

Invictus

by Doomspark

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 12

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;

I am the captain of my soul.

-William Ernest Henley

The Daily Prophet. September 4,

1998, page 1.

PUBLIC AUCTION!

Anyone who suffered loss in the Wizarding War now has a chance to get some of their own back! In a grand display of public spirit, the Ministry of Magic is auctioning off the services of thirty-four convicted Death Eaters! These convicts have been Soulstruck (see page 3) and are completely safe. The auction will take place at the Ministry on September 8, 1998.

The Ministry encourages the public to attend so that they may see for themselves that there is nothing to fear from these former Death Eaters.

The Daily Prophet, September 4, 1998, page 3. Excerpt.

Soulstriking was developed by Aberon McGaven during the Wizarding War to assist in controlling dangerous prisoners when it was found that Dementors were no longer effective. The process permanently depresses the higher brain functions, rendering the prisoner calm and compliant, and completely incapable of magic. The first official use of Soulstriking occurred last August when eighty-six self-styled Death Eaters were convicted of war crimes. Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge sentenced the condemned to be Soulstruck rather than executed. "In this way," he stated, "we hope to show a sense of justice. These criminals will now serve the very people whom they harmed."

Cornelius Fudge put down the paper with a smile and rubbed his left arm reflexively. The Ministry was in dire need of funds. Auctioning off the Death Eaters would not only bring in a healthy amount of coin, but would also transfer the costs for their care to their new owners. He himself planned to attend the auction. He might even bid on Lucius Malfoy!

~*~

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Hermione?" Harry asked. "I thought you didn't believe in slavery."

Hermione turned to face him and planted her hands on her hips. "Harry, it's not about slavery. It's about saving a life." She sighed. "Think it through. Who - besides the Order - knows Severus was a spy? No one. At the same time, everyone knows he was a Death Eater. We know he was arrested, and we know he was convicted. We can't let him be knocked down to, say, Amos Diggory."

Harry winced. "Do you think he'll be here today? Diggory, I mean."

"I'm sure of it. Can you imagine what he'd do to any of those people?"

"After what happened to Cedric, I wouldn't blame him."

"Harry!"

"Well I wouldn't!"

She searched his face. "What about you?"

"Huh?"

"Are you going to buy one of them? Have your own personal Death Eater licking your boots, fawning all over you, panting to obey your every whim?"

It was his turn to sigh. "Hermione... you don't understand. Death Eaters are nothing more than murderers, rapists, arsonists, and every other kind of criminal you can think of. This is a damn sight more humane than the Dementor's Kiss."

"What do you mean I don't understand? What don't I understand?"

"He killed my parents! And -"

" - And he killed mine as well, or did you forget that?" She glared at him. "Harry Potter, you are not the center of the universe! There's not a wizard in Britain today who hasn't been touched in some way by Voldemort and his followers."

He winced as if she'd struck him. "I know that," he said slowly. "but there's a part of me that screams for vengeance. I guess I meant to say that I can understand how Mr. Diggory feels. Just..." he trailed off. "He hasn't ever gotten past Cedric's death."

"You're not him, Harry." Her voice was gentle. "Even if you did buy one, you'd be a better owner."

"I hope you're right." He gave her a lopsided smile. "Let's go get seated."

They made their way past several security checkpoints, and finally ended up in one of the ubiquitous convention rooms on the second underground level. At one end of the long rectangular room was a raised platform. The rest of the room was filled with hard backless benches, many of them occupied by witches and wizards. The frontmost row of benches was cordoned off with a gold ribbon; a sign on the seat said "Reserved for Press".

Harry found a piece of bench in the third row and sat down. Hermione sat down next to him and shuffled her feet nervously. "Harry - I meant what I said outside. We have to see if Snape is here. Even if his mind is gone, he doesn't deserve to spend the rest of his life as a slave."

"And if he's not here, then what?"

"Oh Harry, I don't know. We only know he was captured and convicted because Rita told us."

"I know. Secret trials with pre-ordained outcomes. Fudge at his best. Having an ally in the Press has been useful. I hope Fudge never finds out about her being part of the Order. He'd probably have her killed." Rita Skeeter had joined them after Death Eaters had burned the Daily Prophet offices, killing a number of the staff and injuring others. Her reasoning was simple: Voldemort had proved that he did not respect the Prophet's traditional neutrality. It was safer to join the opposition officially and be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

"I wouldn't put it past him." Her voice dropped to a whisper as the plump Minister of Magic waddled onto the podium and beamed a smile at the audience.

"Good morning!" Cornelius Fudge snapped his fingers and several house elves appeared and began handing out rolls of parchment. "These are the terms and conditions with which you must comply if you wish to bid. They are completely binding, so please be sure you understand them. The auction will start in," he looked at his watch, "precisely ten minutes."

Hermione unrolled the parchment and began reading. "The first part looks like standard boilerplate," she said to Harry. "If there's such a thing as standard boilerplate for slavery."

He nodded, reading his own copy. "Service for life, absolute obedience, lovely wording." He snorted softly. "They're not permitted wands obviously."

She was a faster reader than he was. "Can't address them by their former names - there's a spell that detects it, and will result in the Soulstruck being returned to the ministry to be reauctioned."

The corner of Harry's mouth twitched. "Since they all have the Dark Mark, I suppose Spot would be a good name." She stiffened beside him. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

"I know. Bad jokes are your way of dealing with unpleasant truths." She finished reading, and rolled up the parchment. "Part of me hopes we don't find him here."

"If we don't find him here, we'll keep looking. The Order won't abandon its own."

Her reply was lost as Fudge stepped up to the podium again. "Witches and wizards! The auction begins!"

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 12

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Chapter Two

Hermione closed her eyes as what was left of the first man shambled up onto the platform, urged on by a muscular wizard. Slackjawed and dull-eyed, his red hair falling out in patches, Percy Weasley stood there attired in the dull green shirt and trousers that marked a wizard prisoner. She felt Harry's sharp intake of breath of recognition.

"What am I bid for this one?" Fudge asked the audience. "He is relatively young, and will provide years of faithful service! And remember, he will be absolutely obedient!"

"Three galleons!" called a voice from the front left.

The Minister of Magic looked shocked. "Three galleons? Surely you jest! He's worth more than that!"

The bidding went slowly and topped out at twenty-three galleons. "Sold to the gentleman in the blue cloak in the back row! Come forward, sir, and claim your property."

The wizard came forward, throwing back the hood of his cloak to reveal long red hair. "Make the paperwork out in the name of William Weasley," he growled as he glared at what had once been his brother. In a voice of stone, he repeated the spell that would bind the Soulstruck man to him for life. "And this one's new name shall be Cain."

Tears welled up in Hermione's eyes. Percy had caused the deaths of Fred and Charlie before being captured. She watched Bill stride off, Percy - no, Cain - shambling along behind him. No shackles were necessary; he was bound in chains of magic far more powerful. Harry caught her eyes and gave her a sympathetic smile. The next former Death Eater was climbing onto the platform. She recognized him at once: Vincent Crabbe, senior.

In the back of her mind, she had to admire the arrangement of the auction. The most infamous Death Eaters would be last. Given Fudge's animosity towards Dumbledore, that meant that Snape, if he were here, would be one of the last ones. She swallowed hard, hoping she could stand to wait through it all.

It dragged on and on. She recognized most of the faces, and kept count as one by one they followed their new owners out of the room and into their new destiny. "Twenty-five down. Nine more to go." She muttered to Harry. He was looking pale himself. Walden MacNair had been horribly disfigured. Nevertheless, he'd brought 1800 galleons.

"I'd do this for you if I could, Hermione," Harry replied. "But you know what would happen."

"Yeah, Fudge would spin it like you were bidding purely to affront him. He might even invalidate your bid, and God knows what might happen to Snape then."

The crowd had thinned slightly, the curiosity seekers more interested in talking to the new owners than watching the slow-paced auction. The press coverage was also thinning. Rita Skeeter had left after number twenty-two - Lawrence Nott - had been purchased by Madame Hyacinth Malkin for 1639 galleons.

Number twenty-six shambled into view, and Hermione bit her lip hard to keep from crying. It was Severus Snape. Harry caught his breath as he recognized his former nemesis. "Bid what you need to, Hermione," he whispered. "I'll lend you however much you need to get him out of this."

Always slender, Snape was now skeleton-thin. His skin was stretched tightly over the bones of his face, giving him a death's-head appearance. Bruises and welts showed on every inch of exposed skin. His hair was matted and snarled, and the prisoner's garb he wore was torn and filthy. His left foot dragged behind him as he walked, and it seemed he could not stand upright.

A flash of disgust passed over Fudge's face before he turned his politician's smile on the audience. "Here we have one of the most notorious Death Eaters yet captured! He served He Who Must Not Be Named for over twenty years! No crime was too foul for his hands. He committed rape! Murder! Torture! He used the Unforgivable curses on any who crossed his will! He tortured and killed at least a dozen defenseless Muggles in fits of bloodlust!" He paced around the platform, gesticulating wildly. "He pretended to reform in order to spy on us! He betrayed at least six Aurors who were then slain by his fellows! Execution is far too kind to this criminal; he must pay for his offenses! Who will open the bidding?"

"Four galleons!"

Hermione twisted around to see who else was bidding. Althea Parkinson, Pansy's youngest sister. Her expression boded no good for her former Potions instructor.

"Six!" That was Devon Clearwater. He'd bid up to ten galleons on every Death Eater, and been outbid on all of them. Hermione's heart ached for him. He'd been close to his sister. Although Percy Weasley had been the principal in Penelope's death, in Devon's mind, all Death Eaters were equally culpable.

"Seven!" Ludo Bagman! What the heck was he doing here?

Hermione raised her hand and called, "Nine galleons!"

"Ten!" Althea again.

"Twelve!" A new voice. A wizard Hermione didn't know.

"Fourteen!" In the midst of her bid, the thought came to her that she would have to give Severus a new name. She gasped and sat in a daze for a moment, hearing the others continue bidding through the roaring in her ears. "Get a grip, Granger," she muttered to herself. "You've got to do this!"

"I have twenty-eight galleons!" Fudge was saying when her head cleared. He sounded a little disappointed. "Going once!"

"Thirty!"

"Thirty galleons going once!"

"Thirty galleons going twice!"

"Sold for thirty galleons to the young lady! Step forward, ma'am, and claim your property."

Harry caught her hand and squeezed it for encouragement as she stood up. She was pleased that she wouldn't have to borrow money from him. She walked up to the platform, calling on all the self-control she'd learned during the war. "Make the paperwork out in the name of Hermione Granger," she said. She turned to Severus and repeated the binding spell, looking into his dull, dead eyes. She had hoped to see some spark, some trace of her former teacher. She saw only a terrible emptiness. "And this one's new name shall be..."

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 12

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Chapter Three

"...Grim." She was going to *kill* Harry later for making that joke. All she'd been able to think of were names more suited for pets. Spot, indeed!

Hermione completed the spell and slid her wand back up her sleeve. "Come, Grim." She did her best to make her voice sound harsh. "You have many misdeeds to pay for." She strode off toward the exit, noticing that Harry had made his way through the room already and was waiting for her there. Grim stumbled after her, nearly falling as he tried to keep up.

Ten minutes later, they were out of the Ministry building, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Harry, I'm going to Apparate us home. Come by tomorrow if you like."

"I'd like that." He bent his head as if to kiss her goodbye, his lips just brushing her ear. "I'll talk to Alastor and see if he has any ideas about how to break this Soulstriking." Then he vanished with a quiet *pop*.

She turned to her new property. She had to hold him firmly to Apparate with him, but was wary of hurting him any further. Finally she decided that grasping the front of his shirt would do the least damage. Steeling herself, she gripped the coarse fabric and disappeared.

Hermione had given the situation some thought ahead of time. Not knowing what condition Severus would be in when if they found him, she'd rented a small house on the outskirts of London. The place had three major attractions for her: the owner didn't ask questions as long as rent was paid, the garden was large enough that there were no nosey neighbors to contend with, and the entire garden was surrounded by a heavy chain-link fence. It was now also heavily warded against unexpected visitors. The caution that had kept Hermione alive and relatively unscathed throughout the Wizarding War carried over into the subsequent peace.

They appeared in what Harry had dubbed the "reception room" of her house, what her parents used to call the parlor. Grim stumbled again, and this time he did fall, measuring his length on her floor. Some part of Hermione's mind noted that he lacked the basic reflexes to try to block the fall; his hands and arms had remained at his sides. He didn't even try to rise. He sprawled inelegantly, one arm twisted beneath him. That nearly undid her; she bit her lip again.

"Grim, get up and go sit on the sofa." Hermione almost couldn't watch as he struggled to his feet, staggered two steps across the room, and slumped down onto her sofa. She took herself to task immediately. There were things that needed to be done, and weren't going to get done if she didn't do them. She needed a plan. Two *Accio*-s later, she had parchment and quill, and was scribbling out a list. The very first entry was "Bath".

Fifteen minutes later, she'd completed a list of 78 things that needed to be done and looked up. Grim was still sitting on the sofa, exactly as he had been. Only the slight rise and fall of his chest showed that he was alive. She went into the bathroom and filled the tub with lukewarm water. Towels were stacked nearby, as were two bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and a new cake of soap. All ready.

"Grim, come here." He came horribly, with none of the feral grace that had marked his every movement during her years at Hogwarts. "Take off all your clothes, then get in the tub." She was determined to keep this situation businesslike and professional, and not get flustered at the idea of seeing her former instructor in the altogether. "For god's sake, Granger, he doesn't have anything you haven't seen before." She muttered to herself.

He undressed with fumbling motions, dropping shirt and pants onto her clean floor, and stepping out of the canvas sandals. Getting into the tub was more of a challenge, as his bad leg would not take his weight, and he nearly fell again.

"Stop! Sit on the edge of the tub... that's right. Thank god, I've got a tub with a flat rim. Grim, turn sideways a little. Now put your right leg in the tub. Good. Turn a little more. Now put your left leg in the tub..." It took nearly five minutes of step by step commands, but she finally had him sitting in the tub. "I need to get you cleaned up so I can treat your injuries, Grim. I'll try not to hurt you."

It wasn't pretty, but Hermione had seen worse during the war. Grim's back was covered with welts laid out in a criss-cross pattern. Some were old, some half healed, and some relatively new. Overlaying the welts were bruises ranging in color from the yellow-green of the nearly healed to the blue-black of the newly inflicted. More welts and bruises decorated his arms and legs, though his face was left untouched. The human body is capable of showing an astonishing range of color when it is injured.

Amazingly, none of the welts had become infected. The worst injuries were the three cracked ribs that prevented him from straightening up, and the poorly mended break

in his left leg. Her temper flared again as she realized that the crippling was deliberate. "Oh, Grim. I wish I knew who did this to you. I'd hex their balls off!"

She consulted her list. "Clothes. Right." In the next moment, she banished the torn and filthy clothing he'd been wearing to the trash, and summoned clean, dry clothes in its place - slippers and flannel pajamas. Once he was dressed, she brought him into the dining room. "Let's see here. I'll have to get you some things to wear during the day, but those will do for right now. Treat injuries..." She decided to wait for Harry to show up for that. He knew more and better healing spells than she did.

"Food - that can wait till Harry gets you put back together..." She considered. "You haven't eaten properly in ages. Anything too rich will probably make you sick. Oatmeal is probably best. Maybe some thin broth."

She jumped as her wards flashed indicating that someone was trying to Floo her. "Stay here, Grim. I'll be right back." She dashed into the kitchen and opened the wards enough to identify her caller. "Harry, oh I am so glad to hear from you." She dropped the remaining wards and he stepped through the fireplace.

"How is he?"

Hermione reestablished her wards before answering. "Someone beat the shit out of him. More than once from the looks of it. He's got some broken bones that never were healed properly. The rest is cuts and bruises." She went into the dining room with Harry following. "And he's been starved."

"Any infections?"

"Not that I could see, but you're better with healing than I am." In her school days, she would've had a hard time accepting being less than perfect at any aspect of magic. Now she realized that she had her limitations. It had been a hard lesson.

"Mmm." Harry ran his hands lightly over Grim's leg. "Nasty break, and obviously left to mend on its own. Lovely." He took out his wand and *chascorn*. He watched in satisfaction as the bone straightened, becoming smooth again as it should be. "That will mend any other broken bones he had also. These cuts and bruises will do better to heal naturally. Oh, and try to keep him off his feet for a couple of days until the Bone-healing spell finishes."

"Thanks, Harry. I appreciate this. Stay for dinner?"

"Sure. I talked to Alastor."

"And?" She began fixing dinner.

"As it turns out, he's a drinking buddy of Aberon's."

"Aberon? As in the bastard who developed this?" she nearly dropped the casserole dish she was holding.

"The one and same. Calm down, Hermione. You're not going to get anywhere acting before you think."

She took two deep breaths. "Ok. I'll listen."

"It comes in two parts. The first is a potion, a poison of sorts that prevents the part of the brain that controls magic from functioning. The second is a spell that binds the essence of the person... the heart, mind, soul... whatever you want to call it into a container." He grimaced. "The container has to remain intact if you want the person to live. Aberon told Alastor that he wasn't able to get around that restriction."

"Did he happen to mention how to break the spell?"

"Yes."

"Well, tell me already!"

It was Harry's turn to take a couple of deep breaths. "Obviously it's in two parts. You have to counteract the poison, and you have to restore the soul to the body."

She gestured impatiently. "Go on."

"Aberon is brilliant in a sick and twisted way. He reasoned that no one could truly love a convicted Death Eater... at least, no one who would be allowed to buy one."

"Harsh, but probably true. As much as I respect... Grim... he's not loveable." She stopped for a second. "Waitaminute! Are you telling me...?"

"Yes. Only someone who loves him can break the spell. The counterspell is *Amor Vincit Omnia*. Love conquers all."

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 12

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Chapter Four

Hermione threw her hands into the air. "There's got to be another way to break the curse."

"I hope so, for Grim's sake." Harry replied. "But Aberon seemed pretty sure about it."

"I don't suppose a love potion..."

"Probably not, but it might be worth a try."

"It would have to be a fairly advanced potion." She chewed on the end of a quill. "Lust potions are easy. Aphrodisiacs are easy. But an honest-to-god love potion..."

"... is skating close to Dark magic - manipulating the mind to feel things it wouldn't normally. And there's no guarantee it would work."

"Well what would you propose, mister knowitall?" Hermione was frustrated.

"Learn to love him. For real. Or find someone who does that you trust enough to cast the spell."

That was an uncomfortable thought, and she shied away from it, choosing to focus on the other pieces of the problem. "I'd guess that it would be best to restore the soul first, and then counteract the poison."

"It's not that simple either. You have to do them at the same time... the brain's ability to process magic is part of what allows the soul to be restored."

"Damn it! Why did Aberon have to be so bloody brilliant? He's made this nearly impossible!" She stopped for a second and grinned ruefully. "I just realized - he would've wanted to make it impossible given the circumstances. It's just hard to see Grim like this, when I remember what he was." She turned back to the kitchen and began working on their dinner again. Harry leaned against the doorway with that look in his eyes that meant he was thinking.

"When we break into the Ministry to get Grim's soul back, we're going to need to steal as many of the others as we can also for camouflage," he said after a few minutes punctuated by the sounds of her cooking. "If Grim is the only soul that goes missing, they'll come right to you."

She tucked the casserole into the oven. "Good thought. Do I remember you saying that the jars have to remain intact?"

"That's what Aberon said. If a jar gets broken, the Soulstruck person dies."

"Could we transfer the contents to another jar and then break the original?"

"Maybe. We're going to need some help with this though. There's too many things that need to be done, and we'll be second-guessing ourselves by the time we're done planning if we do it ourselves. Bill Weasley would be my first choice. He's a curse breaker, and he knows what kinds of things to look out for. The only problem is - he may not be exactly rational on this subject. Did you see his face when he bought ... Cain?"

"Unless it was a sham and he's going to try to restore him."

Harry gaped. "I hadn't thought of that. Can I use your floo?"

She nodded and lowered the wards enough that he could use the fireplace.

A few minutes later, Bill Weasley climbed out of her fireplace and shook soot and ashes off his shoulders. "So Harry, Hermione, to what do I owe the pleasure of this invitation?"

"Half a jiff, Bill." Hermione had her wand out and put her wards back up, adding the strongest privacy spells she knew. "There. Listen, we saw you today at the auction."

"You were there? I didn't see you or I would've said hello."

"We were up near the front. But that aside... what are you going to do with your new... property?"

Bill sat down heavily. "Girl, you sure don't pull your punches. I'll level with you. I think this is an outrage, and I want my brother back - for Mum's sake as much as anything." His eyes narrowed. "Who did you buy? Please tell me it wasn't ... Scabbers or Bad Faith, senior!"

Harry grinned a little at Bill's nicknames for Peter Pettigrew and Lucius Malfoy. "I didn't buy anyone. It would've given Fudge a heart-attack."

Bill turned to Hermione. "Fess up, girl."

She took a breath. "I rescued a member of the Order."

He was quick. You can't be a master curse breaker without being able to read between the lines. "The Potionsmaster."

"Yes - for much the same reason. Bill - he's the only person who might know what happened to Albus. If we can find Albus, we might be able to get his conviction overturned."

"Albus is the only wizard who can bring Fudge to heel." Harry agreed. "We've had every member of the Order who could be spared looking for him since... the last fight, and we haven't found him yet."

"So you want to break the spells on ... what's his name... find Albus, and then get the conviction rescinded. That's going to be a lot of work." Bill shook his head. "There's people in the Order - Rita for one - who never really trusted him... I see why you didn't involve the entire bunch of us."

"Right - now we've learned a few things about this Soulstriking business, and we thought you would have some ideas." Hermione rattled off what Aberon had told Alastor.

Bill ran a hand through his hair. "I hate dealing with third-hand information, especially when it's acquired through alcohol. You never know exactly how accurate it is. So - the potion sounds simple enough to counter - you may have to break into St. Mungo's pharmacy to get it, but a *Mens Sana* potion will probably lift it."

Hermione made a note: Get a *Mens Sana* potion - St. Mungo's Phar.

"You don't want to break into the Ministry until you know exactly where the Souljars are kept," Bill continued. "You want to break in, get them - I agree with taking as many as possible - and get out. There were thirty some people auctioned... do we have any idea how big the jars are?"

Harry shook his head. "Alastor didn't say."

"That's a pity."

"We were wondering if it was possible to transfer the contents of the Souljars into another container... my thought was that we could then smash the original containers, and the Ministry might think that the ... people... had all died."

"Too easy to uncover - all it takes is for one of Fudge's minions to see ONE of the supposedly dead Soulstruck, and the game is up." Harry chewed on a hangnail. "But we could do some of them, particularly if we can also mix things up so they can't identify whose jars got smashed and who they have left."

"So - find where they're kept, how big they are, and how they're marked..."

"Then we plan the next step - how to actually get them."

Bill sat back in satisfaction. "I know Mum will cast the spell on ... Cain. I wish I'd come up with a better name - but I was trying to make a point. But who's going to cast the spell on ... your property?"

Hermione blushed. "I'm going to try it."

To Bill's eternal credit, he didn't snicker. Instead, he asked gently, "Do you truly love him?"

"No - I don't think anyone does. I respect him - what he was, at least. I care about what happens to him. But I don't love him! I was going to use a love potion."

