face twisting into a mask of misery, I collapsed to my knees on the hearthrug. 'She had known. I suspected as much.' My other hand joined the first, shielding my eyes as my fingers slid into my hair. 'Yet even if she had told me exactly what those nightmares were about, would it have helped?' The first of my tears escaped me as I gave up the fight against my sorrow. There was no point of manfully suppressing my feelings when alone, no façade of pride to display, no one to deride me with the insult of Snivellus. Sometimes tears were cathartic. Hopefully this was one of those times.

"Hermione, why?" I cried into the silence broken by my sobs, swiping futilely at my eyes. My gaze dropped to the last words written by her hand to me, tears blurring my sight. Clutching at her ring, I lay sprawled in front of the hearth until the welcome oblivion of sleep claimed me.

---

An hour or so later, a bizarre looking creature wrapped in piecemeal, threadbare clothing appeared in the Potion master's quarters. A tower of shapeless woollen hats wobbling as he shook his head, nonplussed by the obstacle in the way of his work.

"Why is Professor Snape not in bed? Dobby wonders why he is on the hearthrug, looking like Missus Norris." Dobby leaned closer, large bulbous eyes blinking as he attempted to put together the pieces of the mystery.

"Professor Snape is very sad, he is missing Harry Potter's friend very much. He is also sad because his letters is all burnt. Perhaps Dobby can help?" Snapping his fingers, Dobby glowered at the scraps of parchment as he called on his magic to reverse the damage. He smiled as he put the once again pristine letters in a pile beside the armchair, using the discarded diary as a paperweight.

"Dobby will tuck Professor Snape into bed now. Winter is no time to spend a night on cold floors." Magic crackling from his fingertips, the house-elf floated the gently snoring man into his bed chambers, almost dropping him as he tripped over the end of one of his dangling scarves. Once his charge was safely ensconced in bed, Dobby bowed.

"Goodnight, Professor Snape."

---

I slipped through the threadbare cloth, at once feeling no resistance at all yet also as if I were sliding through quagmire. I fell to my hands and knees once I was through the veil, my sight swimming. I blinked slowly a few times to clear my vision, catching sight of runes trickling across the stone floor like blood each time my eyes opened. It was from an obscure runic alphabet, the letters familiar: 'A', 'R' and 'O'. I forced my eyes to open, managing to catch the full word denoted by the start and end runes. 'ATROPOS'. This ancient chamber was greeting me...

My head snapped up as the door at the far end of the room opened. I bit back a groan at the swelling ache accompanying the abrupt movement. The man entering the room looked straight through me. I do not have an invisibility cloak as such, but my robes were specifically designed to hide me. Unless the observer knows what to look for, I cannot be seen. Needless to say, it's highly unlikely that anyone in this world does.

"Active again? I wish we could know what they say. That would settle the debate about this room for sure," the Unspeakable grumbled as he conjured a scroll of parchment and a dictation quill. "Right, runic flare in the Death Chamber at 0200 hours, 21.12.1998."

That answered my question about the flow of time beyond the veil. Bit of an anticlimax, really.

With the door still open, this was the perfect time for me to escape undetected by the wards surrounding the room. I struggled to my feet, only to collapse back down, thankfully all but silently. My journey had greatly weakened me. I swallowed my pride and crawled across the room. Even that left me collapsed on the floor outside, gasping for breath. How long would it take me to recover my strength? If only I could Apparate out of here... I wistfully ran a finger along the intricately carved wood of my wand. I could feel from the lack of vibration that my magic had been affected as expected. The same was true for my other powers.

Yet the curse affecting me was not the benediction of my enemies. The gradual return of my powers as the curse wore off would allow me to slip under their notice. For now I would bide my time, although first I would have to find my way out of this rabbit warren before anyone tripped over me. Special robes or not, they wouldn't stop people from walking into me.

Of course, my time in this world would be very limited if another Necromancer already inhabited it, as they would feel my presence before my powers had fully returned; I would be a sitting duck. As such, my first point of call should be the Aurory, where the Dark Detectors are likely to be. If they could detect me, I deserved to be found.

The bored junior Auror manning her post was too busy poring over *Playwitch* to notice as I slipped inside the room, the security wards absent. This Ministry must be of the opinion that a room full of Dark Detectors does not need wards. Leaning over the Auror, I slipped a dose of a potent Sleeping Potion into her coffee. The next slurp she took had her snoring, leaving the room unwatched.

