

The Raven and the Sparrow

by Anastasia

In the days of the final Horcrux, mistrust and mixed messages yield a dark, deadly alliance.

Kill Her

Chapter 1 of 3

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AN: A special thanks to Ariadne, who has graciously agreed to join me on another journey.

"Kill her."

Anyone with a shred of conscience would instinctively recoil at such murderous damnation and turn away from the treacherous orders that were sure to follow; however, no soul dared utter a word. The wind rose up instead, nature's cry of anguish at the truth that evil, too, must live. Murder was an easy subject among those gathered that night, discussed as casually as the weather over tea.

The silence that followed fell heavily, a trace of nervous movement spreading amongst those in the rear.

They were the youngest.

Tonight they would normally be preparing for another school term; however, war had been viciously tearing their youth to shreds for over a year now. They had sworn allegiance under a falling gray moon while one of their own ran wild through the hills, jaws flung open, snapping at the wind.

Dozens gathered from all parts of the wizarding world, some from seemingly upright corners of society, their true loyalties coming to light during a year of terrorist warfare where trust was the scarcest commodity.

In the darkest of times, even loyalty is for sale.

Lord Voldemort stood in the center, one thin hand held up to his chest, fingers spread wide, his eyes closed.

Those in the inner circle shifted, their robes settling heavily over the rampant bramble, twisted roots and fallen branches snapping clean underfoot. A palpable wave passed over them, some hearts beating short with feral anticipation, others with cold fear. Several on one side stepped backward. Another emitted an unearthly low growl.

Voldemort walked on, head tilted in contemplation, his pale, thin lips twisting as he turned sharply and approached a tall figure.

Lifting his head slowly, Voldemort appeared to be admiring the treetops where the raging wind thrashed fragile limbs, whipping them mercilessly into each other.

A bird's nest tumbled out of a high bough, striking several lower branches before falling to the ground.

Voldemort's lips spread further into deranged sneer as he halted.

"Snape."

Severus inclined his head, his eyes cold. "My Lord."

"Kill the Mudblood."

Severus nodded silently, his hand closing into a fist, flexing slowly over the cuff of his robes.

Voldemort bared his teeth at the thought. "You know of whom I speak?"

He did. "Granger."

A faint sniff of derision came from the side, and Voldemort immediately spun in that direction. At a deadly smooth run, he shoved several Death Eaters aside and snatched a fistful of robes, tearing off their wearer's hood.

"Failure! Nothing but a wretch! How dare you!" he raged, shaking a terrified Draco and throwing him to the ground.

Severus calmly watched Narcissa lunge forward, her hood falling at an awkward angle. Her pale and panicked face was a stark contrast to a sea of black, her arms outstretched in what was surely a suicidal attempt to prevent the inevitable. Bella took hold of her sister, her thin nails driving deep into rough robes, angrily tearing for a grip.

"Cissy!" Severus heard Bella hiss, but Severus' attention was torn away by a fierce red light and Draco's inhuman screams.

As Draco dissolved into a crumpled mass of robes, his pale hair barely visible in the darkness and dirt, Voldemort reached for him again, turned, and snarled over his shoulder, "Snape! Now!"

Without a word, Severus turned on his heel and strode through the crowd, his robes flowing out behind him, brushing against the others as he passed. They fell back, their eyes narrowing in either envy or hatred. Those regarding him from the rear, however their eyes gave him an inner pause.

They wore a mask of indifference behind which a raging fire of corrupted innocence burned out of control, tearing at their hearts, frantically commanding them to flee, run, never turn back.

He had worn that same mask himself many years ago.

Part of him wished for it again.

It was only a matter of time before Draco received his full punishment, but that knowledge made it no easier to hear his raving screams fade into hollow rasps of inconsolable despair.

Then fail.

A weathered stack of parchment threatened to topple off of the desk, its crooked neighbors leaning at impossible angles. The topmost pages lifted, fluttering softly on a lazy summer breeze while a model airplane swung slowly on a clear wire, its wings painted bright purple.

An irritated-looking owl hooted softly, rocking as it gathered its feet under itself on a perch near the window. It had drifted into a slow nap to be disturbed by a smaller owl sweeping in and landing on the arm of Hermione's chair, dropping the *Daily Prophet* into her lap.

She didn't need to look at the headline to know.

Tossing the *Prophet* onto a pile of books, Hermione sighed, gathered her hair, and pulled it to the side. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the breeze on her neck, her mind connecting the rising sound of leaves outside with the intensity of the wind that would follow.

The year that should have been their seventh at Hogwarts had been long, filled with failed attempts at finding the last Horcrux and the Order's rising frustration reaching a near breaking point. With Harry's destruction of the Hufflepuff cup, the summer had dawned with increasingly ferocious attacks. Even worse, they were seemingly random, the Dark Mark sharing the sky with a brilliant sun, its faint wisp blending softly against afternoon clouds.

The Muggle newspapers, understandably, were frantic, filled with headlines that could offer no comforting vigilance against inexplicable events.

Harry somehow looked so much older; weighted, his posture rigid, resolute if not passionate. After returning for the last time from the Dursleys', he had done nothing more than eat a hurried meal and announce that he would set out for Godric's Hollow that night, much to the great protest of the Order, Molly in particular, who had told him in no uncertain terms he was not to go alone.

If Hermione hadn't received that owl warning of Voldemort's orders to patrol the skies near where they believed the Burrow to be...