"You've got guts. I'll help you all I can. But we'll have to move slowly so we don't alert anyone."

~*~

Over the course of the next few months, a few incidents took place that were seemingly unrelated.

The pharmacy at St. Mungo's was broken into, and much damage done. A few minor potions were stolen, and the investigation concluded that it was the work of random vandals.

The Daily Prophet published a joint interview with Aberon McGaven and Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge about the success of the Soulstriking. The article included a picture of the two standing in the room where the Souljars were kept.

Aberon McGaven acquired a new drinking buddy - a tall wizard with long red hair worn in a ponytail.

Hermione Granger took a leave of absence from her job in Flourish & Blotts, and began spending much time in various libraries reading up on Love Potions.

The famous Harry Potter held a huge celebration in honor of his 19th birthday. Everyone who was anyone in the wizarding world was invited, and there was plenty to eat and drink.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 12

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Chapter Five

The list of 78 items had grown to 342 by the first week of December, although about half had been crossed off as completed or scratched out as plans changed. Hermione, Bill, and Harry had come up with what they hoped was a workable plan, and they would put it into effect on the Winter Solstice. They'd chosen that date for several reasons, not the least of which that it was the dark of the moon.

Bill stretched his long legs under Hermione's dinner table and sighed contentedly. "That was a good dinner, Hermione. Thanks." He yawned and stretched until the vertebrae in his neck popped. "I will not be sorry when this next bit is done. I don't mind collecting information. But breaking into the Ministry is... I hope Dad never finds out."

"He shouldn't, unless something goes badly wrong," Harry replied, looking up from where he was doodling on a piece of parchment. "Hermione's plan is a good one. We all agreed on it."

Hermione began clearing the remains of their dinner off the table. "It helps that Fudge has been so much of an idiot. He's reduced Ministry security to three Aurors who have to patrol the entire building, since he took off the Anti-Apparition wards."

"Bill, you don't think he's onto us, do you?" Harry asked slowly. "It looks like he's playing right into our hands."

Bill sighed again, this time much less contentedly. "That is one thing that I would give a great deal to know, and we won't know until we do it."

"Let's go over the plan again as soon as I get the kitchen cleaned up," Hermione broke in. "We might see something we overlooked."

"More likely we'll outthink ourselves at this point," Bill replied. "You can't plan for every contingency."

"But the entire point of Arithmancy is to reduce the number of possible actions in a situation to one," she objected.

"That doesn't work when you're dealing with people. People do not act logically all the time, and you can't factor that into your equations. Anything with the human factor has a certain amount of randomness." Bill leaned forward. "The more human factors, the more unpredictable things become. In chess, there are a limited number of moves that can be made in each turn, and you can use Arithmancy to predict the most likely reaction to each move. Master chess players often will have their actions planned out three or four moves ahead. But if they're playing someone who doesn't react as they expect, it throws them off their stride."

"That's why I can sometimes beat Ron at chess," Harry agreed. "He's better than I am, but I'm ... not predictable."

"Exactly," Bill said.

"But..." she began.

"Hermione," Harry said gently, "we know you're nervous. But we've gone over this as much as we can. It's only going to be another two weeks. We've done everything that needs to be done. So we have to wait."

Hermione looked over at Grim, where he sat completely oblivious to the conversation going on around him. "What are we going to do if this doesn't work?"

Bill grimaced. "Depending on what part of it fails, it may kill him with backlash."

"Or kill you, since you're going to be casting the spell," Harry added.

"Thanks for reminding me," she said sourly. "I've been trying not to think about that. But seriously - if we can't do this... wouldn't he be better off dead than... like he is now?"

"What would he want?" Harry wondered aloud. "Death is so... final."

"Harry has the right of it," Bill said. "There are times when Death is a release - when existing becomes too much to bear. But we don't have the right to make the choice for

him."

"Do we have the right to condemn him to a life like this?" She pointed at Grim. "Look at him, Bill! He can't do anything without being told, step by step. He's not human any more! Do you think he wants to live like this?"

"I think that as long as there's a chance of reversing the spell, Grim would want the chance at it. He's not in pain - hell, he's probably in the best shape of his life now."

Now that was probably true. Grim was no longer cadaverously thin. Regular meals had allowed him to regain most of the weight he'd lost. Regular baths had turned his matted hair thick and silky. Best of all, the welts had healed with a minimum of scarring. But his eyes were the same: dead and empty. They were the eyes of a man who has seen too much to remain sane.

She shook her head. "I don't know, Harry. I think I'm going to hope that it works."

~*~

At ten o'clock at night on December 21st, Hermione quietly Apparated into a small room in the first sublevel of the Ministry of Magic followed shortly by Harry and Bill. Harry had spent the last few nights here under his invisibility cloak making notes on the security routine. The Aurors who patrolled the building had just finished their rounds and would be sitting around playing Exploding Snap for thirty minutes. At that time, they would draw lots to see which one of them would check the sublevels. The other two would check the remainder of the building.

Each of the three friends carried a bag with twelve unbreakable jars that had once held various delicacies. Harry had saved them from his birthday party, and the three had spent a week casting every protective spell they could think of on them. Their shoes were treated with a Catfoot spell that minimized the noise their footsteps would make. Harry had his cloak, but the other two were making do with Chameleon spells that would allow them to blend in with their backgrounds as long as they were relatively still.

Bill had brought along a couple of fireworks and some other things which he would use as distractions if they had to run. He'd also dyed his distinctive hair an unremarkable reddish brown - a precaution against possible recognition. Hermione's hair was pulled back into a tail, and stuffed down the back of her shirt to keep it out of the way.

The Souljar room was only two corridors over, and Hermione blessed Rita Skeeter for all her help. Wands out, they traversed the halls. Bill led the way and Harry played tail-guard. When they got to the room, Hermione cast the two quick spells that muffled any alarms and unlocked the door. Quickly they entered and Hermione locked the door behind them.

It was a relatively small room, obviously a laboratory. Immediately to the left of the door was a set of shallow shelves containing beakers, pipettes, and other paraphernalia. A ceramic-topped workbench with a sink ran the length of the left wall, with cabinets underneath and more shelves above. On the wall opposite the door was another, deeper, set of shelves. The right wall was bare except for a heavy metal hook in each corner. A thick chain hung from each hook (coiled neatly on the floor in the case of the lower hooks), and at the end of each chain was a metal cuff. Hermione blanched and turned her back on them.

The Souljars stood neatly in rows in the left rear corner of the workbench, and Hermione cautiously approached them, her wand out, checking every inch of floor and countertop for alarms or other traps, and doublechecking when she didn't find any. Bill followed suit, casting spells to reveal hidden guards, or listening devices, again finding nothing.

"This is insane," Harry whispered harshly. "No traps. No alarms. No wards. It doesn't make any sense! But let's not quarrel with Fate. Let's do this and leave."

Hermione looked at the jars and swore quietly. "None of them are labeled! So we take them all and puzzle out who's who later." She looked again. "Three rows of twelve... that's thirty-six! But only thirty-four were auctioned..."

"We brought some spare jars, just in case," Bill muttered back at her. "Harry will just have to be very careful doing the *Invacumar* spell. It's a very good thing that our jars are bigger than these."

The Souljars, in fact, were rather smaller than they'd expected - about the size of a man's fist. They were a uniform deep cobalt blue in color which effectively masked the contents from view. Their lids were also glass, and a ring of wax around the join made for an airtight seal. She picked up the leftmost jar on the front row and handed it to Harry.

He set his bag of jars on the floor and took one out. "I suppose we'd better make the jars match, just in case."

"Let me do that," Bill said. "You're going to be doing all the actual work." A couple of moments later, all the jars they'd brought with them were twins to the Souljars. Bill had also thoughtfully added numbered labels.

In short order, they had it down to a system. Hermione picked up a Souljar off the shelf and handed it to Harry. He then picked up the next empty jar, checked the number, and transferred the contents with the *Invacumar* spell. The numbered jar was handed to Bill who packed it carefully in one of the bags. The empty Souljar went back to Hermione who carefully returned it to its former location. A heartbeat later, she picked up the next jar.

"Thirty-three..."

"Thirty-four..."

"Thirty-five..."

"Thirty-six." Harry finished and sagged slightly. "Do we chance Apparating out of here?"

"We can't," Bill replied as he packed the last jar. "We've got to cancel all the trap detecting spells we set."

"And the spells in the hallway," Hermione added.

Harry looked at his watch. "We've only got five minutes. Let's move!" He picked up one of the bags. The other two followed suit. Two minutes later, they Apparated out with a great sense of relief.

Back at Hermione's house, the three established the strongest wards, warn-offs, and privacy spells they knew. Bill rubbed his temples wearily when they were done. "If anything can see what's going on here, then we deserve to get caught," he declared.

"I don't think I'd go that far," Harry replied from where he'd sprawled on the couch. "I don't want to wind up in one of those jars."

Hermione set the tea kettle on. "We're not going to do anything until we've had some tea and recovered a little. We'll make stupid mistakes if we're tired." She sat down at the kitchen table and rested her head on her arms.

For a little while there was silence broken only by the sound of breathing and the quiet bubbling of the kettle. When Hermione rose to pour the tea, Harry got up and began lining up the jars in the order they'd been stored. He contemplated them silently, nodding his thanks when she handed him a mug.

Bill joined him, mug in hand also. "So here's our unplanned complication. How the hell do we tell which is who?"

"Well - there's all kinds of possibilities." Harry scratched an ear. "They could be in alphabetical order. They could be in the order in which the procedure was applied. They could be in the order in which they were auctioned. Or it could be random."

"I don't think it would be random," Hermione said slowly. "I'd think even Fudge would want some way to keep track of people, just in case."

"I've got an idea," Bill said. "I think Harry pegged it when he said it could be the order in which this was done. And ordinarily, you might think that this one," he pointed at jar #1, "would be the first one. But if you remember how they were laid out on the workbench..."

"The one in the corner would be the first one! Number twenty-five!" Hermione finished.

"Exactly."

"Which still leaves us with the same problem."

"I wish we'd thought to search the rest of the lab. I'll bet there's some kind of record somewhere."

"McGaven's too much of a scientist not to keep notes - and I remember him saying that he's the only one who could do this Soulstriking and make it work."

"Would he keep that kind of record in his lab or in his office?" Hermione asked. Then she thought about it. "Never mind. He'd want it in the lab for making notes."

The three friends exchanged a long look. Harry said it. "Back to the Ministry."

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 12

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter Six

Under the cover of his invisibility cloak, Harry watched the Aurors playing Exploding Snap. He'd been there for nearly twenty minutes, patiently leaning against an out-of-the-way wall. They should be about due to make their rounds soon, he thought to himself.

Almost as if he had summoned the thought, a card exploded and the game ended in good-natured chaffing. The three Aurors drew lots and set off on their rounds. Once they were gone, Harry Apparated back outside where the other two were waiting.

"They've just started on their rounds. It should only be a few more minutes before they'll be done."

"Good." Bill replied. "I really hate this part of it. Not so much for me, but for Dad."

"I'm going back inside to wait for them. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, something's gone wrong and you two get out of here." He Apparated, leaving his friends to wait and stew impatiently.

"Gods, why didn't we think of this?" Hermione grumbled for the seventeenth time. "I should've thought about it! I should've looked for notes the first time!"

"None of us thought of it, Hermione. We're all equally at fault here."

"We assumed the jars would be labeled. It's not a bad assumption! WHY would Aberon not label the jars?"

"Aberon is a very painstaking researcher. If they're not labeled, he's got some other way of identifying them. I doubt he would depend on their position - it would be too easy to get them mixed up."

"So we hope we can find his notes. If we can, we hope he details which is who. If he doesn't, we hope we can figure it out anyway."

"One way or another, we'll know what our options are tonight."

The conversation was interrupted by a pop as Harry reappeared. "They just got back from their rounds, so we should have about thirty minutes. Let's go - same drill as before." Three minutes later, they were back in the laboratory.

"Don't forget to check for alarms and wards!" Harry hissed as Hermione started towards the cabinets. She stopped and blushed, taking out her wand and casting the requisite spells. The other two did the same. As before, there was nothing. The cabinets were locked, though, and didn't seem to respond to *Alohamora*. Bill tried two or three spells of his own with no success.

"So now what?"

Bill knelt and examined the lock on the cabinets. "I've never seen anything like this. It must be custom work - it's certainly not the kind of thing the Ministry uses regularly."

Harry hunkered down beside him. "I'd guess he installed that lock himself. Look at the fancy engraving. This is probably an heirloom."

"Just lovely," Hermione growled. "Let me take a look." The lock was about the size of the palm of her hand, a rectangle of silvery metal with no visible keyhole. Definitely a wizard's lock. Around the edge of the rectangle were faint lines of engraving. "Bill, do you know any spells to make these engravings more visible?"

"Sure." They traded places. A moment later, the engravings were revealed to be letters, words, but in no language he knew. He knew better than to speak an unknown spell, but wrote it down and handed it to Hermione to study. There were four words: *Pedo mellon a minno*.

Hermione glanced at the phrase and started laughing. "Oh my! Aberon is a genius!" She stood up and looked at the lock. "Mellon!" With a gentle click, the cabinet doors opened.

Bill gaped. "How on earth?"

"It's from a book - a muggle book," Harry explained. "It's far too complicated to go into right now."

Hermione was searching the cabinets and emerged with a stack of parchment covered in tiny crabbed writing. "There's five more stacks of notes down here. We need to hurry."

"Right." Harry began copying the notes using a *Koperian Diese* spell. "We brought three reams of blank parchment with us. I hope that's enough to get everything."

Bill leaned over the counter and studied the rows of Souljars where they stood in neat lines. "I think I'm an idiot," he announced.

"I'm sure some of your brothers would agree with that," Hermione answered as she handed Harry the last stack of notes. "But why say it now."

"Look at the jars - they're not identical." It was true. The jars weren't labeled as such, but each lid had a number engraved on it. Bill grabbed a piece of parchment and began diagramming the jars and numbers while Harry completed the copying of the notes.

"We've got about eight minutes," Hermione said as Bill neatly rolled up his sketch and tucked it into a pocket.

Harry grabbed their copies of the notes. "Get that cabinet locked and let's start taking down spells."

Bill began dismantling their trap and alarm detection spells quickly, while Hermione restored the original notes to their place and closed the cabinet. The lock clicked shut quietly. A minute later they retraced their steps to their entry point and Apparated out.

Again they collapsed into chairs at Hermione's house, completely drained by their activities. Harry handed Hermione the notes. "Please tell me this is what we need."

She set the parchment down on the table. "I'm not even going to look at it until I've had a cup of tea. We've worn ourselves out." She went into the kitchen, where the sound of running water told the two men that tea was in the offing.

Bill put his sketch on the table next to the Souljars. "I'm not up to another round of this tonight. If we need to go back a third time, it'll have to wait for a couple of days."

"It's two a.m.," Harry said. "I'll pass on the tea. I'm too tired to drink it. Let's pick up in the morning."

"You'll splinch if you try Apparating as tired as you are." Bill said from where he sprawled on the sofa.

"Yes, pot," the younger wizard replied.

Hermione reappeared with a mug of tea in one hand. "Neither of you is going anywhere tonight. I've plenty of room here." She propelled them into her hitherto unused guest room where they fell into bed without protesting over much. She checked on Grim and found him sound asleep in his room. He wasn't dreaming tonight. Sometimes he had nightmares, and she would find him completely tangled in the bedclothes in the morning.

She took her cup of tea and went to bed. Half an hour later, she was still wide awake. Swearing quietly, she padded back out into her living room, grabbed the stacks of notes, and returned to her bedroom and began reading. Aberon had methodically dated each entry, and she soon had them arranged in chronological order. He'd begun by defining the project as he saw it - to come up with some way to render a wizard completely harmless. Removing the ability to do magic was not sufficient, he stated. It would be far too easy for another wizard to counter the effect. There must be a control. And that is when he'd come up with the idea of enforced obedience.

Nine pages of notes were devoted to descriptions of various kinds of geas - magical compulsions - with interspersed comments about the viability of modifying a given geas to fit the situation. In the end, he'd chosen to modify the geas originally used on House Elves. He'd picked it because the effects were hereditary - once the geas was tied in with the potion (there were approximately thirty pages devoted solely to its brewing), any child with a Soulstruck parent would be a Squib at best, a mindless automaton at worst.

Hermione shuddered at the thought, but kept reading.

Two pages were covered with notes about the ethics and safeguards surrounding the use of the spell. Aberon did not want the spell to be effective on wizards and witches who weren't truly evil. He'd wanted to tie it to the presence of the Dark Mark, but had been unable to get that restriction to work. What he had done was make the spell only work on a wizard who had cast at least two different Unforgivable curses.

Hermione put down the page she was reading in dismay. She couldn't think of a single living adult witch or wizard who didn't fit that category, including herself. She riffled through the notes, looking for a list. Halfway through the third stack, she found what she was looking for.

Herein is my record of those who have been condemned to be Soulstruck. As part of the spell requires that they give up all knowledge of who they were, I shall have to come up with some mnemonic that will permit me, at least, to undo the spell, if a person should be wrongfully convicted.

1: Elder Square or Hitch

2: Twin Peony

3: Easy Testament

4: Gigi the younger

5: H. Van Ryn Avert

6: Weird Pretty Poison

7: Bottled Crane

8: Rigged Incline

9: Scottish Lake

10: Light Satanist

11: Peer Tribute

12: Wind and Rain Stumble

13: Weird Waste

14: Bagged Testament

15: Death Strangler

16: Little Dragon

- 17: *Twin Carnation*
- 18: *Rude Custard Ferret*
- 19: *Nutty Muck*
- 20: *Reindeer*
- 21: *Eighth Bird Forest*
- 22: *Spring Flower*
- 23: *Scottish Sandpaper*
- 24: *Mad Doc Helper*
- 25: *American Guitar Garden*
- 26: *Very Elder Shellfish*
- 27: *Flower Garden*
- 28: *Winner's Dregs*
- 29: *Our Banister*
- 30: *Greenish Ado*
- 31: *Edged Scervix*
- 32: *Seventh Chalice*
- 33: *Self-loving Faith*
- 34: *Rocky Rat*
- 35: *Ebony Follower*
- 36: *Curious Bumblebee*

Notes to possibly puzzled perusers:

- 1) *Pedo mellon a minno* - "Speak, friend, and enter!" This phrase is engraved above the Doors of Durin in J.R.R. Tolkien's immortal masterpiece "The Lord of the Rings"
- 2) Not all of the Death Eaters listed in Chapter Six are from Canon. I've made some assumptions about some names, and added a few of my own.
- 3) *Koperian Diese* - Mangled German for "copy these", which seems an apt name for a spell to duplicate written works.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter Seven

The dawn came, cold, crisp, and clear, heralding blue skies with no trace of snow in the offing. Hermione was tired of puzzling over Aberon's cryptic list, and feeling a little stir-crazy. She went out into the garden with Grim in tow. It was good for him to get outside.

Three times around the perimeter of her garden was almost exactly one kilometer. She set off briskly, Grim lagging half a pace behind. With his leg and ribs mended, he no longer staggered with every step, and she was no longer afraid of him falling. He was wearing the new clothes she'd bought for him - jeans, flannel shirt, and half-boots. With his hair neatly combed and pulled back into a tail, he looked somewhat younger than his nearly forty years.

Once well into her stride, her mind returned to the current set of problems. She'd chosen to use the *Amorata* potion, the strongest love potion she had been able to find. She figured she could deal with loving Snape - it didn't mean she had to act on it. The effect normally lasted three days, although allowing the potion to "age" could lengthen the duration. Aging also increased the potency. A freshly brewed dose would bring on feelings of warmth and attraction. A dose brewed a week ago invoked desire and love. A month-old dose would bring on a mix of raging lust and slavish devotion. She'd brewed the potion three days ago.

So the list. Between the three of them, they could probably figure out who should be there. Then it would be a matter of figuring out Aberon's mnemonics. Once the first one or two were solved, it should be relatively easy to figure out the rest. And there might be clues in the rest of the notes. She would have to read over them carefully.

After six laps around the garden, she returned to the house ready to tackle the list. Harry and Bill were still sound asleep, judging from the snores that emanated from the guest room. She grinned and put the teakettle on, and settled Grim in "his" chair - a black leather recliner that she'd bought from a local shop. While she waited for the water to boil, she picked up Aberon's notes again and began rereading them.

The snores cut off abruptly when the teakettle shrilled, and by the time the tea was ready, two bleary-eyed wizards had emerged and were slouched at the table. Obviously, neither was going to be fit company until they'd had their morning tea, and probably some breakfast. Her instincts were correct. It was nearly two hours later when they sat down in the living room and began reading over the notes. Harry made himself comfortable on the sofa opposite the fireplace and started with the first stack, looking for anything that Hermione might have missed. Bill took the list of the Soulstruck who'd been auctioned and the third stack of notes, and spread them out on the coffee table. Hermione picked up the next-to-last stack where she'd left off and perched comfortably on the arm of the sofa.

"I may not be able to figure out Aberon's puzzles yet," Bill said after fifteen minutes, "but I'll stake everything I own that this list here wasn't all written out at once. The first few names are, but after that the ink changes with almost every entry. I'd bet he added the names as he completed each spell over time."

Harry put down the notes he was reading and went over to look at the list, reading over Bill's shoulder.

"They're not anagrams, that I can make out," Bill continued. "I thought they might be initials like Weird Pretty Poison would be someone whose initials were W.P.P. but I can't think who would have those initials."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Maybe they're invisible idiots."

"What?" the other two chorused. Hermione put down the notes she was reading and stared at him.

"It's a game I learned a long time ago... it's easiest to explain it by example. You've heard the phrase 'out of sight, out of mind'?" At their nods, he went on. "Another way to say 'out of sight' is 'invisible'. Another way to refer to someone being out of his or her mind is 'idiot' don't interrupt, Hermione. It's like charades you can use words that sound the same, anagrams, you can define syllables independently, and so on."

"Sounds horribly confusing," Bill said

"And not at all sensible," added Hermione.

"But don't you see, given the nature of the list, Aberon would want to confuse anyone else. All he wanted was something to jog his memory." Harry pointed to the thirty-third name on the list. "Self-loving Faith. Self-love is narcissism..."

"Malfoy is French for bad faith!" Hermione gasped. "So that's Narcissa Malfoy! Harry how on earth did you figure this out?"

"Dudley got a book of puzzles for a birthday present once. He didn't want it, but I read it."

Bill waved the list to recapture their attention. "So which one is, um, Grim and which is Cain?"

"We may have to do this by process of elimination," Harry said. "We can probably figure out what most of the names are. Then we just have to match them up."

"Draco Malfoy..." Hermione mused. "Would Draco be Little Dragon or Rude Custard Ferret?"

"I've just had an epiphany," Bill said slowly. "Gigi the younger is Greg Goyle, Jr."

"Excellent," Harry applauded. "You're getting the hang of it."

"Ebony Follower sounds like one of the Blacks but the only one who was Soulstruck is Bellatrix, and her name is LeStrange now," Hermione drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. "Besides, I can't figure out how he'd get 'follower' out of 'Bellatrix'."

"Unless he was referring to her being a follower of Voldemort," Harry answered.

"Argh!" Bill threw up his hands in frustration.

"Let's see if we can put names to the thirty-four who were auctioned," Hermione said.