Approaching the Foe-Glass, I fiddled with the partly disguised knobs on the front to reset it to show my enemies. The fact that I was able to do so without magic said something about the shocking complacency of this Ministry. I peered in, seeing nothing but indistinct shadows. If there was a Necromancer resident in this world, I should have been able to see whoever it was clearly. A slow smirk spread across my face as I realised that I could use this pathetic Aurory to my own ends by resetting all of the Dark Detectors to my needs. Of course, it was possible that they would realise that all of their precious instruments were meddled with, but that was unlikely judging by the incompetence I had observed so far. Just in case, a small act of sabotage to each device would ensure that I would be undetectable even if they did reset everything in this room.

As it was, I was almost found before I could leave the Aurory. The lift doors opened just as I got to them. Even as I dived against the wall in an effort to get out of the way, one of the disembarking occupants of the lift tripped over me, kicking my shin in the process. I shoved the knuckles of my fist into my mouth to muffle my cry of pain.

"Tonks! That's a fine start to your shift," a tall, stately, dark-skinned man boomed in his deep voice as he extended a hand to help up the woman who had all but crippled me.

"Shut up, Kingsley. I know a trip jinx when I feel one. Just because our illustrious Head placed you on the graveyard shift doesn't mean you can take it out on me. We're in the same boat, y'know." Hair abruptly flashing crimson, Tonks revealed herself as a Metamorphmagus to me. Interesting, but irrelevant. She would be no danger to me when my powers returned.

Rolling his eyes as he pulled Tonks to her feet, the two Aurors walked off, bickering. In the time it took me to get to my feet, the lift had gone. Typical! After summoning the lift, I stepped back to stretch my battered muscles, only to be unceremoniously dumped to the floor. Swearing viciously, I sat up, glaring around me to identify what I had slipped on. One of the Aurors, presumably Tonks, had dropped a vial. Picking it up, I read the label, a slow smile spreading across my face. While the strengthening elixir I had just found wouldn't return my powers, it would accelerate the process.

The occupants of the next lift were mystified as the doors opened, seemingly to let no one on. Shrugging, they continued their conversation as I stepped inside before the doors closed, the precious vial in my pocket.

"So the memorial will be unveiled next year?" A toad with a passing resemblance to a middle-aged woman asked of her companion, a tall, stringy young man with a shock of red hair.

"On the second anniversary of You-Know-Who's defeat, yes. The statue will be revealed at Hogwarts, where it is to stand in the Great Hall."

So the Dark Lord had been defeated in this world as well. That was...unfortunate. Something for me to rectify when I had the ability to do so.

"Oh, Mr. Weasley, tell me what the design is," the Toad simpered in her grating girlish voice.

"Madam Umbridge, you know that is a trade secret. Only the Minister and the Artisans have any idea of what it will look like. You have a better chance than me of finding out."

I idly wondered if all Weasleys were as pathetic as where I came from. Looking at this specimen, I presumed so.

"Who will be honoured with a mention?" Licking at her lips, a greedy light in her eyes, I could only assume that Umbridge wanted her name to be so honoured.

"Our dead, of course. The Minister did mention that only those who truly deserved the honour of their name immortalised would be on it." Weasley leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "He let slip that some of the names have already been engraved, and none of them have been rejected by the enchantment."

"Which names? Surely at least one of the so-called heroes is undeserving."

"I know for a fact that the, er, most controversial name has been accepted."

"The N-n-necromancer?" Umbridge stuttered over the word. My ears pricked up, my eyes widening in disbelief as Weasley nodded. A Necromancer, honoured by the Light?

"She did rid the world of You-Know-Who. Of course, if she had survived circumstances would be different. The only Necromancer the Ministry can tolerate is a dead one." Weasley paused, fidgeting with his horn-rimmed glasses. "I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. After all, Hermione Granger was posthumously awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class."

*Granger?* I clapped a hand across my mouth to stifle my gasp. That name I knew all too well. I fought down the surge of panic rising in me *She's dead. She's been dead for over a year here, she can't come back.*

I breathed easier once Weasley and Umbridge had departed the lift. By the time I had reached my destination, I was calm. With Granger gone, my self-appointed task would be considerably easier.

Looking around the hollow spectacle of the Atrium, I bared my teeth with a mirthless smile, unseen by the few workers arriving by Floo, a shadow within shadows. The days of this bungling Ministry were numbered as soon as I staggered through the veil.

*The End... for now*