That night, she had barely been able to speak after screaming into the stark night sky for them to come back. The memory of Harry turning just as the first spell colored his glasses a watery blood red haunted her still.

In long nights when she lay unblinking in the dark silence, she could still see how the soft, low-hanging cloud cover trapped the chaotic anarchy of red and green that had followed.

Shacklebolt had fallen first, the handle of his broom driven into the ground beside his shocked body, his eyes staring up at a slowly parting storm, roiling in preparation for outrage. A Stunner had grazed Remus as he twisted around, sending him into a wild spiral from which he barely recovered long enough to rake across the treetops and crash into a high branch before falling to the ground. Harry's instinct had taken over at that point, driving him to take evasive action, weaving through the thick forest cover, easily outrunning two Death Eaters and leading them away from the Burrow before losing them near a Muggle town.

Hermione had received many more anonymous tips that summer. Some timely, allowing them to inform the Muggle Prime Minister of certain dangers in advance, others suggesting possible Horcrux locations, and still others resulting in nothing more than growing suspicion. Informants, spies and supposed anonymous help, for good reason, were regarded with deep distrust.

Part of her already knew who it was. The wording of some of the tips suggested someone who knew of the Order's inner workings, pointing obviously to Snape.

But why?

Once McGonagall decided that excluding Hermione, Ron and Harry from Order meetings was useless, they had spent numerous sessions ignoring that question. It would need to be addressed, but the warning look on McGonagall's face whenever the subject migrated too close to that edge roughly shelved the subject.

After all, betrayal cuts close to the heart sometimes straight through it.

Hermione's thumb slid over the edges of the parchment, stopping just short of slicing through her skin. Another rush of cool air through the window brought the earthen scent of fall, triggering memories of school. Hogwarts had not reopened since Dumbledore's death, but her soul cared nothing for circumstance. Sometimes the most passionate fury is born from life interrupted, and part of her raged at the reality of a single leaf blowing across the grounds without a student nearby to witness it.

"All right, Hermione?"

Arthur Weasley stood in the doorway, the *Prophet* and several Muggle newspapers tucked under one arm. Each headline was printed in panic-filled large block letters.

"If I could only see a pattern," she said, gesturing to the mass of parchment littering Arthur's desk. Notes with a mixture of attack dates and details were spread across Dark Arts books that determinedly avoided describing Horcruxes.

Her hands settled on the edge of the desk, her nails absently worrying the worn edges.

Arthur set his jaw and rested a hand on the back of the guest chair. "Hermione, there may not be a way to predict what they might do next."

She shook her head wordlessly and turned to look at him just as Remus appeared in the doorway, the lines on his face deepening with grim news.

At Hermione's questioning gaze, Remus stated, "Another."

Holding her head in her hands, staring at the blotter, she asked, "Where?"

Remus looked at Arthur and leaned against the wall. After a weary breath, he replied, "London. Broad daylight."

"The Dark Mark?" Arthur asked.

Remus nodded as he handed Hermione a parchment. "Four Muggles. Dead."

"It's not random," Hermione said in a faded voice, watching the small owl lumber over hills of slick parchment to the discarded *Prophet*. It picked its delivery up again and flapped its wings angrily before depositing it back into Hermione's hands, following its gesture up with an impatient peck.

"Ow!" Hermione shooed the owl away and frowned when it moved just out of reach, settled, and stared at her intensely.

The larger owl sniffed, turned its back on them and returned to its nap.

"Hermione, the Death Eaters are nothing but random murderers. Their only goal is terrorizing for the pure pleasure of it," Remus argued.

Hermione closed her hand around the newspaper and leaned back in the chair. "Maybe, maybe not. I have to try though. Scrimgeour is certainly worthless."

Sighing, she closed her eyes, her thoughts automatically slowing from years of practice. The dying late-day sun shone through her eyelids, coloring her world rose.

"The Muggles have no defense. While we're obsessed with the locket, they're being systematically murdered."

She opened her eyes, her fingers worrying the twine binding the scroll.

Her questioning gaze challenged Remus to suggest a better option.

Remus quieted and then offered, "I know, Hermione. I'm sorry."

Hermione nodded tiredly.

"Molly will likely be calling for supper soon," Arthur said, gesturing for Remus to go ahead.

When the door closed behind them, Hermione opened her hand then glanced at the owl. It had positioned itself on top of her latest set of notes, glaring at her, at the *Prophet* in her hand and then back, as if willing her to look at it.

"Fine. You're certainly insistent," she said tiredly and opened the scroll.

Her breath caught as a smaller piece of parchment fell out.

The owl spread its wings, hopped to the highest stack, and flew out of the window.

Picking up the parchment, Hermione read aloud, her voice growing louder and more frantic with each word. She stood at some point, her eyes riveted on the parchment, walking blind, her hand reaching for the door, throwing it open and clutching the banister as she flew down the stairs.

Flight

Chapter 2 of 3

In the days of the final Horcrux, mistrust and mixed messages yield a dark, deadly alliance.

AN: A special thanks to Ariadne, who always knows how to polish the shiny.

Molly stood in the cluttered kitchen, watching over a slowly stirring pot when the telltale thumping from overhead announced that someone was coming down fast.

Ron instinctively looked up at the ceiling, his eyes tracking the footfalls, a piece of toast poised before his open mouth. Pots hanging from an overhead rack swung and clanged into each other in a chaotic chime.