"Walden MacNair, Greg Goyle, Jr., Vincent Crabbe, Sr., all three of the Malfoys, Sandar Rosier and his twin cousins..." Bill began.

"The three LeStranges, the Wilkes brothers what are their first names, Hermione?"

"Ezekiel and Zachariah." She shook her head, jotting quickly. "I wouldn't give either of those names to my kids. That's fourteen."

"Grim and Cain, Randall Bulstrode, Pettigrew." Bill contributed.

"Septimus Grayle makes nineteen." Hermione said.

"Pansy Parkinson and her father. Also what's his name Avery. That gives us twenty-two."

"Hildebrandt Avery," Bill thought for a moment. "There's also Mulciber can't remember his first name though."

"Who was that Slytherin a few years ahead of us? I can visualize the face, but can't put a name to it. I think he was in ... Cain's year. Maybe a year ahead of him." Harry grimaced. "It's getting harder."

"Don't forget Stebbins and Sloper."

"Right. The Mutt and Jeff of the Death Eaters. If we count the Slytherin we can't remember, we have twenty-six."

A brief pause ensued while they racked their brains. Finally Hermione said, "Let's look at what we have and try to make some matches. We're almost positive that Gigi the younger is Greg Goyle, Jr and Self-loving Faith is Narcissa Malfoy."

"Could Very Elder Shellfish be Vincent Crabbe, Sr.?" Harry asked.

"Seems likely. I'll bet Septimus Grayle is Seventh Chalice." Hermione made quick notes.

"Of course! Septimus means seventh, and a chalice is a grail."

"Merlin's teeth, these are evil!" Bill groused. "I think I've figured out Lucius Malfoy he's Light Satanist."

"Draco is probably Little Dragon," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I'd be surprised if Aberon knew about him being turned into a ferret in fourth year, so Rude Custard Ferret doesn't really apply."

Harry tossed the list onto the table. "What we have is a bunch of guesses. We don't know who is who, and we can't afford to be wrong."

"I've got an idea..." Bill said slowly. "I don't know if it would work or not though."

"Any consequences if it doesn't work?" Hermione asked.

"Not that I can think of." He jerked his head toward Grim. "Ask him to pick out his jar. Do it two or three times, and see if he picks the same jar every time. If he does, I'll bring Cain over here and try it with him."

"You think they might be able to recognize themselves?" Harry asked.

"I don't think it will hurt to try it. If nothing else, it'll give us a break from trying to figure out Aberon's confounded invisible idiots."

Hermione shrugged. "I don't think it'll work, but it's not going to hurt anything to try it." She rose and began setting the Souljars out on the table at random. "He's like a five year old. I have to tell him everything."

"Now that's odd," Bill said. "Is it that you 'have' to tell him everything, or that you 'are' telling him everything?"

She paused, one hand holding the last jar. "That first night, I had to tell him everything. I guess I assumed it would be like that always."

"He was in pretty bad shape that night," Harry said. "Maybe he did need it then. But he might not now."

"If Cain watches me do a simple thing like making tea, he remembers how to do it. Then I only have to tell him to make himself a cup of tea." Bill got up and looked down at the jars. "Should I relabel these to match the lids?"

She set the last jar down on the table. "Grim, come here." He rose at once and came to stand beside her. She looked up at him, speaking slowly and distinctly. "I want you to pick out your Souljar and set it here on the corner of the table."

For a second, she thought something flashed across his face, but then it was gone and she couldn't be sure of it. He looked down at the jars with his usual blank expression. Slowly, he raised his left hand and reached out. His fingers closed around a jar and lifted it up and gently set it down where she'd indicated.

Hermione stared for a moment, and then grabbed the jar. "It's label number 22."

Bill had his diagram out. "That would make it jar number 31, which is..." he scanned Aberon's list, "...Edged Scervix."

She put the jar down. "Grim, please turn around and face the wall." As soon as his back was turned, she began shuffling the jars again. "I won't believe this until he picks out the same jar at least three times."

"Edged Scervix," Harry mused. "I can see relating 'edged' to 'sever' as in his old name... but the 'scervix' part just baffles me."

"Grim, turn around and look at the jars again." Hermione crossed her fingers. "Now pick out your Souljar again, and set it here on the table." Again he looked blank, but reached out and picked up a jar, carefully putting it down where ordered. She turned it with a shaking hand so they could all read the label: 22.

"You don't think he's just reading the labels, do you," Harry asked. "He's heard us mention the label number."

"Good thought," Bill said as he drew his wand. "Cumulous!" A thick fluffy white cloud of fog settled around the jars, leaving only the lids visible.

Hermione shuffled the jars around again after having Grim turn his back. "Grim, turn around and pick out your Souljar. Then put it here on the table."

Grim looked at the exposed lids, and unerringly reached out and picked out the same jar.

"Once more, just to be sure," Bill said. "This time, I'll mix them up." He shuffled the jars around for a few moments and then stood back to let Grim make his selection.

Grim looked at the jars, but made no move to pick one up. Finally Hermione told him to go sit down, and she looked at the other two worriedly. "I was sure we were onto something!"

Bill blushed, matching his hair. "We are." He pulled the jar out of his left pocket. "I wanted to make sure, and didn't want you maybe giving him any subtle clues that it wasn't there. So I palmed it while I was shuffling the jars."

"I should hex you into the middle of next week for that, Bill Weasley!" Hermione said a little angrily.

"No you shouldn't," Harry broke in. "We had to be sure, and you know it."

"I'm sorry, Hermione. It was the only way I could think of to prove it."

She took a deep breath and then another. "You're right. When are you going to bring Cain over?"

"Today. Right now, if you don't mind." His eyes went dark for a moment as he put Grim's Souljar down on the table. "Seeing him like this is killing Mum."

Hermione took out her wand and lowered her wards so he could Apparate out. "You're coming right back?"

"Yes." He vanished with the typical quiet pop. A few minutes later, he reappeared with Cain in tow. "I thought about bringing Mum along too, but thought we'd better get the jar dealt with first."

Hermione studied Cain for a moment before reestablishing her wards. His hair had grown in again in the months since the auction, and he'd regained the weight he'd lost while imprisoned. If you discounted the expressionless eyes and the slackened jaw, he looked much like any other wizard. He was wearing dark red robes handed down from Arthur or Bill, judging from the let-down hem.

"Bill," Harry began slowly, "What's your Dad going to do when he finds out that you've restored Cain?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. If it works, I'm going to let Mum tell him. She's going to be casting the spell, not me. I love my brother, but I don't know if I love him enough." Bill looked down at the jars on the table. "Part of me thinks he deserves this for killing Fred and Charlie." He sighed. "Cain, come here. Now, pick out your Souljar, and place it here on the table."

With a weird sense of deja-vu, they watched Cain unerringly pick out a jar and set it aside. Bill picked it up. "Label number 8, which is jar number 18, which is..."

"Rude Custard Ferret," Harry completed. "Ferret... Weasel.. Weasley. I suppose that's easy enough."

"But Rude Custard? How on earth do you get...?" Hermione asked, shaking her head in confusion.

"It doesn't matter," Bill said harshly. "Let's make sure of this, just like we did with Grim."

Twice more, Cain picked out the same jar. Now they looked at each other with a certain amount of trepidation. Finally Harry said, "I'm convinced, but it's up to you two."

"Let me get Mum," Bill replied. "We'll find out soon enough." He Disapparated quietly as soon as Hermione lowered the wards again.

"He'll be back any moment," she said. "Let's get these other jars out of sight." She looked up for a moment. "Grim, go into your room and shut the door." Then to Harry again, "The less Molly knows..."

"Good point." They carefully put the jars in a box and stowed it in Hermione's bedroom. "What about the notes?" Harry asked, moving toward the table.

She gathered them up hastily, and one page escaped her grasp and fell on the floor. She ignored it in favor of hiding the bulk of their ill-gotten booty. When she came back into the living room, Harry was looking at the stray piece with a rather bemused expression.

The telltale *pop-pop* of Apparation stopped Hermione from asking Harry about it. He rolled it up neatly and tucked it into a pocket before the Weasleys got their bearings.

Molly's eyes were red-rimmed, and she sniffled a little as she looked around at the little group in Hermione's living room. "Bill's been telling me how you've both been such a help to him with... with... Cain." Fresh tears crept down her cheeks. "Do you really think this will work?"

Hermione shook her head and moved across the room to put a gentle arm around Molly. "We don't know we won't know until we try it. It should work, according to everything we've read. But there's only one way to find out for sure."

"What will happen if it doesn't work?"

"It's a dangerous spell, Mrs. Weasley," Harry answered. "It could kill him. The backlash could kill you as well. But we think it will work."

She rubbed her eyes and blew her nose noisily. Hermione brought her a cup of tea, which she accepted gratefully. "So what do I need to do?"

"He needs to drink the potion first. Then as soon as he's done, you cast the spell while holding the Souljar. The incantation is *Amor Vincit Omnia*."

"I think it would be good to try to concentrate on how much you love him," Harry added. "It won't hurt, at least."

"I love my son, no matter what he's done. Give him the potion," Molly said decisively, draining her cup. She picked up the indicated jar and gripped her wand firmly. "I'm ready."

The *Mens Sana* potion was a light blue, the color of the sky on the best and brightest days of summer. It tasted (according to all accounts) like starshine and moonbeams rather more poetic than useful in Hermione's opinion. They had appropriated half a dozen vials in their raid on St. Mungo's, and Harry handed one to Bill.

"Ready Mum?" When she nodded, he unstopped the vial and handed it to Cain. "Drink this."

The Soulstruck man complied with the same deliberation that marked all his movements. When he'd finished, Bill gestured to Molly. "Time, Mum."

She pointed her wand at her son, and spoke the incantation in a trembling voice. Tendrils of muted red and tan emerged from the jar and entwined themselves around Cain. More and more tendrils appeared, weaving a web that encompassed him entirely. Slowly the colors grew brighter and brighter until they matched the scarlet and gold of the Gryffindor crest. And then in an instant they vanished. For a moment there was no further reaction, and then Cain turned his head and looked around with a curiously blank expression. His gaze fell on Bill, and then Molly, and the blankness vanished, replaced by a tearing remorse.

"Mum? Is it really you?" He took a shaky step toward her. "I... I am so sorry..."

She held out her arms to him, and he fell into them as if he were a boy again, tears pouring down his cheeks. Bill had his arms around both of them, his eyes watering also. Hermione touched Harry gently, and they moved into the kitchen to give the Weasleys some privacy.

"It looks like it worked," Harry said quietly. "Bill has sense enough to make sure before they leave here though."

"I'm glad for them, but I don't envy Arthur the position this puts him in. I can see the headlines now: Ministry Official Frees Convicted Death Eater. Rita wouldn't be able to hush it up."

"They'll figure something out. I'd be surprised if they hadn't thought about it already. Percy did some awful things, and I got the feeling when he was captured that he regretted becoming a Death Eater."

She fiddled with the teapot a bit nervously. "I hope it's as easy for me. I really want to get it over and done with."

"You're going to try it today?"

"As soon as the Weasleys have gone." She put the teapot down and rummaged in a cabinet, emerging with a vial containing a violent pink potion. "I've got the *Amorata* potion already brewed, and I don't want to waste it."

"That's the love potion you're going to try?"

"It's the only one I could find that will do what I need," she answered dryly. "And yes, it's nearly a Dark potion. From what I was reading, parents used to use it to get their children to accept arranged marriages. Some old wizarding families still use it for that. The Machiavelli family it was Nicolai who created it in the first place used to brew it a year in advance of a planned wedding because it grows more potent as it ages. It's a very specific potion; you have to add one drop blood from the, ah, desired person, just before drinking it."

Harry gave her a wry grin. "Maybe you should give him a dose of it also with a drop of your blood, just to level the playing field so to speak."

"Harry!"

"It was just a suggestion. You don't know how he's going to react to... to all this." He flailed about for a distraction, and thought of the parchment he'd picked up. "It's going to be a little while before the Weasleys leave. Take a look at this!" He held it out to her.

"You're trying to distract me, Harry Potter, and it's not going to work!" But she reached for the roll anyway, and unfurled it. Her forehead wrinkled as she looked at it. "Where'd you get this?"

"Off your floor. It's part of Aberon's notes."

Lpegh bijwl mwrzm dcpfr aseim vpvra ssnpa

Aozri eceau aeaa0 raeio uamga iaia0 eeaeil

Wleel lhlrc rtscr asrl0 gnoor nnknr vprtrb

Rlkgd laedi mhtht ctcb0 udrtr cstdi etceiu

Midnight, starlight, harvest moon,

Return that which was lost too soon.

Heart of the Soulstruck, soul and mind,

Flicker and fledge and fly and bind!

Euige abmeu aeaai ooiel sayki eyoaa riirus

Nxeob toins drbrm mrvrp trman nprln umspsd

Crlyr rdam ubaie arath urarp taklp susebu

Eowla ijhaa kynar lolmu socka crrbu ssatlm

Moonshine, starshine, midnight sun,

Undo what must be undone.

Mind of the Soulstruck, soul and heart,

Joining where once rent apart.

Nsien xuscl eslhg fswus rsnar rkuuc ngmtab

Oiljd lglnf htewa oiell oiark aimle araid

Tekrt esoao eesir yeace oeioi bn1sy palgke

Tre1a sopiy rbtlr 1rsis krrfn bs1t eyfr1d

Starfire, Moonfire, Witching Hour,

These the signs of Magic's Power.

Soulstruck heart and mind and soul,

Torn asunder, now made whole.

2s1v tner rbrke 2lbt w2fs eo1r 1loe1o

4e r1r iiaet 2eer o3o sn1o 1eyw1r

4r a onnst 2yra o3n r2d 5e

4y n tsg 4n d 3e 5 6

Those who would lift Magic's Curse

Look ye down on Magic's Verse.

See the power in the Name

Not as written, yet the same.

5 g 2e 4g 5 5 5 6

5 e 5 4e 5 5 5 6

"Bloody hell! Another puzzle? We still haven't figured out the entire first one!"

"We don't need to figure the rest of it, Hermione. We got what we want out of it."

She threw up her hands. "I suppose. I just hate leaving things unfinished. So what do you make of this?"

"I've no idea what to think of the stanzas that aren't in English. And the last bit with the numbers is weird too. But the rest of it could be a mnemonic for a spell of some kind."

"Magic's Curse probably refers to Soulstriking given the other English stanzas," she mused thoughtfully. "And the lines about midnight, starlight, and so on could be the time of day when the spell has to be cast obviously midnight the Witching Hour."

"And time of year," Harry added. "You only get a harvest moon in the fall."

"I'm not going to wait nine more months to free Grim," she said decisively. "I'm going to try it today."

The discussion was interrupted by Bill poking his head around the corner. "We're taking Percy home now. Mum's going to tell Dad tonight after dinner. Good luck with Grim, Hermione."

"Thanks Bill! I hope things go well tonight."

He nodded. "So do I." The three Weasleys vanished in a rush of displaced air, and Hermione turned back to Harry.

"Please, Harry, let's not fight about this."

"I'm just worried about how he'll react."

"I know it's not going to be easy. I can deal with it." She paused for a moment. "Harry, I... I need you not to be here when I cast the spell."

"Why?"

"I don't want you to see me under the influence of the Amorata potion." She summoned up a grin. "I might end up kissing him, you know. Or worse!"

"Ewww! That's a horrid thought!" He rolled his eyes. "You win. I'm going to need a Pensieve to get that image out of my mind! When should I check back on you?"

"Three days should be enough time for it to wear off. I'll Floo you if it wears off earlier."

"I guess I'll leave you to it then." He gave her a hug. "Please be careful. If you don't find me at home, try the Weasleys." He Disapparated, leaving her alone in the house with Grim.

Hermione took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly, trying to get her nerves under control. "I don't want to ~~seem~~ under the influence of that potion either. Grim, you'd better be worth this!" The familiar ritual of reestablishing her wards calmed her, and she continued in a happier frame of mind.

She brought the Amorata potion into the living room, and then retrieved the Souljar from her bedroom. Next, she dipped a needle in rubbing alcohol and brought that into the living room as well.

Harry's comment about leveling the playing field stuck in her mind, and she looked at the Amorata vial speculatively. Halve the dosage, halve the effect was the usual rule for potions. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to give him part of it. Or she could wait another day or so for the potion to strengthen more, and then split it. It was rather frustrating that there was so little documented about the effects of different dosages.

She bit her lip. Grim would also be taking the *Mens Sana* potion, and Merlin knew what sort of interaction that would produce. She returned to her bedroom and dug out her dog-eared copy of *Most Potente Potions*, and turned to the section on interactions. Half an hour later, she shut the volume decisively. Stripped of the archaic verbiage, it said that two potions that affected the same aspect of a person would result in both having greater effect. The examples given seemed to bear out her conclusion. Therefore, the *Mens Sana* should increase the effectiveness of the Amorata.

She got a clean mug from the kitchen and poured a scant third of the Amorata into it.

"Grim," she called, "come here, please.

When he reached the table she had him hold out one hand. Before she could change her mind, she pierced his thumb with the needle and squeezed a drop of blood into the vial. It bubbled quietly for a moment and then turned a brilliant crimson, just as it was supposed to. "Cheers!" She closed her eyes and drained the vial in three quick swallows. It was dreadfully sweet and sticky, as might be expected from something that was based on rodemel and marshmallow.

Her first impression was that the potion was ineffective. She didn't feel any different. Disappointed, she opened her eyes and nearly fell as the effect hit her. It was like being wrapped in cotton wool, she decided with part of her mind. A sweet, sticky cotton wool. She had the overwhelming urge to reach for Grim's hand, to run her fingers through his hair, to ... She clamped down on that train of thought before it went anywhere. It took an intense amount of concentration to continue. She set the vial down and took up the needle again. A moment later, a drop of her blood fell into the mug. As soon as the liquid quit bubbling, she handed Grim the *Mens Sana* potion, then picked up his Souljar.

"Grim, drink the potion I gave you, and then drink what's in the mug."

Once he was finished, and the vial and mug back on the table, she summoned up all her remaining strength of will and drew her wand. *Amor Vincit Omnia!*

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter Eight

The tendrils that curled out from the jar in her left hand were almost black. They wove and twined themselves around Grim in a web that hid him from view. Slowly, slowly, they lightened and brightened, separating into two distinct hues - one silver, one a deep, deep green. She breathed a sigh of relief at that; it seemed that the man she loved would be restored after all.

Wait a minute!

"Dammit, Granger! Get a grip!" she hissed to herself, half dreading what would happen next. It felt like it was taking far longer to restore Grim than Cain or perhaps that was just a side effect of the potion and her new longing for the man standing in front of her.

The tendrils disappeared between one heartbeat and the next, and for a moment there was no further reaction. Then Grim staggered and nearly fell, grasping at the table in a vain attempt to stay upright. He caught himself before completely measuring his length, ending up on his hands and knees. A series of expressions passed over his face, ending in something Hermione couldn't read. Finally he looked up and actually saw her.

"Hermione..." He half-staggered to his feet, and then dropped into his recliner, leaning back and closing his eyes. "Merlin - that hurts only a little less than Cruciatus." His voice was hoarse from disuse.

She put the Souljar on the table carefully and moved toward him. "Oh Severus... I'm sorry. I didn't know it would be painful. It didn't seem to hurt Percy like this. Can I get you anything for the pain? I've got a few potions on hand, and some Muggle aspirin. I can go out and get Tylenol if you'd prefer."

He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes and groaned. "Spare me." His fingers ran through his hair and he looked up at her. An odd jolt went through him, and he filed the sensation away to analyze later. He cleared his throat again with a harsh barking sound. "If you wish to make yourself useful, something to drink would be welcome."

"Tea, coffee, or something stronger?"

"Tea. Please." He added the last word almost as an afterthought. She stared at him for a moment and then went into the kitchen, gathering up the mug and vial from the table as she left.

~*~

He sprawled in the recliner, taking comfort from its familiar embrace. As he'd told her, the pain was purely mental. His mind was spinning, processing all his memories of

the last months, sorting and filing them appropriately. It was, he decided, somewhat like having his brain stirred with a swizzle-stick. But as the memories sorted themselves out, the pain lessened.

He remembered the battle with Voldemort clearly enough; he'd been in the thick of it, providing a distraction while the Boy Who Should Be Smacked sneaked behind him and fulfilled the Prophecy with a harshly delivered *Avada Kedavra*. It was only after the battle that the victors learned that their leader had disappeared. Albus Dumbledore was gone. Missing. Severus remembered that all too well. He and Minerva had grieved together for the loss of their old friend.

The victory had galvanized Fudge into action. The Minister of Magic mobilized the Auror Corps, and soon had them rounding up the scattered remaining Death Eaters. Severus remembered being frog-marched out of Hogwarts at wand-point. Fudge had sent three Aurors to "subdue" him, though he'd come quietly enough. They'd taken him to Azkaban to await trial. The trial was a farce, of course. Without Dumbledore's testimony, he was convicted and sentenced to be Soulstruck.

Other members of the Order had tried to speak on his behalf, but what they said was ignored. None of them were there the night he'd come to Dumbledore and betrayed Voldemort for the first time. His actions in the last battle were branded the mark of a man desperately trying to save his own skin.

His lip curled as he recalled his treatment at the hands of his jailors once convicted. One in particular had a fondness for a Muggle invention called brass knuckles. Another used steel-toed boots. It was no consolation that the other convicted Death Eaters were treated just as harshly. He'd soon learned that fighting back in any way brought even harsher treatment.

His last thoroughly clear memory was the day they'd hauled him into a small laboratory and chained him spread-eagled to a wall. Then they'd forced a potion down his throat and left him there. After that, things were fuzzy for a while. Out of focus. When the fuzziness faded, he was back in his cell with a wall around his mind he could see and hear, think and feel, but could not do anything other than what was commanded. This complete loss of self-control was the most terrifying experience of his life.

He'd initially thought he was under the Imperius curse, with the potion used to quash his resistance. Inside the wall, the prison of his mind, he raged and swore and 'watched' as his body obeyed the commands given to him. It was only as time passed that he came to realize this was something more than Imperius. Much more. He prowled around his mental cage like a trapped panther, unsuccessfully seeking escape.

More memories floated through his mind... His "initiation" into the world of the Soulstruck the savage beatings that he couldn't defend against... starvation given food, but told not to eat it... the slap of knotted ropes on his back... baths consisting of being hosed down with cold water... seeing the Malfoys forced to perform gross sexual acts on each other for the amusement of their captors... the crack of his thigh-bone breaking in a fall down the stairs... Avery being made to castrate himself...

He shuddered. Perhaps he had gotten off lightly, after all.

~*~

The shrilling of the tea-kettle broke him out of his morbid thoughts, and he shifted into a more upright position in the recliner and took a new inventory of himself. The pain had receded into a dull ache in the back of his head. Physically... he was rather pleased to note that he felt fine. Of course, he remembered, Hermione had been taking good care of him.

Hermione. What in Merlin's Name possessed him to start thinking of her in that way? She'd always been Miss Granger to him. Now that he thought about it, she'd called him Severus today, rather than using his title or that awful nickname. Grim, indeed!

She brought him a cup of tea, and took her own over to the sofa where she made herself comfortable. "You look like you're feeling better."

"I am. Thank you." He picked up the cup and took an appreciative swallow, letting the hot liquid wash over his throat and down into his stomach. "Earl Grey, I see."

"It was what I had on hand. Bill and Harry like it. I prefer Darjeeling, but I'd run out."

She was giving him an odd look. "Is there something you want to ask me, Herm... Miss Granger?" Damn! He was doing it again!

"I'm glad you're back, Sev.. err, Professor."

He shifted a little uncomfortably. "Thank you, Miss Granger."

"How much do you remember?"

A good question, that. He thought about it. She let him think in silence. Finally he stretched and answered. "It's odd. I know I was Soulstruck, but don't remember much about the actual process. I was drugged with some malodorous potion, early on. I have some memories of my experiences in prison, but they are somewhat disjointed and blurry, as are the first weeks after you brought me here. My first clear memory after that is a discussion between you and Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter about what to do with me if you failed to break the Soulstriking." He bared his teeth at her in something of a smile. "You seemed bent on putting me out of my misery."

She turned red. "Professor... that was... a mistake." It was easier to remember to call him Professor when he was being snarky.

It was easier to call her Miss Granger when she was off balance. "A mistake, Miss Granger?"

"Bill was right. I didn't have the moral authority to decide to kill you. Euthanasia has its place, but not in that situation."

"Because...?"

"Because there was a chance of bringing you back if not this time, then the next."

"Why go to all this trouble for someone you despise?" Now he was goading her, and he knew it.

She put her teacup down with a shaking hand. "I don't despise you at all, Severus. I love you." A split second after the words were out, she clapped a hand over her mouth in obvious consternation.

If it weren't for what she'd said, he would've laughed himself silly at her expression. It wasn't often he'd seen her completely imbrangled. As it was, he took refuge in his trademark sarcasm. "Merlin save me from lovestruck children! Did you restore me in hopes that I'd return your affection?"

She muttered something he couldn't hear, then glared at him. "Merlin save me from ungrateful bastards! Should I have left you in that jar?"

"Why not? I would've been your slave obedient to you in all things... even in your bed, if you so ordered it."

She sputtered angrily. "That wouldn't be love. That would be sex and bad sex at that!"

He snorted. "What's love then? Flowers and candy hearts? Declarations of undying passion? Only a Gryffindor would be fool enough to expect that from a Slytherin." How had they gotten on this subject in the first place? The idea of taking her then and there on the sofa crossed his mind. He immediately banished the thought, but felt the growing tension in his groin that signaled a desire to do just exactly that.

"Those are just trappings of romance, and you know it." She regarded him for a moment as she realized he was trying to keep her off-balance. "I can't imagine you making a declaration of undying passion unless..." She paused and grinned at him. "Unless it was to a book of potions."

His eyebrows rose as he realized he was being teased. It was a new experience and heightened the desire there was no other word he had for her. *That* was another new experience. He was more than familiar with lust, but desire was unusual. He shifted again on the recliner and didn't answer.

She moved to the other end of the sofa, closer to him. In the back of her mind, she knew they were both reacting to the Amorata potion. She kept her tone light, not wanting to break the mood that was beginning to build. "And the only flowers you'd probably keep were ones useful to your work."

He intended to tell her to leave him alone to recover his equilibrium when his nose picked up the subtle scent of her pheromones. His body reacted at a primal level as his blood began singing in his ears. He stared at her, unable to form words.

She could tell she was having an effect on him. The deer-in-the-headlights look was one she'd seen on other men *may regret this later, but...* She threw caution to the winds, and kissed him. Figurative sparks flew between them, and the next fifteen minutes were entirely predictable. Neither of them was in any condition to notice the wave of magic that settled over them as they joined together.

~*~

Hermione was curled up next to Severus, playing possum and trying to figure out how to handle the treacherous new ground she was on. She'd had other relationships, but they'd always been mutual, and not enhanced with potions. The Amorata potion had evidently worked a little too well. Maybe Severus knew of an antidote. But that would mean telling him that she'd doped him as well as herself. She could just imagine his reaction to that! He'd be furious!

Severus. He's going to be Severus to me until this potion wears off. I think the book said three days. How am I going to deal with this for three days? She snuck a peek at the clock on the bedside table. Only 1pm. There was no way to pretend to be asleep until tomorrow morning. If nothing else, they'd at least have to eat something. Maybe they could agree to stay away from each other. But again, that would mean explaining what she'd done.

Oh HELL! I didn't cast a Contraceptus charm. That, Granger, was one of the most stupid things you have ever done in your LIFE. Ten seconds. That's all it would've taken. Stupid, stupid, stupid! No excuses. That was bloody ignorant! She quit berating herself and forced her mind onto a more productive track like what to do about the current situation. She didn't think he was any more asleep than she was, but there was no way to tell without turning around and facing him. The thought of meeting his eyes sent a shiver through her.

He's awake. I felt him move just then. So now what? What in Merlin's Name do I say to him? "Sorry, professor. Just had to jump your bones." Errrm. No. Maybe I'll just pretend nothing happened. She rolled her eyes, knowing that wouldn't work unless he was willing to go along with it. She was about to get up when she realized both of them were completely nude. *Where'd I put my wand? I'll summon something to wear...* She had to think for a minute to remember where it was. Probably on the floor with the turtleneck she'd been wearing. Neither of them had been concerned about such things. And her dressing gown was, of course, across the room, neatly folded on the back of her desk chair. She finally rolled onto the floor in one violent move, and sprinted for the bathroom the destination chosen by the increased nagging of her bladder.

It wasn't until after she'd taken a long hot shower and combed her hair that she realized that she'd forgotten to grab her dressing gown. She grimaced and wrapped a towel around herself and cracked the door slightly. He wasn't there. She dressed quickly, opting for robes rather than more revealing Muggle attire. A few quick cleaning charms took care of the tangled bedding and other mess on the bed and banished her scattered clothing to the laundry. She took another look around the room. He'd evidently found her wand, for it was now on her bedside table. She picked it up and tucked it up her sleeve. Seeing nothing else to delay her, she took a deep breath and walked into her living room.

~*~

Severus was so wrapped up in his own reactions to their joining that he'd been taken by surprise when she bolted. He wasn't used to having sex with former students, or anyone else for that matter. For most of his adult life, he'd bottled up his emotions until something shoved him over the edge and he exploded. This... This was different. He remembered her kissing him... him sweeping her up and carrying her into her bedroom... both of them shedding clothing in desperate haste... and *Merlin's BALLS!* Neither of them had given a thought to contraception!

He got out of bed her bed and picked up his scattered clothes. As he reached for a stray sock, his hand brushed against her wand. He picked it up and considered. Obliviating her was out of the question. That spell was unpredictable under the best of circumstances. Using another's wand, she'd either wind up as another Longbottom or be completely unaffected. He put it on the table next to her clock. As he turned to leave, he caught sight of an untidy stack of parchment on her dresser Aberon's notes, his memory told him. Intrigued, he picked them up, and took them with him into his room.

The notes were placed carefully on his bed while he showered quickly and dressed, dropping his laundry in the hamper. He knew he was delaying the inevitable; ~~had~~ to have a discussion with Miss Granger about how, exactly, she'd freed him from the Souljar. That would, unfortunately, probably lead to a discussion about their more recent activities, and he wasn't sure he wanted to discuss that at all. *My apologies, Miss Granger. Twenty years of abstinence, and all that. No harm, no foul.*

Had it been twenty years? He remembered how, in his fifth year, Narcissa Black had brought him up to her room. He'd been a shy and awkward fifteen year old virgin. She'd gotten him half undressed and herself more so, and then accused him of trying to rape her when he'd lost control and climaxed. The ensuing investigation by the Hogwarts staff had been bad enough, but the true story of his humiliation and lack of control spread through Slytherin House like wildfire. Narcissa was convinced that he'd done it on purpose scorning her "charms".

At the end of his seventh year, he swore his loyalty to Voldemort and received the Dark Mark along with a fair number of his classmates. They'd been given no direction, nothing to do. So they'd devised their own amusements in the form of raping and torturing Muggles. Severus grimaced at the memory. In the two years they'd run wild, he'd become a very accomplished rapist, even learning to enjoy it.

As they grew older, they began taking on a larger role in Voldemort's plans. Severus was earmarked to be a researcher and developer of new potions, and his laboratory became his life. He didn't have the time or the inclination to terrorize random Muggles any more. He'd felt productive and happy. This lasted until Narcissa married Lucius the summer she turned nineteen.

He received a summons to appear before Voldemort. Such things were uncommon, but not so much as to be worrying. He'd thought that Voldemort wanted a status report on the latest potion he was developing. He'd arrived promptly, only to be seized and disarmed by Avery and Wilkes his two least favorite people. As sadists, only Bellatrix LeStrange was their better.

His stomach clenched at the memories of what came next. They'd raped him savagely while Narcissa had watched and taunted him. It was her revenge for the incident in their fifth year. The summons had been faked. But it was the following day that had driven him back to Dumbledore. Another summons, this one genuine. He'd been unable to move without pain, and Voldemort had noticed and demanded the reason. Expecting his tormentors to be punished or at least chastised, Severus had told him everything. Voldemort had laughed. Then he'd said that Malfoy's gold was more valuable to him than any researcher. Three hours later, Severus was in Albus Dumbledore's office.

He shook himself like a wet dog. Memories weren't getting him anywhere. He returned to the living room, settling himself in his recliner with Aberon's notes. A few minutes later, he heard footsteps and looked up as Hermione entered the room. She looked uncomfortable but determined, and he cast about for a somewhat neutral topic of conversation. "A most peculiar man, Mr. McGaven. Brilliant, but twisted."

She brightened almost instantly. "Yes modifying the old geas that was used to create the first House Elves was a stroke of genius. If you read further, he explains a lot about what he was thinking. It's enlightening and disturbing all at once."

"Enlighten me, Miss Granger. How, exactly, did you break McGaven's spell? I was under the impression that it was permanent."

For some reason, this simple question seemed to make her uncomfortable. "Errm. It was luck more than anything. McGaven has a drinking problem, and one of his drinking buddies was Alastor Moody."

"So Alastor interrogated McGaven. Then what?"

"From what Harry said, it was more a matter of McGaven spilling his guts to Alastor and anyone else who would listen. He was quick enough to take up with Bill Weasley." She bit her lip. "We thought Bill's knowledge of curse-breaking would be useful."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Miss Granger, you are surely more organized than this. Please give me a brief and orderly synopsis of your actions since you attended the auction, with emphasis on how you broke McGaven's spell."

"Please... sir... can we discuss it tonight? I have some things I absolutely must get done today."

"Perhaps that would be better." He nodded slowly. "That will give me time to read these notes thoroughly. Very well then."

"Is there anything you'd like me to get for you while I'm out."

His attention was already mostly focused on the notes. "No. Thank you."

She took that as her cue to leave, lowered her wards, and Apparated.

~*~

Hermione reappeared on the street that ran in front of her house. Once she made sure no one was in sight, she raised the wards again and Apparated again, this time to Hogsmeade. A few minutes later, she was walking up the path toward her former school.

She knew she was putting off the inevitable, but she had other things on her mind. It had occurred to her that there had to be some sort of "morning after" potion that she could brew up. Also, she wanted to see if the library at Hogwarts had any more information on potion interaction.

The holidays were a good time of year for some clandestine potion brewing. Minerva was only too happy to allow her to use Snape's old lab, and carefully did not ask any questions, though her eyebrows rose fractionally. She did ask Hermione to stop by her office again before leaving. Hermione nodded and made her way down into the dungeons and was absorbed in brewing up her "morning after" potion, when Poppy Pomfrey knocked on the door and came in.

The mediwitch spared the bubbling cauldron a single glance. "Oh Hermione! I'm so glad Minerva told me you were here. I need to restock my supplies for the spring term. Could you give me a hand?"

Well that was a great excuse to stay as long as she needed. "Certainly. There's room for two or three other cauldrons here. What do you need?"

"Pepper-Up, Bruise-begone, Skele-gro..." she enumerated a total of half a dozen potions. "I know that sounds like a lot, but usually Sev..." she trailed off.

"Professor Snape used to spend the holidays brewing without you having to ask." Hermione finished.

"That's so true." Poppy dabbed at her eyes with a pristine handkerchief. "He was such a good man under all that gruff exterior." She opened the supply cabinet and began laying out ingredients on the counter.

"He's not dead, or even sick, you know." Hermione found Pomfrey's reaction a little irritating. "I take good care of him."

"I'm sure you do what you can. But I feel that he would be better off in my care."

Hermione set a second cauldron down with slightly more force than necessary. Poppy had taken care of Severus for years, literally. She'd evidently developed an attachment for the dour Potions Master. "Let's get the Skele-gro started. It takes a while to simmer."

"Where is he today?" Poppy asked as she began adding ingredients. "I thought you took him everywhere."

"He's at home." Hermione adjusted the heat under her potion. "I was doing a lot of running around this morning, and didn't want to risk splinching." Part of her wished she could tell the mediwitch the truth. But Poppy, though completely trustworthy, had never been a full member of the Order, stating that her oaths as a Healer might come in conflict with it.

"That was a good thought. I'm sure it's difficult to for him to use the Floo." Poppy set out a third cauldron. "Bruise begone or Pepper-Up next?"

"Bruise Begone. It takes less time over-all, but it's more fussy. I'll get the ingredients for you." She poked through the supplies, carefully selecting the best and freshest herbs. Comfrey, chamomile, and sage among other things. She put them down on the counter and got out a clean mortar and pestle. "Has Professor McGonagall hired a new Potions instructor yet?"

"She hasn't said anything about it to me. I don't even think she's been looking and Merlin knows what we'll do next term!" She wrung her hands. "So many vacancies on the staff it's going to be dreadful."

"Vacancies? I know Madame Hooch retired. Who else left?" The faculty and staff had gotten off lightly in the War; Albus and Severus were the only known casualties.

"Filius and Ivy both resigned at the end of the fall term. They said they were getting along in years and wanted to retire also. They moved to America Florida, I think it was."

Hermione thought a moment. "So Minerva needs three core classes, plus a Quidditch coach to bring things back to normal in 2 weeks. A tall order to fill."

"She told me that the Quidditch position was taken care of. Personally, I think we could do without the sport. It's only good for hurting children!"

"I've never been much of a fan," Hermione agreed. And with that, the two conversed amiably about their mutual dislike of Quidditch until their potions were done. They were cleaning up when Minerva came in.

"I'm glad you're still here, Hermione. There's something I'd like to ask you. Are you still working for Flourish & Blotts?"

"Yes I'm on vacation till next week when the textbooks for next term start arriving."

"I'm sure Poppy told you that we expect to be short-handed this term. I realize this is somewhat irregular, but would you consider taking a position here as staff pro tem until I can find and hire a full-time replacement?"

"Me? An instructor? What subject?"

"Potions." The Headmistress looked worn and tired. "My old friend Liam Carpe has agreed to come out of retirement and teach Charms for a term or two, and Sylvia Brancher has accepted my offer of the Herbology teacher position. But I haven't found a qualified instructor for Potions yet, and time is running out."

"I'll let you know this evening. I'd like to think about it for a little while. Who's going to be coaching Quidditch?" She'd've jumped on it like a shot if it weren't for Snape.

Minerva's eyes lit up. "Your friend Mister Potter has agreed to take on that job. As a matter of fact, he suggested I ask you to take the job of Potions instructor. Please, let me know by tomorrow about the Potions position."

Hermione nodded. "Certainly. I understand you're in a bind." She looked around. "We've got everything cleaned up down here, so I'll be off now. Thanks for everything." She gathered up her things and Apparated back to her house. Lowering the wards, she Apparated once more and reappeared in her living room.

Snape looked up as she appeared in a rush of displaced air. "Good evening, Miss Granger."

She set her box of carefully packed vials on the table and sniffed experimentally. "Are you cooking something?"

"Yes when it appeared that you would not return home for dinner, I took the liberty of exploring your pantry." He rose with a swift elegance and strode over to the kitchen. "I've read over McGaven's notes, and there is much there to discuss." He reappeared with two bowls of stew, thick and hearty with vegetables. "But not until you've eaten." One bowl was set in front of her. He kept the other and sat down at the other side of the table. "I assure you, Miss Granger, it is not poisoned."

She laughed a little nervously. "Sorry, sir. Just a little preoccupied." She sat down across from him and began eating, trying to ignore the sweet sticky fog of Amorata that was insisting on settling around her now that she was in his presence again. "You don't discuss business over meals?"

"Not by preference. It upsets the digestion." He ate with quick economical movements that were beautiful to watch.

In far too short a time, both bowls were empty. Hermione took them into the kitchen and rinsed them off, leaving them in the sink. They could be thoroughly washed later. She returned to the living room wondering what one should use to gird one's loins.

Snape was still seated at the table where they'd eaten. "Well, Miss Granger, it seems we have much to discuss."

"Agreed and something new that came up today, which takes precedence." She outlined Minerva's job offer. "I would enjoy the job, certainly. It would give me and you by extension complete access to a well-stocked lab and library."

"An intriguing thought assuming I am enough of a Thespian to pretend to be Soulstruck." He stared up at the ceiling. "Have you ever heard of *aHeliax* potion, Miss Granger?"

"No, sir. And if you please, I'd rather you called me by name. Miss Granger makes me feel like I'm a student again."

He raised a dark eyebrow. "As you will, Hermione. Although I trust you'll forgive me the occasional slip." His eyes rested on her, studying her as if seeing her for the first time. "If we are to be colleagues, then you should perhaps use my name as well."

"Yes, Severus." It almost came out as a purr, and she bit her lip in embarrassment. "What is *aHeliax* potion?"

"It's an emotion suppressor and relaxant." His lips twitched slightly. "I'm not sure of my ability to rein in my temper indefinitely without it. It's not available generally; you need a prescription to get it from St. Mungo's. Or Poppy might have some on hand; I made a great deal of it during the war. If we are relocating to Hogwarts, it will be a necessity."

"I can see that. It's not going to be easy pretending."

"No it's not. But I survived for years as a spy against long odds. I should be able to survive this as well." He inclined his head towards the stack of notes. "By my calculations, virtually every adult wizard alive today is subject to Soulstriking."

"That's what I thought also." She rested her chin on her hands. "I know McGaven meant well, but during the war, desperation made everyone... desperate."

"I found the list of mnemonics intriguing," he continued. "Do I remember correctly that there were only thirty-four Death Eaters auctioned off?"

"Thirty-three. You're not a Death Eater."

"I was, at one point in my life. However... There were thirty-six jars. And here's another puzzle for you: there were over eighty Death Eaters caught and convicted. Why were only thirty-six Soulstruck, and what happened to the rest?"

She shrugged. "Is it important? I was more concerned with rescuing you, than caring about the likes of... the ferret." She regarded him for a minute. "Why doesn't Fudge like you? Or more properly, he *knew* you were a spy why did he have you convicted?"

"You really don't know? Here are some facts for you to consider. Item one: at the end of your fourth year, Fudge refused to believe that Voldemort had returned. It wasn't until the end of your fifth year, when his nose was rubbed in it, that he could no longer ignore the facts. Even then, he was slow to take any action. Item two: Fudge attended Hogwarts and was in Ravenclaw."

"Ravenclaw? I never would've guessed! I was thinking Hufflepuff."

"Item three: after Voldemort's defeat, Fudge sprang into action and did what he should've done three years earlier. He had every surviving Death Eater arrested, including quite a few people that were never suspected. He was always right; the Aurors always found the Dark Mark."

She processed this information. It was news to her. "But how would he know? Torture? Veritaserum?" She looked up at him. "Did you tell him?"

"No. Remember, he did not trust me."

"If you didn't tell him..." She bit her lip in thought. "Oh my god."

"What have you concluded?"

"Fudge is a Death Eater!"

Chapter Nine

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter Nine

"Very good, Miss ... er, Hermione."

"How did you find out? When did you find out? Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I had suspected him for some time, and these suspicions crystallized just before the final battle; it was purely by accident I overheard Voldemort talking to him on the Floo network. I sent an owl to Albus, but I had no chance to tell anyone else." He quirked an eyebrow upward. "From your reaction, I assume Albus either never got my message, or never passed it on to anyone else."

"I'd bet he never got it. He would've told someone, I think."

"It's hard to say what the old man would've done. I think Albus took a childish delight in being unpredictable." He stretched, making the vertebrae in his neck and back pop with a series of sharp cracks.

"Bill Weasley does that too, you know."

"Fascinating," he said dryly. Then, "I had no proof, of course. Perhaps that's why Albus said nothing. It would not be easy to denounce the Minister of Magic, even for him. After my trial, Fudge came to see me at Azkaban. He said that with Dumbledore vanished and Voldemort dealt with, with the Death Eaters gone, he would rule wizarding Britain without interference. He is a dangerous man, Hermione. Clever and ambitious. He should've been sorted into Slytherin!"

"And here I always thought he was a fool," she marveled. "He's a consummate actor."

"Yes, and you can trust nothing he says or does, even if appears to benefit him. He's always playing games within games. Voldemort wanted to purge the wizarding world of all except pure-bloods. Fudge seeks to build a monarchy with himself as king."

"Back up a moment," she said. "Did you just imply that Fudge did something to Professor Dumbledore?"

"That is the impression I received from what he said. He was altogether too gleeful about Albus' absence."

Hermione drummed her fingers on the table. "I'm trying to put together a mental picture of that last big fight. You and Voldemort were sort of the focus of everyone's attention. Harry was with you. Was Fudge there at all?"

"Yes, I saw him there after it was all over." Severus cast his mind back on his freshly processed memories. The battle had taken place in a nondescript field near Glastonbury the property of an old Muggle couple who actually lived in London, and had no idea of the carnage wrought upon their land. Their battle plan was simple: decapitate the snake kill Voldemort, and the Death Eaters would flee. It had worked! Careful misinformation by himself and other spies had convinced Voldemort that Roger Bacon's original Philosopher's Stone was there, heavily guarded. The bait had been taken; Voldemort had summoned his forces and set off to retrieve it. "I don't believe you need to picture the entire battle. Just Albus and those surrounding him. I'm afraid I won't be of much assistance to you there though; the last I saw of him, he was up on that little rise. That was right before..." Before Lucius Malfoy had caught Remus Lupin with an Incendius curse. The werewolf had howled his agony a horrid soul-wrenching sound that seemed to freeze all time for an instant before turning his wand on himself. The hairs on the back of his neck rose at the memory.

"Before Remus suicided." Hermione bit her lip and her eyes brightened with unshed tears. "I heard later. War is such a hellish waste of good people! I was over in the southeast corner for most of the fight. The Death Eaters were trying to Apparate in behind us, so we kept pretty busy reinforcing the wards there. Alastor Moody has the fastest wand I've ever seen bar none. He taught me a couple of new spells too, mostly by bellowing."

"I think that you or perhaps we should discuss this with your compatriots Messrs. Weasley and Potter."

"Agreed. We need more data to figure out what happened to Albus." She sighed. "How far did you get with those notes?"

He jerked his head toward the neat stacks of parchment on the table. "I spent some time sorting them into categories: potion notes and recipe. Spell notes and history. Notes containing references to those who were Soulstruck, including a rather cryptic list. And miscellany things which didn't fit into any of the other categories."

She stood up and walked around to his side of the table. "McGaven has one of the most warped senses of humor I've ever run across." She picked up the list. "This Harry figured out what it was."

"I remember the discussion." He twisted around in his chair to look at her. Her nearness was unsettling. "But I don't remember anything of how you actually broke the spell. How did you break the Soulstriking, Hermione?"