Hermione appeared at the bottom landing, clutching the banister as she turned to rush into the kitchen. "They're going to attack us here!" she yelled. She gripped the

doorframe and held out a parchment.

Molly caught Hermione by the shoulders. "Hermione, wait. Settle down."

Ron stood up slowly, his eyes widening.

Hermione pulled free of Molly's grip and spun when Harry entered the room. "Harry!"

"Is this more rubbish from your secret informant?" Harry said suspiciously as he walked past her. "The same as the others? Sending us straight into more traps and dead-ends?"

Hermione stilled.

Ron slowly sank back into his chair, his hand idly holding his toast as he looked helplessly between Harry and Hermione. The tension was deep, hurtful: the silence of a weight that held old wounds open just enough to bleed.

Molly shook her head but remained silent.

"Have you forgotten that the same 'rubbish' is what saved you that night?" Hermione said in a low tone. She pulled away from Molly and leaned over the table. Her shoulders were held straight, her hands clenched into tight fists.

Harry stalked around the table, his voice growing louder with every step.

"Did you think that it might have been a trap all along? If they know where we are, where are they?" he shouted, holding his arms out. "What if the only reason you got that information was so you'd call the alarm, and they'd find us?"

"Harry!" Molly scolded.

Remus appeared in the doorway along with Arthur and Ginny.

Hermione was seething. Her tone was almost calm, the surface smooth, but underneath the current, deadly. "Are you blaming me for Kingsley's death?"

Harry crossed his arms, narrowed his eyes, and looked away.

"Are you?" Hermione asked in a cold tone.

Harry moved to turn away from her, but she swiftly cut him off, forcing him to look at her.

"You do," Hermione said slowly. "You blame me."

"No..."

"Say it!" she shouted, slamming her hand on the table.

Remus stepped between them. "It was no one's fault," he said, staring at Harry until he turned away.

Ginny placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder, ignoring Harry's glare.

"That will be enough," Minerva announced as she swept into the room and made her way determinately to the back door. She opened the top half of the split door, her long fingers clutching her wand firmly at her side.

Before anyone could say a word, she held up a hand, lifted her chin, and announced, "We shall move to Hogwarts immediately. It will be safer."

No one said a word.

Every hand on the Weasleys' clock swept urgently to "Mortal Peril," the gears grinding loudly in the silence.

Over Minerva's shoulder, a ragged mass swirled just above the tree line, obscuring all but one thin sunbeam. Following the angle of the light, the sight was enough to stop even the strongest heart.

Dark, tendril-like shadows were silently spilling out of the underbrush and spreading killing everything in their path.

He could hear them. Their low banter, slow easy sounds of a late summer evening carrying on the wind.

It had an edge.

Not many could feel it or discern the turn in its warmth toward the damp earthen fall. Standing in the deep underbrush, he watched. Waited. The opportunity was there just out of reach. The wards were strong. Strong enough for concealment and alarm, but weak in other aspects.

Memory, however, could not be erased.

He knew where they were, where she was. While the others could not see, he could.

He could climb the stairs and walk directly into the sitting room should he choose. Perhaps he would even get as far as taking a seat before the first startled hex would fly.

Their naiveté was both shocking and amusing at once.

As a replica of a Muggle airplane spun in the breeze, swinging out toward the window, straining against the thin wire holding it to the ceiling, a slow sneer appeared on his face.

It would almost be too easy.

The bright sky turned grey, blotted out by a furious torrent of torn robes falling through the trees. They spun like silent silk through the branches, twisting and turning over onto each other, their brittle-thin fingers clasping onto dry wood.

Severus could smell it in the air.

If mortal fear exuded a scent, it was pouring out of the Weasleys' house, only to come crashing to a halt when met by a poisonous wave, carrying nothing but death and destruction.

He could feel it as a faint metallic chime struck the hour, and the whisper of robes slipping over wood joined the wind.

They were terrified.

And they would run.

"Nervous among Muggles, are you, Snape? Or is it the lack of your armor?" Bella taunted.

Severus scowled but remained motionless. Dressed in only a plain shirt and trousers, he was still overdressed to blend appropriately, but then again, he mused, what was the proper dress for such an occasion?

Draco muttered, "When?" He was watching with trepidation as multitudes of Muggles rushed toward a waiting train.

Severus could hear the nerves in Draco's voice. A mistake now would be deadly.

The steam added to the already strange day. The air pressed low with something profound, something simultaneously grand and awful.

Severus shook his head, concentrating on the timing of each train's arrival and its rate of speed to the bridge. Calculating an average time depending on the train's number of cars, he closed a rusted pocket watch with a gritty *click*. One train stood empty of passengers while another was rapidly filling up with tired-looking Muggles clutching evening newspapers.

Long shadows stretched across the platform, becoming lost against the wall where Severus stood. The sun had fallen lower and was now shining directly through the train's windows, outlining the crush of passengers inside.

A sharp hiss came from his left.

Greyback had separated from them and was walking slowly, his hand trailing along the wall, fingers curling into a fist.

Severus followed Greyback's line of sight and spotted his prey. A boy, no older than a first-year, had left his mother's side to look in a store window, holding his hand up to the side of his face to peer through the glass.

Greyback, garnering his fair share of strange looks from passers-by for his flowing robes, too heavy for late summer, made no attempt to hide the fact that he was out for blood, even going so far as to wipe his mouth clear of saliva. His head lowered in a timeless predator position, he stopped, waiting to see if the boy sensed danger.

The others watched with bored expressions, while Bella sniffed with indifference and seemed to be considering her next insult.

Severus ground his teeth and stole a glance toward where Greyback was within meters of the unsuspecting child. Just then, a train pulled from the station, rapidly picking up speed and heading to the track that would take it over the bridge.

"Now," Severus ordered and strode across the platform.

Drawing their wands as they reached the railing, the group watched with rapt attention as the train lumbered around the curve, leaving the station and heading for the bridge.

Bella struck first, her wild laughter shattering the otherwise calm evening commute. She leaned forward and reached out, as if wishing to be even closer to the inevitable destruction that was sure to follow. The others followed suit, with only Draco falling back, holding his wand loosely. His panicked eyes found Severus, who, even as the sound of twisted iron tore across the water, was tracking Greyback's position.

Bella's spell struck the lower join of the bridge's structure, which instantly buckled, violently throwing the track to one side. The train continued even as the subsequent spells rained down in a hail of red fire, exploding the wooden ties into flaming matchsticks and wrenching steel into spiraled curls leading nowhere.

Their laughter was drowned out by the high-pitched squeal of the train's brakes, the sparks falling in a cascading shower into the water below. The engine listed to one side as it careened out of control, the smoke stack catching a glint of sun as it slammed into the buckled tracks, the momentum of the following cars thrusting it all upwards where it caught, breaking several cars in two and flipping others backwards.

One after the other, the following cars crashed into each other until they simply ran off the rails and teetered, threatening to fall.

Bella was still laughing, eyes wild with unrestrained glee as one of the last cars broke free, teetered for a moment, then fell into the water below.

The train's engine caught fire, the flames reaching higher than the setting sun. Blackened metal glowed as flames spread out along its sides, sending sparks to illuminate the whim of the breeze back to the wooden cars.

Catching, taking root, and being born again then devouring.

Severus crossed the platform, ignoring the Muggles rushing to the railing, ironically surrounding the party guilty of the atrocity.

Greyback ignored everything, instead choosing to stalk the boy peering in the glass.

Fingers closing on thin arms.

A soul devoid of magic helpless...

"Fenrir!"

Jerking in surprise, Greyback spun, then snarled as the boy ran to his calling mother.

Severus raised an eyebrow, standing aside to let the boy pass.

Greyback stood straighter, seemingly recovering from his primal state.

"Snape."

"You're missing the festivities," Severus said, his eyes narrowing. He held his hands clasped behind his back and approached. "We are not here to fill the world with more flea-bitten monstrosities such as yourself, but to follow the Dark Lord's orders or have you forgotten?"

Greyback's lips curled. "Of course not."

"You'd do well not to," Severus said, allowing a moment to pass before turning toward the scene unfolding on the platform.

A multitude of Muggles had gathered, at first complaining that their train had not departed, then pressing against the railing to see another hanging over the edge of a destroyed bridge while flames captured within black smoke billowed from its engine. Flames raced along the sides of the cars, roiling inside and spilling upwards out of each window.

As the Dark Mark exploded over the rose-colored sky, the sounds of crackling and groaning wood paralyzed the crowd.

Severus stood, watching as Bella and the others faded into the background as planned.

Eventually, a slow panic spread through the Muggle crowd until suddenly their paramount mission was to leave the station now. The frantic crowd spread, flowing around the group of Death Eaters who stood with eerily calm expressions amidst the chaos.

Fenrir suddenly let out a low chuckle, blatantly showing the startled crowd his wand before pointing it at a nearby pillar, bursting into maniacal laughter when it exploded, spraying pulverized masonry in all directions. Bella followed suit, striding past Fenrir with an air of complete arrogance, pointing her wand at the nearby ticket booth, whose occupant was currently fleeing through the back door. Flames erupted inside, their reflection quietly flickering behind the barred glass.

Fenrir sniffed, but then had to shield his eyes from the horrific explosion that followed. Everyone within range instinctively threw themselves to the ground as wood, glass, metal bars and flaming tickets shot across the platform at lethal speed, slamming into anything in their path and leaving streaks of fire in its wake. The window frame cart-wheeled through the air, finally coming to a fiery rest at Bella's feet. She raised her wand again, but then paused.

Ignoring the wanton destruction, Severus prepared to Apparate. Their mission was complete, and the Muggle sirens were fast approaching.

"Kill the Muggle, Draco."

It was Bella, her voice deadly serious.

Severus turned.

Fenrir shoved Draco hard, growling, "Now, Draco!"

Severus walked through the wreckage, ignoring the increasingly louder sirens approaching from the West, the grating sound of metal as the train shifted yet again, and the screams of the fleeing Muggles.

All of it narrowed to a pinprick as the scene unfolded.

Draco was backing away, unaware that Fenrir had circled behind him. His hand clamped down on Draco's shoulder, and he shoved him forward, hissing, "Do it..."

Severus could see the target, a Muggle man, no older than he was, stumbling through the wreckage in an attempt to reach the other side of the platform. He passed a nervous glance at them, trying vainly to move even more quickly through the tangle of wood and glass, taking large steps and dragging his leg along when it sank into the debris.

Draco stood, his wand held tightly in his trembling hand. He was shaking his head and, even with Fenrir's grip on his shoulder, backing away.

Severus' blood ran cold.

Within a fraction of a heartbeat, the prey had slipped away unnoticed, and a new victim had been identified.