She flushed on hearing him use her name. "Alastor got McGaven to tell him the counterspell. I cast it."

"*Amor Vincit Omnia*? Or is there another one?"

"That's the one I used." She turned away from him slightly, almost squirming in embarrassment.

"But..." He stopped, a little flustered. *Surely she doesn't... love... me.* "... for that to work, you must... feel something." When she didn't answer, he put a hand on her arm. She trembled at his touch. "Something besides fear and revulsion," he amended.

"Yes." She steadfastly refused to look at him, afraid of what would happen if their eyes met.

"So... what you said this morning was a convenient fiction for the moment?"

She wrenched herself away from him, attempting to summon up a glare and failing miserably. "No it was... is... the truth. I love you."

The desperation in her voice set off alarm bells in his mind and chilled him more effectively than an ice shower. "Miss Granger, what spell or potion did you use to bring yourself to such a state?"

She mumbled something he didn't hear, and he caught her chin and turned her to face him. "Repeat that, please."

"I used an Amorata potion... Severus... it was the only way."

She ran a hand along the side of his face. "I know I'm just reacting

to the potion, but it feels real to me right now. It'll wear off in about

three days. I'll... I'll stay in my room till then. I won't bother you

again!"

Amorata? I may have underestimated her there are few wizards or witches who can successfully brew that hellish concoction. He captured her hand and cleared his throat. "Why that particular potion?"

She shifted uneasily trying to twist her wrist away from him. "Because it was the best one I could find I didn't want to risk using a lust potion. I needed to... love you, as you said."

"So you drugged yourself, risking that brilliant mind of yours, without thinking of the consequences. You realize that if you had erred even slightly in the brewing, you might have wound up insane or worse?" He let her go. "I... appreciate your efforts on my behalf."

"I used Marston's translation of Machiavelli's book," she said, leaning against the table next to him. "It was that or the Aligheri translation, and Marston had more extensive notes."

"Though Marston does have a marked tendency to gloss over consequences," Severus returned. "A serious failing in any book on potions."

"I'd have to agree with that. I thought that at worst it wouldn't work. I tried a translation spell on the Machiavelli first but it didn't work very well. It translated the words, without any regard to the meaning."

"Which is why Marston, Aligheri, and their ilk make a living translating spellbooks and potion books. Marston is something of a polyglot; he knows some thirteen languages." He took a long breath. "That aside, I owe you an apology for my... actions earlier this morning. I've no idea what came over me. I can only put it down to a lapse in self-control caused by breaking of the Soulstriking."

It was her turn to take a deep breath. "Apology accepted, though I owe you one also since I started it. I plead influence of Amorata. *I might just be able to get away without telling him I drugged him as well. I think a distraction is in order.* She nodded toward the vials on the table. "I, um, have plans to deal with any possible consequences."

He flushed slightly and nodded, then changed the subject to something more comfortable. "Then we should relegate the subject to the past." A pause. "Would you be able to return to Hogwarts tomorrow to brew Helix?"

"Certainly I take it you think I should take the job?"

"Yes it will be much less dangerous if I slip out of my Soulstruck character there than here."

"I'll owl Minerva tonight and let her know, and also tell her we're coming by to do some more brewing." She grinned. "I got quite a grilling from Poppy Pomfrey about your absence today."

He groaned. "She's still fixated? I wish she would find a husband! She's worse than Sybil Trelawney ever was. I'll definitely need Helix if I'm to be anywhere in her vicinity."

It took a moment for Hermione to recognize the source of the flash of anger that his words inspired. Not anger. Jealousy. She shook her head to clear it. "I may need some myself if this damned Amorata doesn't wear off. Is there an antidote for it? The Amorata, I mean."

"Of sorts, but you'd find it a case of the cure being worse than the disease, so to speak."

"Oh?"

If it hadn't been for his actions that morning, he would've smirked. Instead he put on his driest impartial academic tone. "The antidote is to have sexual relations with a person of the appropriate gender who meets two criteria first, that person must love you; second, they must consume an Amorata potion made without the drop of blood."

She blushed scarlet. "I'm sorry I asked! You're right the cure is worse than the disease. Machiavelli is almost as twisted as McGaven."

"Machiavelli developed the basic potion. The interactions and some of the more unpleasant side effects were added by one of his contemporaries Lucrezia Borgia. The Borgias were *quite* efficient when it came to arranging the lives of others to suit their purposes."

"Lucrezia Borgia? That's a name known even to Muggles she's supposed to have been a murderess who poisoned a lot of people."

"She was also a talented witch with a vast knowledge of herbology and potions. She chose to turn her talents to the fine art of poison-making. Many of her notes are still used today by Potion Masters doing research in related fields."

"And she developed the interactions and side effects of the Amorata potion?" Hermione got a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach. "What sorts of side effects?"

"Remember what this potion was developed for: to insure that arranged marriages would be consummated, and would last. If the parties involved tried to resist, they would slowly sicken. Eventually their resistance would shatter and they would consummate the marriage, bringing immediate relief. Repeat that experience a few times, Miss Granger, and I'm sure you can predict the result."

"They would connect the relief with the consummation at a very primal level, no matter what their intellect told them." She shuddered. "Nothing breeds attraction like co-dependency. I assume this side effect is permanent?"

"Correct. However, that particular effect only applies if each person has consumed an Amorata made with the other person's blood. If only one person has drunk a 'keyed' Amorata, they experience love and lust, but it wears off."

Not one of the fifty-thousand oaths Hermione knew was adequate to express her dismay at Snape's words. She returned to her side of the table and sank into her chair. *This is not what I needed to hear.* "I see. And no one's managed to undo Borgia's modifications?"

"No one has ever tried, as far as I know. The potion is rarely used these days." He picked up the stack of pages that he'd labeled 'miscellany'. "McGaven is far too fond of cryptic statements for my taste. This list what did you call them?"

"Harry called them invisible idiots," she replied automatically, her mind still mulling over the implications of the potion.

"Yes quite fitting. That list, and this... cryptic verse..." He stabbed at the parchment with a long forefinger.

"We thought that might be another way to break the spell but I didn't want to wait until next November for a harvest moon. I'm not sure what the other verses the ones that aren't in English are for. They don't appear to be incantations."

"I'd agree with that assessment." He picked up another piece of paper. "This one what do you make of it?"

She forced herself to focus on the parchment he showed her. There was a single line of writing on it.

INIITP MONNEA PTVKNG OEI TE RSS H T I A B N L T E

"Another bloody puzzle! McGaven's a sadistic bastard!" She laughed a little nervously. "I said that a few weeks ago also. I guess he didn't want to make things easy for

us... or anyone."

"I expect we will have to solve the poem puzzle as well as this one, and perhaps others as well."

Hermione drummed her fingers on the table in thought. "McGaven has a penchant for Muggle literature." She explained the lock on the cabinet in his lab. "So, I think it possible that these aren't spells or incantations, but something more mundane."

"Think like a Muggle, in other words." He sounded horrified and thoughtful at the same time. "Perhaps you and Mr. Potter would be better qualified to tackle this."

She shrugged. "Maybe. But different points of view are often helpful in solving puzzles. We have to work together." She rose. "And I need to send that owl off to Minerva. Care to come along?" She wasn't completely serious, yet part of her wanted his company. Wanted his presence at her side... wanted him to kiss her again... she clamped down on that train of thought.

"Where are you going to find an owl at this hour?"

"Hogsmeade, of course. I'll Apparate there."

"As I recall, it was more usual for me to accompany you on such mundane missions. Therefore I should continue to do so." He pushed back his chair and rose, picking up his coat from the couch.

"True enough." She moved to stand next to him, biting her lip to maintain her composure. "Give me your hand so I can Apparate us."

For his part, her proximity was unsettling him again. He could feel his pulse quicken. But she was right. He called his senses to order, exerting all his force of will upon them, and took her hand. She lowered her wards, and they vanished with a pair of quiet pops.

Once at Hogsmeade, Hermione made a beeline for the Owl Post Office, with Severus following her closely. He concentrated on maintaining the slack jawed, blank look of the Soulstruck. A few minutes later, her hastily scrawled acceptance to Minerva was on its way. When they went back out into the street, she was dismayed to see that a storm had moved in and it was sleeting. The wind and cold struck through her lightweight robe chilling her immediately. She hastily Apparated them back to the street in front of her house and lowered her wards for what felt like the fiftieth time that day. She was about to cast the final Apparation to get them inside, when long fingers closed over her wand hand.

"You'll splinch us if you try it. Let me do it." He'd had the good sense to shrug into his heavy jacket, and wasn't feeling the cold. Hermione was too tired and chilled to argue, and handed him her wand. In another moment, only the sleet and wind spun through the space where they'd stood.

The two reappeared in her living room where the sudden warmth made her dizzy. She clutched at the nearest object to keep from falling. That said object was Severus didn't seem to matter. Even after her head quit spinning, she held onto him, enjoying the closeness. He made no attempt to pull away from her.

Severus stood still as she seized him, fighting the overwhelming urge to sweep her off her feet and carry her into her bedroom. Just what he'd done that morning, he reminded himself. He opened his mouth to tell her to release him, when he realized that she was reacting to the change in temperature. When she didn't let go in a few moments, he wondered if she was possibly ill.

"Hermione... are you well?" He raised a hand and touched her forehead, searching for symptoms of fever. She was a trifle flushed, but her skin felt cool to his practiced fingers.

She unwound her fingers from him reluctantly. "I'm sorry, Severus. I was just dizzy. Too much Apparating in too short a time." She made no move to step away from him. "I haven't kept up with the weather reports in Scotland. I had no idea a storm was going to blow in."

"Obviously, or you would've worn something more appropriate," he said dryly.

Hermione nodded. "Yes and I need to change before I catch a cold or worse. I'm going to turn in for the night; it's been a long day." Their eyes met, and a thousand unspoken words were exchanged.

"Good night then, Hermione." Before he thought about what he was doing, he tilted her head up and kissed her gently. Then her hands were pulling his face down to hers, and her body pressed up against him. The blood roared in his ears as his senses were overwhelmed with a rush of sensuality. Déjà vu be damned, he thought. The couch was closer than the bed, if not quite as comfortable.

~*~

When conscious thought returned, Severus found himself sprawled on the floor, where he'd evidently fallen asleep. Or passed out, perhaps. He levered himself into a sitting position. A glance at the clock told him that it was four in the morning. Hermione was asleep on the couch. As he looked at her, she sighed in her sleep and smiled. He felt his groin tighten again with desire, and fled into his room shutting the door behind him, not bothering to retrieve the clothes he'd been wearing.

He dropped his head into his hands and groaned quietly. What was it about that girl -- no, that woman -- that caused him to lose anything resembling self control? She was like a drug in his system, fueling his passions beyond his dreams, leaving him aching like a teenager.

A drug. Severus stopped castigating himself and thought about it. Would she have dared? He recalled the discussion about the Amortatia. She certainly had the courage to risk poisoning herself. But she hadn't known about the modifications added by the Borgias. He strained his memory, trying to recall the events of the morning. Good Merlin! It had only been that morning!

He remembered going out for a morning walk, measuring the boundaries of her back garden. Then he sat in his recliner while she made tea and talked with Potter and Weasley. Then... ah, yes. He'd picked out his Souljar. Now surely that bore some thinking about. The jars all looked alike, but that one had somehow stood out, as if it was connected to him at some level. He filed the thought away for later.

The Weasleys. He hadn't been in the room, but he knew Molly Weasley's voice. He had heard her speaking the incantation to break the Soulstriking of her third son. Then things had been quiet for some time. Hermione had called him into the living room eventually. He tried to visualize the scene... he was standing next to the table. She... she pierced his thumb with a needle to get the blood. He stared at his hand, at the minuscule scab and noticed the faint tenderness there for the first time. What then?

She'd drunk the contents of a vial and set it back down on the table next to a mug and another vial. He remembered the face she'd made at the taste. Then she'd... she'd used the needle again and let a drop of her blood fall into the mug. His temples throbbed as memory came flooding back. He'd drunk the second vial and followed it with the contents of the mug. He remembered the overpowering sweet taste well enough. Then... she'd cast the spell.

Furiously, he strode back into the living room. She was still asleep on the couch, still smiling. That would change quickly enough. "Granger! Wake up!"

Her eyes flew open. "Hmm? What?" It always took her a moment to reorient herself when she woke up.

"Wake up. Now."

She stared blearily at the clock. "It's four a.m., Severus."

He glared at her. "What are you playing at, Granger?"

"I...I don't understand. What's wrong?"

"Fool! Meddling with things you don't understand! You couldn't be bothered to research the Amorata properly, is that it? Or did someone else put you up to it?"

Uh oh. He's figured it out. And he's not happy. "Severus, I " she twisted upright and snatched at the afghan on the back of the couch to cover herself.

"Were you going to tell me? Or did you think it would be amusing to watch me beg for your favors such as they are?" He looked her up and down with contempt. "You've had your fun, I suppose." He stopped as his stomach tied itself into a large and painful knot. The Amorata was beginning to take effect.

"Severus it wasn't like that!"

"What then?" He spat the words out around the twisting pain in his insides. "What possible reason could you have for drugging me? Damn you, Granger, you knew it wasn't necessary!"

She gulped. "I thought it would level the playing field... make it easier for you to get used to life again. I didn't know about what Borgia did to the potion my book didn't mention anything about it!"

"Ignorance is no excuse." He straightened painfully and glared at her from his full height. "You know better than to trust a single source completely, Miss Granger. Do you realize what your infernal idiocy has condemned me to?"

"This isn't just about you, Severus!" She got to her feet, matching his glare with her own as a headache blossomed behind her eyes. "There's more important things going on at the moment than you or me or any single wizard. Quit being such a self-centered prick!"

Merlin's balls! Did she have to be righ?

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 12

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter Ten

Severus threw the last of his clothing into the trunk and slammed the lid with a satisfying loud crash. He seized the brass handle on one end and dragged it into Hermione's living room, where it joined a motley collection of other trunks and boxes. "Don't you believe in shrinking spells, Granger?"

She sealed the box of kitchen utensils that she'd been packing, and raised an eyebrow at him. "Not when I don't know how long things are going have to stay packed, Snape." She made his name into an epithet. "I don't want the charm wearing off at some inopportune time."

"I suppose you already packed the tea?"

"Of course. I want to get moved to Hogwarts as quickly as possible."

He bared his teeth at her in a silent snarl, but returned to his room and made a final check for anything he'd missed. After nearly two hours of shouting at each other, they'd been intolerably miserable. She had subsided first, not bothering to return his jibes. He'd stopped soon after. They had an uneasy cease-fire at the moment, and he was concerned about her ability to maintain the deception they were practicing.

Truth be told, he was also concerned about his abilities in this matter. It was quite different from the spying he'd done. There, he'd used his ability to threaten, bluff, and fast-talk to cover any slips. Here, that would not be an option. He dared not slip up.

His room finished, he returned to the living room where Hermione was now putting knickknacks in a small box. That appeared to be the last of the packing. "What next, Granger?"

Again, that raised eyebrow. "We'll be Apparating to Hogsmeade and walking up to Hogwarts."

"And this?" He waved a hand at the boxes and trunks.

She winced. "Minerva is sending two house elves to bring it along."

That made him laugh despite himself. "House elves? You're going to put house

elves to work?"

"They get paid now, you know. It's not like it used to be." Hermione sealed up the box in front of her. "I just need to Floo Minerva and then we can go." She knelt before the fireplace and lit the flames with a quick *Incendio*. "Headmistress McGonagall's office!"

A few minutes later, two house elves popped into the room. Snape stared at the floor so he wouldn't meet their eyes while Hermione gave them lengthy and detailed instructions. As soon as the elves vanished with the first load of boxes, she came over to him. "Let's go, Grim."

He rose, settling a blank look on his features. She took his arm and Apparated.

~*~

Minerva had given them a suite of five rooms on the third floor, looking out over the Forbidden Forest. She showed them to the door chattering about casual things, carefully not looking at Severus. Once Hermione had set the password ("Invictus!"), Minerva told them she would be by to talk later, and left them to their own devices.

Snape collapsed onto the sofa as soon as the door was shut behind him. "Merlin! I think I bit my tongue a dozen times. Why did you have to start talking about decorating charms?"

Hermione gestured at the plain white walls. "I don't know about you, but these are going to drive me mad if I don't do something with them. Do you have a color preference for your room?"

"If you insist on knowing, ivory with forest green trim," he replied. "When do you think you'll be able to brew the Heliix?"

"This morning. It'll go faster if you help."

He waved a hand expressively. "It will be more dangerous. Remember, I am *supposed* to be incapable of such things."

"True enough. I'll get started on it then. You'll have to come with me though; if I don't bring you along, Poppy will ask all kinds of uncomfortable questions."

That started a new train of thought. "Speaking of uncomfortable things," he began, "did you take your *Nonconceptus* potion?"

"Erm. No. I was distracted last night." She rolled her eyes. "I checked it this morning, and it had begun to separate. I threw it out. I'll brew more today also."

"That potion is only effective within the first forty-eight hours."

"Which means I need to take it by tomorrow morning. Let's see if we can avoid getting distracted again." She blushed slightly as she remembered exactly how she'd been distracted. "Come on, then."

Snape took a deep breath, settled his features into blankness, and followed her out the door and down into the Potions Laboratory. In short order, they had half a dozen cauldrons bubbling happily. Hermione had done the vast majority of the work, only asking Grim to help her retrieve ingredients off the highest shelves. Now he was stirring the Heliix—it required an hour of slow and steady mixing for best potency. Hermione had just finished a fresh batch of the *Nonconceptus* potion when Poppy came bustling in.

"You're here already! I can't tell you how pleased I am to have you back. And... him too." She cast a fond look at Snape. He ignored her and continued the mindless stirring. "He does look better than the last time I saw him." The mediwitch's eyes fell on the cauldrons. "Are you sure it's safe for him to be doing that?"

"Quite sure," Hermione answered. "It's only slow stirring. I wouldn't ask him to do anything too complicated."

"I should hope not." Poppy's eyebrows rose as she saw the *Nonconceptus* potion. "What in the world do you need that for?" She stared at Hermione and then at Severus, and then back at Hermione.

Hermione began ladling the potion into a vial. "It's not what it looks like." She took a long breath. "I'm experimenting with the recipe—to make it last longer so I can brew it up ahead of time like I do for a lot of other potions. You can't tell me you won't need it. This batch," she held up the vial, "is my control."

"Oh I see!" Poppy looked relieved. "How clever! I thought..." she trailed off.

Hermione didn't dare meet Snape's eyes. She'd break into hysterical laughter if she did. "Oh! Nothing like that! I mean, how could I?"

"He's still... whole, isn't he?" The mediwitch twisted a hand nervously in her apron. "They didn't... hurt him while he was in prison?"

"Not like that, no."

"I think he should be given a thorough exam, dear. Just to be sure. I appreciate your efforts, but I am a trained professional after all."

"Really, Poppy, he's fine." This had gone beyond funny.

"It won't be any trouble. Just bring him up to the Infirmary when you're done here. Shall we say in about an hour?"

"More likely two or three hours. I'll have to clean up down here when I'm done, and then it will be time for lunch. *And that will give me time to talk to Minerva and see if she can get Poppy under control. Worst case is, Severus takes a double dose of Heliix before the exam, and we pray.*

"I'll see you after lunch then." With a cheery wave, she vanished—presumably to get ready.

~*~

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Hermione said as she made a final pass with her cleaning rag over the countertop. Severus was decanting the Heliix potion into vials; they'd made enough to hopefully last for the term. "I like Poppy, but she's not a member of the Order."

He set the cauldron down in the sink and turned on the tap. While it filled, he picked up one of the vials and held it up to her in a mock salute before drinking it. Tranquility settled over him like a warm and comforting blanket—a wall around his mind, but this one soothing and protective. The caged panther settled down in the heat and dozed.

She saw the tension drain out of his muscles, out of the fine lines of his face. Subtle changes, and all of a sudden he was Grim again, not Severus.

His reply came slowly. Softly. "We need to tell Minerva sooner rather than later." He began rinsing the cauldron out.

"Agreed. I'll tell her at lunch that I need to talk to her immediately—and with any luck, that will let us put Poppy off again." She looked around the lab to make sure that everything was tidied up.

He turned the cauldron upside-down to drain, and they left the lab and made their way up to the Great Hall.

Minerva was the only one seated at the high table when they arrived, for which Hermione was grateful. She sat down with Grim between them, offering him a buffer from the rest of the faculty. Minerva gave her a raised eyebrow.

"Problems, Hermione?"

"I need to talk to you right after lunch, Professor."

"Certainly. I hope you haven't changed your mind about working here."

"Not at all!"

"So you did take the job!" Hermione turned and broke into a smile as Harry walked up to the table. "I'm glad of it." He gave her a hug and whispered, "How'd it go?"

"It worked—tell you later," she replied.

Harry took a seat on her left. "It's good to be back."

As the other members of the faculty trickled in, they discussed class schedules, curricula, and other professional matters. Hermione's ownership of Grim was public knowledge, and there were surprisingly few questions about his presence.

"I'm very interested in the structure of the Soulstriking spell," Liam Carpe said in his gruff baritone. "It must be quite a powerful Charm! I'm sure it's classified though." He twirled his wand in one hand.

"You probably wouldn't want to examine that spell too closely," Harry replied, flashing a quick grin at Hermione before looking directly at the Charms professor. "Just think of all the trouble it would cause if someone at the Ministry thought you were trying to break it."

"Errm, yes." Carpe subsided, much to Hermione's relief.

When lunch was over, Minerva rose. "Professor Granger, I need a word with you in my office. Mr. Potter, please join us. The rest of you, please Floo me your course plans by this evening. Other than that, enjoy these last few days of calm before the students arrive."

They rode the spiral staircase to Minerva's office in silence. Once there, the Headmistress shut the door and warded it with a series of strong privacy spells. Then she turned and studied the three other occupants of her office with a severe expression. "Well then. If this is Order business, we should be holding this meeting at Grimmauld Place."

"It doesn't concern the entire Order yet," Harry said.

"It does now, Harry. But Minerva... we need *your* help, and it can't wait." She took a deep breath to begin, but was interrupted.

"She's trying to tell you that she broke the Soulstriking," Snape said, rising to his feet. His lips twitched at Minerva's shocked expression. "Only she'd take three hours to get to the point."

"Severus!" Hermione didn't know whether to be outraged or not.

Minerva folded him into a bony hug. "I'm glad you're back, you sarcastic, wonderful bastard."

"And I'm glad to be back... you frightful, marvelous harri-dan."

Hermione cleared her throat. "We need sanctuary here, obviously. We want to get the conviction overturned, but that's become more complicated than I thought."

Snape turned serious and resumed his seat. "Hermione is right. Shall I summarize?"

"Please do," Harry said. If there was a trace of sarcasm in his voice, Snape chose to ignore it.

Minerva summoned parchment and quill to take notes. "Let's do this in an orderly fashion. Severus will summarize, then we will discuss."

He began.

~*~

"We don't want to get you in trouble with the Ministry, Minerva," Snape finished finally. "But Hogwarts is, frankly, safer for me than anywhere else."

"It's not that we don't trust the rest of the Order, it's just that... the fewer people who know, the easier it will be."

"I'm aware of that, Professor Granger," the Headmistress studied her notes. "I think you are right... we must solve the puzzles you mentioned and collect more information. I don't see any reason why Severus' restoration can't remain secret for the time being."