One of their own.

Suddenly, Bella snatched hold of Draco and screamed, "You're worthless! Have you any will to serve the Dark Lord? Traitor!"

The sirens, muted behind buildings, quickly became clear, piercing wails, overwhelming Bella's rants and Fenrir's renewed threats. A low rumble joined the high pitch, rising, a palpable vibration in the air.

Bella viciously shook Draco, whose knees had come unhinged. Forgetting magic, he seemed to want nothing more than to flee. With Draco's shirt twisted around her fist, Bella drew her wand, waving it about in a grand gesture then pointing it directly at Draco's throat.

Muggles ran in all directions, their discarded daily papers flying through the flames, transforming into airborne torches.

Severus found his voice lost in the fray, his every attempt to get a clear shot at Bella ruined by her wild rants and drowned threats as she shook Draco, jerking his shirt ever tighter around his throat. Even if she never cast the Killing Curse, Severus knew Draco would surely die from strangulation.

Thrusting his hand between Bella and Draco, Severus took no notice when the sun was blotted out and the others suddenly Apparated.

Severus caught sight of Bella's face, filled with a horrific level of rage, only to see it fall, her expression quickly changing to one of shock as she quickly turned her wand on herself and Apparated.

Draco dropped to the ground, his face pale, his eyes showing only slits of pure white.

Severus sensed a change. Something was imminent.

Darkness fell in the afternoon, a silken curtain of black raining night down around them.

Severus picked Draco up, then almost dropped him at what he saw...

The train's engine had barely remained upright on the tracks, an astounding feat in and of itself, only now it was twice its normal size, bowing upwards in a slow bellow. Black soot poured out of the smoke stack, forced upwards in a great rush that was rapidly growing faster and faster, joined by cinders, fire, then in a clear moment it all stopped.

A slow breeze carried the soot away, moving it aside as if to afford a better view.

The engine, however, was now an impossible size, twisting the wheels, forcing the undercarriage into a grotesque position, bending it almost in two.

It paused shuddering an impossible sight, too horrific not to heed, too obscene to comprehend.

The last siren fell silent, and, as the day exploded into a blinding light, Severus threw himself over Draco and Apparated.

Hermione sat in the warmth of an early morning sun, her quill poised over a curling parchment, her mind wandering. The repeated attacks had become more and more disturbing over the summer, but they were nothing compared to the past week. Random acts of complete and senseless destruction had paralyzed London, the Muggle newspapers screaming about robed figures and inexplicable bolts of light before explosions obliterated everything within range.

Her hand reached through the pile of papers and pulled one out. Rereading an article, it described those at the scene as "odd-looking." No need to strain herself deciphering that piece of information. The optimistic writer, however, saw fit to mention that the destroyed train had been largely empty, on its way to another station for maintenance.

With a weary sigh, Hermione held her head in her hands.

The silence deepened a fraction. Every so often, a bookshelf would settle, the wood cracking loudly, sometimes enough to startle her.

Hogwarts empty.

Somehow the thought alone was disheartening. The reality of returning to the castle after so long, though walking through corridors turned cavernous when devoid of students, however, struck her hard.

The ghosts were pleased to see living souls among them once more, even if it was only the Order. They wafted silently through darkened classrooms, sometimes simply lingering in dusty corners, looking longingly toward empty rows of tables.

The heartache was almost too much to bear, as if the walls themselves possessed the capacity to hold a sense of tragedy.

Her thoughts turned to her source.

There had been no warning this time. Only the parchment she received that day over a week ago, simply stating that the Burrow's location was known and that an attack was imminent. To leave.

Nothing more.

Severus held the flask up to the flame, then tilted it slowly, allowing the liquid to rest at the edge, hesitating in time with his heart. His mind slowed, concentrating on the endless churn of the potion below. Its mesmerizing spiral had been his obsession for the past two days, and his expression of pure wonder only deepened when the cycle slowed then reversed. Without conscious command, his finger nudged the flask a fraction, sending the precious drop into the center.

His breath slowed. Everything did clutching onto the edge of perfection behind the fragile mask of madness.

Severus' eyes slipped closed in something disturbingly close to pleasure as the light from the potion turned from red to gold.

"Well done, Severus. I had every confidence in you."

Severus' shoulders rose. One hand caressed the edge of the cauldron, his gaze still riveted on the rapidly spreading color as it bled across the surface and deepened.

Without turning, Severus sneered, "Words of a prisoner."

"No," a nervous voice breathed, "I always thought you were one of the brightest."

Severus snorted and raised an eyebrow, turning slightly. "And now?"

Slughorn paused.

Tearing himself away from the potion, Severus stood and drew his wand.

A slow groan escaped Slughorn as he shook his head, the word "Please" repeating in his mind.

Severus thought it interesting that someone should try to plead with him using their thoughts.

Amusing even.

Slughorn looked just as anyone would seated for afternoon tea, only his expression was one of pure white terror, and magical bonds held him fast.

"Now, now, Horace..." Severus said thoughtfully, tilting his head as he stepped closer.

The chair protested as Slughorn shifted his weight, struggling against the bonds, breath hitching, riveted on Severus' cold eyes.

Unable to look away.

As Severus raised his wand, he muttered, "It's only logical. You must know how they're created and how they're destroyed...."