Harry was still wrapping his mind around the idea of Fudge as a Death Eater. "I agree," he said slowly. "But we will eventually have to let everyone know."

"So, a brainstorming session on the puzzles... tonight?" Hermione asked.

"Yes... if you can make enough copies for everyone, that might help."

"Where are we going to meet?"

"The Room of Requirement, at 7pm" Minerva replied, "and I will see if Bill Weasley can join us. As he is already privy to much of what's been done, I believe he will be more of an asset than a liability."

"Except, if he is seen, explanations will be required."

"I'll make sure he isn't seen," Harry replied. "I'll lend him my cloak."

~*~

Severus and Hermione reached the Room of Requirement somewhat earlier than anyone else. This was mostly due to their desire to avoid a run-in with the school medi-witch. Poppy had been affronted by Minerva's politely phrased order to cease and desist. Despite the calming influence of the Heliix potion, Severus' fingers had twitched several times during that confrontation as if he wished to cast a spell. Matters reached a head when Poppy turned to Hermione and offered to buy Severus outright though it was hard to say who was more offended.

They entered together and found seats at the big round table that took up the middle of the room. Hermione passed around the copies of the three puzzles, putting one of each at every place. "There. Now..."

Harry came in casually folding up his cloak. "Hello, Hermione. Hello, Professor." He took a seat. "Bill will be here in a moment."

"Bill is here," Bill said, walking into the room. "Hello Professor. It's good to know that you're back."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley." Severus inclined his head. "I do appreciate your efforts on my behalf. And yours also, Mr. Potter."

Bill gave Hermione a hug, "Good to see you also. Who else is coming?"

"Just Minerva. We had to let her know."

"Makes sense," Bill said. "And she may have some new ideas for these puzzles." He picked a chair and sat down heavily. "Nice setup here." He gestured at the sideboard laden with coffee, butterbeer, tea, and a wide assortment of snacks. "Let me guess... Hermione summoned the room?"

She grinned, and resumed her seat. "Yes... I tried to make it comfortable."

Minerva strode in, gave the room a once-over and immediately went over and poured herself a cup of tea. "Very civilized, Professor Granger."

"Professor?" Bill asked.

"Harry and I are teaching at Hogwarts now," Hermione answered. "That's one of the reasons we're meeting here."

"So let's get started," Minerva said. "There are five of us and three puzzles. Any suggestions for how to divide them?"

"The list of names is, perhaps, the lowest priority," Severus answered. "The other puzzles are more likely to contain useful information."

"Very well I suggest that one of us work on that puzzle, one on the short puzzle, and the other three on the poem puzzle."

"I'll work on the short puzzle," Harry said. "I haven't seen it yet."

"I'll take the Invisible Idiots," decided the Headmistress. "I'm a fair hand at cryptic crosswords, so perhaps that will help."

"Let's get started then."

Bill pulled his chair over next to Hermione and Severus. "So we get the poem puzzle." He studied it for a moment.

Lpegh bijwl mwrzm dcpfr aseim vpvra ssnpa

Aozri eceau aeaaio raeio uamga iaiaed eeaeil

Wleel lhrlc rtscr asrlid gnoor nnknr vprtrb

Rlkgd laedi mhtht ctcto udrrt cstdi etceiu

Midnight, starlight, harvest moon,

Return that which was lost too soon.

Heart of the Soulstruck, soul and mind,

Flicker and fledge and fly and bind!

Euige abmeu aeaaio ooiel sayki eyoaa riirus

Nxeob toins drbrm mrvrp trman nprln umspsd

Crlyr rdamu ubaie arath urarp taklp susebu

Eowla ijhaa kynar lolmu socka crrbu ssatlm

Moonshine, starshine, midnight sun,

Undo what must be undone.

Mind of the Soulstruck, soul and heart,

Joining where once rent apart.

Nsien xuscl eslhg fswus rsnar rkuuc ngmtab

Oiljd lglhf htewa oiell oiark aimle araicl

Tekrt esoao eesir yeace oeioi bn1sy palgke

Tre1a sopiy rbtlr 1rsis krrfn bs1t eyfr1d

Starfire, Moonfire, Witching Hour,

These the signs of Magic's Power.

Soulstruck heart and mind and soul,

Torn asunder, now made whole.

2s1v tner rbrke 2lbt w2fs eo1r 1loe1o

4e r1r iiaet 2eer o3o sn1o 1eyw1r

4r a onnst 2yra o3n r2d 5e

4y n tsg 4n d 3e 5 6

Those who would lift Magic's Curse

Look ye down on Magic's Verse.

See the power in the Name

Not as written, yet the same.

5 g 2e 4g 5 5 5 6

5 e 5 4e 5 5 5 6

"We think that the poem is a set of instructions for another way of breaking the Soulstriking," Hermione said. "And I've no idea about the rest of it."

"A mnemonic of some kind?" Severus asked. "Look at it. Every line has the same pattern several groups of 5 letters, and one of 6."

"Let's take the verse out of it." Hermione waved her wand at the chalkboard, and the letters began forming there in block letters.

Lpegh bijwl mwrzm dcpfr aseim vpvra ssnpa

Aozri eceau aeaaao raeio uamga iaiaed eeaeil

Wleel lhrlic rtscr asrld gnoor nnknr vprtrb

Rlkgd laedi mhtht ctcbo udrtr cstdi etceiu

Euige abmeu aeaaai ooieil sayki eyoaa riirus

Nxeob toins drbrm mrvrp trman nprln umspsd

Crlyr rdammm ubaie arath urarp taklp susebu

Eowla ijhaa kynar lolmu socka crrbu ssatlm

Nsien xuscl eslhg fswus rsnar rkuuc ngmtab

Oiljd lglnf htewa oieil oiark aimle araicl

Tekrt esoao eesir yeace oeioi bn1sy palgke

Tre1a sopiy rbtlr 1rsis krrfn bs1t eyfr1d

2s1v tner rbrke 2lbt w2fs eo1r 1loe1o

4e r1r iiaet 2eer o3o sn1o 1eyw1r

4r a onnst 2yra o3n r2d 5e

4y n tsg 4n d 3e 5 6

5 g 2e 4g 5 5 5 6

5 e 5 4e 5 5 5 6

"I didn't know what to do with the numbers, so I left them there." Hermione said.

Severus stared at the board. "Oh, Merlin," he whispered. "Oh my dear Merlin."

Bill

and Hermione whipped around to look at him. The former Potions Master had gone absolutely white. "Severus? What is it?"

"Look ye down on Magic's Verse," he rasped. "Read down the first column."

Hermione looked. "L, A, W, R, E..."

"Lawrence Nott." Bill said. "But..."

Severus had sunk into his chair. "Now the last column."

"A, L, B, U, oh my GOD!" Hermione's near-shriek brought Harry's and Minerva's heads up. A quick explanation later, and Bill began writing down the decoded puzzle. After the first three names, it was obvious that this was the proper solution.

"Lawrence Nott, Pollux Rosier, Ezekiel Wilkes, Greg Goyle, Jr. no surprises there." Harry said.

"Hildebrandt Avery, Bellatrix LeStrange, Ichabod Jugson ditto," McGonagall contributed.

"Jeremiah Sloper, Walden MacNair, Lucius Malfoy, Marmaduke Herriot. Didn't realize Herriot was a Death Eater." That was Hermione.

"Wetherby Stebbins, Rastaban LeStrange, Zachariah Wilkes." It had almost become a chant.

"Mortimer Garrett, Draco Malfoy, Castor Rosier, Percy Weasley..." Bill's voice shook just slightly on the last name.

"Filbert Mulciber, Rodolphus LeStrange there's the last of that family," Harry muttered. "And good riddance to bad rubbish!"

"Augustus Rookwood, Sandar Rosier, Emory MacNair figured he'd be in there too." Hermione again.

"Igor Karkaroff, Martin Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe, Sr. more bad rubbish." Minerva had caught up with them.

"Pansy Parkinson, Viktor Krum, Randall Bulstrode, Adrian Pucey that's the one we couldn't remember," Harry said slowly.

"Severus Snape, Septimus Grayle, Narcissa Malfoy, Peter Pettigrew not sorry to see him on the list."

Harry went white as he read off the next-to-last name. "Sirius Black," he whispered. "Oh god, no!"

With a shaking hand, Bill wrote the final name on his list. "Albus Dumbledore."

Chapter Eleven

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter Eleven

Minerva clutched at the table. "Albus? Oh Merlin." She swayed and would've fallen except for Snape's quick reflexes. He settled her into a chair and brought her a cup of tea and one for himself. Then he sat next to her, offering her the comfort of his presence and his gentle grip on her hands.

"But... but... Sirius is dead! I saw him die!" Harry repeated for the fifteenth time. He stared at the board, at the now-smeared letters that spelled out his godfather's name. Hermione pulled him into a fierce hug as he fell into a chair, his shoulders shaking. Bill Weasley, the least affected of them all, followed Severus' lead and brought two cups over to Harry and Hermione.

Predictably, Hermione recovered first. She unwound herself from her friend and drank her tea with a quick nod of thanks to Bill. He jerked his head toward the other end of the room, and she joined him there, though her eyes flickered toward Harry every few seconds.

"You don't think this is some kind of joke, do you?" Bill asked. "Those are about the only two names that would reduce Harry and Minerva to tears."

"A joke? A hoax? I don't think so. What I don't understand is how or why."

"Maybe there's some significance to the numbers that I missed? I assumed they were just for spacing out longer names."

Hermione patted his arm. "The spacing works out too well, Bill. The numbers are just filler. This has got to be the right solution."

"I wonder," Bill said thoughtfully. "These puzzles... the notes... the lack of wards..."

"What?"

"Aberon McGaven he had to know Dumbledore. Everyone did. So if he Soulstruck him, then..."

"Maybe Fudge was blackmailing him? Threatening him?"

"And maybe McGaven set things up so that it would be possible to untangle what was going on..."

"McGaven knew about the Order. He probably figured that someone would come looking for Albus eventually."

"You're basing your statements on the supposition that McGaven is not working with Fudge," Severus' voice drifted over to them.

"You're right, Severus," Hermione said as she and Bill returned to the table. Harry had gulped down his tea and was now just staring off into space. Minerva had aged a dozen years in moments, and had her face buried in her hands. Snape had an arm around her shoulders, but he was obviously already thinking past whatever he was feeling.

Damn him, Hermione thought. Doesn't he know he's making me jealous? She shot a glare at the back of his head, then ran her hands through her hair wearily. *Jealous of Minerva? Granger, you have GOT to get a grip. Maybe YOU should take some of that Helix.*

"This third puzzle may be a key then," Bill said.

"I thought it was an anagram of some kind," Harry turned to face them, his eyes dark with grief and anger. "But I hadn't gotten very far with it." He lapsed back into that mindless staring into space.

Hermione looked at the puzzle again. It was only one line of letters.

INIITP MONNEA PTVKNG OEI TE RSS H T I A B N L T E

"I wonder..." Not bothering to use magic, she grabbed a blank piece of parchment and began writing, using block letters and being careful to line up the columns as she wished.

INIITP

MONNEA

PTVKNG

OEI TE

RSS H T I A B N L T E

"Oh my..." She continued writing. A moment later, she looked up.

INIITP

MONNEA

PTVKNG

OEI TE

RSS H

T I

A B

N L

T E

"I think I've got it." She didn't shout, but the words were enough to bring all of them to her side, even Minerva still sniffing intermittently.

"Important notes invisible ink tenth page," Bill said. "Incredible."

"Severus gave me the idea with the solution to the other puzzle."

"Tenth page of what?" Harry asked.

"I'll be right back!" Hermione dashed off.

"So where'd she go?" Bill demanded of no one in particular.

"McGaven's notes," Severus said. "I'd bet my next paycheck if I were employed that she's gone to fetch McGaven's notes and will come back asking if anyone knows a charm to reveal hidden writing."

Harry snorted. "I don't think a charm will show anything."

"Why not," Minerva asked. "A simple Finite Incantatem will lift most concealment charms."

"Aberon likes Muggle books, and Muggle codes. What's to stop him from using a purely Muggle form of invisible ink?"

"Is there such a thing?" Bill barely beat Severus to the question. "A non-magic form of invisible ink?"

"Yes, there's actually two that are easily available. Lemon juice and," Harry flushed painfully, "urine. When they dry they become invisible until exposed to heat."

"Mr. Potter, do I want to know how you know about these things?" Severus asked.

"A Muggle book, actually, Professor. It was a spy novel."

"What was?" Hermoine asked as she reentered the room, her arms laden with McGaven's notes. "And does anyone know of a good charm for making hidden writing show up?"

Severus chuckled, and Harry shrugged. "It was a discussion on invisible ink, Hermione."

It was soon obvious that "tenth page" was less than specific. Finally, they divided the stacks of notes into five piles and went through every page individually searching for the invisible writing. Two hours later, they were finished unsuccessfully.

"Well damn," Bill said. "I had hoped it would be easy."

"You've been very fortunate so far," Minerva reminded them. "If the Ministry was still warded with Anti-Apparation spells, you'd still be searching for these notes."

"Merlin's bones! Minerva, you're a genius!" Harry shouted. "These are copies of the notes! We need the original pages!" He grabbed his cloak. "I'll go get them and put the copies in their place."

"You're not going alone," Hermione said. "I'm going with you."

Harry picked up the notes. "No you're not." He swung the cloak over his shoulders and left, the soft pattering of his footsteps marking his path.

"Mr. Potter has the right of it," Severus said slowly. "It will be faster for him to go alone."

"But he might get caught!" She stood up. "I'm going after him."

Severus reached out a long arm and plucked her wand from her hand. "Better one gets caught than all. Let me remind you of what you said to me earlier: there is more at stake here than you or me or any individual wizard."

Their eyes met and Hermione felt her objections melting away. A niggling little voice in the back of her head reminded her that it would be much nicer to stay here with Severus. She told the little voice to shut up.

And so they waited. Every few minutes, someone would take a deep breath as if to say something and then simply let it out again. Or there would be the sound of throat clearing, heralding the beginnings of a sentence but no sentence followed. Hermione looked at her watch; it seemed to be stuck, for it hadn't moved noticeably in the last however long it had been since she'd looked at it. She shot Severus a dirty look where he sat, still holding her wand.

"This is ridiculous," Minerva finally said into the smothering silence. "Mr. Potter is an accomplished wizard. We should be making plans to... to do something!"

"What can we assume?" Severus asked. "Let us assume that Fudge is indeed responsible for Albus' Soulstriking, and that he is held prisoner somewhere. What then?"

"That will be sufficient reason to call the entire Order back," Bill said firmly. "Half the reason that it splintered after the war is because no one could agree on who would be in charge."

"So that gives us who in addition to the five of us?"

"Tonks, Moody, and Kingsley for starters," Hermione said.

"My family." Bill's eyes were stormy. "Dad was really angry with Mum for restoring Percy. But he'll come around for Albus. So me, George, Ron, Ginny, Mum and Dad."

Slowly, carefully, Severus asked, "Not Percy?"

An eloquent shrug. "I don't know, Professor. I love him; he's my brother. But I don't think I trust him yet."

Minerva put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I think we should leave him out of our plans then, though someone will have to keep watch on him."

"We shouldn't make firm plans until Harry gets back," Hermione said. "But we've got what thirteen of us to storm the Ministry? That's not going to work very well."

"Stealth and guile, not overt force," Severus replied. "The same principles that you used to break into the Ministry - twice."

"Obviously parental love is sufficient to break a Soulstriking," Minerva mused while Hermione glared at Severus. "We should assume that filial love is also." When the other three gave her looks of non-comprehension, she sighed. "Harry is the obvious one to break the spell for Sirius. But Albus that will have to be you, Severus, or me."

"A good thing for us that Aberon didn't restrict love to the romantic type," Bill said. "That would make things considerably more difficult."

The sound of footsteps in the corridor silenced them. A moment later the door opened and Harry came in carrying a large box. He kicked the door shut behind him and put the box on the table with a sigh of relief. "Nothing's changed at the Ministry, but the Aurors got into a disagreement about the rules for their game. I had to wait till they resolved it." He tapped the box wearily. "Here are the notes. I also used an All-Seeing Eye spell, and found a Muggle loose-leaf notebook taped to the underside of one of the shelves."

"And you brought it along also?" Hermione asked.

"Any tea left?" Harry sat down. "Yes, I brought the original with me. There's an invisible duplicate transfigured out of an ordinary beaker in its place."

Bill brought him a cup of tea. "You sit and recover, Harry. We'll take a look at this."

"Nice work, Mr. Potter," Severus said.

Hermione emptied the box onto the table. "Here's the original notes. Here's the notebook."

"Bill and I will look over the notes for the invisible ink and anything else that might be useful," Minerva decided.

"So Her... Miss Granger and I will look through this notebook." Severus picked it up and opened it at random, then began flipping through the pages. "It's empty."

"Invisible ink, remember?" Hermione reached for her wand and then rolled her eyes. "I need my wand back, Severus." The moment he returned it, she snatched a teacup and charmed it to emit heat. "Hold it next to that with the pages fanned out so they all get the heat."

"How long does this usually take?"

"Not long," Harry replied. The tea was beginning to revive him. "No more than ten minutes. God, I have got to get back in shape! All that spell-casting wiped me out." He stretched tremendously. "Any luck yet?"

"The edges of the pages are turning brown, but I expect that's not quite what we're looking for," Severus replied dryly.

"Eek! No maybe we should take the pages out of the notebook and heat them separately." Hermione took the notebook away from him. "Here." She opened the rings. "Keep them in order, if you can." She handed him the first two pages. "Give those a few more minutes, and then if you don't see anything, try the next two."

"And what will you be doing," he muttered to himself as he did her bidding. "Cozying up to Potter again?" He watched as she crossed over to where Harry was sitting, and leaned on the table chatting with him quietly. A wave of quiet rage swept over him, and it took him several moments to recognize it as jealousy.

The feeling was forgotten as letters began to appear on the pages he held out to the charmed teacup. Letters, then words, then sentences and paragraphs slowly appearing in dark brown against the flimsy white notebook paper. "I've got something," he said triumphantly. "Look!"

They crowded around, looking at the first pages while he took the next two and began exposing them to the heat.

"When one has much to say of questionable nature, one takes various odd actions which may save one's life at some indefinable point in the future. After these recent events, I feel I must take measures. I am not irreplaceable, and I know it well. So I revert to the tricks of my Muggle-born childhood friends. It is all too ironic that children's games befuddle adult wizards."

"So Soulstriking. A good idea at the time, I thought. I've always enjoyed modifying spells to suit my own purposes. It's perhaps a little tedious, but there's a beauty in creating something entirely new out of something old and forgotten. No one remembers the battles hundreds of years ago, where the House Elves were forced to submit. Most wizards don't even know they're geased to serve. Most elves probably don't even know it these days; it's been long enough now that the ones who actually remember the war are dead as are the first of their children."

Bill stopped reading. "Interesting background, but hardly important. Let me have the next two pages."

"...have set up my own lab in the Ministry where I can actually perform the spell. Of course, the Minister says he will have his guards force the prisoners to drink the potion for me. I wish I'd had more time to do research I was close to doing away with the potion entirely. I will begin with my experiments tomorrow."

"Disaster! The jar I was using was cracked and exploded during the transfer process. I will have to be sure to reinforce the protective spells on them before doing the transfer. One less Death Eater to worry about, though. The body did not survive the experience."

"The Minister wasn't at all upset. He urged me to complete my research, my work. The Aurors have captured many Death Eaters, and it is fitting that they be used to refine the spells that will put an end to them forever."

"The rest of this is just more of the same." Bill snagged another teacup and charmed it for himself. "The more, the merrier." He picked up the next pages and began warming them. "I'm guessing that if Aberon said tenth page, he meant tenth page."

"But what he considered important might not be everything we need to know," Harry objected. "We really need to go over everything."

"You're right," Hermione said, handing him the four pages that Bill had already skimmed. "Here. Oh, and number them, would you?"

"We're not returning them?" Bill asked. Then he looked at the pages he held. "I guess we can't, now that we've revealed the writing."

"True enough," Harry replied, as he printed careful block numbers in the upper right corner of each page. As each page was done, he blew gently across the ink to dry it, then set it aside. "We shouldn't number them until after the writing's exposed we don't want to write over it."

Severus put down the quill he'd just picked up. "An excellent point, Mr. Potter."

"Let's be sensible here," Minerva interjected, coming over to join them. "Two of us can hold the pages up to the heat. One can put the numbers on them after the writing shows up, and the last two can do the first read-through."

"Gryffindors," Severus muttered. "Always having to take charge." He ignored the glare, raised eyebrow, snort, and snicker from his four compatriots.

"For your sins, you get to do the first read-through with Hermione," Harry said with a wicked grin. He handed Severus the pages. "These are already done. Have fun."

"Mr. Potter, you may do the numbering, as your penmanship is better than mine and far better than what I remember of Mr. Weasley's." Minerva said primly.

"So you and I get the scut work, eh?" Bill gave Minerva a grin. "Harry, here's page five and six for you."

Hermione took the first four pages and settled down in the nearest chair. Severus sat next to her and she began reading aloud.

"... first successful Soulstriking today! Lawrence Nott will never cast another Unforgivable Curse again! The Minister was very pleased, and we had dinner together at his manor. He's a very curious man had a lot of questions about the Soulstriking process. He wanted to know if it was possible to separate out the parts of the Soul that control magic if they could be removed entirely, then the remainder of the Soul could be restored. Of course a person subjected to that would be a Squib but that's more humane than execution."

Severus snorted softly. "How can he think that?"

"He has no idea what it's like to live without his magic. He probably doesn't know any Squibs. Here," Hermione handed him the pages. "You read for a while." Harry

skittered another four sheets across the table to her, and she took them with a nod of thanks in his direction.

"...success rate is now about one in three. Fudge says he would like it to be better, but he's not trying to push me. He's concerned about sentencing an innocent man, and he's right. I'll have to work on it.

"It's a problem with the potion, not the spell. The Soulstriking works properly, but the body doesn't survive. If the spell were at fault, the Souljar would shatter. Fudge has collected the Souljars for the failures. He doesn't want them taking up space in my lab. He's asked me to dinner tomorrow night."

Hermione handed Severus the next set of pages. "What on earth would Fudge want with their Souljars?"

"I don't know." He drained his tea and set the cup back down.

"I got quite a shock today when I went into my lab. Lucius Malfoy! I had no idea! He always seemed so respectable! I'm rather glad the Soulstriking worked; if he's truly innocent, he can be restored. He was my tenth success. I've begun making a record just in case.

"I've been thinking about what Minister Fudge said about removing magic from the Souljar. It should be fairly easy to do a modification of the Soulstriking spell. I think I'll work it all out, and tell him at Christmas it'll be a surprise! He's been working very hard lately; I do hope he's not sick."

"Some surprise," Severus grumbled.

"Hush." There was a beat, a pause, before Hermione continued, "I didn't mean quit reading! Honestly, Severus!" Their eyes met for a thousand-year moment until he turned back to the pages in his lap.

"I believe I've determined how to extract the magic essence from one Souljar and add it to another one. I'll need to do some experimenting, of course, but I've no lack of test subjects. I've also solved the problem with the potion! I need to be a little more consistent in how finely I chop the jacamar feathers. They're awfully tough, so I need to make sure my knife is freshly sharpened!"