Severus sat, listening to the rustle of the weeds outside. There was no need to open any windows, as the glass was gone long ago, welcoming the fallow Spinner's End air into his home. Whether it was to wreak havoc or provide comfort, it was all the same. At the edge of the small yard, a fence board banged against its neighbor, beating it harder with every gust of wind.

Draco had recovered from being nearly choked to death by Bella the previous week, but had become a liability. His inability to either avoid confrontation or carry out the Dark Lord's commands made him expendable. Narcissa had begged Severus to watch over Draco once again, pleading with him to take Draco in and cover for his failures.

Once again, he found himself in the role of protector.

Severus' face darkened as he considered Draco, who had fallen asleep on the threadbare couch in his study. The young wizard's dreams were fitful, and Severus had taken his wand, prying it from his fingers after one too many half-asleep attempts at defensive magic.

Severus' hand held a piece of worn parchment, his thumb rubbing over the edge in slow contemplation as he watched an owl approach, its wings spread wide on the billowing current of air. It landed, folded its wings and carefully stepped through a windowpane to sit on his waiting arm.

Setting the owl on the nearby perch, Severus took the note and looked back at Draco, who, without his wand, had taken to clutching the upholstery so tightly that the tendons in his arms stood taut and shook. If the sight of complete unconscious terror wasn't disheartening enough, Draco's voice moving from gasp to half-cry completed the display of despair.

Sighing, Severus opened the owl's delivery and read, his brow furrowing more with each word. He reread the parchment and closed his eyes slowly, letting his lids settle heavily. Exhaustion threatened to take him before his hand reached for the quill and his other pulled out the crooked drawer on the nearby desk just enough to pull a fresh piece of parchment out.

The note was brief, as only one word was needed.

Severus leaned forward and noted the color of the troubled sky, then turned back to the mottled owl that was staring at him with growing apprehension.

Placing the parchment in the owl's beak, Severus touched his wand to its back and ordered, "Fly unseen."

Bone-thin branches spread over the walls, dragging their sharp edges over the wet rocks, scratching them raw. They took years to grow in the dismal pall that passed for daylight, the low mist lifting for a time, then falling heavily back into place as night crept closer.

A dirtied hand took hold of one of the strands, twisting it to take hold, wrapping it around the palm and pulling slowly. Slick fog slipped through their fingers, each knot offering purchase for a fleeting moment before swinging further away.

The rock was bone cold against his wrist, the jagged edge rasping his pale skin raw.

He let the breath he was holding out in a slow hiss, refusing to let go. Twisting his fingers around, he wound the wet wood until it split, separating into strands.

Blood-flow slowed to a stop, fingers throbbing, wrist on fire, skin thinning tearing.

A catch of breath across the aisle echoed.

Footsteps soon followed.

The strands tore slowly, wound around each finger while his other arm twisted between metal and stone.

Breaking skin, the fire turning dark.

Growing louder, voices reverberated off of desolate archways.

With a final jerk, the branch broke free.

The wood lying unfeeling in his bloody hands, Lucius sat back down on his bed. Warmth spread back into his fingers, sending blood streaming from the ends of each fingertip as he slowly held his hands up.

Ignoring the blood, he pulled another, larger branch from under the mattress and slowly wound the newcomer around the rest, ending in a sharp point. Baring his teeth as he nodded to a pair of eyes watching him from the other cell, Lucius Malfoy ran his hands over the wood.

Instead of holding it like a wand, he turned it over.

And gripped it like a knife.

Reveal

Chapter 3 of 3

We all bleed the same...

Disclaimer: JK still owns them all.

AN: My eternal thanks to my beta, my author, Ariadne, who rocks with the polish, and to everyone on LJ who voted for me to return to the fandom and finish this story. I can only hope it was worth the wait.

Loud, jovial voices reverberated through the cell block as the conversation turned light-hearted, further buoying an undercurrent of feral hatred amongst the inmates. Then the tone turned casual as the sound of a hand slapping cold stone was followed by a girlish voice shrilly proclaiming confidence. Murmurs of agreement accompanied the footfalls, no longer obscured by stone, individual voices falling away. Their steps told where they were, dusty shuffling sounds marking which cells they passed.

Through filthy, stringy hair, Lucius watched, his head held high.

He held onto the cell door's frame, arms stretched up, as the visitors drew to a halt in front of him.

A look of disgust passed between Scrimgeour and Umbridge before she appraised him sarcastically, "My, my – Mr. Lucius Malfoy..."

Lucius' thumb slipped over the end, passing where the last branch joined, binding it together.

After all, it wouldn't do to have it snap at the pivotal moment.

"The hygiene here in Azkaban is not quite to your high standards, is it?" she asked, passing a skeptical eye over his torn and dirty robes, the edges germinating a layer of mold where they dragged over the endlessly damp floor.

He remained still, his head tilted back, pale eyes narrowing a fraction.

Scrimgeour flinched and, watching Lucius, moved his hand toward his wand, his other reaching for Umbridge's sleeve.

"You always were arrogant, strutting about as if you owned the Ministry. Now look at you!" Umbridge crowed, ignoring Scrimgeour's warning and jerking her arm away from his hand.

Lucius' gaze moved slowly from the rusty ledge where his hands rested, down the length of the bars and then to where a small, ornate belt loop rested at Umbridge's hip, her wand sitting neatly, its handle leaning forward.

"Perhaps if I had taken more interest in the more upstanding members of the Ministry –*Dolores* – I wouldn't have been led astray so easily," Lucius said emphatically. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted Scrimgeour's hand.