"What dunderhead taught McGaven potions?" Severus grumbled. "Even Longbottom knew that by the end of his first year." Before Hermione could respond with the name and complete C.V. of McGaven's teacher, he continued reading.

"Three Soulstriking today! I'm almost too exhausted to write this. Wetherby Stebbins, Rastaban LeStrange, and Zachariah Wilkes. All successful! I'm positive now that the process is foolproof! Sent an owl off to the Minister and let him know. Not an hour later, he stopped by and offered to buy me a drink. How flattering! He had a new question for me also he asked if it was possible to put a Soul into a different body. I asked him why on earth anyone would want to do that. He said if someone was wrongfully convicted, but their body had been damaged (MacNair's comes to mind), that it would be something to offer. Where do you get a body without a Soul though? That's obvious once you think about it you restore it into another body that's been Soulstruck.

"The Minister is really looking unwell. I've heard a rumor that he's using a Glamour when he has to make public appearances. He only drank water tonight. I didn't want to say anything, but I think he needs to see a good mediwitch."

"Seven pages, Hermione. Bits and pieces of clues on all of them." He looked up as Harry handed him a stack of papers. "Thank you, Mr. Potter."

"That's the last of them, Professor. Please go on."

"I've been too busy these last few days to write in my journal. There was an extended sweep and several arrests I've had a lot of work to do. It gave me a bad turn to see Arthur's son in my lab. But he was convicted. I wouldn't do this otherwise. That Bulgarian Quidditch player he was another surprise. He was probably using the Dark Arts to help Bulgaria win their matches. There's rumor that they'll have to forfeit all their games for the rest of the season.

"The Minister stopped by again, late in the day. He says he has a special project that he wants me to work on when this work is done oh yes! I almost forgot to mention it! There are less than ten Death Eaters remaining in prison, and their trials are scheduled for this week. I won't be sorry to put this behind me, but I know I've made the world a better, safer place. Poor Minister Fudge he looks dreadfully ill thin and papery.

"I have done some more experimenting, and I've successfully transferred magic essence from one Souljar to another. I chose Nott as the donor because he wasn't a powerful wizard, and I wanted to be careful. I added it to Lucius Malfoy's jar. I still can't believe he was a Death Eater! If he's ever restored, the extra magic will be some form of reparation.

"I took great pride in my work today! The Minister came and watched he hasn't done that before. But then, today was the day I Soulstruck one of the worst of the lot! He was a traitor he's the one who was responsible for getting Albus Dumbledore killed! Good riddance, Severus Snape!"

Severus put the papers down on the table with shaking hands. "Someone else had best finish reading this. I might shred these pages into little pieces if I continue."

Hermione put a hand on his arm. "It's all right, Severus. We don't believe it. We know the truth."

Minerva picked up the discarded pages. "I'll continue. I'm getting the feeling that time is essential." She cleared her throat and began.

"The last of the Death Eaters has been Soulstruck! There are thirty-four of them, all lined up in blue Souljars on my lab bench. I've got half a dozen jars left. I was going to throw them out, but the Minister says that I should keep them that he might sentence other criminals to be Soulstruck one day but only the very worst.

"He also asked me if I could teach another wizard how to do Soulstriking. I hated to disappoint him it can't be done. I've tied too much of myself into the casting of the spell, so only I can do it. When I designed the spell, I didn't want it falling into the wrong hands. I did build in a fail-safe though any powerful wizard can break the spell under the right circumstances.

"I'm getting a bit nervous these days. Maybe it's my imagination, but the Minister seems distracted, as if he has something on his mind. He gave me such a look when I told him I couldn't teach anyone else it startled me. It scared me. It made me feel like I was a rabbit and he was a hunting hawk. I'm glad I've been keeping this journal in invisible ink. This evening, I went through and made some additions and changes to my notes. More childish puzzles, and probably not necessary. But..."

Minerva stopped for a moment and sipped at her now-cold tea as she turned to the tenth page of the notebook.

"Merlin help me, this has gone beyond all reason and I cannot stop it. I don't know what to do!"

"Fudge came to see me today while I was straightening out my lab. He reminded me of the new project he'd mentioned a few weeks ago. He took me into a part of the Ministry where I'd never been, down to the lowest sub basement. He had a lab set up there, much like my old one, but bigger and all-new equipment.

"Then we sat down to talk and he told me what he wanted me to do.

"He's dying. Cancer a Muggle disease. It's rare for wizards to contract such things, but it does happen. Neither Muggle technology nor wizard magic can do anything about

it. And he doesn't want to die and so he has decided to live.

"He had two more prisoners, he told me. Special prisoners, and both powerful wizards. He wants me to use the Soulstriking process to transfer his Soul into one body, and then transfer the magic of the other to him in his new body. I thought he was joking and then he gave me that hawk-look again, and told me I didn't have any choice.

"He's kept records. There were forty-two Death Eaters that died during my experiments. I had no idea it was that many. He will bring forty-two charges of murder against me if I don't help him, and he will personally make sure I am given to the Dementors.

"Merlin help me! I am such a fool! And a coward! I agreed. Before I realized what he was doing, he put a Compulsar Hex on me. I don't have to do what he says, but every time I disobey, pain wracks through my arms and legs. It gets progressively worse. He has told me not to tell anyone of this, and I won't. But the Hex is specific, so I am recording it in my journal.

"So, he brought in the first prisoner, and I thought I was dreaming. Sirius Black was supposed to be dead! Fudge laughed at me and told me to do my job. I had to obey him. While I worked, he told me that Dementors can pass through the Veil without harm, and bring things back. He'd originally meant to release Black and get Harry Potter's eternal gratitude but then he learned he was mortally sick... and that's when he got this depraved idea.

"That was bad enough, but then... then he brought in the second prisoner, and I saw what he meant to do. He wants to be transferred to Black's body and have me combine Albus Dumbledore's magic with his. The result... well... my theory says that he will become amazingly powerful. Almost god-like. Or perhaps, devil-like would be more accurate.

"I asked how he managed to capture Dumbledore, and he bragged about it. It was during the fight everyone was watching Voldemort and Harry Potter. Dumbledore was distracted, and Fudge hit him with a Stupefy, seized him, and Apparated.

"So now I have Soulstruck the most powerful wizard in the world, and rendered him helpless. Fudge was going to kill Dumbledore's body, but I told him that it might cause the magic to fade. He agreed, reluctantly. Then I suggested that adding Black's magic would make him even more powerful. He liked that idea. I also told him that I would need to do some more research, and could begin testing in early January.

"He permitted me to go home tonight with a reminder not to talk about this. I asked him why? Why this evil? He laughed at me and showed me the Dark Mark on his arm. It's faded, but still obvious what it is. I suppose my shock showed on my face, because he laughed again a high, horrible laugh and said he'd been in Voldemort's service for years and no one knew. Even Dumbledore hadn't known.

"I have been a fool, but I'm not stupid. Once I complete this once the transfer is complete and the stolen magic transferred to him, I will be expendable. More, I will be a liability. I keep hearing that laugh in my head. That horrid laugh. If I get drunk, perhaps it will stop."

There was a long silence when Minerva finished reading. Bill let out a long breath. Harry buried his face in his hands, tears leaking through his fingers. Severus studied his hands where they lay on the table in front of him. Hermione bit her lip, and blinked furiously. Minerva had grown steadily paler as she spoke, and now she sat down, grief and anger mingled on her face. Time seemed to stop for a while.

"We need to get Albus out of there," Severus said finally. "and Black," he amended with a glance at Harry. "If this plan is allowed to come to fruition, no one who crosses Fudge is safe." He crossed over to the sideboard and poured fresh tea for them all.

"You're right, Professor," Bill said. "And sooner rather than later." He all but forced Harry's fingers around a teacup. "We're all members of the Order. Let's act like professionals."

"It's late," Hermione said, "and we're all worked up. We shouldn't do anything tonight."

"Tomorrow night," Harry said in a half-strangled voice. "I think I'll go mad in white linen if we wait any longer."

"I'll owl the rest of the Order," Bill said. "I assume we're meeting at Grimmauld Place?"

"That would be best, I think," Hermione said. "It's easier than explaining why everyone's coming to Hogwarts."

They left it there.

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"What if no one shows up?" Harry asked. "The Order hasn't been active for months."

"In the owls I sent, I said 'News of A.D. Meeting.' They'll be here. It's half an hour yet." Bill cracked his knuckles. "I'm glad you finally got rid of that picture, not to mention that crazy house elf."

"Kreacher?" Ron walked in the door. "Good riddance to him! Good to see you, Harry. I heard you're teaching at the old school this year?"

"Me and Hermione both, Ron. She's teaching Potions as a favor to Minerva."

"Nice." Ron sprawled in a chair. "So, Bill, how about a preview of this news?" He put on his best innocent look.

"Sorry little brother, I only want to say things once. Let's wait till everyone else gets here."

The Order trickled in by ones and twos, except for the rest of the Weasleys who came en masse. Even Rita Skeeter showed up, looking unwontedly serious. The last time they had all been under this roof had been the morning of the last battle. The symbolism was not lost on them. When everyone was present for they all had answered the summons Minerva took the floor.

"We've recently acquired information about Albus' disappearance. We know approximately where he is being held, and why, and by whom. We have extremely limited time to effect a rescue. I'll summarize, provide copies of our information, and then we'll discuss plans." With a wave of her wand, she sent copies of Aberon's notebook around to everyone in the room. "The passages I believe are important are marked, but there is almost certainly more useful information that I didn't catch. Please hold your questions until I'm done."

She explained what they'd learned, though she neatly avoided the subject of Severus' restoration. "So, Albus' body is in a cell under the Ministry somewhere, along with Sirius Black's. We need to rescue them and restore them. Questions?"

"Something else we have to do also," Arthur Weasley said slowly, "is find McGaven and put him in protective custody until we can convene the Wizengamot. Fudge will kill him, and he is our only real witness."

"Not quite," Hermione answered. "Severus can testify also."

"But..." Arthur stopped and looked at her with enlightenment dawning. "You bought him at the auction the memo came across my desk. So..."

"Yes, Arthur," Severus came forward from where he'd been standing in his best Grim pose. "Miss Granger risked a great deal to restore me."

There was a collective reaction at the table. Ron rolled his eyes and snorted in disgust, earning himself a kick from George who whistled in admiration. Arthur shook his head and muttered about fools rushing in where angels fear to tread, while his wife and daughter burst into tears of joy.

"Good job, Hermione!" Alastor Moody rumbled. The former Auror rose and looked Severus up and down. "Glad you're back with us, Snape. You're a better man than you give yourself credit for."

Tonks grinned and elbowed Kingsley, then the two applauded vigorously. Rita regarded both Severus and Hermione with a contemplative stare, saying nothing.

Minerva rapped on the table. "Business, please. Arthur is right. We need to find McGaven."

"We should do that at the same time as we spring Albus and Sirius," George said. "If Fudge finds McGaven missing, he may kill them, and vice versa."

"So two field teams," Tonks said, "Plus a team here for communication."

"I'm going to be on the team that rescues Sirius," Harry said in a voice that denied any appeal. "He's the only family I have."

"I'll be on the communication team," Rita said brightly. "It's what I do best." She tilted her head to one side. "Severus, could I... interview you?"

"Absolutely not," he snapped. The Heliix must have worn off. I'll need to be sure to take some more when we return to Hogwarts.

"Perhaps when this is over?" She caught the growing scowl on his face. "It was just a thought."

"I'll be on the communication team also," Minerva said. "We need at least two more here."

"I'd say that I should go after McGaven," Alastor rumbled. "I've shared more than a few drinks with him."

"Likewise," Bill said.

"Very well, Bill and Alastor you two will find McGaven and try to bring him back here. Do you want a third?"

"Probably a good idea easier to cover our backs."

"I'll go," Tonks volunteered. "It sounds more like action and less like sneaking around. My cup of tea."

"Molly and I will stay with the communication team," Arthur said. "That leaves who for the main field team?"

"George, Hermione, Ron, Kingsley, Harry, Severus, and Ginny."

"Not Ginny," said the owner of that voice. "I'm going back to the Burrow to take care of Percy as soon as the meeting is over."

"Who's in charge?" Ron asked. "Kingsley?"

"Not me," the retired Auror said. "I think Snape should lead this dance."

"Agreed," Hermione said just as Ron opened his mouth to protest.

"But..." Ron began again.

"No, Ron," Harry said. "Snape's the best choice. If you can't deal with it..."

They locked eyes, the two longtime friends, and it was Ron who looked away first. "You're right, Harry." Then to Severus, "I'll do as you say, sir."

"Very well then. We have only one objective: get Black and Albus out of there quietly and quickly and without getting caught. You Weasleys are in charge of diversions both arranging them so we can get in and out, and having them available for emergencies. So you will be both point and rear-guard. We'll set up an Apparation point within line of sight of the Ministry. Kingsley, do you know the Aurors on night shift any more?"

"Not really. Haven't been by at night for a while."

"Then you're our outside lookout. You keep our Apparation point clear. You'll also be primary communicator to the team remaining here."

"Yes, sir." Kingsley turned to the communication team. "I can only keep two links up at this distance, if I'm going to be good for anything else."

"Same," Tonks interjected. "Damn useless spell, that Speech Relay is."

"It's better than nothing." Kingsley replied. "Can't rely on having a fireplace handy to Floo."

"Molly and I will be your links," Arthur said, "and Rita and Minerva can link with Tonks."

"Right. Loquimisso!" He touched his wand to Arthur's left ear, then repeated the spell on Molly while Tonks did the same to Rita and Minerva.

While the communication links were being established, Severus continued with his instructions to his team.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, and myself will handle the actual rescue. When we get into the room, we'll check for traps and alarms and disarm any we find. Release any binding spells on the prisoners, and so on. Then, Mr. Potter, you will Apparate back here with Black, while I do the same with Albus. Miss Granger, you will then take down all our spells and work your way out with the Weasleys covering your retreat. Get back to the Apparation point, and then back here. With any luck, we can be in and out in less than an hour. Questions?"

Predictably, Hermione raised a tentative hand. "What about the inside team communicating back to Kingsley?"

"Can't do it," Kingsley answered. "Communication spells broadcast their presence, and any Auror worth the title will recognize them if he gets within fifty feet. So you'll be going in incommunicado."

"Any other questions?" Snape caught and held the eyes of each member of his team, one at a time. "Ready?"

A ragged chorus of affirmatives answered him, and he nodded slowly, then looked up at Minerva. "My team is ready."

"We're ready too," Moody said. "It's early enough that we're likely to catch McGaven in a pub. Save us the trouble of rousting him out of his house. Poor bloke I'd drink too, if I had those troubles on my mind."

Minerva shook her head. "Severus, you'll need this." She handed him a wand. "Albus had a box of unregistered wands stashed over here. I still don't know how he got them. That one is ash and phoenix feather, like your old one."

As his fingers closed over the wood, he suddenly felt complete again as if a vital gap in his soul had been filled. "Thank you, Minerva." He gave her one of his rare hugs, which she returned with interest.

Minerva looked at the clock, then at the faces of her friends. "Good luck, then, to all of you. One or the other of us will always be here if you need anything."

"Now y'see," Kingsley said to Ron right before they Apparated, "that's why he's a good leader. Twenty years as a spy the man knows how to think on his feet."

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Their chosen Apparation point was the same place Hermione had used only a few days ago when they'd engineered the first break-ins. Kingsley set up a series of passive alerts and subtle warn-offs that would keep most Muggles out of the vicinity. While he was doing that, the other five set up the static Charms they would need. Hermione's Catfoot spell on all of them, and Chameleon spells on Ron, George, Snape, and Hermione. Kingsley declined, preferring his own See-Me-Not spell. Harry, of course, had his cloak.

As before, they Apparated into the first sub-level of the Ministry as soon as the Aurors resumed their interminable game of Exploding Snap. George got a thoughtful look on his face as he regarded the staircase that led up to the main level. He knelt next to the bottom stair and muttered an incantation. A moment later he straightened up. "Let's go." He adroitly stepped over the stair he'd just trapped.

"What was that?" Hermione asked.

"A modified version of one of my new products," George grinned. "Anyone who steps on that will get the urge to hit the facilities... and it gets stronger pretty fast."

"Clever," Severus approved. "That might buy us some extra time."

"Oh, but we'll have to come all the way back to remove it!"

"No you won't. This spell dissipates in about an hour leaving very little magical residue about what you'd see if someone with spelled shoes stepped there recently." He twirled his wand nonchalantly. "I've keyed it to alert me if someone triggers it also."

"Like one of the Aurors. George, that's incredible!"

"I'll take point," Ron volunteered. "I've gotten good at finding traps and the like." He rubbed his nose, "After Charlie and Fred... well, I thought it would be useful, so I've been studying it on my own."

They made their way down the corridors, Ron leading the way. Every so often he would stop and make a sweep for detection spells. George was sparing with his delaying spells, placing them at intersections, and sometimes going several feet down a path not taken to plant one.

They found the doors to the second level easily enough, as Harry and Hermione both remembered the way from when they'd been at the auction. The stairs to the third level were quickly located also, and they descended again with George putting a Sticky Hinge hex on the door after it closed behind them.

They had some trouble locating the stairway to the fourth level, and their half-hour was nearly up by the time they found it.

"How many levels?" Harry asked. It was one of the first things he'd said since they'd entered.

"This is it." Severus replied. "If McGaven was accurate, we'll find them here."

The corridor was perhaps a little shabbier than the upper levels, its paint not quite as bright, and the air a little mustier. It exuded an air of disuse. Ron turned to face them. "Wards ahead, and warn-offs." A fluffy cloud of pink smoke flared out of his wand and settled over the wards, showing a series of bars at knee and chest height criss-crossing the corridor. Other clouds of pink smoke clung to the walls where warn-offs and other alarm spells were located. "I'd say we're onto something this is going to take a few to unlock."

It took several minutes of joint effort, but the wards and warn-offs faded quietly. "I think," Hermione said, "if we can, let's put them up from the other side."

"Someone's just tripped the first delay," George interrupted. "Let's move."

They moved. Once past the barrier, the corridor made a sharp right-angled turn and dead-ended in a door on the left and another straight ahead. Ron grimaced. "No wards here. I'm going to go back and put that mess back up. I don't think the Aurors will take it down again."

"I'll go with you," George said. "It'll go faster with two of us."

Severus nodded, and the Weasley boys disappeared around the corner.

The door on the left wasn't locked. It opened to reveal the laboratory described in McGaven's notebook or one identical to it, down to the chains hanging on the wall. Severus gave the shackles no more than a passing glance, but Hermione saw his jaw muscles tighten. They gave it a quick once over, and turned their attention to the other door. This one was locked, and refused to respond to Harry's Alohamora.

Harry's fists clenched. "Mellon!" The door remained locked. "Damn!"

Severus raised an eyebrow at Hermione, who gave him an eyebrow right back. "Let me try, Harry." She pointed her wand at the lock and began murmuring incantations.

George and Ron came trotting back. "All set. Now we can Apparate out from here."

"Haven't you got that door open yet, Hermione?" Harry asked. Just as he finished speaking, the lock gave a quiet click and the knob turned. Shaking with eagerness, he was about to shove the door open when Snape's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Wards and alarms." Severus said quietly.

The Weasley brothers already had their wands out. "Door is clear," George said. He pushed it open slowly, alert for signs of trouble.

Another jet of pink smoke flew from Ron's wand and settled on the floor just inside the door, and in a spiral design in the air in the middle of the small room. "Pressure alarm there in the floor," he said, "and a Confounder Hex in the room. Clever hex, that. It makes you forget what you came in the room for."

"I'll take them down," Hermione said. "I've got to put them back up to cover our trail anyway." It took nearly four minutes, but alarm trap and hex quietly faded. She sagged against the door frame. "Go on it's clear now."

Harry nearly bowled Severus over as he charged into the room. It was small and windowless; the only light came from the corridor. Two crumpled forms lay on pallets on the floor, and Harry's vision blurred with tears as he recognized one as his godfather. He knelt beside Sirius, feeling for the pulse at the throat. There was one, barely.

"Pick him up and Apparate, Potter!" Severus had lifted Albus in his arms already, and was glaring at the younger wizard. "We're past our time."

It was surprising how light Sirius was, Harry thought in the back of his mind. He hoisted him into a fireman's carry and nodded to Severus. "Ready!"

They Apparated, leaving Hermione and the Weasleys to clean up their trail and make their own ways out.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 12

Convicted as a Death Eater, Severus Snape is condemned to have his mind and magic ruthlessly torn from him. As restitution for his crimes, he is sold into slavery - and bought by Hermione Granger.

Chapter Twelve

Severus reappeared in the alley behind Grimmauld Place with a sigh of relief. Minerva was there waiting for him, and she promptly levitated Albus out of his arms and into the house while dragging him along by one arm. Once inside, he sank into a chair, too tired to do anything. Footsteps approached, and he looked up to see Arthur Weasley standing in front of him offering a mug of tea which he took with a nod of thanks.

A moment later, Molly Weasley shepherded in a staggering Harry Potter, followed by a levitated Sirius Black. "There you go, dear." She pushed Harry into a chair. "I'm taking Sirius upstairs. You'll need a cup of tea before you do anything else tonight. Arthur, get some tea for Harry."

"Heard anything from Kingsley?" Severus asked.

"Not yet, but it's only been a few minutes." Arthur said.

"We need a better spell than that Speech Relay," Harry said. "It's too awkward to figure out in advance who you need to be able to talk to."

"Agreed."

Arthur got that look on his face that meant he was listening to something no one else could hear. "Are you sure? What? No, you better get out of there now." He shook his head. "Kingsley says that Fudge just showed up at the Ministry, and he hasn't seen anything of the rest of the team yet."

Severus shook his head wearily. "And none of them have a communication link up."

Minerva came into the room just in time to hear the last. "Tonks just told me that they found McGaven completely pickled in a Muggle pub, and they're on their way back. They should be here pretty soon they're looking for a place to Apparate."

"Tell them to hurry," Arthur said. "It sounds like something alerted Fudge to what we're doing."

Molly came back downstairs. "Oh dear, am I hearing right? Trouble?"

"Yes we're calling in everyone. The other team says they have McGaven, and they're on the way back. Rita's outside as lookout."

"Damn," Harry swore suddenly. "The Souljars are still at Hogwarts!"

"No they're not, Mr. Potter," Severus replied. "We Hermione and I brought the two we need with us, as well as the *Mens Sana* potions. They're upstairs."

The younger wizard rose and pushed his glasses up. "I'm going to restore Sirius now." His expression dared anyone to contradict him. As he reached the stairs, he turned for a moment. "Thank you all for this. For everything."

Severus locked eyes with Minerva. "We have a duty also. One of us must try to restore Albus." *And I need to do something to keep from worrying about Hermione.*

"And you want to."

"I am expendable. No questions will be raised if the spell backlashes." He didn't have to finish. Minerva was no fool.

"Good luck, Severus."

Luck is entirely too fickle. Severus thought as he climbed the stairs. *Wish me success instead.* He was just in time to hear Potter's *Amor Vincit Omnia*. He stepped into Albus' bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Minerva had lifted the Stupefy spell, for the old wizard was sitting up aimlessly, his features blank and eyes empty. And that is what I looked like for months. He picked up the *Mens Sana* potion and handed it to Albus. "Old Man, drink this and then put the vial down."