Umbridge gestured grandly. "See? Arrogant!" She waved her finger admonishingly toward Lucius as she turned toward Scrimgeour.

The blood that was slowly coating Lucius' forearms, however, riveted Scrimgeour, and his mouth fell open slowly.

Lucius suddenly thrust his hand through the bars, snatched hold of Umbridge's sleeve and viciously jerked her forward to crash into the bars. The sickening sound of fine facial bones breaking echoed as Lucius pushed her away, sending her head to snap backwards, and then pulled her even harder toward him, a murderous sneer spreading on his face as she again slammed into the bars.

This time, however, something was waiting.

Umbridge emitted a surprised, "Oh!" A look of indignation crossed her face, as if Lucius' taking her wand was far more important than the fact that he had just plunged a piece of wood straight through her neck.

Scrimgeour, once a great Auror, reeled to one side in shock as he frantically drew his wand.

"Avada Kadavra!"

They both cast at once, Scrimgeour's spell flying wildly above Lucius' head and bouncing back at impossible angles from ceiling to floor, sending other Death Eaters to take cover in their cells.

Lucius' spell, however, hit home, felling the former Auror, sending him backward onto the cold floor, his arms splayed upward in an almost comically delayed gesture of surrender.

Laughing, Lucius tossed Scrimgeour's wand to MacNair and, even as the alarm sounded, paused to lean over Dolores Umbridge, who lay sprawled in the center of the aisle, the same shocked expression on her face, her mouth hanging wide open.

"We all bleed the same," Lucius crooned softly.

He held his blood-covered hands out in front of her.

"All the same."

Minerva leaned back in her chair wearily, the wood creaking loudly in response. Her eyes wandered to where Dumbledore's portrait hung, still slumbering, his hands peacefully clasped on the frame's edge. The other portraits, however, were well awake and leaning forward with rapt attention, watching Harry, who was sitting slouched in a chair across from Ron.

Harry was absently fingering a pawn, setting it on its edge and turning it around.

Ron looked up irritably. "Going to make a move, are you?"

Harry shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. "No."

Suddenly, Molly burst into the room, hair flying, a parchment clutched in her fist. Arthur was close behind, looking worn beyond his years. His usually calm demeanor was shattered, his face a blotchy mass of red.

"Minerva," Molly said breathlessly. She reached the desk and leaned on it with her free hand. "Scrimgeour is dead, at Azkaban... Death Eaters.... "

Minerva closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. When she opened them, she saw Harry stand to stare out the window.

"Anyone else?" Minerva asked, gesturing for them both to sit.

"Umbridge," Molly said flatly, taking a cup of tea from Arthur.

Minerva nodded. "Ah." She turned to look at Harry, who was now looking in Hermione's direction.

"Where's your informant now, Hermione?" Harry said, plunging his hands deep into his pockets.

Hermione sat at a small parchment-covered table near Remus and Tonks, a large inkpot anchoring it all against the strengthening fall breeze.

She looked up but didn't respond.

Harry turned. "Well? You're the one with the answers, yeah?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

Molly made a movement, but Minerva's hand on her sleeve stopped her.

"I haven't heard since we moved," Hermione said coldly.

Harry shifted his weight and started to pace. "What now? Face him now, and there's still a Horcrux."

He stopped, and the shuffling from the portraits stopped as well. Minerva shot an irritated look at those closest to her.

Hermione crossed her arms. "Suicidal."

Silence fell between them with neither giving way.

Harry stared down at the chessboard as if contemplating a next move.

"What now?" he muttered.

It was Ron who spoke, though, setting his king on its side.

"We surrender," Ron declared.

The portraits let loose shocked gasps and erupted into argument. Minerva raised a hand and stood, hushing them.

Harry slumped down in his chair and looked at Ron incredulously. "What?"

Ron leaned forward. "The arrogant git will buy it. We surrender, he comes here."

"And the Horcrux?" Hermione reminded him, but then dawning comprehension took over. "He'll need it and reveal where it is."

She looked at Ron with near wonder. "Shockingly simple."

"That's me all right," Ron muttered. "Shockingly simple."

Harry picked at the arm of his chair. "Will never work."

"Doesn't need to," Hermione said. "If Voldemort thinks he's readying for a battle, he'll be sure to make the location of the Horcrux known to someone in his circle."

"Your informant again?" Harry said sarcastically.

Hermione's eyes sharpened as she replied, "Have a better idea?"

Awkward silence followed, the portraits rustling softly as they leaned toward each other, arguing in loud whispers.

Finally, Harry tilted his head. "How?"

He looked toward Hermione, but she was already leaving the room, watching an owl that was flying toward the castle.

"Leave that to me," she called, slamming the door behind her.

Rust crumbled into his palm as he placed a hand on the railing. After Apparating in the middle of an overgrown clearing under a threatening sky, Severus had released his hold on Draco, keeping a steadying hand on his shoulder until he was sure Draco could stand on his own. Their Marks had burned with a searing heat that conveyed in no uncertain terms that the Dark Lord wished to see them. Now.

Severus left Draco behind, his sense of self-preservation overriding any sense of charity toward the young wizard. Draco was a liability, a chronic failure drawing the Dark Lord's rage. It had already been over a week since the order to kill Granger had become his sole purpose, and he had nothing new to report and no reason why.

Pushing open the front door, Severus entered what had once been a great foyer. Black and white marble was largely black now, covered in mud and something resembling moss. In the corner, a grandfather clock stood cloaked in cobwebs, surprisingly still keeping time. A smear across the glass revealed the face, showing five minutes to midnight.

Draco entered the foyer and immediately made his way up to where a shape stood at the top of the stairs. Severus looked up to see Narcissa and returned her glance with a nod as he started up the stairs, his hand dragging wearily up the banister, ignoring the gritty dust.

A large room opened off of the landing where the soft glow of lamplight threw tall shadows on the walls. In the corner sat Lucius Malfoy, sullen and pale, his eyes shifting to where Voldemort was pacing. When his wife and son entered the room, his hollow gaze fell on them, prompting Narcissa to place a hand on Draco's shoulder. Lucius' homecoming from Azkaban had been a less than happy affair, with him staggering into the hall, covered in blood, raving about revenge and blood purity, then leaving as suddenly as he came. The others stood completely still, painfully avoiding calling attention to themselves.

As Severus entered the room, Voldemort immediately turned and spoke. "Severus. The Mudblood lives."

All eyes fell on Severus.

"Yes, my Lord. I believe the Order has returned to Hogwarts."

Voldemort stepped closer. "I want her dead."

"My Lord, with the Minister of Magic dead, we may take over," Severus offered. "Surely, the Mudblood is of little consequence now."

Voldemort bared his teeth a fraction and leaned forward. "Protecting her, are you, Snape?"

"No, my Lord."

"Then do it!" he roared, sending a collective flinch through the room.

"Yes, my Lord," Severus said.

Circling around, Voldemort observed Severus, who remained impassive. An end table shifted slightly, a low shadow winding past and behind the wall of robes.

Voldemort halted, then passed his gaze around the room.

"Malfoy," he said softly. "As a reward, you may kill the Aurors."

At first, Lucius simply looked blankly at Voldemort, then a disturbing smile slowly spread on his face. He inclined his head. "With pleasure, my Lord."

Raising a hand, Voldemort added, "Except for dear Nymphadora. I do believe Bella would love to have that honor."

Bella's expression was of pure rapture, her hands clasped together eagerly. "Yes, my Lord!"

Voldemort's look of amusement at Bella's reaction disappeared. "If any of you dare to betray me..."

Immediately, looks of denial spread amongst the Death Eaters, some even taking a nervous step backwards. Bella fervently shook her head, then looked toward Severus and then Draco.

Without another word, Voldemort left the room.

"I do not trust you, Snape. I want you to know that," Bella said to Severus' back as he left the house and descended the outside stairs.

"You have made your feelings plain on that matter. The Dark Lord, however, does not seem to share your opinion," he snarled over his shoulder.

"I do not care – "

Severus turned, hissing, "Do not care? You would do well to remember that *what you* care about means nothing."

Bella narrowed her eyes and roughly shoved her hood back. Her voice started as a harsh gasp. "And you would do well to remember that some of us doubt your loyalty, Snape. Someone is providing the Mudblood information. It is obvious that someone is you!"

"It certainly requires an impressive amount of intelligence to reach such an exceedingly incorrect theory."

Bella rushed forward, her voice rising, and snatched hold of his sleeve. "Don't taunt me!"

Severus spun, tore her grip from his arm, twisted her robes around her throat and shoved her against the side of the house.

The rain had intensified, leaving Severus' hair in twisted strings pasted along his face and neck. His breath warm in the cool rain, Severus snarled, "I may not be so cruel as to taunt you – dear Bella – however, murder is not outside of my limits."

"You wouldn't dare," she gasped, her long nails clawing into his shoulders.

He shrugged apologetically.

"No honor among thieves, Bella. I would gladly go before the Dark Lord and explain how you interfered with my duties, how I was forced to respond with the appropriate level of force."

Bella's mouth hung open, jaw working for a moment before some rational part of her brain told it to close.

"Do we understand each other?" Severus growled, his hand twisting tighter.

Instead of agreeing, with a narrow breath, Bella gasped, "It's Draco! You're protecting that failure – he's the traitor!"

Severus shook her and leaned closer, but Narcissa was suddenly at his side. "How dare you?! Draco is a loyal as you or I!"

A strangled laugh escaped Bella as she clawed at Severus' fist. "Your son is a complete failure! First, he fails to kill even when the old fool is surrounded and helpless, and then he refused to kill a lowly Muggle!"

Severus shoved Bella away, leaving her stumbling and clutching at her throat. When Narcissa lunged for her, Severus took hold of her arm.

Bella staggered backwards, hissing, "It's one of you. I know it is and I'll find out!" then Disapparated.

Severus released Narcissa, and the two of them turned to see Draco standing in the doorway.

"Take him," Severus said as he turned away. "There's nothing I can do for him now."

Walking through an open corridor, Hermione turned the parchment over in her hand, touching each corner, running the edge over her fingertips.

Turning a corner, she stopped and laid the parchment out on a ledge. A raven nearby cried out, spreading its wings and throwing them angrily when the owl tried to take a perch nearby. The owl awkwardly corrected its flight and kept going, leaving the raven to fold its wings and turn its shining gaze back to Hermione.

One word written at the top of the page...

Reveal

She stared at the page, thinking – then gasped.

Drawing her wand, she took a deep breath and tapped the parchment.

At first, nothing happened, leaving her to furrow her brow; then slowly, as if a silken curtain was being drawn down the page, scrawled words appeared.

And at the end was a time.