Albus complied with a slow deliberation that Severus was all too familiar with. When he set the vial down on the table, Severus picked up the Souljar and let his mind wander back over the years... Albus, who gave him a chance for redemption when no one else would. Albus, who gave him a job and a home. Albus, who defended him to all his nay-sayers. "Old Man, I hope this works, for both our sakes. I wouldn't want to try it with someone else's wand. *Amor Vincit Omnia*."

Tendrils of smoky grey drifted out of the Souljar and crossed over to Albus. Slowly they grew brighter and brighter until Severus could barely stand to look at them, and there were more and more of them, weaving and spinning a web about the old wizard until nothing could be seen of him. Then they vanished, absorbed in an eye-blink.

For a moment, nothing. Then Albus raised his head and looked Severus in the eye. "Severus?"

He let out the breath he'd been holding. "Yes, Albus."

Albus looked around, and Severus could almost hear his mind whirring. "Grimmauld Place?"

"There's been a lot going on. How do you feel?"

The old wizard winced and rubbed his temples. "I don't believe I've ever had such a headache."

"I'll get you some tea."

"What aren't you telling me, Severus?" Albus rose to his feet and fixed his former Potions Master with a steely eye.

Damn the man! How does he do that? I'm a grown wizard, and he makes me feel like an errant first-year! It's a long story. If you must hear it now, come downstairs." He helped Albus down the stairs and got him settled in a chair. Minvera brought him tea and lemon drops, and Rita brought over a plate of sandwiches.

A moment or two later, Harry and Sirius appeared at the top of the stairs, Sirius leaning heavily on his godson. Molly had another chair ready, within reach of both tea and sandwiches, by the time they reached the bottom.

"Good to have you back, Albus," Moody rumbled. "Likewise, Black."

"Back?" Albus queried. "And Sirius!" The old wizard stared. "I never thought... how..." He shut up, aware that he was babbling.

"Allow me," Minerva said. "I've gotten good at summarizing." She gave them a complete and concise synopsis of the events since the battle. "While Severus and Harry were breaking the Soulstriking, the other team returned with McGaven. He's currently Stupefied and tucked into one of the spare rooms. We still don't know what happened at the Ministry though. Fudge showed up there at a quarter to one. Tonks is watching the back alley in case they return."

"No way to communicate," Kingsley said in frustration. "I wish I hadn't had to bail out."

"Oh Ron... George..." Molly whispered. "Please be careful!"

Harry started pacing. "What can we do? We've got to help them!"

"We don't know if they need help," Moody said slowly. "Whatever we do even if it's sit here on our duffs we must think and not just react."

Arthur took a long breath. "You're right, Alastor. It's just hard."

Severus watched the byplay with a twisting feeling in his gut. *It is hard to know that someone you care for is possibly in danger and that you cannot act to help them. Bad enough when it is your colleagues. This is... worse. Much worse.* "I will Apparate there and see what's to be seen."

"You'll do no such thing," Albus said sternly. "Nor will I, nor will Sirius. We cannot afford to be seen."

"I don't think I could Apparate across the room," Black said tiredly. "I didn't feel this bad when I got out of Azkaban the first time."

"I wish we could have a mediwitch look at you," Harry muttered. "I've done all the Healing spells I know. But Poppy's the only one I trust, and she's not a member of the Order."

Black looked much worse than Albus, Severus decided as he studied his one-time nemesis covertly. He looked dried up... bleached out... dessiccated. Like the lightest breeze would crumble him into dust and blow him away. Albus, on the other hand, seemed to be reviving more and more with each moment.

"Kingsley, was Fudge alone when he showed up?" Bill asked.

"Errm, no. He had someone with him." The big man looked a little embarrassed. "Whoever it was, was Soulstruck. You can't mistake the way they move. Wish I'd gotten a better look. Wasn't Pettigrew I'd know him anywhere. He was wearing a hooded cloak."

"Maybe he was going to do some experimenting on his own," Molly began.

"Possible," Severus allowed, "but I think it's more likely that we somehow alerted him."

"Cornelius did buy one of the Soulstruck, now that I think about it," Arthur said. "He sent off owls to everyone in the Ministry showing how much had been brought in but the note included a list of people who'd bought them. It didn't say who'd bought whom though."

"Oh, I can tell you that," Rita piped up. "He sent a copy of that owl to the paper, but he gave us the names of the Soulstruck and their new... owners."

Bill sat down with a thud. "I don't suppose you have that still?"

She rummaged around in her extra-large handbag. "Just a moment. It's in here somewhere." She pulled out a roll. "My boss wanted me to do a series of human interest type interviews with them why'd you buy this one type of thing. Here you go!"

Cornelius Fudge was the thirtieth name on the list. In the next column over were two words. Severus felt his blood run cold. "Lucius Malfoy!"

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Hermione was putting the Confounding Hex back in place when George ducked back around the corner from where he'd been keeping watch. "The jig's up Fudge just showed up, and he's not alone! He's taking down his wards!"

"Crap. Forget this, Hermione. Let's go!"

She nodded, and they Apparated.

Instead of materializing outside, they reappeared in back in the corridor. "Oh shit," Ron said. "He's put up an Anti-Apparation shield."

"Spread out along the walls and freeze!" Hermione snapped. "Let the Chameleon spell work. They'll probably find two of us, but the third may have a chance to get out."

They nodded and spread out, Ron inside the laboratory, Hermione in the corridor, and George inside the cell.

"Well, well. What have we here?" Fudge stopped as he came around the turn and regarded Hermione. "You can forget that silly concealment spell; it won't stop an All Seeing Eye."

Crap! She stepped away from the wall, allowing the Chameleon spell to fade. "Good evening, Minister."

"Miss Granger, I believe. Well, this is a surprise. What could you possibly be doing down here where you have no business?"

She didn't bother replying.

"I see you're going to be troublesome. *Expelliarmus! Petrificus Totalus!*" He gave her an evil grin as she fell to the floor, and caught her wand deftly. "You've slowed down since that battle in Glastonbury. I was expecting a protracted duel. Now..." he gestured and a hooded figure shuffled around the corner. "I need to know what you know, Miss Granger, and I am not a patient man." He turned to the hooded man. "Sisyphus, pick her up, and take her to the lab."

The hood fell back as the man straightened up, and Hermione got a sick feeling in her stomach as she recognized Lucius Malfoy. He slung her rigid form over his shoulder like a piece of wood, and shambled off, Fudge following. From her current position, she could see nothing but the ceiling.

"*Stupefy!*" She recognized Ron's voice. She heard a soft thump, and cursed mentally, desperate to know what was going on.

"*Stupefy!*" She had just enough time to recognize George's voice before she was falling as Malfoy measured his length on the floor. Fortunately, she landed on her captor. Then "Ugh."

"Never mind him. Get her wand!" Ron again. Footsteps, and then he was in her field of vision. *Finite Incantatem!*

She groaned as the hex released her, and sat up. George came up, looking a little pale and handed over her wand. As she took it, she saw a smear of blood on his hand. "What happened?"

"It's... well..." He helped her to her feet, and she saw what lay behind them. Fudge sprawled in heap with his head tilted at a crazy angle.

"He fell hard," Ron said. "I caught him just right with the Stupefy." He looked a bit lost. "I didn't mean to kill him like that."

She took his hands. "We'll talk about it later. Right now, we need to figure out what to do about this. *He's never seen a death like this; the Killing Curse doesn't leave any marks and neither does Cruciatus.*

He swallowed hard and nodded. "Right. You're in charge now."

George had his wand out. "The Anti-Apparation shield's still up. Fudge must've had the Aurors reestablish it. All his personal wards are fading now that he's...dead." He was as somber as she'd ever seen him.

"Then we walk out." She swept the area with a dispassionate glance. "All our own personal spells are gone, right?"

"Almost." He pointed his wand at Malfoy. *Ennervate!* The Soulstruck man opened his eyes but made no move to rise. "Residue from Stupefy and Ennervate fade fast. It'll be gone in less than ten minutes."

"Good. Here's what we're going to do." She took a long breath. "We're going to make this look like an accident."

A few minutes later, they began picking their way back to the ground floor, leaving behind a carefully staged mess in the lab. To the observer, it would appear that Malfoy had stepped on the hem of Fudge's trailing robes, causing the Minister to trip and break his neck. Ron had painstakingly cleared the corridor of any signs of Fudge's actual fall.

It was a long process, as they had no idea where the Aurors were on their rounds, and had to carefully edge around each turn, and through each intersection. In the little room on the first floor that they'd used as their destination originally, Hermione called for a breather.

"How do we get out of the building though?" Ron asked quietly.

"Hope and pray that Fudge didn't tell the Aurors anything other than bring up the Anti-Apparation shield," she replied. "They haven't been locking or warding the door when they go to make their rounds."

"You mean we'll just be able to walk out the main door?" George asked. "That's mind-boggling."

"That's only if they haven't changed things."

"The hard part is, we have to make it into the atrium where they're playing cards without being seen."

Ron stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. "All windows on the first floor are barred, and there aren't any in this room anyway. I wonder... could we get out the ventilation shaft? All we need to do is get outside even if it's on the roof and we can Apparate.

"Give me a leg up," George said, looking at the grill above his head. "I'll see if I can get it loose quietly. We don't dare use any magic right now."

"Right." Ron bent to let his brother stand on his shoulders. "You need to diet."

"Hssh." The older Weasley hooked his fingers in the grating and gave it an experimental tug.

"Try pushing up, as well as side to side," Hermione suggested.

"Yup. There it goes." He slid the grating out of its bed, and poked his head up. "Phew, lots of dust. No spiders though."

"Good." Ron grunted. "I'm boosting you up now!" He gripped George's ankles and lifted. There was a moment of wild scrambling, and George squirmed into the shaft. A moment later, he turned around and looked down at them.

"It's pretty good sized. Come on, Hermione. You next."

She clambered up, George offering her a steadying hand. Once she was clear of the hole, Ron took a deep breath, bent his knees, and jumped as high as he could. George seized one arm and Hermione the other, and they pulled him up after them. Then George slid the grill back in place.

"All right then. Now what?"

Hermione thought a moment. "That way is closest to the outside, but I think the other way will lead up to the roof."

"So to the roof it is," George said jauntily. He headed off in the direction she indicated, crawling on hands and knees, as the shaft was far too low to stand upright. Hermione followed, and Ron brought up the rear. All too soon, the shaft began sloping upward, growing narrower as it did so.

"Uh oh."

The slope got steeper and the corridor narrower, and they were finally forced to abandon crawling and begin "chimney climbing" holding themselves in place with the pressure of their hands and feet against the sides of the shaft. It was a tedious business, as they gained only inches at a time.

George paused for a moment and wiped his hands on his shirt one at a time, supporting himself with his feet alone. If he fell, he'd take the other two with him. He braced his hands against the shaft walls at shoulder level, and brought his feet up as high as he could. Once his feet were braced again, he straightened his knees out, forcing his torso as high as he could. Then it was time to repeat the process again.

In the shaft below him, Hermione was more than a little worried. This had seemed like a good idea initially. Now, they had to stop more and more often to rest, and their hands were sore from the constant pressure. Ron had slipped once, and slid nearly three feet before catching himself. It had been hard to do nothing, to hold onto the rough metal and watch helplessly. But there was nothing she could've done. All of them knew it.

George stopped again, and she looked up. He was doing something, but she couldn't see. All of a sudden, moonlight filtered in through a hole in the side of the shaft. She saw his silhouette from the chest up as he gripped the edges of the opening and pulled himself out the vent hood to stand under the open sky. "Come on," he said. "It's flat out here."

Two minutes later, they were all collapsed on the roof of the Ministry of Magic. "Can't Apparate," Ron said muzzily. "Too tired. Splinch."

"It's just after 3am we were crawling in that shaft for nearly two hours."

"Merlin! Mum's gotta be frantic by now!" George said as he put the panel back in place.

"We'll rest for ten minutes and then Apparate," Hermione said.

"Right." George settled himself comfortably and pillowed his head on his knees. Ron sprawled on his back, already half-asleep. Hermione sat down beside George and closed her eyes for just a moment...

~*~

After much furious discussion and quite a bit of yelling the Order of the Phoenix had sent Bill Weasley out on a reconnaissance mission using Harry's invisibility cloak. He'd returned in less than an hour saying that he couldn't see or hear anything suspicious.

"I walked by twice, and the Aurors were just sitting there playing Exploding Snap. No sign of anyone, including Fudge."

"If they'd been caught, the place would be lit up like a Christmas tree," Arthur said, "and they'd be owling everyone. Ginny would let us know."

"Unless it was Fudge who caught them," Tonks said around a mouthful of sandwich. "He's no slouch as a wizard."

"So what do we do?" Molly nearly shrieked.

"We wait," Albus said. "Arthur is right. Even if Fudge caught them, he'd have to explain their presence somehow and we would know."

"Let's send someone on recon every half hour or so," Harry suggested. "At least we'll be doing something!"

"Very well, Harry." Albus looked around at the rest of the Order. "Who should be in the rotation for recon?"

"Me," Bill said at once.

"I'll go," Kingsley volunteered.

"I'll lend anyone my cloak," Harry said slowly, "but I'd rather stay here with Sirius." Black was obviously failing. They'd moved him into a bedroom, and Harry could hardly be dragged away from his side.

"If we're simply doing a recon," Severus said, striving for his most reasonable tone, "I can certainly do that. Using Mr. Potter's cloak, I won't be seen."

"I suppose," Albus sounded tired. "So the three of you work it out among yourselves."

"You need to rest, Albus," Minerva chided. "We'll wake you the minute there's any news." She took the old wizard by the arm and all but dragged him up the stairs. "Now stay there and sleep!"

Since Bill had already done one recon, they decided that Kingsley should do the next, and Severus the one after that. Then it was just a matter of chewing their nails as the minutes crawled past. Arthur finally sent Molly home to "rest" and to update Ginny on the situation, though he doubted she'd really get any rest.

Kingsley was grim when he returned at 2:30am. "At some point, they put up an Anti-Apparation shield around the Ministry building. My guess is that Ron and them are working their way out."

"That's not going to be easy," Moody rumbled. "There's no good way to get out, except by the front door and that's where the Aurors sit."

Harry came out of Sirius' room, and marched over to his former Potions instructor. "He wants to speak to you. Alone." His tone was an odd mix of resentment and supplication.

Severus rose slowly and went into the room, shutting the door behind him. Black was lying on the bed with his eyes closed, the fingers of his right hand curled around the wand Minerva had given him. The rise and fall of his chest was the only sign of life. "You asked to see me?"

Sirius opened his eyes slowly. They were sunken pits in his face, almost like the sockets in a skull. "Snape never was good with words. Told Harry about what happened at the Ministry. Not your fault. Mine." He took a long ragged breath. "I'm sorry about setting you up with Remus. Wasn't right, and what Albus did about it wasn't right either." Another long shaky breath. "I'm dying. I know it. Two things to tell you first. 's obvious you care for Hermione. Saw your face. Tell her, man." His voice was fading, the words slurring. "Other thing is, was me and James who hurt you. Don't blame Harry." His eyes closed on the last words.

Severus threw the door open. "Potter!"

Harry was there instantly, with Minerva and Albus right behind him. He knelt beside the bed and took his godfather's hand. "He's dying, isn't he?"

"Yes. I'll leave you alone with him."

"No," Harry said slowly. "Stay. Please. All of you." He looked up at them, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "I'd like you to stay."

They kept a silent vigil as Sirius' breathing grew shallower and shallower and finally stopped entirely. Harry let his tears fall finally, the tears he hadn't been able to shed the first time he thought he'd lost him. Minerva was weeping quietly also, and Albus had his arms around her. Hesitantly, Severus put a hand on Harry's shoulder, not sure if his comfort would be accepted.

Harry turned and looked up, surprise flashing across his face. He swallowed hard, twice. "Thank you, Professor Snape."

"Severus." He felt his resentment for the young wizard fading in the face of grief. "You can call me Severus if you wish."

"Thank you, Severus." He looked down for a moment then met Severus' eyes. "You can call me Harry."

Severus nodded. "Black and I made our peace. I think he would be pleased."

The rest of the Order began filing into the room, offering Harry their condolences. As they came in, Severus left. He was more than a bit unsettled, and wanted something to do. Finally when he couldn't stand it any more, he picked up Harry's cloak and swirled it about his shoulders. "I'm going to go take a look around the Ministry." He was gone before Kingsley's wishes for good luck were voiced.

At the Apparation point they'd used before, he stopped and made sure the cloak covered him entirely. Then he walked by the building, pausing to take a good look through the window. It was as Bill had said: the three Aurors were there, with their interminable card game.

The door from the street opened into that room. The only other way out was the doors that led to the stairs up or down. No place for them to hide *Where are you, Hermione? You wouldn't sit and wait to be rescued; you don't need a knight in shining armor.*

He walked around the building, looking for other exits. There were none. He knew it, but looked nonetheless. It was much like any other office building, tall and blocky, with heavily barred windows on the ground floor, and only the one door. So much for the obvious means. He considered the problem. In his years as a spy, he'd often worked his way into places he wasn't supposed to be. People were often careless with window latches on upper floors.

The back of the building had no windows, and the sides were too well lit for Snape's comfort. He circled the Ministry building again, this time halting next to the little storage shed behind it. The shed was locked but not warded, and a simple Alohomora opened it. He stepped inside and pulled the door shut behind him before casting a Lumos.

The shed was obviously used for storage. It held a couple of broken chairs, a three legged table, a cracked mirror, and, yes, there was the handle of a broomstick wedged in behind a file-cabinet that was missing its second drawer.

"*Accio broom!*" A moment later, the dusty old Lightning 320 hung in the air in front of him. He doused the light from his wand with a quick Nox, and stepped outside again. Once the shed was relocked, he mounted the broom and kicked off, being careful to cover it completely with the cloak. He rose slowly; the broom was somewhat past its prime, and quite splintery.

"Damn this thing. *Lightning Reparo!*" The broom twisted under him as its spells strengthened. The splinters wove their way into their original grooves in the grain, and the bedraggled bristles grew crisp again. Now it responded to his unspoken commands, taking him up to the roof where he landed.

A noise behind him made him start, and he nearly dropped the broom. Readjusting the cloak, he turned around and saw the three huddled up against a ventilation hood, sound asleep. An unidentifiable snore had caught his attention.

He didn't know whether to be angry or relieved, as he knelt beside the youngest Weasley and shook him gently. "Get up, Mr. Weasley." He repeated the action and words with George. Then, "Wake up, Hermione."

They stirred and slowly woke, looking somewhat baffled. Hermione yawned and then looked at her watch. "George! Ron! We fell asleep! Get up!"

Ron slowly levered himself to his feet. "Gonna Apparate now?" he asked, obviously still not awake. George hadn't managed to rise yet, though he was stretching and blinking furiously as his brain began kicking in.

Snape decided it was time to get them back to Grimmauld Place. He threw back the cloak and appeared in his signature black in front of them. "If you were still in school, I'd take thirty points from Gryffindor for falling asleep."

Hermione yelped, "Severus!" She threw her arms around him, not caring what Ron and George might think. He didn't care what they thought either, as he returned her hug with interest. She broke their embrace and stared at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to fetch you, obviously." He tilted an eyebrow at the still-groggy Weasleys. "If you can Apparate with one, I'll manage the other."

She nodded and took Ron's arm. Severus hauled George to his feet. A moment later, they vanished.

They reappeared behind Grimmauld Place, and Tonks dragged them inside yodeling at the top of her lungs. Tea and sandwiches were handed around liberally, and Harry quietly informed them of Sirius' death.

"I'll never forget him," he said, "but I'll try not to make the mistakes he did." A long breath. "We have to stop Fudge, no matter what."

Hermione began recounting the events at the Ministry. Long habit kept her audience mostly quiet, although Moody did let out a few snorts. Molly paled at the description of Ron nearly falling down the shaft, and pulled him into her lap as if he were five instead of nearly eighteen.

Severus took hold of Hermione's wrist with gentle fingers and turned her hand over, exposing the scrapes and blisters. Minerva let out a vile Scottish oath and began casting Healing spells on the three of them. This temporarily interrupted the story, and when Hermione resumed, she found herself sitting next to Severus with him still holding her wrist something she didn't mind in the least.

"That's the end of it," she said. "We got out the access panel, and we were too tired to Apparate. We would've splinched, certainly. So we were going to rest for a few minutes..."

"And we fell asleep," George finished. "Had some of the weirdest dreams too right before I woke up, Hermione, I dreamed you were hugging Professor Snape."

"Yeah," Ron said, "I dreamed the same thing."

Hermione rolled her eyes at them. Snape ignored the comment.

"We will have to convene the Wizengamot to get Severus' conviction overturned," Albus said, "but that shouldn't present any great difficulty though it will have to wait until they appoint a new Minister."

"What about the other Death Eaters?" Kingsley asked. "Is it possible that any of them are innocent?"

"A good point! We should insist on restoring everyone who was Soulstruck and having proper public trials."

"I don't think we have to bring exactly how Fudge died into it," Moody said. "It's not germane. But we'll have to be careful to skate around it."

"More than that," Harry said, "We really don't want anyone else to get the same idea he had. I'd honestly recommend Obliviating McGaven and burning his notes." He bit his lip. "I don't want anyone else to be Soulstruck. Ever."

"Fudge is dead and his plans with him," Rita mused. "Too bad I can't print it it'd make a great story."

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"I'm glad that's over," Hermione told Severus, as they entered their quarters later that night. "You'll probably have to pretend to be Soulstruck for a while yet, but not much longer."

"For which grace, many thanks," he muttered. Then, "I wonder if I can talk Minerva into letting me teach Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Surely you'd rather teach Potions!"

"Hermione, that is your position here. I'm quite certain that Minerva intends to make your job permanent. I wouldn't want to take it away from you."

"But you... Severus, what do you want to do with your life?"

He considered. It had been a long time since anyone had asked him what he wanted. "Honestly, I don't want to teach. I want to do research and experimentation in Potions. But that takes money."

Enlightenment dawned. Once Soulstruck, Severus had lost everything. His Gringotts vault had been emptied into the thirsty coffers of the Ministry. He was, literally, a non-person. "Anyone whose conviction is overturned will be owed something..." she began.

He snorted. "I could spend the rest of my life trying to collect that debt. My reputation wasn't the best, and Fudge may he rot in the deepest hole in Hell destroyed what remained of it. Here, at least, I may find work for a while." He sat down and stretched out his long legs. "Don't go all noble on me, and offer to lend me the money to 'get started', Hermione. It's not just about the cost. It will be a long time before my name is not synonymous with Death Eater. No reputable firm will have dealings with me for some years to come."

She tilted her head to one side, considering. Then she laughed. "Severus, you are altogether too Slytherin! In about ten years, the movers and shakers of the wizarding world will be your former students from Defense classes! It's brilliant!" She sat down on the couch across from him.

He shrugged. "I do not enjoy teaching, that's true. But I think I can do more to repair my general reputation here, than anywhere else. I can also do Potions research in my spare time, if the Potions instructor will permit it, that is."

"Of course."

"There is this also." He rose and crossed the room, taking a seat next to her, though not quite as close as he wished. "I have grown used to being around you." It was as close as he could come to voicing his feelings.

She turned to face him, looking at him directly. "I prefer you here also."

He shifted closer to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She settled against him, resting her head on his shoulder*Peace.*